

Holidays with the Rats 2011:

Holiday & Surprises



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Primal's Gift

By C.M. Torrens

I.

PRIMAL Death walked the city street drawn to a particular sense, the warm glow of another Death. No souls called to him, and hadn't for some time. He was thankful. Things were happening and throwing the world off balance. He was going to have to look into it, but not today. Today he had another task. A personal one.

The colorful lights of the holiday season shone off the snow as he made his way through the dark street. He pulled his fedora down to keep the light snow out of his eyes, his pockets bulging with candy and trinkets.

He smiled as a family rounded the corner and a boy stopped to stare at him. Primal reached into his pocket and handed out a few candies. The boy's face spread into a bright smile as he pulled the candies tight to his chest.

With a wink and a grin, Primal continued on his way. The sounds of Christmas music and warm laughter echoed down the street, but watching the children was always the best part. The way their faces glowed was priceless. They made the season special. He never grew tired of the holidays.

The night grew darker and his trinket filled pockets grew lighter. Reaching into his pocket his fingertips fell on a small wooden box. He

hoped it was the right gift. It was hard to choose a present for a being that needed no basic comforts.

Hand closing around the warm wood, he shook off his nerves and followed his senses toward another Death.



ANGEL stalked the city street watching the bustling crowd and gaudy red and green lights blinking over dirty snow. He loathed this time of year. Once a simple holiday, it had exploded into an infestation of greed and gimme.

He turned off the main street, away from the shops, needing to get away from the crowds and crackling speakers blaring out Christmas jingles. A soul called to him ringing through his bones drawing him further away from last minute shoppers and whining children.

The call persisted the ache drawing him toward his next job and he found himself in front of a small home. No colored lights adorned the house, much to his relief, but a single handmade wreath decorated the front door. The sound of footsteps caught his attention and he looked down the block. An older Death walked toward him, his face lined with age, gray eyes kind and gentle. His familiar fedora cocked sideways to keep back the light snow. Primal. One of the first, maybe even the first of their kind. Angel remembered him well.

“Primal?” Angel said, unable to hide his surprise. “It’s been a long time.”

A gentle smile touched his lips. “Yes it has. Things are very strange lately.”

Angel frowned. “Checking up on me?”

“Should I be?”

Angel felt heat rush to his face. “I hope not.”

Primal chuckled softly. “It’s not you I’m worried about Angel. Come on, let’s visit the couple, shall we?”

Angel nodded and followed Primal into the small house. An elderly couple sat huddled together on the couch under a blanket, a tiny little tree

decorated the living room. A few small candles brightened the room and made the glass balls on the tree glitter. The old man's breathing was labored and an oxygen tank sat propped against the couch. His wife tucked the blanket around them better and lay her head on his shoulder.

"Cute couple," Angel said and his eyes slid across the room to the mountain of gifts under the tree. "A shame they spent every last penny on gifts. They might be able to heat the house if they hadn't."

"Such a cynic you've become, Angel." Primal studied the couple a long moment. "They love each other, they don't seem upset about their choices."

"But the whole holiday has become so rushed and panicked. Nothing warm about it anymore."

"This moment isn't warm?"

"An exception."

"When was the last time you gave something for the holiday?"

"What would I give? I'm a Death, like you."

"You seem to forget that we have substance too. We can be seen, felt, if we put our minds to it."

"Like Old Death."

"Old Death was a special case. He found his soul mate as he was losing his way. Are you losing your way too, Angel?"

Angel sighed. "Maybe I am."

Primal moved closer and Angel swallowed, suddenly nervous. The heat of Primal's body so close he fought to concentrate on the couple in the next room.

"You're suddenly tense, Angel. Are you okay?"

Angel nodded finding it hard to speak. He cleared his throat and looked over his shoulder at Primal. Did he know?

He turned to face him slowly, gathering up his courage as he stared into Primal's eyes. The strong planes of his face eased with laugh lines. His

dark hair, more silver than black slicked back away from his face, and a stray lock curled to his temple.

“Why are you here, Primal?” Angel asked.

Primal reached into his pocket and pulled out a small box. “Did you think I’d forgotten?”

Angel frowned and eyed the box in Primal’s hand. A small green and red bow decorated the top of the small wooden box.

“Forgot what?”

“Tonight is your first century. Happy ... uh, death day?” Primal said, handing him the box.

Angel stared down at the box afraid to touch it. “What is it?”

“It’s my gift to you.”

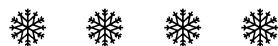
Angel hesitated before reaching out to take the box. Pulling off the bow and chewed on his bottom lip. Thumbing the latch, he shot a queasy look at Primal.

“What are you afraid of?”

“I’ve never gotten a gift before. Seems like I should give you something too.”

“The season is about giving, not receiving, Angel.”

Angel ran his hand over the smooth wood before opening the box slowly. A small glowing light filled the box. Squinting into the light, he reached inside and touched the glow.



HOW had his love become so cynical? Primal wondered.

The centuries tended to blur together and maybe it was easy to forget that they were people as much as the next. This was why he treasured the holidays so much. The smiling faces and laughter warmed his heart. It was seeing that joy in the eyes of others that made people want to give everything they had to those they loved.

He watched as Angel slipped his hand into the box. His dark eyes grew distant and his hair dripped with melting snow. His lips curled into a distant smile as the memory took hold.

What do you see, my love?

II.

THE world shifted and morphed around him as his mind spun. A moment later Angel found himself in a small corridor outside his apartment. He was a child again, not more than eight. Not a young Death, a real child.

The bare wood floor in the hall was covered in a dirty green runner of carpet. Behind him shouts vibrated from inside. Down the hall Christmas music played and laughter rippled from the apartment. A sharp contrast to his own apartment.

Curious, he picked up his worn teddy and dragged it with him down the hall. The scent of Christmas dinner filled the hall and children with their shiny new toys ran around the apartment. The open door gave him a perfect view of all the things he saw on TV. How things were supposed to be, but never were.

A little girl inside ran to the door and looked him over. "What did Santa get you for Christmas?"

Angel looked down at his thread bare toy, stuffing spilling from an empty eye socket. He shoved the toy behind his back uncertain what to say. He couldn't recall ever getting a gift from Santa. All the kids talked about

him, even the horrible boys that were said never to get gifts from the kindly man.

A deep voice called the little girl back into the apartment and the world inside was closed to him with a click of the door.

He turned back to his own apartment as the shouts grew more intense, wishing for just one moment that things were different.

The slow steps of a man climbing the stairs caught his attention and Angel looked up as the man paused in the hall. His long trench coat was covered in snow and a hat sat at an angle on his head, keeping his face in shadows.

