

# ~ Twelve Days ~

by Colleen

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All comments are welcome at [colleen30@webtv.net](mailto:colleen30@webtv.net)

I have also created a group for discussions of this, past and future stories. Maybe some sneak previews as well.

Join us at [http://groups.yahoo.com/group/colleens\\_corner](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/colleens_corner)

## Part 1

Giant candy canes twirled and gingerbread boys and girls danced around the tall evergreen, twinkling with multi-colored lights. Huge presents wrapped in sparkling paper and tied with puffy red bows littered the fluffy white covered ground. The luminescent, winter wonderland was nestled in the corner of the small indoor mall. Parents and children lined up thirty long, waiting for their turn to visit the jolly old elf. Some of the wide-eyed youngsters reviewed their lists with a parent or a sibling and some fidgeted and complained of the long wait. But one young boy was mesmerized with the toy train that zoomed in and around the big tree and festive gifts. He watched as the blue engine pulled the other cars over a little bridge and through the long tunnel. In one hand he clutched his favorite toy, a tiny stuffed bear and the other held onto his mother's coattail. His green eyes stayed glued to the racing train as the line inched forward. They would be the last visitors of the day as the closed sign was put up right behind them. His mother had told him why they were there, but he hadn't really paid attention. He was just glad they weren't shopping, that was so boring.

Twenty minutes later and it would finally be their turn next. Someone ruffled his bright blonde hair and he looked up and smiled at his mother. She knelt down next to him and removed his heavy brown coat for his picture with Santa.

"Do you remember what you are going to ask for?" she asked as she straightened the collar of his green, button down shirt.

The little head bobbed. "Uh huh," he said. Then a small finger pointed to the display behind them. "I wish I could have one of those," he added in his little voice.

The woman chuckled to herself. It wasn't something he had wanted before, but after seeing his reaction to the cars clacking along the railroad tracks, she wasn't surprised. It was only twelve days until Christmas and she had already purchased all of his presents, including the one fairly expensive item, for which it had taken her months to save up. A small, bright blue bicycle with training wheels sat in the storage room of their apartment building, just waiting for the big day. *Maybe I can still get him a train if we get that bonus check at work*, she thought. This would be the first Christmas that he would really remember and Taylor Shafer wanted everything to be perfect for her son. Her job at the catering company just brought in enough money to keep them in their small apartment and provide food for the table. Taylor was no stranger to financial struggles. She had lived that way her whole life. She could just never seem to catch a break. But when her beautiful son came into her life, Taylor vowed to work day and night to make sure he had everything a child needed. The one thing he needed most was love and that she knew she could provide in a never-ending supply.

The blonde headed boy suddenly jumped when he heard the booming voice yell out with a string of ho, ho, hos.

"Guess it's our turn." Taylor stood and started toward the red suited gentleman, but the child grabbed her and halted her movement. He then ducked behind her legs and buried his head. "What's wrong Sweetie?" she asked. "It's just Santa. I thought you wanted to sit on his lap and tell him what you wanted for Christmas."

"No!"

Taylor briefly caught the eyes of Mrs. Claus as the gift giving couple watched the scene. She bent down to talk to her distraught son. "Okay, you don't have to sit on his lap or even talk to him. But will you go over there and stand by him so I can have a picture?"

"No Mama, no! I don't want to!"

Taylor was definitely disappointed, but she certainly wasn't going to traumatize her son. She pulled him into her arms and hushed his fears. "It's okay Honey. You don't have to do it. I'm sorry he scared you." She gently dried his falling tears with her long fingers.

Mrs. Clause watched with misty eyes at the tender parent and child moment. She bent over and whispered something into Santa's ear and the hefty, crimson-clad man got up from his huge throne and slipped away behind the painted, wooden backdrop.

The small, plump woman with the gray bun on her head grabbed a red and green swirled sucker from the basket beside her and carefully approached the upset duo.

Taylor got a closer look at the soft, green eyes behind the tiny wire rimmed glasses perched on the button nose as the woman came near. They smiled at one another. Taylor had some idea of what she was trying to do.

The youngster's tear filled eyes looked up from his mother's shoulder when he heard the footsteps across the crunching fake snow.

"Hello," Mrs. Clause said softly, trying not to scare him any more.

Uncertain green eyes looked from the smiling stranger to his smiling mother. Finally he decided that the newcomer wasn't too bad. "Hello," he responded shyly as he was lowered to the ground.

Mrs. Clause twirled the small lollipop between her fingers asking his mother the unspoken question. Taylor nodded.

"Would you like to have this?" the gray haired woman asked.

His mouth watered at the delicious candy before him and he started to reach out for the treat, but pulled back. His head tipped way back to see his tall mother's face. "Can I Mama?" he asked.

He received permission, but was informed that it must wait until after dinner. He smiled coyly as he took the sweet and with just a tiny nudge from his mother he said, "Thank you."

"You're welcome," said Mrs. Clause. "What is your name?"

"Travis."

"It's nice to meet you Travis. You're a very big boy, what are you eighteen, nineteen?"

He giggled. "No! I'm almost four," he stated proudly, holding up four little fingers.

"Four!" The woman exaggerated her words to make the child feel very important. "Wow, I've never met anyone who was almost four years old." The woman pointed over toward the tree. "I saw you looking at that train over there. How would you like to help me play with it for a few minutes?"

The crowds of shoppers hurried all around the little wonderland, attending to their own business, paying no attention to the trio. Christmas songs from traditional Crosby to bluesy Elvis to modern Streisand flowed not so smoothly through the staticky public address system. But all the bustle dwindled down to a flutter as Taylor Shafer watched her young son laughing and playing when just minutes before tears were rolling down his red, wind chafed cheeks. But the woman behind the St. Nick's spouse disguise had quickly returned him to his carefree world. Taylor's smile grew wider as Travis's eyes did the same with each new discovery he made. The tall woman suddenly remembered the camera around her neck and quickly began capturing the Kodak moments.

For another fifteen minutes, Mrs. Claus worked her magic, playing with Travis and making him laugh. Taylor thought how unusual it was. He was always so leery of strangers and while that was a very good thing for his safety, it did sometimes hamper special occasions, as with Santa

earlier. But he certainly wasn't afraid now. Somehow this woman had garnered his immediate trust.

After half a dozen flashes, the red clad woman took Travis by the hand and slowly led him over to Santa's chair, talking to him all the while. She yawned and stretched her arms above her head. "Boy, I'm a little tired," she said. "I need to sit down for a while." She took a seat in the big cushioned chair.

Travis's mother laughed silently as her son's new playmate was nearly swallowed up by its enormous size. The child was distracted, checking out the old fashioned rocking horse that sat next to the chair. He pretended to pat its wooden nose and giggled when it began moving.

"Would you come up here and sit on my lap?" Mrs. Claus cautiously asked.

He was a boy of few words. Travis's blonde head just nodded quickly and he climbed up with just a little help. She settled him onto her lap and reached around and gave him a quick hug. She whispered in his ear. "Look at Mama and smile."

With a quick flash of light, the tall woman held out her arms for her little boy. He scrambled off the big chair and was quickly scooped up and tickled around the neck with several snorting kisses.

Mrs. Claus misted over again at the sweet display of affection. She was a sucker for a mushy moment and didn't care if the whole world knew. The small woman walked over to the giggling pair and addressed the dark haired mother. "I know it wasn't exactly what you wanted, but I hope it was alright."

"It was perfect. Thank you." They smiled and their eyes held for several long seconds.

"You know," said the shorter woman, "I was just about to go and have some dinner. Would you two join me?" The invite might have been for both of them, but her gaze never left the pretty blue eyes.

Taylor finally looked over to her son and tickled his belly. "What do you say Travis, should we have dinner with the nice lady?"

Again he just nodded his answer.

Mrs. Clause grinned at the pair. "Good. Give me a few minutes to change and I'll be right back."

Taylor watched the other shoppers scurrying about the mall with their loaded down bags, glad that most of her shopping was done. It was not a task she enjoyed. Although she loved choosing things for her son, shopping was a chore best left to others like...Ben. If it were possible, the man could spend a dozen hours at the mall, run home for a quick shower and return for a dozen more. He was an enigma among men.

After just a few minutes, the former Mrs. Claus came around the corner slinging a small purse over her shoulder and adjusting the gray, wool coat draped over her arm.

Taylor looked up and was instantly captivated. Of course she had known the woman wasn't really a senior citizen, but what she didn't imagine was that under that gray wig and plump suit was someone so young...or so beautiful, with her short, golden hair and dancing, green eyes.

"Okay lets go." She laughed. "I guess I should introduce myself first," she said, holding out a delicate hand. "I'm Corridan Sterling. But my friends call me Cori. And I have defiantly decided that you are my new friends."

The taller woman was still struck speechless. "Oh...yes...I'm Taylor, Taylor Shafer."

"Well," said Cori, "let's eat. I'm starved."

Taylor lowered Travis to the ground and took his hand as they set off down the mall. Halfway to their destination, Cori felt a little hand slip into hers. She looked down to see the boy smiling shyly. She grinned back and gave his hand a soft squeeze. Taylor had watched the simple exchange and it nearly brought tears to her eyes. She couldn't figure out for the life of her, why she felt like crying, albeit happy tears.

Soon the hungry trio was entering the festive restaurant, a place called The Pear Tree. Although quite crowded because it was prime dinnertime, they did manage to get a small three-sided booth in the back. Taylor perused the children's menu, picking out a meal for her son before deciding on a fish dinner for herself. She was careful to check the prices before ordering, not wanting to take advantage of her new friend's generosity. Again, Taylor pondered how she could consider someone she had known such a short time and hadn't even said a dozen words to, a friend. But it was true.

Travis busied himself coloring on the paper menu that had been placed before him. Taylor watched with a smile as Cori practically devoured the plastic coated menu in her hands. Cori always had terrible time deciding which meal to order, they all looked and sounded so delicious. With a last debate, she finally decided on the sirloin smothered in mushrooms and melted Monterey Jack cheese.

They engaged in small talk as they waited for the meals to be prepared. They both discovered that they were born and had lived their whole lives in Minneapolis. Even more surprising was the fact that they had, at one time, lived just a few blocks from each other and had attended the same school for two years until Cori's parents had moved again.

