

What She Craves

Chapter One

Tory snorted and sat back in her chair. “You can’t be serious, Summer. It’s your first Christmas with Gage. I’m not crashing that little party, no matter how many times you ask.”

Inwardly, Tory cringed. How pathetic, having her best friend take pity on her on Christmas Eve. It made her feel like a little lost orphan or something. Even though Summer didn’t mean it that way, Tory still wanted to crawl under the rug. Or better yet, have some handsome man walk through her front door and sweep her away. Sort of the way Gage had come into Summer’s life. He’d brought life back into her friend’s eyes. Tory was grateful to him for that. A little envious that she didn’t have a guy treating her as if she hung the moon, sure, but happy for Summer. Gage was exactly what Summer needed. The death of Seth, Summer’s first husband, had put the woman into a deepfreeze. Gage had come along and thawed her out.

Summer reached across the table and swatted her hand. “Don’t be so difficult. Gage said he’d love to have you over, and you know I always enjoy your company.”

Tory forced a smile to her lips as she picked up her mug and sipped her hot coffee. The temperature was in the teens outside, and it wasn’t much warmer in her drafty kitchen. As she looked around, taking in the nearly fifty year old house, Tory sighed. It’d been her grandmother’s house until she’d passed away and left everything she owned to her only granddaughter. Tory knew she should renovate the old two-story, but she couldn’t bring herself to change even the color of the paint, as hard as the bright yellow was on the eyes, much less let some construction crew tromp around getting drywall dust all over her Nana’s prized area rug. Her grandfather had bought the oval rug when he’d had to go overseas on a business trip. It wasn’t the most beautiful thing, with the puke-green-and-rust floral print, but her grandmother had loved it, cherished it. No, Tory thought with fondness, the house would stay as it was, well-loved, if a little drafty at times.

Tory took another sip of her coffee and desperately tried to come up with a logical reason why she couldn’t spend the evening with the lovebirds, when the phone rang. Ah, saved! Tory set her cup back down and stood. By the time she’d reached the living room, the phone had rung twice more. She grabbed it from the cradle and said, “Hello?”

“Hey, sugar. What’s up?”

Tory smiled as a little tingle skated down her spine. She’d recognize that devilish voice anywhere. One of her best buds, Devon Mason. Sweet, funny, cute as hell and just ornery enough to make her forget the little pity party she’d been throwing herself. “Hi, handsome. Not much, just talking to Summer.” Tory walked back into the kitchen to find Summer rinsing her cup and setting it in the sink.

Devon groaned. “Is she still trying to get you to go to her place tonight?”

“Yes,” Tory bit out, as she picked up her own cup and brought it to the sink.

“Nothing quite like watching new lovers to make you feel like a total loser during the holidays, huh?”

Tory turned and leaned against the counter, Summer’s gaze glued to hers. “Uh, yeah. Something like that.”

“So, how about you come with me instead?”

Instantly perking up, Tory asked, “You’re going to Con’s party?” Their mutual friend Con Walker held an annual Christmas party. The event was talked about for weeks beforehand and months afterwards. No expense was spared when Con threw a party. She’d gone every year and always had the time of her life. This time around, she had no date. Going alone seemed...beyond sad.

She heard what sounded like shuffling papers in her ear, then Devon said, “Wouldn’t miss it.”

Summer motioned to the other room, indicating she was going to the bathroom. Tory nodded. Once alone in the kitchen, she asked, “And you don’t have a date? That surprises me, Devon.” Devon made a tsking sound into the phone. “I wouldn’t ask you if I had a date.” He paused, then added, “And why should that surprise you? It’s not like I’m a player, Tory.”

Okay, now she felt bad. “That’s not what I meant. It’s just that you always have a date at Con’s Christmas Eve Gala.”

“So do you, sugar. But I figured since we’re both available this year, it couldn’t hurt to go together, right?”

It did sound like fun. Tory always enjoyed Devon’s company. And Con, though not as playful and flirtatious as Devon, made for some damned interesting company, she admitted to herself. Where Devon tended to be the impulsive jokester, Con’s personality leaned more toward quiet and intense. Together they never failed to entertain her. As Summer came back into the room, Tory made her decision.

“What time are you picking me up?”

She heard Devon chuckle. “Be ready at seven, sugar.”

“Okay.” A little shiver ran through her. Crazy as it seemed, she was nervous. It’s not a date. He’s one of your best guy friends, nothing more. Get a grip.