He stared up at the man in awe. His hair touched with silver and gray eyes bright and kind. He didn't have a beard like he did in the movies or a mustache, but those eyes, so bright and alive, said it all.

"Merry Christmas, young one," he whispered, and pulled out a handful of candies and a brand new teddy bear.

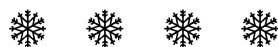
Angel took the toy in his hands and stared up in awe at the man in front of him. He couldn't find his voice. He knew he should thank him for such a gift, but was unable to make the words unclog his throat.

The man laughed gently. "Shh. Have a great holiday."

Santa had made a trip just for him. Perhaps to make up for the lack over the years.

The man ruffled his hair and continued on his way down the hall and up the stairs, before disappearing out of sight.

The vision faded, but not the joy.



HIS vision blurred and Angel closed the box slowly. Primal stood in front of him, watching his face, hope visible in those gray eyes.

"Well?" Primal asked. "What was it?"

Angel frowned. "You don't know?"

"I gave you one happy memory, I didn't choose it. You did."

He looked up at Primal a long moment. “Do you still give gifts to children?”

Primal blinked. “Only to those who see me. How did you know I did that?”

“That was my memory. It was you. I thought you were Santa Claus. You gave me a new teddy and some candy.” Angel stared up at him. “You were my happy memory. You’ve always been my happy memory.”

Primal reached out and stroked his cheek. “I didn’t know.”

Angel cupped his hand over Primal’s and smiled. He could get lost in the gray eyes.

The souls of the couple called out to them and Angel turned his attention back to his duty. They moved behind the couch and one at a time, released the couple from their shells. Primal took Angel’s hand as the portal opened. The elderly couple barely noticed them as they walked hand-in-hand through their portal. In love even after so many years.

Angel could relate to that.

The portal closed leaving them alone in the small candlelit house. Church bells chimed in the distance announcing the arrival of Christmas.

Primal’s hand tugged him close and Angel looked up into his gentle face.

“Happy Holidays, Angel,” he whispered.

Angel leaned in close. “Happy Holidays,” he said, and their lips met in a gentle kiss.

His body sighed against Primal’s holding him tight. Another fond memory only Primal could give.

THE END

C.M. TORRENS writes stories of dark new worlds and of people finding love in strange places. Her fascination with paranormal and the unusual often lead her down strange paths that creep onto the page. She loves stories which uncover hope in bleak circumstances and remind us that we are never really alone.

She can be found at: <http://www.CMTorrens.com>

Other Titles:

His Soul To Take – Dreamspinner Press

Holiday Under Wraps

By AJ O'Donovan

JO stepped out of the car and frowned up at the house. It was decked out with fake snow and lights from top to bottom. As beautiful as it was it was another reminder of the two worlds that she and Patrick came from. He thought nothing of going all out for Christmas decoration wise while all she could think about was how much money he was spending on electricity and useless pretty things.

She slammed the door shut and leant back against her car. She didn't want to resent him for growing up with responsible parents and enough money for trips to Europe every summer while her family struggled to feed themselves. Taking a deep breath she reminded herself she was above such things. The door opened and a cheery light spilt onto the lawn. Patrick stood framed in the doorway, a bright welcoming smile on his face. Her worries melted away as she saw him and she crossed the garden to hug him.

"Hey, babe." His voice soothed her as she snuggled into his embrace. "Welcome home."

"That still takes some getting used to." She smiled up at him.

"Come on, let's get inside. I have something for you." Jo followed him into the living room with some trepidation, his idea of a gift was usually something she thought was far too expensive.

“Surprise!” The lights flicked on as a crowd of people jumped up from their hiding places. Jo clutched a hand to her chest.

“Jesus, guys! You scared me!” Patrick tucked her under his arm as their friends grinned at her.

“We wanted to throw a housewarming slash Christmas party for you Jo!” one of Patrick’s coworkers said as he handed her a drink. Jo tried to put on her happy face as someone cranked up some Christmas music and red and green wrapped packages appeared from behind backs. Christmas. She quickly downed the drink and held it up to cover her annoyance.

“Let’s celebrate!” she called. The occupants of the room cheered and turned their focus to the food laid out on the living room table, or to dancing.

Patrick tightened his one armed hug and kissed the top of her head. “I knew you’d be happy with this. I know it’s still a few days til Christmas but people had other plans tomorrow and of course we all wanted to have a party to celebrate you moving in with me too.”

Yeah. It was the twenty third of December. Her birthday. And everyone had forgotten. One of her friends pushed a cracker into her hand as Patrick was pulled away to help pile up presents. With a grimace she pulled it and frantically tried to think of a way to endure the party.

She made her way through the room, saying hi to everyone and collapsed into her favourite chair. She’d snagged another glass of drink on her way through and sipped it thoughtfully. Patrick was an amazing fiancé no doubt, but this party made her so upset with him. He can’t have forgotten that it was her birthday, could he? She had complained to him in the past that she was always getting combined presents and Christmas cards instead of birthday ones. People were so wrapped up in the holiday spirit that they forgot that she was celebrating something different. She had thought for sure that things would change once she was settled with Patrick. But apparently not. Sure she said it was fine to put up so many lights and things on the house but maybe he was asking because she was sharing in the bills now? Ugh, it didn’t make sense! She drained her glass and stared at the pile of Christmas presents Patrick was putting under the tree. Six foot of fake green

fir adorned with pretty baubles and lights mocked her resolve to be happy about things.

The top of the tree had a little glittery star and she silently wished that her friends and especially her fiancé understood that sometimes she wanted to be a little selfish and have her birthday to herself and not have it overshadowed by stupid Christmas.

She hadn't made it to twenty eight without enduring a few disappointing birthdays before now so with a grin she threw herself into the party spirit. She made her way through the room saying hi to everyone, exchanging hugs and eating bits of mince pies and mixed nuts for the next two hours until her face hurt from smiling and her head was ringing with the sound of sleigh bells. The party had started winding down when she found herself pushed under a sprig of mistletoe. With a laugh she kissed Patrick squarely on the lips to the sound of applause.



JO waved the last guest out the door before closing it with a sigh. Patrick pulled her into a hug and she felt some of her resentment melt away. "The surprises aren't over yet." He teased her and she groaned inwardly. She'd already endured a Christmas party on her birthday, what more could he have planned? He pulled her along the corridor and up to their bedroom. There was a beautifully wrapped shoe sized box sat on the bed. She didn't know what to do if he'd bought some expensive shoes. She barely wore heels as it was and she'd probably break an ankle in something designer.

"What is it?" she started towards it but Patrick held her hand tightly and she stopped.