Taylor spoke of her estrangement with her parents, but didn't elaborate as to the reason why. She smoothed her son's fair hair. "Travis is the only family I have, except for my best friend Ben." She sighed. "It's hard being a single parent." She addressed her son. "But you're worth it, ain't ya?"

He grinned and nodded, even though he didn't understand what she meant.

Cori took a sip of her coke. "I know what you mean about being a single parent," she said. "My daughter is four months old. But I am very lucky that she has two grandparents that are just crazy about her. That's where she is tonight. They totally supported my decision to have a baby on my own. I don't know that I could have gone through with it without them."

All through the meal they continued to discover more things about one another. Their questions flowed free and easily, neither one feeling inhibited or intrusive. Cori found out that Taylor worked at a company called Exclusive Catering and Party Prep. But Taylor quickly held up a hand. "Don't let the catering part fool you though, I don't do the fancy cooking. I'm more in the prep department. I set up the chairs and tables, dance floors, small stages and sound systems, tents in the summer. And sometimes I tend bar."

Cori was genuinely interested. "I bet it's busy, especially this time of year?"

"Oh yeah. But that's a good thing because it allows me to get some much-needed overtime. I could have worked tonight..." Taylor's eyes drifted over to her son and softened. "but we needed to spend some time together."

Cori gave a small groan at herself. "And I've intruded. I'm so sorry."

The dark head snapped back. "No! Not at all! Please don't worry. Really, I thank you for what you did back there. That was very special." She paused a moment as they're eyes held once again. The blue eyes finally broke away, a bit flustered. "And it's been really nice talking to you. Outside of work I don't get much adult companionship. So, tell me about you."

The blonde spoke fondly of her career as a portrait photographer, again imparting how lucky she was to have her studio attached to her house so she could still spend plenty of time with her baby. "So what do you like to do in your spare time?" Cori asked, wanting to know much more about her new friend.

"I haven't had any spare time since Travis came along. When work is slow I try to pick up part time jobs to fill in the money gap. They usually involve odd hours. Luckily I have a very reliable and flexible child care provider." Taylor twirled the ice in her nearly empty glass and frowned. "But I may be losing her soon. Her husband may be transferred. I'm not sure what we'll do then."

An idea germinated in Cori's head, but she figured it was just a little too soon to spring the idea.

Taylor leaned over and covered Travis with his coat. He had scooted down and fallen asleep on the red padded bench, his half eaten lollipop still clutched in his hand.

The smaller woman's forehead wrinkled with remorse. "I've kept you out too late, haven't I?"

"No, not at all. Don't worry about him. He can sleep anywhere, anytime. I only wish I was that free to be able to do that." She lifted her glass. "To childhood," she said. Cori agreed and tipped her glass to meet Taylor's. The tall woman smiled warmly. "Really though, I have had fun tonight Cori."

The blonde detected just a touch of shyness behind that smile and was greatly endeared to this woman's charms. "So have I. How about we have some more fun tomorrow night? Would you like to go see a movie with me?"

"They still making those?" joked Taylor. "Truthfully, that would be nice, but I am a little short on money, especially this time of year. But thanks for asking."

"Actually I have two free passes. A customer gave them to me and it's no fun to go alone. They've been sitting on my desk at home for three weeks." She saw the blue eyes hesitate again. "I can even offer some free baby-sitting, if you would trust my parents."

Taylor really wanted to see Cori again, whether it was a romantic date or not. On that subject, she just couldn't quite make up her mind as to Cori's preferences. "I...would they really want to sit for a baby and a three year old?"

Cori laughed out loud. "Are you kidding? They love kids. They're just counting the days until Kylie is old enough to play with." Those green eyes took on a slightly more serious gaze. "They couldn't have any more children after me and I know they really missed that. I think that played just a little part in my decision to have a child at this early time in my life instead of waiting until I got married."

Taylor's heart sank in her chest with Cori's final words. *Oh well, I can still use another good friend.*

Cori brightened. "So how about it, you on for a movie tomorrow night? We can share a popcorn."

Taylor knew she couldn't resist that smile. "Okay, sounds fun."

"Great!" Cori's cherubic face took on a decided childlike quality when she asked, "How about we share a dessert now? I try to be good and watch the sweets...when I'm alone. But since I now have a partner in crime I won't feel so bad."

Taylor just grinned and shook her head as she handed the wide-eyed woman the dessert menu.

After their little trip to chocolate heaven, Cori paid the bill and left a generous tip as Taylor picked up her son and wrangled the still sleeping child into his coat and hat. Cori laughed at the humorous predicament and lent a hand with a sleeve and a zipper.

"See, I told you he could sleep through anything." Taylor leaned the thirty pound child against her shoulder and slung her backpack over her other arm as she followed Cori out.

Taylor insisted on walking the small blonde to her car, not trusting the darkened parking lot, hoping two women with a child would be a less desirable target for any lurking hooligans.

Arriving at the green Chevy Tracker, Cori unlocked the door and slid into the driver's seat. She turned on the engine and the heat sprang to life, quickly filling the small interior. "At least let me drive you over to your car," she implored. Taylor had told her that she had to park in one of the smaller back lots.

If not for her son, she might have refused, but she walked around the front of the purring car and got in, reveling in the warmth.

In a short matter of minutes, they had arrived behind Taylor's old faded out Ford. It had seen better days, but it still got her back and forth to work and that's all that mattered to her.

"I'll see you tomorrow night then Cori." Taylor hoped she would remember to remove Cori's business card from the pocket of her jeans before she tossed them in the wash. After that short thought, Taylor felt a kiss placed on her cheek.

"Night Taylor. Night Travis," she whispered to the snoozing child.

Taylor was still stunned at the small gesture of affection and was once again confused as she got out of the car, climbed into hers and buckled Travis into his car seat.

With just a few sputters, the automobile gruffly roared to life as Taylor gave a short shake of her head. Adding a small sigh, she quickly decided that that's exactly what it was, just a friendly gesture of affection. *She was just thanking me. For what?* Taylor thought it over for just a few seconds. *For walking her to her car...that's it. I mean, she said she wants to get married one day. It couldn't have been anything else.* Easing out of the parking spot she lamented over the fact that she had not had a date since Travis was born. Even before that, dating had not been a top priority with her. She had gone out from time to time with some very nice women during her short stay in college, but nothing ever escalated into a serious relationship. That's it, she finally decided. *She just wants a friend.* She leaned to look toward the back seat. *Plus, she was bewitched by my best little guy. I can certainly understand that.*

## Chapter 2

Snow was piled three inches thick on the sills of the window, but the little red headed girl who sat near it was much more interested in the cocoa colored bear she had just been given. The two year old giggled and hugged the stuffed animal to her chest as the bright light flashed.

"Okay Honey, now look up here and smile." Cori clicked the shutter again then looked to the child's mother for her approval as she finished the photo set. December was one of Cori's busiest months, with everybody wanting Christmas pictures of their little darlings. Young children weren't the only subjects though. There were entire families some consisting of four or five older children, some multi-generational families and parents with grown children. There had even been a handful of twenty and thirty-something couples wanting a 2001 holiday remembrance.

Once Cori had finished with the necessary paperwork, the mother and child walked out of her studio hand in hand. She raised the fake, snow covered window backdrop and turned off the two



bright, white lights. Cori then walked through a nearby door, which connected to her house, to check on her own little girl. Her next appointment wasn't for half an hour and she intended to spend every minute of that time with Kylie, even if it was just to rock her or tell her a story.

Fifteen minutes later, just as Cori quietly closed the door to her daughter's room the phone rang. She grabbed the small cell clipped to her belt. "Hello."

"Hello, it's Taylor Shafer."

"Of course it is," Cori said cheerfully. "I recognized your voice right away."

"Oh...well I didn't want to bother you, I just thought I'd see if you still wanted to go to that movie tonight."

Cori stepped into her kitchen and grabbed a small bottle of juice from the fridge. "Absolutely!" she answered. "I've been looking forward to it all day."

"Me too," the dark haired woman admitted, almost shyly.

"The movie starts at seven, could you be here about six?"

"Sure. I get off at five today. That's plenty of time to stop by my place, get changed and pick up Travis." Taylor hesitated before asking again. "Cori, are you sure your parents won't mind watching him tonight?"

The photographer did a quick glance at the clock on the wall as she spoke. "Taylor, believe me they are thrilled with the idea, especially Dad. He can't wait to play your son. They're all going to have fun."

Taylor was spurred on by the unbridled enthusiasm in the voice on the phone. "Okay! I guess I'll see you tonight. Bye."

Cori grinned at the thought of her timid new friend. "Bye."

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Taylor reached in to unbuckle the car seat. "Are you going to be good for Mr. And Mrs. Sterling tonight?" she asked the three year old.

"Yes Mama," Travis said as his booted feet hit the ground.

Taylor tugged his black, knit hat down over his ears and raised the zipper to his chin. "Good boy," she praised and took his hand. They hurried up the long walkway wanting to get out of the cold, but still took time to enjoy the holiday lights twinkling along the rooftop and the waving Santa greeting them from the front window. The charming two-story house was modest in size and covered in tan and brown stonework with dark shutters flanking each big window. A large

screened in porch waited for their entrance with several electric candles flickering along the ledges, brightening the evening dim.

Travis hopped up the three big steps. "Mama," he said.

Taylor knocked on the door below the green wreath that hung there. "What Honey?"

"Who are Mist and Mist Sterwing?"

Taylor opened her mouth to answer just as the door opened. Her lips remained agape as she took in the vision standing there.

Cori was backlit by a blinking Christmas tree and the glow of a fire, but her snug fitting black jeans, red turtleneck and black suede vest were clearly seen by the very interested blue eyes.

Taylor's jaw snapped shut audibly as she was afraid to be caught staring, but knowing that it was already too late. "I...ah..." Her stuttering didn't lend itself to hiding her embarrassment either.

The petite woman bit back a silly grin in favor of a sweet half smile.

"Hi Cori," said Travis, unintentionally deflecting the attention from his mother.

The blonde grinned openly at the wide-eyed boy. "Hi Sweetheart. Come on in."