“Good. And Tory?”

“Yeah?”

“I have a feeling this is going to be a Christmas Eve we’ll both remember for years to come.”

Devon’s warm voice uttering such a wicked promise had Tory frowning and staring at the phone. What was that about? By the time she managed to think up a witty reply, all she heard was a dial tone.

“You’ve made plans, haven’t you?”

Summer’s soft voice tore Tory out of her musings. She clicked end on the phone and placed it on the counter beside her. “Devon is taking me to Con’s. He’s picking me up at seven.” Tory mentally ran through her entire closet and cursed.

“What is it?”

“I don’t have squat to wear. I need to go shopping.” Tory grinned and bobbed her eyebrows. “Want to hit the mall?”

Summer clapped her hands together. “I see cappuccinos and sexy dresses in our very near future.”

Tory laughed. “Sweet. Let me get changed and we’ll see if we can’t find something that’ll knock the guys right on their asses.”

“Guys? You and Devon are just friends though, right?”

That stopped her. Friends. “Of course. I just meant, you know, if there are any single guys at the party.”

“Uh-huh.”

Tory turned and nearly ran from the kitchen. She was going to a party with a friend. She’d have a few drinks, laugh a little, then come home. A nice evening out. That’s all there was to it. A little voice in the back of her mind kept blathering on about Devon’s sensual voice and the promise he’d uttered.

That little voice needed to shut the hell up already.

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Devon sat back in his chair and stared at the phone, a sense of anticipation stirring his blood. Tonight would be the night. It had to be. He’d waited long enough. He picked up the phone again and dialed another number.

“Tell me you have good news.”

Devon smiled at the frustration in Con’s voice. “She’s coming,” he said, putting his friend out of his misery. “I’m picking her up at seven.”

He heard Con let out a breath. "Damn. I can't believe it's finally happening."

"Easy, Con." Devon felt compelled to issue the small warning. "She's only agreed to accompany me as a friend. Nothing more."

"I know, but I'm still trying to think positive here. Don't piss on my parade."

Devon chuckled and crossed his legs at the ankles. "No one is pissing on anyone's parade, but we need to take this slow. I don't want her hurt."

"And you think I do?"

Flicking a glance at his office door, ensuring no one was around, he replied, "No. It's just that Tory is going to be shocked when she finds out we both want her. That we've both ached to be more than her good buddies for the past three years. If I had to guess, I'd say she's never been with two guys at once. Much less two guys she's viewed as mere friends." The more he thought about it, the more his gut churned. "Christ, she's so damn innocent."

"Especially compared to the two of us, is that what you're saying?"

Con's anger seeped through the phone. "We're a hell of a lot more experienced, and you know it. Already I feel like the big bad wolf luring the sweet little girl with the promise of candy."

"Damn it, Devon, we're not wolves and she's not a little girl. This isn't about getting laid. It's about finally having Tory all to ourselves. This is the best opportunity we're going to get."

Devon reached over and picked up his paperweight. It'd been a gift from Tory. She'd given it to him on his last birthday. As he stared at the hard glass ball with the delicate flowers suspended inside, he smiled. It was silly and girly, but he loved it because it had come from her.

"I know, I know," Devon said. "We've gone over it a thousand times. Besides, I'm not sure I can sit by while she dates yet another asshole. I nearly lost it when she went out with that guy last month. The doctor, remember?"

Con cursed. "She seemed pretty taken with that one, didn't she?"

"Yeah, but a few dates in and she was giving him the heave-ho."

"Did she ever tell you why?"

"Yeah, he bored her. You ask me, Tory needs more from a guy than a few gentle kisses and sweet words."

"I agree. She might look like a blonde-haired angel, but I have a feeling she can be quite the powder keg with the right man. Or men, as it were."

Devon placed the weight back on the desk and groaned. “This could go so wrong, Con. She’s our friend. We love her. What if we screw everything up?”

“We won’t. Stop with the negative shit. You’re making me mad. Fuck!”

Devon had heard that tone from his friend before. While it sent most people scurrying, Devon merely shrugged. “Yeah, okay.”

“Focus on bringing her to the party,” Con said, clearly calmer now. “We’ll play this by ear. No pressuring her.”

“The one scenario that has me feeling sick to my stomach is that she ends up in bed with us, then regrets it come morning and never speaks to us again.”