"Look, I know you haven't had the easiest life growing up—"

"Oh, Patrick, I—"

"No, let me finish." She looked him in the eyes and saw he was deadly serious and nodded. "I know you didn't have a lot of money growing up and never really got to have a house all decked out for Christmas like I did, or had fancy parties. And I know you never really got things you really wanted. I want to change all that. I want you to have everything you ever

dreamed of. And I wanted to start that tonight. Which is why I threw this party and I got all our friends here to celebrate you moving in with me.”

“And Christmas,” she couldn’t help but add.

“You may think that. But you’re wrong. I know you better than you think Jo. Open your present now.” She frowned up at him. Cryptic wasn’t really his style. Taking a deep breath she let go of his hand and crossed the room to the bed. How could he say he knew her after tonight? After forgetting her birthday and making her feel so damned inferior to him? She lifted the red velvet lid off the box and blinked at the pile of newspaper inside.

She looked over at Patrick and saw he was grinning like an idiot. Looking back, she pulled the paper out, expecting to see some shoes or a designer top. Instead she saw something furry and black.

“What the hell?” as she spoke the fur moved and she shrieked a little, dropping the lid on the bed. A tiny kitten popped its head up from the balls of newspaper and gently meowed at her. Her heart froze as she stared down at its tiny adorable face. Patrick came up behind her and hugged her tight against him.

“You once told me that you never had a pet growing up, and that every year you wished for a kitten for your birthday.” At the word birthday she jumped and struggled to turn to see Patrick’s face. “You thought I forgot didn’t you? No, my love, I remembered. And everyone at the party was in on it. All those Christmas presents under the tree? They’re double wrapped, once with birthday paper and Christmas paper on top. I wanted you to have your dreams. I wanted you to have your home, your friends, your pet, and your special day.”

Jo wiped her eyes as she realized she was crying. She had no idea he could be this amazing.

“Happy birthday.”

THE END

AJ grew up in Cardiff, but moved after a nasty sheep breakup. She now lives in Newport and eschews wool in favor of cotton. You can find her living the glamorous life of a writer and eating bonbons all day in her Castle in the picturesque hills of Wales. For other things she makes up, please visit www.ajodonovan.com

Change of Heart

By Nena Clements

ONE thing was certain, this Chanukah promised to be unlike any other holiday celebration Rachel had ever experienced. Her anticipation of a benign family gathering crumbled to tiny shards the moment a rich baritone resonated at the kitchen doorway. There was no mistaking that voice or the jovial inflection of his words. Aaron Weiss stood behind her.

Her hands stilled from their task as air caught in her throat. It couldn't be. Her Aunt Minerva wouldn't play matchmaker yet again. She couldn't possibly be doing it with him.

Instinctively Rachel's hand tightened around the potato she grasped while the fingers of her right hand curled about the knife. Please don't come in she silently begged.

"Hello Mrs. Spellman."

"Aaron." Aunt Minnie turned, giving him wave of her hand. "Come on in." She swept a glance at Rachel in the process. "Have a seat. Have you met my niece?" Before he could say a word she made introductions. "This is Rachel. Rachel, Aaron. He's a newcomer to the congregation." She gave him a wide smile. "He's away from home and we weren't about to leave him to spend the holiday alone."

Rachel didn't dare turn. She'd end up dropping everything in her hands. It was bad enough Aunt Minnie had roped her into peeling fifteen pounds of potatoes as it was.

"I believe we know each other, thanks." He rounded the table and slid into the chair almost directly opposite her. She couldn't look at him, not yet.

Rachel felt his gaze brush over her, warm and appreciative. No one had ever really looked at her the way Aaron did, even all those years ago. Her usual cursory glance without meeting of the eyes should have told him he held no interest for her, even now. But Aaron wasn't easily deterred. He saw straight through her and it unnerved her.

She could feel his gaze bore right through her as if it were daggers. Her heart beat a crazy tattoo against the inside of her chest. It was all she could do to keep her hands from shaking.

Raising her gaze, Aaron's face came into view. Rachel schooled her expression into a friendly, noncommittal smile. She had become practiced at hiding behind a mask of indifference. But those years of practice didn't help her in the least. She took in a heavy breath to keep from gaping. He was just as she remembered him, only better. His easy smile brightened expressive hazel eyes above sharp cheek-bones. His classic nose still protruded just a tad too much, but it didn't detract from his strong jaw and the determined jut of his chin. A mass of chestnut waves framed it all. Striking was the placement of a yarmulke at the crown of his head. He never wore one all those years ago.

He was as beautiful in real life as he was in her mind's eye, yet now he was a man rather than a boy. His sensuality screamed at her from across the table and she cursed the fact she noticed it so explicitly.

"Yes, Aunt Minnie," Rachel smiled politely. "I do know Aaron." His warm smile brought a mild wave of heat to her face.

"So Rachel, it's good to see you again." His gaze roamed over her face in a sweet caress, but never lowered to the rest of her body. Not that it needed to. The changes in her face were enough to give anyone a hint of her transformation. "You look great."

Rachel waited now. It was due to come any second. Everyone who'd known her from her high school days always remarked about it.

"Thanks." Rachel gave him her standard smile. He just smiled back. She turned the knife in her hand mindlessly, expecting the next line. It always came. He crossed his arms in front of him. Then he leaned in. Close enough to make the space private, but leaving just enough between them not to crowd her. Here it comes she thought.

"What happened to you that night after the dance, Rachel? You know I waited for you." His pleasant smile melted into a flinch of hurt.

That night was his last night in high school six years ago.

His words threw her off kilter, her mind scrambling to place the time and situation he talked about. This wasn't at all the question she had anticipated.

"You said you'd wait right there for me." Disappointment shrouded his features, but only briefly. His lips curved into a bone melting smile, all teeth and warmth and his eyes... They traced her features, the top of her head, her nose, resting at last on her lips. Then trailing back up to her eyes. Something remarkable saturated her under his inspection. The unnatural tingle of admiration brought every nerve alive over every inch of her skin. And all this from one raking look. Rachel knew right then she was in trouble.

"That night?" She clambered for an answer, dragging herself from the foreign sensations his gaze stimulated in her, to sift through memories. How could she forget? He had danced with her. He had held her like no other boy had held her. Close and possessive. For the first time in her life she hadn't perceived some cruelty crouching in the wings. Then, after they'd finished dancing, he brought her to a secluded place in the gym and kissed her. Even now the memory of that kiss sent sparks firing in places she'd rather had just stayed dormant.

"Hmmm." He looked at her, refusing to release her as his silence egged a response out of her.

Rachel remained mute, her gaze fixed on his. Much to her relief, her aunt turned from the pan of oil she warmed on the stove to fill the overwhelming quiet. “So Rachel, how do you know Aaron?”

Rachel flashed her a tight look. “We met before Aaron graduated. Wasn’t that it?” Rachel forced her face to smile. Her insides shook, though. She had spent the last four years teaching herself the art of confidence, but deep inside she trembled.