Travis took the invitation to heart and barreled right in, dragging his mother behind him. They stepped into a beautifully decorated room with a blue patterned sofa and matching loveseat perched in front of the stone fireplace. A tall entertainment center sat against the far wall, holding a large television and a stereo system. A smaller cabinet nearby held dozens of videos and music CDs. Cori was somewhat of a movie buff and she owned many black and white classics as well as modern blockbusters.

Cori dropped to the child's level when an older couple entered the living room. "Travis," she said, "this is my Mom and Dad. They're going to take care of you tonight."

"Hello Travis," said the slender, brown haired man. "Are you ready to have some fun?"

The boy nodded enthusiastically as Cori made further introductions. "Taylor this is my mother Barbara and my father Ken. Known to their friends as Ken and Barbie," she teased.

Barbara grimaced playfully. "Not to the friends who still want to remain on our Christmas list."

Cori stepped from the room letting her parents take over the hosting.

Taylor pulled off her thin glove before extending her hand to the older, but otherwise carbon copy of Cori. "Hello Mrs. Sterling. Thank you for looking after my son tonight."

"It's our pleasure Taylor. Please call me Barbara."

The tall woman held out a couple of small, brightly illustrated boxes. "Here's a couple of his favorite videos...if he gets bored. He's very well behaved, you shouldn't have any problems."

"I'm sure we won't dear. He's adorable by the way."

"Thank you." Taylor watched with a grin as Travis was already on the floor playing with Mr. Sterling. There were a dozen or so large, white dominoes with colored dots scattered about the gray carpet and she could here Cori's father explaining the game's instructions to her son. The blonde headed boy nodded as he listened with rapt attention to the gentle voice.

Cori walked in just a few seconds later with a yawning bundle in her arms. "And this is Kylie Marie," she stated proudly.

Taylor moved forward to get a good look at the baby who was dressed in a lavender one-piece pajama. She had to smile as the big blue, green eyes drifted toward the sound of her voice and a little fist flailed in her direction. "Cori, she's beautiful. She looks just like you." Taylor squirmed at the realization of what she just said, but she didn't let her face reflect her discomfort. "Travis, come over for a minute."

Cori sat on the sofa as the little feet scurried over.

"Look at the little baby." His mother instructed.

The child had a baby doll at home, but this was his first encounter with a real live infant. He looked at the unmoving object quizzically until Kylie twisted in her mother's grasp and squeaked. Travis smiled gleefully and looked up at his mother. "Mama, the baby moved!"

The whole group laughed at the wonderment in his voice. Taylor nuzzled her son's head. "Yeah Honey. She's not like your baby at home. She's real. You were that little just a few years ago."

Travis gave her another silly look before asking cautiously, "Can I touch her?"

Taylor deferred to Cori for an answer. "Sure you can Sweetie."

"Just be very gentle," Taylor added.

Very slowly he reached out and stroked the back of her tiny hand as the adults smiled fondly. It was very obvious that they all loved little ones.

"She's soft," he observed. "And warm."

Cori was falling madly in love with this incredible little fellow as she watched him interact with her daughter. She gently took his hand. "Here watch this." Cori held his forefinger close to

Kylie's hand and as expected she took hold. She also chose that moment to smile for the first time since her appearance.

Travis nearly exploded with joy. "Mama, she's holding my finger! She likes me!"

Taylor was on the verge of tears wishing, she'd had a camera. "Of course she does Honey." She looked up just in time to see Mr. Sterling lower the camcorder from his face. The precious moment had been preserved and she sent him a silent thank you.

"I guess we should go if we want to make the movie on time," said Taylor as she eased her son's finger from the baby's grasp. She gave Travis one last hug. "Bye, Sweetheart. Have fun."

Cori handed the baby to her Mom, slipped on her heavy, wool coat and followed her new friend out to the car. A blast of cold wind hit her as they neared the sidewalk, which was covered in thin layer of mushy, white flakes. "Brrrr." She shivered and buried her face in the back of Taylor's coat as the taller woman bent over to unlock the car. "Sometimes I really wish I lived in Florida," Cori said through chattering teeth.

The small body that clung to Taylor's back felt amazingly comfortable. She had a quick flash of lying in front of a roaring fire with the naked flesh of that small, but curvaceous body spooned up against her equally naked flesh. *Damn, I feel like some hormonal teenager*, she thought silently. *I've never felt like this before. Why now? Why with her?* "Yeah, but the cold has its advantages sometime," she mumbled, but failed to elaborate further as Cori slid into the seat. Taylor rounded the front of the car, sighing at what could never be.

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Thankfully, the concession line at the theater was short and they quickly took their large bucket of popcorn and made it to their seats just as the coming previews flashed across the huge, white screen. Taylor removed her coat and laid it in the empty seat next to her, suddenly remembering something. She fished around in the garment's deep pocket and came out with two small, wrapped bundles. She leaned toward the blonde head. "Here, I got something for you." She handed over the tidbits. "To go with your popcorn."

Even in the dimmed room, Cori caught sight of the silver wrapped chocolates. "Oh wow! I love these. Thanks."

"I pilfered them from work," whispered the dark haired woman. "Someone brought in a big bowl of candy and I saved the last of these for you. They're one of my favorites." Taylor smiled. "Glad I made the right choice." Cori offered to share those too, but Taylor declined. She just enjoyed the sight of her friend savoring the sweet treats.

All through the movie they laughed at the hilarity on the screen as they munched on the buttery kernels. At one point, out of the corner of her eye, Taylor saw Cori forgo her napkin and lick the extra slippery substance from her fingers. Taylor squirmed in her seat and groaned internally at the unintentional torture.

Cori dumped the empty container into the proper trash receptacle on their way out of the multiplex. She pulled her coat tight again as they hit the chilled air. "How about getting something warm to drink?" she asked as they approached the car. "I know of great place to go."

The hour was still fairly early and Taylor decided to take advantage of the night out since it might be her last for some time. And she was dreading having to depart from the lovely company. "Sure. Sounds like it will hit the spot. Where to?"

Taylor recognized the address and in just five minutes or so they were pulling into the parking lot of a place called Izzie's Palace. Cori led their way into the subtly designed establishment, where a fully decorated tree greeted them with holiday cheer. The blonde settled her coat onto the brass coat tree and Taylor did the same.

"Cori," shouted a stout woman with an auburn crew cut, who stood behind the padded bar. "Long time no see."

The photographer made her way over to greet the woman. "Hi Bobbi," she said as a hug was bestowed on her.

"How is that cute kid of yours?" Bobbi asked.

"Getting cuter everyday, if do say so myself. This is my friend Taylor."

Bobbi stuck out a friendly hand. "Isabella Roberta Watkins. But Cori can tell you that nobody dares call me anything but Bobbi. Welcome. Any friend of Cori's is bound to become a regular customer."

Taylor laughed at the unusual greeting. "Thank you...Bobbi."

Cori chuckled the woman with an elbow. "Can't say that anymore Bobbi." She smiled up at the tall woman by her side. "But perhaps you might be seeing me in here now and again."

The red headed woman slipped back behind the bar and brushed a white towel across the highly polished surface. "Let me know what you'd like and I'll bring it over to you."

Cori debated just a second. "Herbal tea I think." Coffee was Taylor's choice.

"Comin' right up," said Bobbi as the duo headed off for a corner table.

"I need the ladies," Cori said, leaving Taylor to study the room.

Lit candles adorned every one of the dozen or so tables, giving off the scents of vanilla and cinnamon. The soft carpet felt odd beneath her feet, knowing that she was in a bar. She had been in a few of the liquor selling establishments during her time in college, but none nearly as nice as this. Delightful art prints hung along the walls along with frosted mirrors and more mood lighting in the form of wall sconces. The room was rather quiet except for the soothing

Christmas tunes coming from the wall mounted speakers and the far away chatter of the other nine patrons, whom she suddenly realized were all women. A dark, sculpted eyebrow slowly lifted to the raven hairline.

With a smile, Bobbi delivered the hot beverages and fresh cream. "Let me know if you need anything else," she said with a ghostly wink.

Cori arrived just a second later. She rubbed her hands together expectantly. "Ooh that smells good." Taking her seat, she noticed Taylor seemed kind of distant as she stirred the sugar into her coffee. "Is something wrong Taylor?"

There were a few more clanky stirs before she responded. "This, ah..." She nodded to the rest of the room. "...this place is a..."

"Gay bar." Cori finished the thought, then frowned sadly. "Does it make you uncomfortable to be here Taylor? I thought you knew I was..."

The dark haired woman gave a small, lopsided grin as she continued to stare at the table. Inside she was thrilled and a big lump of happiness chased around her system, renewing the havoc on her hormones. "No, I'm not uncomfortable," she confirmed quietly. Taylor finally looked up into the sea green eyes and her smile widened. "I'm very glad." She shrugged a shoulder. "I was just...I was getting mixed signals."

Cori blushed. "Oh. Here I thought I was being too over bearing."

They both laughed softly and Taylor reached over to take the smaller hand in hers. She rubbed her thumb over the soft skin and watched the flickering flame dance in those emerald eyes. "I'm very, very glad," she reiterated.

"Me too."

They spent the next few minutes quietly sipping their soothing drinks and just taking in the new aspect of their blossoming relationship.

"So tell me, what's the story of you and this place?" asked Taylor.

"Not much of a story really. I used to hang around here quite a bit during my later college years." She went on to tell how she studied journalism intending to become a photojournalist. But as graduation neared, the thought of running around the world didn't appeal to her much anymore. Instead she took a job at a large photography studio. "After a couple of years photographing all those babies my maternal instincts kicked into high gear. I knew being a single parent would be a challenge, but I had no prospects at a lasting relationship." Cori gave a twisted facial expression to back up her point. "I would have had to work twice as hard to raise a child alone and I didn't want to be just a part time parent. So I resigned myself to wait, but that didn't stop the ache to hold a child in my arms. Things changed two years ago. I came into a modest inheritance from

my grandfather. I'm not rich by any means, but it did allow me open my own studio at home and not have a lot of financial worries. I got pregnant after the second try and the rest is history."

Taylor was mesmerized by the beautiful blonde's voice. So much so that she didn't even realize when it had stopped. But the next, slightly gruff, voice caused her to jump.

"Can I get you ladies a refill? Sorry, didn't mean to startle you."

"That's okay. I was..." Taylor winked at Cori. "...involved."

Bobbi gave a knowing grin, happy for her old friend. "I see. Have a good night ladies."