“I’ve had the same thought,” Con said. “I’d rather cut off my own arm with a friggin’ butter knife.”

“Damn straight. So, are you sure we should go through with this?”

“I’m not willing to go the rest of my life without at least trying. You?”

Put that way, Devon knew there was only one answer. “No, I’m not.”

“It’s time to take the gloves off, Devon. We’ve kept our feelings hidden long enough.”

Devon agreed wholeheartedly, but deep down he prayed it didn’t blow up in their faces.

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“Wow, you look...hot.” Summer said, her gaze raking Tory from head to toe. “Devon won’t know what hit him when he sees you in that dress, girl.”

Tory laughed. The sapphire blue halter dress did seem to complement her coloring. And the slit up the front wasn’t too shabby either. As she spotted Summer’s hourglass figure in the dressing room mirror, encased in a short, ruby red satin dress with spaghetti straps, Tory let out a whistle. “Next to you I may as well be invisible. Gage will be drooling for hours when he gets a load of that sexy little number.” Tory turned around, smiling at the excitement in her friend’s expression. “You’re simply stunning, honey. He’s going to love it.”

Summer smoothed her palms down the front of the dress. “It’s strange, you know.”

“What?”

Summer didn’t meet her gaze, and that troubled Tory. “Looking forward to Christmas. It’s been so long since I had a reason to smile on Christmas Eve. After Seth’s death, I just sort of...” she shrugged, “...I don’t know.”

“Tried to forget this holiday existed?” Tory interjected, her heart clenching for her friend. After Seth’s car accident, Tory had worried for Summer. Despite having her husband snatched from her much too early, Summer had pulled herself together. She’d even managed to make her bed-and-breakfast a success. There was no one Tory admired more.

“Yes, I suppose that describes it.” She waved a hand in the air. “Anyway, I can’t wait to show Gage this dress.”

Tory laughed and patted Summer’s bare shoulder. “You might not be in it long.”

Summer blushed. “Gage does have a way about him, that’s for sure.”

The look that stole over Summer’s face said it all. She loved Gage. And why wouldn’t she? Gage was smart, kind, strong, and he owned his own successful private investigative service, to boot. He was one heck of a catch. As Tory turned back to the mirror, she wondered if she’d ever find her own knight in shining armor. She had a sudden vision of herself as an old woman, living alone, a dozen cats as company. Crap, why was she suddenly feeling so alone? She’d dated plenty of great guys over the years. So why the ticking biological clock now?

“So, did you decide? Is it to be the blue dress or the gold one?”

Summer’s question shook her back to the problem at hand. Looking over the blue, shimmery dress, Tory knew it was the one. “Blue. Definitely the blue.”

“That was my choice too. The gold is pretty, but the blue matches your eyes.” Summer went back to her own dressing room and shut the door. “Next up, shoes,” she called out.

Tory started to unzip the dress, groaning a little as she spied the price tag. “I’m going to need the credit card if we’re doing shoes too. This night is getting expensive.”

“I have a feeling it’ll be worth it, though,” Summer shot back. “Don’t you?”

Tory stared at her reflection, Devon’s deep voice haunting her thoughts. “Yeah, I do.”

They fell silent as they finished. When they both emerged from the dressing room, Summer flung her dress over her arm and grinned. “Maybe a trip to the lingerie store is in order, huh?”

Tory blushed, which was totally unlike her. Maybe she was coming down with something. A virus would explain the strange mood she’d been in ever since Devon’s phone call. “For you, maybe. I’m going out with Devon, my friend, remember?”

“Hmm, I remember. Get something sexy, just in case.”

Uh-oh, Summer had that matchmaker look in her eyes. It didn't bode well. The last time Summer had that particular look, Tory had ended up on a date with a guy who'd talked stocks all evening. She'd fallen asleep on him on the car ride home. Not pretty. "What part of just friends didn't you hear? Don't get any ideas about Devon and me."

"I heard you just fine, but you're forgetting something. Christmas is a magical time, Tory. A lot can happen."

"Not that. Trust me, not that."

Summer merely grinned, as if she knew some little secret. It tempted Tory to protest further, but she'd only come off as defensive. In the end, she opted to shut the hell up and let Summer have her delusions. Besides, getting new panties wasn't exactly a hardship. Even if no one ever saw them but her, they'd still make her feel sexy.

And sexy was good.

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