“That’s right.” Aaron slid a glance to her aunt. “We were just getting to know each other when Rachel disappeared.” He swiveled in his seat to watch Rachel work, again his gaze firm and inscrutable.

From the corner of her eye, Rachel watched her aunt turn, the question poised on her tongue. “Disappeared?”

Once more his stare pierced the silence, begging an answer into the emptiness. Rachel bent her head, instead to the potato in hand, remaining mute and hoping her aunt would let it drop. She had no intention of revealing details of her past to her aunt. Aunt Minnie was sweet and kind and Rachel’s history would only invoke the woman’s pity. The past was past and Rachel wished it to remain so.

Rachel pursued the seeming tedium of peeling potatoes. Thank goodness for the distraction because God knew the man unnerved her. It had been quite a while since she’d allowed anyone to get the best of her. Aaron had the decent manners to let it drop.

Aunt Minnie rifled under the sink in a bin and pulled out two very large onions. “Aaron arrived at our synagogue last month from Israel.” She laid the onions next to the pile of potatoes Rachel tackled.

Rachel eyed them suspiciously. “Surely you don’t mean for me to chop those?”

Aunt Minnie arched a delicate brow. “Latkes aren’t the same without the onions?”

“Oh no. I mean, yes. Of course.” An uncanny uneasiness tightened in her chest. Onions always made her cry. None of the anecdotes she’d learned prevented it and here she was worried about how her make-up would

smudge. There she'd be, raccoon eyes in front of Aaron Weiss. Ordinarily vanity never took precedence in her life, but *he* was here. Since when had Rachel worried about her appearance?

Aaron's long reach grazed past Rachel's hand, sending a tingle of electric sizzle up her arm. "I'll do it, Mrs. Spellman. Have you another knife?" He made sure she saw his lopsided grin in the process.

Aunt Minnie shot Rachel an *I'm impressed* face over Aaron's shoulder. Apprehension stilled Rachel's hand. She narrowed her eyes in warning to her aunt. The woman didn't need any encouragement about the man. It would only fuel her matchmaking tendencies. Lord knew the world would be a better place without Aunt Minnie stirring up the pot. But even more shocking was Rachel's silent relief that Aaron was her aunt's focus.

Her aunt fished another knife from a drawer and laid it on the table. "I can use every able body we have here. It's going to take an hour to cook all these as it is."

"I'll earn my dinner at least."

"I don't usually put guests to work, but in this case I'll make an exception."

Aaron started in on the onion without a moment's hesitation. "This is one of those rare talents you acquire in Kibbutz life." He waggled his brows at her aunt, but sent the brunt of his charm to Rachel. "If you don't help prepare the food, you don't eat."

A Kibbutz. Rachel choked back the awe surfacing in her face. The man went from a fairly plush life here in the States to live the life of a communal farmer in Israel. He had guts.

She eyed the onion he started peeling, still obsessing over her mascara and the perils of onion juice in the air.

"I had wanted to do that when I was younger." A wistful look came over her aunt's face. The intrusion provided an excellent distraction. Rachel had lost track of Aaron's whereabouts after he'd graduated Harvard. They had been to high school together a good two hundred miles away. She hadn't meant to keep track of him to begin with, but things had just turned out that

way. Blissful ignorance was preferred to knowing details about the one person she was drawn to all those years ago. Now here he sat within arm's reach of her. And there was no sign of a gold band on his left hand ring finger. Even more dangerous.

"Yeah." He started fingering the skin of one onion, loosening the husk and peeling it from the flesh. "I went to Yeshiva in Jerusalem for a year and spent the last year on a Kibbutz."

Rachel concentrated on the potato in her grasp, feigning indifference at his news. Deep down she admired him and his bravado. Rachel graduated from Morris University and moved from her parent's home to her aunt's town to work. That hardly constituted any dramatic life changes. But taking time away from studies to spend two whole years in Israel impressed her beyond measure. To go to an Israeli Yeshiva on top of that was truly an accomplishment.

"What are you doing now, Rachel?" His brown eyes fixed her to the spot.

"I just finished my undergrad studies in Visual Arts at Morris. I'm working on a masters in fine arts at SIU here." She plopped a peeled spud into the pot at the end of the table. She didn't want the focus on her any more than the basics. "Last I heard you were in Harvard's pre-law program."

Aaron's head shot up.

Oh crap. That was a tactical error. How could she possibly show distance from any interest when she spouted such details?

"I only say that because when you say you were at Yeshiva." Her shoulder shrugged over her ear. "You aren't at Harvard."

His mouth stretched into a broad smile that lit his brown eyes. "No, I'm not." He broke their contact and bent to finish peeling the onion.

Now he was playing coy. She waited though. He hadn't even broached the subject of her weight. Everyone did sooner or later.

Silence stretched between them for a moment. The Dreidle song filtered in from the living room and Andrea, Rachel's thirteen year old

cousin, sauntered into the kitchen, Aaron in her sights. For such a young girl, Andrea understood the interaction between the sexes better than any of Rachel's friends. The child was too worldly for her own good. Fortunately Rachel's Aunt Minnie knew her daughter all too well.

"Aaron this is Andrea." Aunt Minnie narrowed her gaze in warning to her daughter as she slid into a chair next to Rachel, opposite Aaron.

"Hey Andrea," he nodded. "You ready to peel away?"

Andrea crinkled her pointed little face at the inquiry. "I just came to visit." She stretched slender perfectly manicured fingers in front of her. "I'm not about to ruin this nail job."

A roll of gusty laughter issued from Aaron. "With that attitude at a Kibbutz you'd be sent to dig up potatoes instead of peeling them."

Andrea tucked her delicate hands under her chin. "I guess that rules out living on a Kibbutz, then." Her mother's laughter rang from her station at the stove.

"You can be assured of that. Andrea has a career in fashion planned."

At that, the little nymph straightened her slender shoulders and cocked her head. "That's right."

Everyone chimed in laughter at her assertion.

Rachel hadn't been that sure of herself at that age. She remembered quivering at the mere thought of a future. Back then Rachel couldn't get past the extra roll on her belly or even past the extra doughnut on the plate.

The last potatoes peeled, Rachel and Minnie shredded them, mixed them with the onions and flour and eggs ready for the frying pan. The familiar aroma of fried potatoes filled the kitchen with those first dollops.

"You two go relax." She shooed them from the kitchen, wooden spoon in hand. "I'll take care of the rest. I'll call you if I need you."

Just the words Rachel dreaded hearing. This meant Aaron would have ample opportunity to grill her about her past.

While the younger children played Dreidle on the living room floor, Aaron cornered Rachel on the large sectional. She tried not to show how nervous his proximity made her. The fact he could get away with it, ground at her. She wanted nothing more than to be close to him, truth be told.