"Bobbi," Cori said before the owner got away. "Can we have one of the apple cream cheese dumplings...and two spoons?"

"You got it."

Cori turned back to her new friend and took a sip of her refreshed tea. "So now it's your turn. What's the tale of Taylor Shafer? What is your middle name by the way? I want to know everything about you."

"Ann. And like my middle name the rest is rather boring."

"Mine was boring too, but I still want to know. I mean...if you want to tell me."

Taylor had smiled again like she had been doing since they arrived. She was sure she was the epitome of the grinning fool. But she didn't care. She was a happy fool. She'd spent so much energy on what Travis needed that she had unselfishly neglected her own needs. She was lonely...very lonely, but until now she had never realized it. Even if she had, there was never time. Again, even if there was, she wasn't sure if she would have actively sought out a possible partner. It just wasn't a priority. But meeting Cori had been so right. And being with Cori was incredibly comfortable. In an imperfect world, at the moment everything in her world seemed perfect. And she was going to savor it for as long as it would last.

"I want to tell you," Taylor said. "Everything up until college was pretty typical. Everything after that is not, but still not that interesting. Anyway, my parents had no money to send me to school and I didn't have any scholarships and didn't qualify for any loans. So even at eighteen I decided to stay living at home and get a full time job so I could save up and go to college part time and work part time after a couple of years. I got the job at the catering place and that worked out pretty well. I started college at twenty- two, studying computers. I got good grades and everything went well for more than a year." She paused, considering how to proceed. "I guess I should go back and tell you about Ben. We've been friends since high school. He was kind of an outcast because he made no secret that he was gay and so we sort of clicked. He's a struggling artist, but his time will come because he is extremely talented." Taylor took a long sip of her cooling coffee as the desert arrived. She studied it carefully. "That looks interesting," she commented. The rolled up pastry was stuffed with a cream cheese, a baked apple filling and

dusted with a cinnamon sugar coating. Beside that sat two huge scoops of vanilla ice cream and all were drizzled in caramel. One bite sent her taste buds soaring into rapturous space.

Together, they made quick work of the delicious confection. "We're getting pretty good at this sharing thing huh?" said Cori.

"It's easy to share with someone special. Okay where was I?"

"Ben."

"Oh yeah. Although Ben was pretty sure he was gay, he toyed with the idea of exploring his sexuality. He met this pretty blonde several years ago and decided that he was attracted to her. He was totally honest with her and they started seeing one another. But after a month they both mutually decided that the relationship just wasn't right for either of them. About a month after they stopped seeing one another she came to him and told him she was pregnant, even though they had taken all the necessary precautions. She knew abortion wasn't right for her, but she didn't want to be a mother either; she wanted a career. She decided to give the baby up for adoption. One day I went to Ben's apartment and found him crying. I had never, in all the years I'd know him, seen him cry. Not when he was ostracized or beaten up...never. He told me that he already loved the child that he hadn't even seen yet. He wanted so much to be a part of its life, but he wasn't in any position to be a parent either."

Cori watched Taylor's saddened eyes as she told the heart-wrenching story. She jumped ahead anticipating what her friend was about to say.

"I had always loved children and hoped to one day have them. So I asked them if I could adopt the child. I was adopted so I didn't have to think too hard about it. I just knew this situation had presented itself to me for a reason." She finally smiled. "It was a good arrangement. Travis loves his uncle Ben and they spend a lot of time together." Taylor took a deep breath. "I dropped out of college and went back to a full time job, using the rest of the money I had saved for the adoption fees. Ben helps out financially whenever he can. We live in a two-bedroom apartment and I work nine hours a day. But I have never, for even a second, regretted that decision. My son is the most important thing in my life."

Cori took hold of Taylor's hand. "I think that's a very extraordinary story. And I think you are a very special person."

\* \* \* \*

Taylor and Cori walked hand in hand up the walk of Cori's house. They stepped into the screened in porch out of the biting wind, which had escalated. Cori hugged the taller woman and snuggled into the fur around her coat's collar, noticing the many worn through spots. Taylor always sacrificed when it came to her son. During the last winter, she had bought the best, warmest coat she could find for Travis, while she purchased hers at a second hand store.



"I really like spending time with you Taylor." Cori pulled away and smiled up at the six-foot woman. "I really like you."

"The feeling is very mutual. I know this is happening really fast, but..."

"But what?"

"You are becoming really important to me. I just...thank you for coming into our lives."

They closed the distance between them. Cori whispered Taylor's earlier sentiments. "The feeling is very mutual." Their lips met gently and they shared one slow, but loving kiss and then a few more brief, but sweet kisses. They both still tasted of cinnamon and apples. Their insides warmed considerably, making the air around them like a summer day as they parted and hugged again.

Cori and Taylor stepped into the darkened living room to find her parents cuddled together on the couch, snoozing in front of the television. Taylor whispered into the nearby ear. "Now that's cute."

The dark-haired woman gathered her sleeping son from his spot on the love seat. Much the same as the night before, she wrestled him into his coat and gloves while he snored away. Cori met her at the door and they had another quick kiss. Taylor immediately looked over her friend's shoulder for the parents.

Cori giggled softly. "It's okay, they know."

Taylor breathed a sigh of relief. "Good. I'll call you tomorrow. Goodnight."

"Goodnight." The small blonde turned to find the older couple smiling at her.

"She seems very nice Dear. It's good to see you happy."

"I am happy Mom." Cori continued her thoughts privately. *I don't know what it is about her, but I feel a connection to her like no one I've ever known before. She's something special and we're going to build something special. It's right this time. I know it.*

Continued in Part 2.

**The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive**

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**~ Twelve Days ~**  
by Colleen

**General Disclaimer:** This is an alternate uber story. The physical descriptions of the two lead characters may remind you of two others we all know and love, but all characters in the story are from my own imagination. This story is an original work and is copyrighted by the author. It cannot be sold or used for profit in any way.

**Love/Sex Disclaimer:** This story depicts a loving relationship between two consenting, adult women and contains scenes of intimacy, but nothing explicit. If you are under 18 years of age or if this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you live, please do not read it. If depictions of this nature disturb you, you may wish to read something other than this story.

All comments are welcome at [coleen30@webtv.net](mailto:coleen30@webtv.net)

I have also created a group for discussions of this, past and future stories. Maybe some sneak previews as well.

Join us at [http://groups.yahoo.com/group/colleens\\_corner](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/colleens_corner)

## **Part 2**

### **Chapter 3**

Cori tossed the props she'd just used for a photo shoot into a nearby toy box. Her stomach grumbled a protest of being kept waiting so long for lunch. "I know, I know, I'm going." She just stepped through the door leading into her home when someone knocked on the studio door. She briefly thought about letting it pass until a strange, but pleasant tickling sensation suddenly replaced the rumbling in her belly. She hurried across the room as the second knock sounded.

"Hi," the visitor said when the door opened.

Cori grinned widely. "Hi."

Taylor held up the red and white sack in her hand. "I thought I'd surprise you. I hope you haven't eaten yet."

Cori grabbed her new friend by the arm and escorted her into the warm, cozy studio. "I am starved." She gave Taylor a welcoming kiss. "And this is a wonderful surprise."

"Actually I was being just a little selfish. I needed to see you." Taylor's blue eyes scanned the room, in interest and in apprehension at her next question. "Am I being too pushy...I mean moving too fast?"

Cori chuckled. "Well let's see, I'm the one who has asked you out...twice. Do you think I'm moving too fast?"

"No, of course not."

"Good. At least we're on the same track." The blonde took Taylor's hand and started to lead her into the house, but a thought dawned on her. She turned and smiled. "Wait right here. I'll be right back."

The dark-haired woman didn't have to wait long. Cori soon returned with a blanket tossed over one arm and a wicker basket in the other hand. She spread the blue and red patterned throw on the fake snow in front of the camera. The painted forest scene behind them completed the outdoor atmosphere. "Come on, let's have a winter picnic," she said. Once seated beside one another, Cori handed Taylor a cola and poured herself a glass of something else.

The dark haired woman looked at the white substance. "Milk?" she questioned.

"Yeah. I'm nursing." She took a big gulp as the taller woman removed the food. "Actually," Cori continued, "I've been drinking this religiously for over a year and I've kind of gotten addicted."

"Speaking of addicted, my son would not stop raving about your parents this morning at breakfast. He rambled on forever about all the things they did. He had so much fun. And your father taught him the months of the year. We had just started on that lesson, but your father must have the magical touch."

Cori chewed on her chicken sandwich, grinning and shaking her head knowing the secret. "He was a teacher for twenty years," she explained.

"Well no wonder. My son could be a genius if he hangs around your father often enough."

Cori smiled and looked into the cool blue eyes. "That can be arranged. Besides, Mom and Dad had just as much fun as Travis did."

Taylor ate more of her food as her expression turned pensive. "I wish Travis had grandparents he could count on to spend that kind of quality time with him." She quickly shook off the feeling and moved on to something more cheerful. "I also heard all about Jack."

The blonde head flew back with a groan. "Oh no! My parents only live a couple of blocks over. Dad must have gone home and brought him back for a visit...and then snuck him back before we got here."

"Apparently so. He was wearing his winter sweater and matching boots."

Cori rolled her eyes.

"What kind of dog is Jack anyway?" asked Taylor. "I couldn't quite tell from his description."

"Jack is a two year old Basset Hound. And he is more spoiled than I ever was. See, I told you they were anxious to have grandchildren. They got a head start with Jack."

The blue eyes dropped to the colorful blanket. "Travis loves dogs and has been wanting one. But we just can't have one in our apartment."

Cori placed her hand on the cloth-covered knee next to her. "I hope my parents didn't cause you any trouble by introducing him to Jack."

"No of course not." Taylor took that hand and gave it a little squeeze. "Besides, he can get his canine fix when he comes to visit your parents."

Cori smiled. "We'll just have to make sure he gets to come by often."

They talked and laughed and told more stories for the next thirty minutes. But the perfect lunch finally had to come to an end. Taylor looked down at her watch. "Darn. I lost track of time." She jumped to her feet pulling Cori up with her. "I hate to leave you with this mess, but I'm gonna be late getting back to work."

They both hurried over to the door. "Don't worry about that," said Cori. "But do you have just a few more seconds?"