“So, Rach. Tell me what happened that night.” She couldn’t believe he persisted in this vein.

“It was pumpkin time, Aaron,” she shrugged.

“You told me you’d wait while I got the car.”

That had been a lie. Rachel’d had no intention of going anywhere with Aaron Weiss. At seventeen, she knew far too well how boys played. None of them had any interest in Rachel as a person. Degrading and humiliating her because she was the fat girl was all they’d intended.

His attentions during those last few hours of that dance had made Rachel feel like a queen, though. She’d had fun dancing and talking, but she didn’t reveal anything soul rendering. Rachel knew how to play that game. Experience made her leery. Too often she’d been led on and then unceremoniously dumped. They enjoyed making her a laughing stock among their buddies. She prayed he wasn’t like the other boys, but she knew when to pick up her toys and skedaddle. That’s exactly what she did, too. When he left for his car she’d seen the perfect opportunity to make a run for it.

Rachel glared at him. “What did you expect?”

His handsome face wrinkled into a scowl. “What do you mean? I told you I’d take you home. I meant it.”

“Please.” Her hand sliced through the air. “I know a mercy case when I see one, Aaron. I was just letting you off the hook.”

“What is that supposed to mean? Mercy case?” He gave her a dark glare.

“I know how you guys played the fat girl. I wasn’t going to make you go through with all of it.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about?”

Rachel didn't want to finish this conversation. Aaron's gaze drilled into her and she was beginning to feel more uncomfortable with every passing second. She had no intention of divulging any soul rending revelations. She kept to herself. Life was just safer that way. Risking any piece of her heart now was still dangerous.

Aunt Minnie wafted into the room. She propped her shoulder against the living room arch, drying her hands in a towel. Her gaze swept past the four younger children stretched across the rug and leaning against the furniture.

"I can use some help in here now."

That was Rachel's cue. A thankful flood of relief swept over her, freeing her from Aaron's incessant inquiry.

"I've got it," she said, surging to her feet. From the corner of her eye, she saw Aaron follow in her wake. Her initial rush of relief faded as he followed her into the kitchen.

"Wow." Piles of latkes decorated several platters as well as a varied assortment of donuts stacked in delectable piles. Her aunt stooped over the open oven, oven-mitts donned, to pull a large roaster from its depths. "You've made all those potatoes?"

"It isn't hard when I have one large hot plate and two frying pans." She set the roaster on the stove and removed the lid. The aroma of heated brisket filled the room, almost knocking Rachel off her feet. She was hungry and that was the most delectable flavor her taste buds had experienced in months.

"That smells heavenly, Aunt Minnie."

"Am I glad I made it over here tonight, Mrs. Spellman. Would've hated to miss this feast." Aaron leaned over Rachel's back, his body heat radiating through her back.

"You two set the table, if you would? Silverware is in this drawer." She pulled at one drawer next to the refrigerator. "Plates and glasses are up here." She nodded at the glass paneled door with plates behind it. "Oh. The

channukiahs are in the pantry. Use all four of them.” Aunt Minnie waved her on. “Don’t tell me it’s over doing it. I like each child to light his own.”

“That’s a lot of candles Aunt Minnie.” With that her aunt tossed her shopping sack filled with eight boxes of candles. “Yep, that’ll take care of it.” They all laughed.

Rachel and Aaron made short order of the table. Rachel pulled silverware from the drawer while Aaron set out the plates and glasses. Tension vibrated between them as she fought to avoid brushing his shoulder. The back of her hand brushed over his fingers as he set down a plate. That unmistakable charge rushed through her arm at the touch. Preventing contact as she sidled past him proved almost impossible around the extra bodies. The slightest graze along his body created a flame of heat in her cheeks. Rachel didn’t dare chance a glance at him for fear she’d puddle on the floor from embarrassment.

It was all pushed aside as Aunt Minnie, a platter laden with brisket, called everyone to the table. She placed another platter piled with brisket at the other end of the table along with two bowls of salad and a large bowl of green beans. Three separate plates of latkes dotted the table with their accompanying sides of applesauce and sour cream. The menorahs were sprinkled around all those plates of food. It was the most wonderful Chanukah feast Rachel had the pleasure of enjoying since she’d left home.

Before long the whole family crowded around the large table leaving empty dishes and platters in their wake. Lively chatter from the younger kids droned beneath adult conversation. Rachel kept to herself, but Aaron’s presence loomed large next to her. He answered questions from her uncle and her great Aunt Elsie, always shifting his gaze to include her in the conversation. His connection with her family surprised her. Especially since he’d only just joined their synagogue.

Rachel didn’t want him to be included, though. She didn’t want to know any more about him. He was already too good looking with too many great qualities to ignore. Rachel, though, had decided well into her sophomore year in college that investing herself emotionally into another human being outside of her family wasn’t worth the effort. From then on it

was just her. Her art gave her the emotional outlet she needed. She didn't need the roller coaster thrill of a relationship while she worked at getting her life in order. That seemed to be enough, until tonight.

As the younger children filtered away from the table, Rachel helped Aunt Minnie clear the dishes. Aaron followed her every move with a far too conspicuous hunger. She just knew he wanted to pull her away somewhere and finish their previous conversation.

The table cleared and tidied, her aunt arranged the small menorahs known as channukiahs, installing candles at the shamash, or servant candle, stations and in the first hole of each menorah. Then she disappeared for a short while to return with several wrapped gifts in her arms.

"Let me help with you with that," Aaron offered, taking the largest packages from her and setting them on the table before he folded once more into the chair beside Rachel. All that male heat warmed her eliciting another shudder of nerves. All four children trailed behind her aunt with giggles and laughs. As soon as she set the packages down they rifled through them, shaking and jostling trying to guess the contents.

The blessings were sung by all as each child lit the single candle for the first night of Chanukah on their menorah. It was an unusual mixture of bass and baritone and tinny child-like tones. Rachel reveled in the sound of it all. There had only been herself and her parents to sing the blessings all those years ago.

No sooner was the shamash reseated into their holders, then the packages were opened. It was more like ripped open, each child shredding the paper to reveal his or her treasure. The children wasted little time in retreating to the other rooms to play with their new toys, leaving the adults to sip coffee and nosh on the remaining donuts. Rachel had settled into her seat with a fresh cup of coffee when firm fingers circled her wrist and tugged at her gently. Aaron's insistent pull brought her out of her seat, his head nodding toward the front room.

"Follow me," he coaxed.

Rachel's questioning gaze swung to her aunt who only shrugged a mute response of ignorance to the unspoken question.

Aaron pulled her through the living room, stopping at the coat closet in the front hall. He pulled Rachel's wool coat from the rack and pushed into her hands.

"What's this?"

"Put it on, please. I'd like to talk to you outside. It's pretty crowded in here."

Dutifully, Rachel shrugged into the coat. She could have refused she guessed, but the silent pleading look in his eyes warred against her obstinate nature. He was a man with a mission and no amount of deterrence would keep him at bay.

Once on the porch, Aaron rounded on her, pinning her between his large frame and the porch railing. He wasn't exactly menacing, but his whole body vibrated with determination.

"What was that last statement about the fat girl all about?" acidity laced his voice. The set of his jaw and the way his eyes bore through her told her a glossing over as an answer wouldn't satisfy this inquiry.

Explaining all that hurt without revealing the pain clenched her chest tight. So tight her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. Rachel narrowed her eyes and shrugged, hoping it might assuage him. He had picked up the conversation as if the last hour and half hadn't happened. She doubted the effectiveness of her sidestepping from this point.

Her knuckles whitened as she tightened her grip on the wood beneath her seat. She sucked in a breath and breathed it out. "It was the standard joke around school. Don't tell me you didn't know I was the local entertainment."

A faint flush raked over his cheeks and regret shadowed his brown eyes. "So you just lumped me into that group of losers?" He shoved his fingers through his hair, dislodging his yarmulke in the process.

Of course that's what she thought. Aaron was male, wasn't he? Didn't all the boys behave the same? For the briefest moment her heart stopped. Had his actions truly been from the heart?

"I didn't know you from the next guy," she replied, her voice sounding small against the new revelation. Which wasn't entirely true. Aaron was male, but he wasn't like the other boys.

Aaron fixed her with his soft brown eyes, pain edging them. "Couldn't you tell from the way I kissed you?"

Rachel closed her eyes and swallowed the ache of the memory of his kisses. They were bone melting. No boy had ever kissed her so sublimely, not even as a lure for mockery. No man had kissed her like that since. She had dismissed the tender joy of Aaron's kisses to the infatuation she had had for him at the time. He was attractive. He'd played the lead in the senior play, a dashing example of a modern prince charming. His natural charisma had drawn her to him, but she wouldn't allow herself to believe true affection bolstered his bold advances that night. Rachel had learned a hard lesson from the last two boys who had taken her out.

She discovered the hard way how cruel boys were. After going out with Jimmy Sims, it was only a burger joint for food. He'd taken her for a drive in his car afterward. She let him kiss her, but nothing else happened. The guy didn't really seem into it and Rachel may have been eager for a liaison, but she never compromised her integrity to get there. He'd taken her home within the hour.

The damage unfolded the next day at school. Between the cutting remarks from Jimmy's buddies and the snickers from the girls of the "in" clique, Rachel realized her "date" had been purely entertainment for his crowd... at her expense. Rachel wanted to crawl in to the gutter when she realized what they'd done. The humiliation almost crushed her. Until her plan of retaliation took on a life of its own. She could play the same game.

Lead them on and leave them before their prank took a bite out of her. Showing them she knew what was underway her best defense.

Rachel wasn't about to let on the immense emotional toll the ordeal had cost her. Even now, the twinge of hurt still stung. Instinctively her practiced outer crust reappeared as she thrust out her chin at him.

"Don't tell me you didn't hear about the tricks all the boys liked to play on Rachel Spellman. Fat Rachel, desperate to the core."

Horror descended on his face. "I never hung around with those jerks. The thespian crowd was more my speed. Those assholes always had it out for us."

Rachel didn't want to believe him. How could she? Every boy in the junior class had used her gullible nature as a means to poke fun at her. She shuddered at the memory of all that humiliation. Lurid leers and snide remarks followed her down the hallways that year. *Throw Fat Rachel a bone. She's desperate.*

"I find that hard to believe," she replied.

Aaron narrowed the space between them, pressing his knees against her thighs.

"You really believe I was part of some plot to debase and humiliate you? After all these years, you still hold to that?"

The inflection of pain in those words sent a stab of stinging remorse through her chest. When he put it like that, she sounded like a horrible witch.

"What else was I to think? Every time I confided in someone, the information came back to bite me. I found more enemies than friends. I naturally lumped all males in the enemy section of my social hierarchy. High school was plain hell. I couldn't wait to get out of there."

"Those kids were cruel beyond measure. I'm sorry you had to go through that. Rachel, I would never do that."

He was right, of course. She'd found Aaron guilty of those offenses solely by his gender.

His wide hands pressed warmth to her thighs as he held her gaze. Rachel studied his face, the set of his mouth and the tightening of his jaw.

His hands slid from her legs to encase her cold fingers, prying them from the wooden railing of the porch.

“You’re hands are ice.” Gentle pressure infused warmth into her frigid fingers.

“I forgot my gloves.” She shrugged off his concern, though his touch started to shatter her neatly constructed shield. He’d spent the whole evening chipping away at it. Her tidy little world was slowly unraveling as he tugged at the loose ends. Rachel fought to tuck those ends back away, but Aaron’s determination was proving to be more of a challenge than she’d anticipated.

He raised her hand to his lips and breathed on her fingers. The humid warmth of his breath sent shivers of excitement skittering along her skin. Rachel fought with herself to withdraw her hand, but Aaron’s grasp was so secure she’d never get her hand free before he could snatch it back, of that she was sure.

Then his lips touched her skin. Warm, soft, moisture caressing her fingers. His brown gaze riveted her to the spot. She sought only to find any form of malice or malevolence in his face, but all she found was a hunger and a form of reverence that made her knees spongy and wobbly. If not for the railing, Rachel was sure she’d be a puddle on the slats.

“I couldn’t find you at all, Rachel. No one knew where you lived and none of the Spellman’s in the book had a Rachel in their house.”

Revisiting that night again threw her off kilter. She hadn’t recovered from his hands on hers and his mouth and his nearness.

“Yeah.” She stumbled over the words. “My dad had our number unlisted.” A nervous, jittery laugh escaped her throat as she watched him closely. “I didn’t have many friends.” Her chest ached against the memory. “Who cared where I lived?”

He narrowed his eyes in disbelief. “I can’t believe that, Rachel. You’re witty and smart. You were a blast to be with.”

“I was fat!” She tugged at her hand, but his fingers tightened their hold. “My sense of humor hid all the crap and despair of being shunned.”

Aaron's weight bore against her legs as the porch's column pressed into her back.

"I think we should forget about the past. Except for that last hour." His brown eyes smoldered. "I can't forget about that last hour, Rachel."

Neither could she. Try as she might through the years, her mind always wandered to the feel of him around and next to her that night. For a boy of eighteen he had been remarkable. He had treated her like a real person. His consideration for her needs and his generous nature left her believing, if only for the moment, what it might be like to be truly loved. But far be it from Rachel to be fooled. For that reason alone, Rachel had fled from him. Knowing the truth would have shattered the fantasy and it was one of her only happy memories from all those gruesome years of high school.