There was something about that tone of voice that Taylor couldn't resist. After slipping on her coat she turned to face her...what was Cori to her? They hadn't reached the partners stage...or even the lovers stage; they'd only had three dates. Friend definitely wasn't enough, but girlfriend didn't really sound important either. But for now it seemed the best. "Yeah why?" she asked.

"Because I need to hug you." And Cori did just that, slipping her arms under the black coat and resting them on the long, muscled back.

But that wasn't enough for Taylor. She brought her right hand up and let the silky, blonde hair slip through her fingers as she stared deeply into those emerald orbs. What she saw there scared her. Not the kind of fright that would make her run away. Just the opposite, it was a feeling so strong that she saw...forever. It scared her that forever might not be enough. Without a word, Taylor dipped her head and their lips met in a repeat of the sweet kiss they had shared the night before. But that wasn't enough either, as the passion they had both been curbing escalated beyond their limits. Lips were tasted and nibbled softly in a teasing exchange. The mists of two single breaths dissolved into one as one inquisitive tongue engaged in a loving duel with the other. Each mouth was thoroughly explored, as time no longer had any meaning. They parted reluctantly, eyes still closed trying to calm their passionate hearts.

Cori finally blinked and she eased from the embrace she initiated. But she rested her hands on the taught stomach, not willing to let go until the last possible second. "Thank you," she finally whispered.

"Oh, you don't have to thank me for that."

Cori giggled, a trait that Taylor found adorable. "That too," she said, "but I meant thank you for coming over...with lunch."

"You're welcome. I have to work late tonight. Can I call you when I get home, about nine?"

"Absolutely." Cori snuck another kiss. "Bye."

"Bye."

Cori had to stand at the door and watch as her friend drove off. She was so hypnotized that she didn't even notice that her next appointment had also arrived.

Taylor did call that night and they talked until the tall woman actually fell asleep in the middle of a sentence.

\* \* \* \*

They both had extremely busy days on Monday. Cori had back to back appointments all day long and Taylor had to rush across town a couple of times to setup for three separate parties. She had taken several breaks during the day and had tried during every one of them to call Cori, but the busy photographer was always with a customer and all Taylor had heard was the blonde's voice over the answering machine. Their free time never coincided and they never had the chance to even say hi person to person.

\* \* \* \*

The words began to blur on the page. Harry Potter was becoming Hurry Pootr. Cori reached up to rub her overtaxed eyes, closing the big book and setting it aside. A flip of a switch extinguished the lamplight at her side and she took her cup of hot chocolate and moved to sit in front of the dying fire. Slowly sipping the thick, sweet beverage, she watched the orange flames licking the top of the blackened logs. Kylie was long asleep and Cori realized how lonely she felt. In just a few days, Taylor's presence had already enraptured a life Cori had already thought content. But now she realized it hadn't been complete. The blonde replayed Taylor's words that were left on the answering machine and Cori wrapped her arms around her herself, failing to sooth the ache from the absent embrace she longed for. "I missed you today," she whispered to the darkened room. Grabbing the iron poker beside her, Cori snuffed the few remaining glowing embers and the feelings of morose that had draped over her soul.

The photographer headed for the kitchen to put away her dirty mug, but a knock on the door detoured her intended path. One green eye peaked through the tiny hole in the door and a grin split her weary face. Anxious fingers fumbled with the locks and the door was flung open. Cori grabbed the visitor by the furry lapels and pulled. "Get in here Taylor!"

The tall woman was happy with the enthusiastic greeting and complied willingly. Taylor wrapped long arms around the little blonde and hugged her tight. "I can only stay a minute," she whispered into the soft hair. "I just missed you today and I had to stop by and see you." They pulled back from the embrace and stared into each other's eyes, enjoying the expression that resided there. Taylor leaned down to capture the beckoning lips, but their mutual fatigue kept

them from delving into a heavily passionate kiss. But any chance to be close and just feel one another was a prize they both cherished.

"I missed you too," Cori said when they parted. "I'm sorry I missed your calls all day."

"I understand. We were both swamped. How's your schedule for tomorrow?"

Cori did a little mental review. "Not too bad. Nothing like today anyway."

Taylor paused just a moment to enjoy the short fingernails scratching against her tired back. "I have to tend bar at a party tomorrow night," she said. "So I was hoping we could meet for lunch."

Cori smiled. "Sounds like a plan to me."

They debated where to go for lunch in between goodbye kisses. The blue eyes caught sight of the clock and its nine thirty-three time. "I really have to go Cori. The babysitter is waiting."

The smaller woman groaned. "I know. See you tomorrow. Goodnight."

"Goodnight. Sweet dreams."

Cori flashed a sexy grin. "Oh they will be, I assure you."

\* \* \* \*

Taylor was allowed an extra long lunch since she would be working late into the night. She and Cori had chosen an offbeat, but nice little restaurant, which was located halfway between where the dark haired woman was working and Cori's suburban house. A nice, easy conversation complimented the great food and it nicely fulfilled their daily fix of each other's company.

After the meal, Taylor still had some time so they drove back to Cori's house for a few intimate moments. As always the kisses and soft caresses were perfection, but their underlying desire for one another was rising like a rolling tide.

The babysitter had discretely taken Kylie into the nursery to give the new couple their privacy.

"Do you happen to have any small bottled water?" Taylor asked.

"Sure do. It's..."

"Cori, may I speak to you for a moment?" The question came from the hallway.

"I'll be right there Mrs. Pine." Cori turned back to her friend. "The water is in the fridge, help yourself."

Taylor took a long swig of the cool liquid and leaned against the kitchen counter. "Is something wrong?" she asked when the blonde stepped into the kitchen

"Kylie has a little diaper rash. Mrs. Pine just wanted to know how I wanted to deal with it." The dark head nodded. "Now where were we?" Cori asked as she came to stand in front of the tall woman.

"Well, I was about to head out, but I would like to ask you something first."

"I'm all ears," Cori said as she unwrapped the two pieces of candy she had in her hand. She placed one chocolate kiss between Taylor's lips and popped the other into her own mouth.

Taylor quickly chewed before asking, "What do you say this weekend we spend some family time together...I uh mean the four of us do...something together?" There was no immediate reaction to her verbal slip, but Taylor saw the eyes flicker just a touch.

Cori took a step closer into the open space between the tall woman's legs. She looked deeply into the vibrant eyes and finally smiled. "Taylor, you can call us a family. That's the way I'd like to think of the four of us. A family is a group of people bound together by love, not blood or legalities." Her eyes dipped just a second as she tried to prepare her next words. "I know you're worried that this is happening fast, but when you know it's right I don't think that time really matters. I'm not the kind that falls at the drop of a hat. I have only had one serious relationship in my life and it... I know that what I feel for you and...well there's just **no** comparison." Two curious hands settled just above Taylor's hips and gave a little squeeze. She tilted her head just a touch and sighed happily. "I've been looking for you for a long time. I love you. I love everything about you, including your son. I'm in love with you." The small blonde was suddenly picked up and twirled.

"Thank God!" Taylor shouted to the ceiling. "Because I am so madly in love with you I'm about to burst." She set Cori down easily, but didn't let go. "I just didn't want to scare you."

"Scare me? You mean you can't see it every time I'm near you?" Her tone was light and teasing.

"Well...I know there's a very strong physical attraction between us and I know for me it's much, much more and...I really did hope that it was that way for you too. You see I haven't had even one serious relationship. Plenty of dates...before Travis. But they were just for a fun time. Most of them didn't want anything more serious. But now I know it wouldn't have mattered. You are the only one for me."

At the risk of sounding corny, Cori echoed the sentiment. But aren't you allowed to be corny with a new love, to be silly and really enjoy the fun, knowing that you have that solid love to build on.

\* \* \* \*

"Why don't you look through this catalog and see if any of these examples appeal to you and I'll get the lighting set up." *Ring. Ring.* "Excuse me just a moment Mrs. Gold," Cori, left her customer and answered the phone. "Hello."

"Hi Sweetheart." Taylor heard nothing but soft breathing on the other end of the line. "Cori, are still there?"

"I'm here. That's the first time you called me sweetheart and I was just savoring the sound of it in your voice."

"Oh...well I'll make sure you hear it often then."

"You only left half an hour ago," said Cori, "miss me already?"

"Yes I do. But I actually called to ask you two questions. First, could you get a babysitter for tonight?"

"Mom and Dad to the rescue again."

"Okay, then how would you like a job?"

"A job?" Cori asked.

"Yeah. I'm tending bar at a corporate VIP party tonight and their photographer had to cancel. I said I might know of someone. I know you don't need the money, but it does pay four hundred dollars...if you have the time and you want to do it."

Cori contemplated. "Well...I'll do it on one condition."

"What's that?"

"You got me the job, so as my agent you take twenty percent."

An audible huff of air left Taylor's throat in protest. "Cori."

"It is a proper business practice, Tay," the photographer said. "I can put you in touch with one if you don't believe me. And if you need a little incentive to accept my proposal, a photographer at an affair like this has to dress to mix in with the crowd. And I happen to have an emerald cocktail dress that I have been dying to wear." Cori could actually hear the vision pop into Taylor's head and heard her breathing increase accordingly. "So what do you say?"

"Ok..." Taylor swallowed and tried again without the squeak. "Okay, you sold me."

\* \* \* \*



The tuxedoed men and sequined dressed women filed into the luxury hotel's festively decorated ballroom. The co-workers and their spouses gleefully exchanged handshakes and hugs, as a five stringed quartet serenaded the gathering crowd. Everyone walked in with a wrapped toy...or two that would go to a charitable organization for underprivileged children. There was also going to be an auction later in the evening with the proceeds going to yet another charity. The philanthropic company was renowned and respected throughout Minnesota.

Taylor organized the glasses and bottles behind the portable black, marbled bar. She knew it wouldn't be long before a line formed, ready to indulge in a libation or two. Taking a tray from a box on the floor, Taylor arranged five crystal flutes on it and began filling them with a fine vintage of champagne. Her co-worker and friend Becky would soon be milling through the group, offering the bubbly liquid to those who preferred.