Aaron leaned in closer, his breath warm against her cheek. "I never cared about your weight. You are more that." His knees edged her legs apart, warmth suffusing the inner part of her thighs through her corduroy pants.

Rachel's heart started a heavy tattoo against her ribs as Aaron narrowed the space. She strained her head to gaze past his broad shoulders, almost hoping someone would step out the door. "Are you sure we should be doing this at my aunt's house?"

"Doing what?" A playful curl edged his full mouth as his forehead nudged hers. "I'm going to kiss you. You do realize that?"

Rachel nodded slowly, her eyes captivated by the warmth of his gaze. His wide hands trailed up her arms, halting at her shoulders. His head angled and warm lips captured hers. His body pressed closer as his fingers tunneled into her hair, pinning her against him in delicious heat. His body nestled between her legs, wedging her between the porch post and all that hard muscle.

Rachel's arms took on a life of their own, circling his neck as her mouth begged him for more. More heat, more moisture, more Aaron. He still tasted of latkes mixed with the sweet of donuts, but he smelled of male. Her fingers dug into the heavy wool of his coat as she sought grounding

from the wave of passion as it shudder through her. His mouth was insistent and demanding, yet tender all at once. Rachel hadn't remembered when a kiss could disarm her so quickly.

His tongue swept over her lower lip, begging entrance. Rachel opened to the warm, wet taste of him. Her tongue tangled and cajoled with his as his hands moved down her back and tightened around her. He pressed her against him, hard and firm. The flare of heat in her cheeks at his bold advance was cooled by the December air.

Here she was, kissing Aaron Weiss. How long had his last kisses haunted her? Not only was he kissing her, his body pressed against her in fiery heat. She felt every contour despite her coat. His leg rubbed shivers of excitement into the inside of her thighs. Between his mouth and his thigh Rachel felt herself swirling in a haze of longing she'd only dreamed existed. Beautiful, enticing sensations whirled within her. Rachel struggled to stay grounded in reality before the tumult of his kisses sent her body and her brain into an alternate reality. But Rachel discovered she preferred this realm after all.

Unexpectedly, Aaron broke the kiss, his labored breathing matching her own. Pressing his forehead into hers, his hazel eyes peered at her from under dark brows.

"Don't tell me you don't feel that, Rachel." His hands trailed down her neck to bracket her shoulders.

His breath warmed her face and she nestled her head under his chin. He was right. Every thrill of those kisses years ago returned to haunt her. It had been torture to tear herself away that night, knowing that her body responded to him so intimately then. Her reasoning that night had been protective. Afraid he would inflict the same shame the other boys had put her through. That was so simple an explanation. Her need to be wanted almost had won out over self defense. But she'd torn herself from the overpowering feelings his kisses and caresses had elicited. She had been strong enough six years ago.

Not so tonight. Tonight Rachel wouldn't run. Tonight she would stay and find out what lay ahead.

Her shoulders sagged as she leaned into his chest and his arms slid around her back. He encased her in warmth and strength. The scratch of wool registered against her cheek and the scent of the fibers, her head bobbing the affirmative. The comfort of his thigh warmed the outside of her left leg and she felt herself burrow deeper in his arms.

Aaron's crooked finger lifted her chin so his warm smile filled her field of view.

"Talk to me, Rachel."

"I don't know what to say." Her heart hammered against the inside of her chest. She pressed her lips tight. All this was too new and wonderful at the same time.

"Tell me you didn't run away six years ago because you didn't like me."

Her mouth curved into an involuntary smile. "No. That wasn't it. I told you why." Her face heated under his intense inspection. "I was afraid. I liked you and I couldn't bear to find out you too would have tricked me."

A frown formed on his lips. "Damn," he swore softly under his breath. "I hate that you thought that of me. You fascinate me. I just wanted to get to know you. That night was magic. You were always beautiful to me, Rachel."

Her chest clenched at the implication. He couldn't know the hurt those boys had inflicted on her. Her only defense was to fight back. How many boys could she treat the same way she'd been treated? He was just a casualty of the war. If she'd only known. But she hadn't given him half a chance. Rachel guarded her heart fiercely back then. Even now she kept a shield at the ready.

"I didn't know, Aaron. Back then you were another boy. As far as I was concerned, boys were dangerous. All boys. But there was something different about you. I couldn't risk the hurt to find out."

"I'm sorry you had to go through that." The pad of his thumb rubbed lazy circles on her cheek, regret registering in his eyes. His gaze remained riveted to hers. "I'm just glad I found you again." His head dipped again and claimed her lips in another searing kiss.

Rachel's heart beat pounded within her chest, the surge of blood pounded in her ears. Was this really happening? More pressure of his hard body against hers. The thick layers of their jackets didn't diminish the heat their bodies exchanged. Aaron's hands bracketed her head gently once again before he pulled away.

"You know Channukah is a time of new beginnings. I want to start something with you Rachel Spellman. You promise to give me half a chance this time?"

The palms of her hands rubbed a trail up his back, drawing him closer to her. His words made fresh hope bloom inside her. Rachel's move to Bloomington had been a fresh start for her life. She could never have anticipated this much of a fresh start.

"I promise. I won't run away this time." She smiled into his handsome face, the sting of happy tears at the back of her eyes. "After that kiss any man should have another chance. Even from me." Every nerve in her body hummed at the thought of more kisses, more everything from Aaron Weiss.

He was right. This was the time to start something new. It was the season to start over. Rachel desperately needed a new beginning in her life, letting loose of the past and embracing the future without fear. For the first time in her life joy spread through her. Radiating fragments of light saturated her. A fresh hope gave her a buoyancy she'd never experienced. Being in Aaron's arms certainly made everything richer, more tangible.

Channuka truly was the right time to make a change.

THE END

NENA'S clean country life is filled with kids, dogs, cats, goats, chickens and horses. The fresh air inspires her stories of sweet romance, some contemporary and some historical. She is often seen riding her horse to clear her head, instilling daydreams of new characters that are just waiting for their turn on paper. She churns out stories in the hopes one of them will find a home with a publisher in the near future.

She can be found at: nenaclements.wordpress.com

Other Titles Coming Soon:

“Caught Unawares – in the Cleis’s Press Anthology Cowboy Love

The First Time

By Voirey Linger

THE first time he kissed her was on the playground at recess. It was 1942 and they were both six. Ethan's lips were chapped from the autumn air and it was just a child's peck. But it made something funny happen inside Libbie, like her heart flipped over inside her chest.

He ruined the moment by sticking a garter snake in her face.