A brunette, made even taller than Taylor by four-inch spikes approached the bar with a sway that would have made Jacques Cousteau seasick. The split up the side of her blood red dress went almost all the way to the equator and the northern hemisphere was showing more mountain range than a National Geographic. "A very dry Martini," she asked in her Kathleen Turner voice. Taylor turned to grab the silver shaker and the vodka as the vixen tapped her painted fingernails on the polished bar top. Her dark eyes scoped out the available bachelors in the room, no doubt looking for the night's conquest. Without so much as a thank you, she lifted her drink and sauntered away, sucking on the green olive.

*Office slut*, thought Taylor with a mental chuckle. *Too easy*. To occupy her time at these fancy affairs, Taylor played a little game, fitting all the different people into various categories. It might be a little cruel, but as long as she kept it to herself she figured there was no harm done.

"Scotch rocks," ordered the next customer. The burly gentleman with graying temples and mustache had at least nodded and smiled as he approached.

Taylor picked up the metal tongs and dug into the ice bucket under the bar. One cube clinked into the square glass and the bartender's body froze, as she happened to glance at the entryway. The photographer had just entered the door. The heavy camera bag Cori had slung over her shoulder did nothing to deter her absolute beauty. The shimmering green dress she was wearing had an asymmetrical hemline with one side dipping below her knee and the other side stopping just above the joint. A very modest slit separated the silky material on the longer side. The bodice, also uneven, left the right arm covered completely and the other shoulder bared, the material slightly draping down her left arm and continuing to her wrist. Her mid-high heels perfectly accentuated two sculpted legs. Taylor's intense appraisal continued until she heard the clearing of a gruff throat.

"I am so sorry Sir." She apologized as a blush flew to her cheeks and she finished preparing the drink.

The smiling gentleman followed her previous line of sight. He leaned over and whispered. "I completely understand. She is gorgeous."

Taylor couldn't meet his eyes. She just mumbled. "Ah...yes she is." Even though it wasn't required, he left a healthy tip and walked away, still grinning.

Cori went to the far corner and discreetly removed her camera, checking it over one final time before hanging the strap around her neck. She turned back toward the guests, but her green eyed gaze pierced the crowd and landed on the smartly dressed bartender. She gave a smile and a tiny wave of her hand before setting about to the evening's job.

After having been caught lovingly leering at her girlfriend earlier, Taylor covertly watched Cori for the next hour as the photographer mingled with the increasing crowd preserving moments for posterity. The blonde smiled often and offered many Merry Christmas and Happy Holiday greetings. She was even drawn into a couple of interesting conversations, one on world travel and another offering photography tips.

As many of the guests dined on various hors d'oeuvre and main dishes from the buffet, others paired off and began dancing in the center of the room. As her subjects continued on with the evening, Cori decided to take a much-needed break. Something to drink and a visit with the dashing bartender was definitely in order.

The photographer gathered her equipment bag and sauntered over to the bar. The tall woman was wiping out a glass, her back to the crowd. "Got anything I might like?" Cori questioned in a sultry voice.

A wide smile quickly adorned the dark haired woman's face. Before turning, Taylor did just a little teasing. "That's a loaded question," she said. "And I would answer with a vivid demonstration, but my girlfriend is here somewhere and I have to be good. You'll know her right away, she's the most beautiful woman in the room...no make that the world." She slowly swiveled and her arms came to rest against the bar top. "Hi," she said with a half grin.

Cori laid her hands near Taylor's, their fingertips touching. Both being professionals and on a job it was all they dared do...but no one could stop their thoughts. "Do you know how much I want to kiss you right now?" the smaller woman whispered.

Taylor gave her another tense smile. "So much it hurts."

"Guess I'll just have to wet my whistle some other way...for now. How about a club soda?" As Taylor reached into the small refrigerator, Cori set her large, black bag on the bar. "Could you keep this back here?" she asked.

"Sure." Taylor stowed it behind her and went to ask her friend another question. "So are you..."

"Ms. Sterling, there you are. I was so upset because I thought you had gone." The tall, blonde man stopped at Cori's side and placed an intrusive hand on her back.

"Hello Mr. Parker," she said uneasily.

His bright white, no doubt capped, teeth nearly blinded Taylor as she refused to back away. But he totally ignored her in favor of some old and moldy seduction techniques directed at her girlfriend.

"I thought I asked you to call me Steven?" he said.

*Office lothario.* Taylor mentally slapped the label smack dab on his tanning booth enhanced forehead. *Maybe I could introduce you to the slut in red,* she thought.

"Dance with me please?" he asked the photographer.

*Begging? Yeah that is probably the only way you can get anyone to spend any time with you.*

"I'm sorry Mr. Parker," said Cori, "but I really don't feel like dancing. I'm just taking a small break from my job."

He pathetically tried again. "Just a quick one, then you can get right back to work. Surely you like to dance?"

Cori took a sip of her drink, looking across the rim of the glass at the bartender. Seeing Taylor's jaw clench as she pretended to go about her business, made Cori smile...internally. "Mr. Parker, I really don't care to dance now or anytime this evening." She answered politely, but staunchly.

He frowned. "Okay. You say that now, but you will change your mind." He turned to leave not seeing the visual daggers hitting him in the back.

Cori covered the tense hand of her snarling friend. "Forget him," she said. "Can you take a break now? Maybe we can find somewhere to be alone for just a few minutes."

Taylor's face brightened as she signaled to the buffet table. "I'll be back in fifteen," she said when her relief arrived.

They discreetly headed for the doorway of the ballroom, nodding and smiling at the friendly people...and hoping that persistent Parker was nowhere in sight. Cori silently followed her to the elevator and once inside, her hand slipped into the larger one as they watched the numbers drop. The doors opened on the eighth floor and Taylor led her down the hall while fishing for something in her pocket. One more turn down a short hall and the tall woman slipped the key into a lock of the last door. Taylor flipped the light on as they stepped inside.

"I hate having to hide to spend some time with you and this isn't a very romantic place." Her head nodded to the large and mostly empty storage room. "But I'm afraid it's the best I can do."

Cori's arms encircled the other woman's neck and she took a step closer. "I don't care where we are, as long as I'm with you." Their lips met smoothly, only slightly sating their desire. But as the kiss continued it had the opposite affect.

Knowing that their time was short, they separated. Taylor glanced at her watch and confirmed that nine minutes had already passed. One thumb rubbed across the fine, yellow hairs lining the nape of Cori's neck as Taylor's other hand caressed the draping, emerald material along Cori's arm. "You look spectacular in this dress," she whispered huskily.

"I was just thinking the same thing about you in this vest and bowtie." Cori straightened the black material around the tall woman's neck. She laid her head against Taylor's chest, in the v of the dark vest. "I guess we have to go back now huh?"

"I'm afraid so." They stole another kiss and then Taylor nibbled the thumb that wiped away the extra lipstick from her lips. "I'm going to follow you home because there is something I want to do, that we can't do here."

Cori was definitely intrigued back didn't ask. "Okay," she said lightly.

\* \* \* \*

The last major event of the evening was the silent auction, which was being held in the adjoining room. The door had been left open and Taylor listened as she packed away the bar supplies and her co-workers cleaned up the rest of the party mess. There were many items up for sale including cruises to Alaska and the Caribbean and a ski trip to Aspen There were also individual items like golf clubs and even a motorcycle.

She packed up the last dirty glass, loaded the box onto the metal cart and pulled the four-wheeled vehicle into the hall. Fifteen minutes later, Taylor was standing in the hotel lobby waiting for her friend. She heard the bell ding and turned toward the elevator, where she saw Cori step off, but so did her new shadow. *Office jerk*. Taylor updated Mr. Steven Parker's status as she watched him follow her girlfriend across the room.

Cori stopped abruptly, just a few feet from where Taylor was standing.

"Oh, excuse me," said Parker when he bumped into the small woman.

Cori turned on him one last time. "I'm going now," she said sternly. A light bulb suddenly flipped on. "My baby is waiting for me at home."

Parker stood back, slumped shouldered. "Why didn't you just tell me you had a boyfriend? Now I get the point. Goodbye Ms. Sterling."

Taylor dramatically rolled her eyes. *Office idiot*, she thought as an arm slipped around hers. "I'm sorry you had to put with him all night," she said as they headed for the big glass doors.

A shoulder shrugged. "It's not the first time," said Cori. "Besides...I saw the jealousy flash across your face. And that feels kinda nice."

Taylor stopped under the bright lamppost hugging herself against the cold. She turned to Cori, very seriously. "I just want you to know that if I thought you were really interested in him...or anyone else, I would let you go...but it wouldn't just break my heart, it would crush it."

Cori lifted a gloved hand and drew a finger down the side of Taylor's reddening face. "Sweetheart, I never intend to crush, break or even dent your heart."

Taylor's response was a lovely, brilliant smile.

Once back at Cori's house, the photographer saw her parents off with hugs and kisses. Just as she shut the door, soft strains of music began to fill the room. She turned to find Taylor standing near the stereo holding out a hand. Their bodies slowly came together and started swaying to the mellow notes, making lazy circles in front of the twinkling tree.

"This is what I wanted to do all evening," whispered Taylor. "I really wanted to be the only one you danced with."

Cori took in a short happy breath. "My card is full and your name is on every line. I love you," she said just before their lips met.

Continued in Part 3.

### The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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## ~ Twelve Days ~

by Colleen

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All comments are welcome at [colleen30@webtv.net](mailto:colleen30@webtv.net)

I have also created a group for discussions of this, past and future stories. Maybe some sneak previews as well.

Join us at [http://groups.yahoo.com/group/colleens\\_corner](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/colleens_corner)

## Part 3

### Chapter 4

Cori lifted the last print from the clear liquid and hung it on the wire to dry. Inspecting it carefully for the correct exposure, she shut off the machine and turned the lights on full. She had spent the afternoon in the darkroom, developing and printing the five rolls of film that she had taken at the party the night before. A smile formed on Cori's face as she studied the big 8x10 in front of her. She had snapped three pictures of the dapper bartender, but this was by far the best one. It depicted a close-up of Taylor in three quarter profile with a tiny smile curling the sides of her mouth. She was very relaxed and totally unaware of the camera lens pointed in her direction.

There was an empty two-tone wood inlaid frame that, Cori decided the photo would look perfect in. And then it would be hung on the wall going up the staircase, where all her other cherished family photos resided.