The first time he kissed her for real was ten years later. He'd asked her to a dance and was a perfect gentleman throughout, the kind of boy her parents would approve of.

But after the dance he'd talked her into a kiss.

"It'll just be a quick on, Libbie. Just a peck," he promised.

She wasn't sure, after all, good girls didn't kiss boys on the first date. Or the second. But he was so cute, and so charming.

"But I kissed you before," he reminded her.

Her face got hot and she was glad the car was too dark for him to see her blush. He'd remembered! That silly kiss in first grade had left her smiling for weeks, but he'd never tried it again. She'd been heartbroken.

He hadn't forgotten, even though she was sure he had.

That was all it took. She gave a shy nod. “Just promise me there won’t be any snakes this time.”

She leaned toward Ethan, ready for another peck, this time on the lips.

She wasn’t prepared for what she got. This time his lips were warm and soft against hers. He didn’t just give her a fast kiss, either, his lips... lingered, and they moved.

Her breath caught, and her heart did that funny flip again.

His mouth grazed over hers, urging, inviting her to do something. But she didn’t know what. She sat, still as a statue, waiting to see what he’d do, trying to figure out what she was supposed to do back.

Then his tongue had slipped out and he licked her bottom lip. He *licked* her! Libbie was so shocked her mouth fell open and her eyes bugged out.

Ethan didn’t waste any time. In a heartbeat his lips sealed over hers and he pushed his tongue all the way into her mouth. And, gracious, it felt so good. She sighed into his mouth and her whole body seemed to melt. Before she knew it, her tongue was in his mouth, too.

She didn’t know how long they sat there kissing before Ethan pulled away. Her parents were waiting for them, he reminded her. But next time, if it was okay with her, he’d kiss her again, and maybe more.

It was another six months before they got to the more bit. It was her seventeenth birthday and he’d taken her to a movie. Under the cover of the darkened theater, he’d snuck his hand under the edge of her skirt and touched her bare leg for the first time. They’d both sat, stiff and staring straight ahead at the screen while his fingers crept under her hem to trace a light circle just above her knee.

Those little circles tied her stomach in knots and made her feel all achy inside. The private place between her legs felt all full and empty and wanting at the same time. For the first time she began to understand why good girls weren’t supposed to do these things. Kissing had felt good, but this... this was something complete different. This was temptation.

He didn't do more than touch that one little spot, just above her knee and she didn't dare let him. It might be dark but the theater was full of their friends and classmates. Ethan was too much of a gentleman to risk her reputation. Still, the illicit thrill was a temptation they caved in to many times after that. Each time his fingers crept a little farther under her skirt, but never so far that someone might notice.

Eight months later, it was Ethan's birthday. He was eighteen, a man. That night they skipped the movie. Instead he drove them out into the country and parked on the side of a gravel road.

There, alone in the country, he pulled her close and kissed her. His tongue thrust deep in her mouth. He was hungry, his mouth almost rough on hers. His hand slid under her skirt, pushing it up around her hips.

For the first time, she felt his hands on her bare thighs. They gripped at her, pulling her closer, pushing her legs apart. She found herself straddling his lap, her damp crotch pressed to his. He was so hot, so hard against her. This time it didn't matter that she didn't know what to do, because her body was telling her to move.

She pulled her mouth from his to take gasping breaths. This was more than good. This was amazing.

Suddenly, Ethan grabbed her, his hands hard at her waist, and he practically threw her off of him.

"No more," he said. His eyes glittered and his jaw was tight.

Libbie's eyes pricked with heat and she tried to straighten her skirt. She'd never seen Ethan so mad. What had she done wrong?

Even as she asked herself the question, she knew the answer. She'd behaved like a girl with loose morals. A good man like Ethan deserved better.

He'd given her time to straighten up before he took her home, but he didn't say a word. He didn't even look at her. His entire body was so tense he looked like he was carved out of stone. He dropped her off in front of her house and didn't bother going in to say goodnight to her parents.

Oh, her parents. She couldn't face them like this. She bolted in the door and ran straight up the stairs to her room, where she threw herself across the bed and sobbed.

Later there was a gentle knock on her door, her mother probably, but Libbie told her to go away. She didn't want to see anyone, talk to anyone. She was too ashamed. On top of it all, that strange achy feeling Ethan gave her was worse than ever.

Frustrated, she'd tugged her clothes off and tossed them on the floor before pulling her nightgown from under her pillow.

That night she'd curled in a ball and pressed her fist hard between her thighs. At first it made the empty feeling go away, but it came back and grew into something that scared her. She pulled her fist away and the ache came back.

It made her miss Ethan even more.

The tears began again and she cried herself to sleep.

The next morning he was waiting in her living room when she went downstairs. He sat perched on the edge of the couch, a bouquet of wilting daisies clenched in his white-knuckled grasp. Her father sat in a chair, pipe in hand and glowering at Ethan in disapproval.

Ethan saw her and popped up like he was spring-loaded.

There, in front of her father, he apologized. He swore he wasn't mad at her and that he was sorry.

Her mother had all but dragged her father from the room then, to give the two lovebirds a chance to talk, she'd said.

It wasn't enough privacy for Libbie. No doubt someone was hiding in a doorway, anxious to find out what they had been fighting about. She took his hand and led him out to the front porch.

They sat on the swing, her afraid to ask and him looking like he'd rather face her father than explain.

But explain he did. About a man's needs, about wanting something he knew wasn't right or respectful to her. He hadn't wanted to do something they might regret.

Then he dropped to one knee.

Libbie's mouth dropped open as he asked her to marry him.

She shouldn't have been shocked, really. Hadn't they been headed toward this from the moment he'd kissed her?

But after last night, she'd been so sure he'd changed his mind.

Relief swept over her and tears flooded her eyes in a burning rush.

In an instant he was back on his feet, his arms around her, cradling her to him and begging her not to cry.

She couldn't help it. All she could think was that he still loved her and she hadn't lost him. Burying her face in his shoulder, she tried to say yes, but no words made it past her tight throat. Instead she nodded.

That wasn't good enough for Ethan, though. Once her sniffing ceased he insisted on hearing the words, just so there would be no mistake.

"Christmas, then," he'd said. "We'll get married on Christmas day, because I don't think I can wait any longer than that."

That Christmas morning, both of their families crowded into her parents' house. Standing before the Christmas tree, Libbie received the best Christmas present ever as the minister declared them to be husband and wife.

And for the first time, Libbie kissed her husband.

THE END

VOIREY LINGER is a Southern gal who is ruled by her cat and has an unholy love of chocolate. She discovered romance novels at age 12 and eventually managed to combine her love of romance with a very dirty mind.

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Other Titles:

Risking Eternity – Ellora's Cave

Forsaking Eternity – Ellora's Cave