\* \* \* \*

A crying baby in one arm and a boiling pot on the stove didn't frazzle Cori Sterling. Add a ringing phone and a knock at the door at it might start to strike a nerve. But for now, the little mother had everything under control. "Okay Sweetie," she cooed to the tearful infant while shutting off the flame. "I get the point. It's dinner time." Cori quickly moved to the comfortable recliner in the living room and settled in. Several buttons on her multi-colored shirt were opened and Kylie was cradled to her mother's chest for a nourishing meal. Cori cupped the back of her daughter's fuzzy, blonde head with her free hand, rubbing over the shell of a tiny ear with her thumb. One big, green eye peered up as the baby suckled in time to her mother's humming. A smile drew over the older woman's face as it always did when she spent these precious moments with her child. All throughout her pregnancy, Cori had thought of all the things that she wanted to do with her child. She had even started a journal with all the ideas listed for each year of age. But now she would have to alter at least some of those plans, for it would no longer be just the two of them. They had an expanding family to happily consider.

Knowing that her daughter was not yet full, Cori switched her to the other breast. "You're getting so big," she said. "I'm afraid this just isn't enough for you anymore. I'm glad we started you on cereal last week." Cori placed a kiss on the wrinkled forehead. "But you'll always be Mommy's baby. I love you Sweetie."

Finished with her meal, a wide-awake Kylie was placed against a strong shoulder and a gentle hand patted her back. Before long a loud burp sounded in Cori's ear. She chuckled. "Oh my, that was a good one." The pair sauntered back into the kitchen to finish Cori's dinner. The baby loved her mother so much that she absolutely did not want to be put in her swing, so with a squirming Kylie on her hip, Cori re-warmed the sauce for her pasta. The phone in the other room rang. She headed for the living room, but quickly scurried back when the red sauce started to bubble. Running to the phone, Cori checked the caller ID before answering. "Hi Mom."

*Knock. Knock. Knock.* "Special delivery."

*Oh boy!*

\* \* \* \*

"Ouch!" Taylor pulled her burnt finger away from the hot bowl she was removing from the oven. Once she set the dish on the table, she held up the oven mitt, finally noticing the worn hole near the top seam. The pretty features scrunched into a scowl as Taylor sucked on the injured finger. The useless accessory was soon sailing across the room landing in the open trashcan.

"Come on Trav, dinner." Taylor called her son as she dished out the beef and noodle mixture onto two plates. She sprinkled the smaller portion with a handful of cheese. That was the only way she could get the boy to eat most of his food. *At least he's getting plenty of calcium*, she thought. As a test, she put just a few of the cheddar pieces on top of her own food.

The three year old came in seconds later wiping his damp hands on his shirt. "Honey, you are supposed to dry your hands on the towel in the bathroom," she softly chided, "not your clothes." She lifted him into the big kitchen chair and went to pour him a glass of milk.

"But da towel fell on da floor Mommy. It gots germs. My shirt is clean."

Taylor ruffled his bright blonde hair, grinning at his developing logic skills. She sat down, tried the experimental dish and nodded. *Not bad*, she thought. *Guess he knew something I didn't*. "What did you do today Travis?"

The child fumbled a forkful of food into his mouth and remembered how mommy taught him not to talk with his mouth full. He swallowed then answered happily. "We made cookies at Mrs. Archer's and in pweschool we made..." Travis suddenly slapped a hand over his mouth.

"What's wrong?" Taylor asked, concerned. "Is it too hot?"

He shook his head hard without removing the hand. Finally the boy moved two small fingers and whispered. "I almost told you da secret about da pwesent."

Taylor scrunched her lips to keep from smiling. "That's okay Sweetheart, I didn't even hear what you said. It's still a secret." Travis relaxed and grinned. "Eat up," she told him.

\* \* \* \*

The tall woman wiped her hands on a yellow towel and turned off the water in the sink when the phone rang. "Hello," she answered.

"Hi. Guess what?"

"You love me."

Cori giggled. "Always. But besides that, the heat went out in my parent's house and they'll be spending the night here."

Taylor's brow wrinkled and she twisted the phone cord between her fingers. "Well...I'm sorry to hear that and don't take this the wrong way, but what does that have to do with me?"

"What time does Travis go to bed?"

"About eight."

"Perfect," said Cori. "Since Mom and Dad will be here for Kylie, how about if I come over with a movie and popcorn and we can spend the evening together?"

Taylor smiled. "That sounds perfect, but just bring the movie. I've got the popcorn here."

"See ya soon."

\* \* \* \*

Taylor was stretched out on her sofa with Cori beside her; the smaller woman's back was to the cushion. To be more precise, half of Cori's body was lying on half of Taylor's. Those were the two happiest halves. There was a big bowl of popped corn on the low table in front of them and they fed each other while trying to figure out the plot of the mystery playing on the television. The blonde absently ran her wool-covered foot along the taller woman's calf when there was a lull in the action. They comfortably held that position for the length of the movie.

As the credits rolled, Taylor hit the remote and turned her full attention to the small woman in her arms. "You guessed it right Hon," she said of the movie's ending. "I love a smart woman."

"Me too." Cori quietly drew small circles across Taylor's flat belly. They stayed like that for many peaceful minutes, in the dim lighting just basking in the quiet and each other.

"This is nice," Taylor finally said with a kiss to Cori's forehead. "I'm glad you thought of it."

Cori echoed her earlier statement. "Me too."

Taylor tipped her head with a query. "Cat got your extended vocabulary?"

A chin planted itself just above her left breast and two green eyes twinkled up at her. They held Taylor's for a very long time as a teasing smile haunted the corners of her lips. Their little stalemate played out for many heartbeats until the dark haired woman finally broke.

"Well, if you won't talk," said Taylor. "I have only one alternative." She shifted in a flash and moved like lightning.



"No, Taylor! Stop!" Cori constricted her body into a fetal position and tried desperately to push away the fingers tickling her sides. "Please Tay! Please stop!"

The teasing digits slowly ceased their torture. "Since you asked nicely," Taylor said, only slightly breathless.

Their bodies had twisted during the little tussle and the taller woman ended up on top. Taylor lifted her weight on her strong arms and settled just off to the side of the smaller woman. They kissed easily under the soft glow of the colored lights on the tree beside them. In Taylor's precarious position, a cramp suddenly hit her lower back. She moved to relieve the tension and her butt hit the green bowl, flipping it and sending a spray of mostly unpopped kernels over the entwined duo. They both laughed into the kiss and then separated, still giggling wildly.

Cori pulled a fluffy, white piece from the dark hair and chewed it thoughtfully. "Ummm, even better than before."

Taylor laughed and tapped the button nose. "You are a nut," she said. The tall woman stood and brushed the popcorn onto the floor as Cori made a dash to the bathroom.

She returned minutes later to find Taylor sweeping up the mess. Cori resumed her place on the couch, pulling one leg up under the other as Taylor carried the trash into the kitchen.

"Speaking of hair..." Taylor said upon her return.

"Were we?" asked the blonde.

Taylor brushed back some of the stray yellow locks. "I've been meaning to ask you, wasn't the Mrs. Claus gig permanent for the season? I know you haven't been back there again."

"No it wasn't. Last year it was, but I was only filling in for a friend for just that one night." Cori gave her a lopsided smile. "I'm gonna have to get her a very special present for being sick that night."

Taylor descended very slowly upon her favorite lips. "Did I ever tell you how sexy you were with gray hair?" She asked the question halfway to her destination.

Cori watched the approaching blue eyes. "You're kidding?" she asked seriously.

"Oh no. You are going to be beautiful, forever." Taylor spoke the words breathlessly before landing softly.

As the kiss deepened, Cori turned her body and slipped onto Taylor's lap. The larger hands were soon stroking the jean cover thighs on either side of her legs. Cori let her hands play in the raven field atop Taylor's head as she leaned farther into the long torso beneath her. Two bodies rocked against one another to the melody of the ascending passion play. No longer able to hold off, Cori clawed at the shirttails tucked inside the blue jeans. Her palms soon landed against the tight abs,

which were covered with just the right amount of warm, fleshly femininity. Taylor's hands drifted up to caress the behind moving so sensuously in her lap. Low moans soon accompanied the oral caresses and the decision was made for them. As it bore the weight of her own body, Cori's hand fumbled to open the brass button that guarded the treasure she desperately sought.

Even as the wondrous sensations cascaded over her, something negative tickled at the back of Taylor's lust filled brain. Her lips never faltered in their joyous task even as her hands wondered up to gently, but forcibly separate them. She panted. "Baby, wait."

The blonde's mouth moved to the soft neck and chiseled jaw. "No more waiting. I want you...can't wait..." She slowly felt her partner's attention drift elsewhere and pulled back to find the blue eyes watching the door at the end of the short hall. Cori's forehead silently dropped to a broad shoulder as her breath evened out.

"I'm sorry Sweetheart," said Taylor. "I'm not ashamed of you or us, but I don't want to confuse Travis. He gets up early and if he were to find us... I haven't talked to him about this yet. I'm just worried..." Two fingers hushed her slightly swollen lips.

"I know, I know." Cori assured her. "You're right. Your son's well-being has to come first. I'm the one who's sorry."

"Hey, don't ever say that. I love you and I want to make love to you...very badly."

Cori rubbed her thumb over the strong cheekbone as she pondered for a solution. "How about if I sleep here on the couch?" she asked. "I kinda told my parents not to worry if I didn't come home tonight."

Taylor gave a slim smile. "Baby, this old couch is horrible. You wouldn't sleep a wink."

The photographer chewed the inside of her cheek as she wracked her brain again. "I could go home...after. I just really need to be with you Tay." Cori was enveloped by strong arms and hugged tightly

Taylor sighed heavily. "You deserve better than that Sweetheart. This is not an affair, this is a relationship and I can't send you off after making love to you, especially the first time. This is too special."

"You're right, this is special." Cori teasingly circled a fingertip around Taylor's breast, smiling at the visible reaction she received. And the verbal reaction she heard in the form of an exaggerated 'Ohhhh God'. But it suddenly dawned on her the cruelty she was inflicting. Cori stopped and kissed the flushed cheek. "I'm sorry Honey. I've just never felt this way about anybody before. But you're right." She sat back and straightened her disheveled clothing. She couldn't stop the tiny sigh of disappointment that slipped from her lips and she hastily moved away. A hand landed on her shoulder.

"Come here," said the emotional voice. Cori was pulled into the gentle embrace. "I've never felt this way before either." Taylor didn't tell her just how true that statement was. This time it was she who initiated the light kisses. But their intense love quickly rolled them into a point of no return. "I'll find a way to lock the door." Taylor stated between kisses. "And I'll be sure to get up before Travis does. But I do need you to stay." Taylor harshly captured the reddened lips again as her powerful legs lifted them both from the couch. The shorter legs wrapped around her waist and she carried her soon to be lover into the hallway.

Steps away from the bedroom door they heard, "Mama! Mama!"

Cori slipped to the ground and quickly stepped aside as Taylor made the short journey to her son's room."

"I'm here Baby." She gathered the crying child into her arms and sat on the side of the small bed. "What's wrong Honey, did you have a bad dream?"

The blonde head could barely nod from its place buried deep in her neck. Cori stood in the doorway and watched as Taylor rocked and murmured to the distraught child.

"It's okay Honey. The bad dreams are all gone now."

"No Mama. I wanna sleep wit you. You keep dem away."

Two sets of compassionate, but disconcerted eyes met as Taylor once again tried to gently persuade her son to stay in his own bed.

But again he said no...loudly.

Cori pointed to herself then in the direction of the front door. She blew a kiss and went for her coat. Pulling the hat down over her ears, she reached for the doorknob.

"Cori, wait!" Taylor came rushing into the room and pulled the blonde into her arms. "I'm sorry Sweetheart. This has happened before, it's not a conspiracy." She tried to lighten the mood and received a tiny smile for her effort.

"I know." Cori gave Taylor a quick kiss on the cheek. "Go take care of him," she said. "He needs his mama. I'll call you tomorrow. Love you." With that, Cori slipped out the door without waiting for a reply.

"Love you...too." The blue eyes slid shut and a heavy heart lay in Taylor's chest. She didn't have but a few seconds to bemoan the situation before her son bellowed again.

Cori mumbled to herself as she headed out into the frigid night. Of course she understood that the needs of a child have to come first, but it didn't stop the ache in the pit of her belly for the woman she loved. She stood in the blustery wind for a few seconds hoping the chill would calm her raging hormones. Then she sat in the idling vehicle waiting for the heat to build so she could

comfortably drive without gloves. Pulling the seatbelt on Cori muttered, "There has to be a solution to this situation. We're two intelligent adults, we can come up with something. It's not a bad sign. It's just bad timing."

The green Tracker started off on the fifteen-minute trip back to her house, navigating the nearly empty streets in the late night hour. A light snow began to fall, quickly disguising the ice that had already formed on the blacktopped roads at the hand of the harsh winds. She drove past the mall where she had met Taylor and a smile graced her lips. A heavy breath left her throat as she thought, *love can be frustrating*. A shake of her head and a wider grin followed along with another notion. *But I wouldn't give it up for anything in the world*.

A pick up truck pulled out of the gas station and stopped at the next red light just ahead of her. The bed of the truck was overflowing with several big Christmas trees and Cori briefly wondered where he was going with that many.

The wind suddenly whipped up as the snowfall increased in intensity.

Waiting for the light to change, Cori watched the flakes of white land upon the prickly evergreen fingers. Her fingers nervously drummed against the steering wheel as her level of hormonal excitement was still on high alert. She reached over to adjust the heat as the light turned green. The anxious driver in front of her screeched the vehicle's big tires as he took off.

Then it all happened in an instant.

Out of nowhere, came a speeding car turning from the opposite direction. Its tires squealed across the road and crashed into the front of the pickup and the two cars skidded several feet clipping the nose of Cori's SUV. The Tracker then hit a patch of ice and spun many times, sliding down a small embankment, only stopping when the driver's side crashed into a huge metal post.

Gasoline and evergreens littered the intersection. The sound of screeching tires, crunching metal and crackling glass broke to a sickening quiet covered only by nature's roaring winds. There were no cries for help or moans of pain, only the lonely, silent darkness.

Continued in Part 4.

**The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive**

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## ~ Twelve Days ~

by Colleen

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## **Part 4**

### **Chapter 5**

The Shafer apartment was one of ten in the building on the outskirts of town. It consisted of five rooms: a small living room, a small eat-in kitchen, two small bedrooms and a small bathroom. Taylor however refused to think of their place as small. She preferred to think of it as compact. Mother and son had just about everything they needed, just not a lot of extras. She had managed to acquire a few, so called luxuries like a VCR and a microwave over the years. Travis's room had a full toy box in one corner and a stacked bookshelf in the other. As often as she could, when she was home before bedtime, Taylor and Travis sat on his bed and read a story. She cherished those times in particular because it was a tradition she carried over from her own childhood.

There were only two signs of the coming holiday in the four-room apartment. A lopsided wreath that Travis had made in preschool, hung on the inside of the door, bringing a smile to Taylor's face every time she left. Near the window, in the living room sat a sm...petite Christmas tree decorated in blue and white. A golden-garbed angel sat atop the green branches holding out welcoming arms.

Taylor set the bowl of Rice Krispies down in front of her son, who proceeded to dive in with both feet, so to speak. The little blond woke up cheery and smiling, his nightmares of the night before banished by his six-foot hero. The teakettle whistled as Taylor dropped a scoop of instant coffee into her favorite blue mug. She took the hot drink and turned back toward the table to share a bowl of cereal with her son, but at the last second she made a detour into the next room and flipped on the small television. She kept one ear to the morning news as she chatted with Travis about the hot topics of a three year old, which consisted of the latest adventures of Tommy Pickles and friends to reviewing his latest accomplishment, being able to recite the first half of the alphabet.

With breakfast done, Taylor gathered up the dirty dishes and set them in the sink. "Go get your toys together Babe." She told her son. "Mrs. Archer is waiting on us."

The nearly monotone voice of the television reporter began another of the day's top stories. "An accident late last night has left two people dead and one hospitalized."

Taylor felt a little tingle on the back of her neck as she washed the last bowl and spoon. But she brushed it off as a chill when she heard the furnace come on.

The news report continued. "The three car accident happened around eleven thirty p.m. at the corner of Grant Avenue and Berlinger Street. Alcohol is the suspected cause. No names have been released pending notification of relatives."

Travis came running from his bedroom with his backpack in hand as there was a knock on the door. Taylor was just about to grab her coat from a nearby chair when she changed routes to answer the knock. "Hello, Mrs. Archer. We were just on the way down."

The little boy ran to his babysitter, hoping she was going to make more of his favorite cookies today. "Hi Ms. Archer," he said with a small wave.

The older woman smiled down at him. "Good morning Dear." She then raised her gaze to his mother. "Taylor, I was just about to go down to the basement to bring up some packages and I thought maybe this strong young man would like to give me a hand...In exchange for some yummy treats later today."

The little blonde head tilted and he asked enthusiastically, "Can I Mama?"

"Sure Honey." Taylor bent over to give her son a hug. "You have a good day. I love you." She kissed his cheek then addressed the sitter. "I should be home at the regular time tonight." Taylor stood at the door until they reached the elevator, where Travis looked back and said 'love you Mama'. She shut the door and went for her coat again when the phone rang. "Hello."

"Taylor, it's Barbara Sterling. I'm afraid I have some bad news Dear."

The dark haired woman didn't hear most of the next words spoken as her mind flashed back to the news report she had heard earlier. The timing and address now registered in her thoughts...and so did the chill she had felt earlier. She hung up the phone without a good-bye and ran out the door leaving her coat behind.

The sixteen-degree temperature didn't matter to Taylor as she hopped out of the car and dashed across the parking lot of the small suburban hospital. Her tennis shoes sank into the three-inch snow piles where the ground had not been cleared and she nearly ran into the automatic doors, before they had the chance to slide open. With squeaking shoes, she walked up to the desk and asked her desperate questions. Taylor then frantically searched the maze of halls looking the right room number. She stopped to take a much-needed breath before slowly opening the door. Quietly, Taylor stepped inside, her heart still pounding and her eyes misting over at the sight of the petite woman she loved, lying so still in the sterile, metal bed. Even in the dim, early morning light, Taylor could see the blue and purple bruise that spread out from under the blonde bangs and spread over half of Cori's forehead. Under her left eye was a square patch of white gauze,

taped to the pale skin. Under that bandage was an uneven row of seven tiny black stitches. A stark white blanket was pulled up to the sleeping woman's chin, obstructing Taylor's assessment of any further injuries. The tall woman tiptoed over to the side of the bed and eased herself into the cushioned chair, never taking her eyes off her injured friend. The sadness and feeling of helplessness was almost overwhelming. Taylor took a few more deep breaths trying to loosen the tightness in her chest. Nothing had ever affected her so strongly as this near tragedy and she said a long prayer that nothing ever would again.

The clock on the wall was the only sound in the room and it ticked away twenty minutes as she watched the slow, easy breathing. Between the cold and the tension, her neck had begun to stiffen up. Taylor leaned forward in the chair and dropped her head to her chest rubbing the muscles in question with one hand. She pulled the tie from her ponytail and the long, dark curtain of hair fell across her face, obscuring her view of everything except her soaking wet footwear with their now dingy laces. Only then did she feel the slush that had seeped into her shoes and socks. Taylor wiggled her squishy toes, paying no attention to the nurse who came in and opened the blinds, letting in the winter's morning light. The heater in the corner quietly hissed as it popped on, re-warming the air in the tiny room and the tall woman's cold, wet body. Her red cheeks were starting to tingle from the wind's harsh slap in the face and she reached up to rub her earlobes, drawing the circulation back to the abused flesh. Then a small, scratchy voice barely broke the silence, but was loud and clear to the worried woman.

"Tay?"

The dark head popped up as she moved closer to the bed. "I'm here Sweetheart." Taylor wanted so badly to touch Cori, but didn't want to cause any more pain than she could clearly see etched on the pale face.

The blonde licked her parched lips. "Is there any water?"

"Sure." With hands just a little shaky, Taylor helped her take a few sips of the cool liquid.

"Thank you." Cori smiled softly and her green eyes blinked open again, looking over at her beautiful partner. "What time is it?"

Taylor hadn't bothered to check until now. She turned to the timepiece on the wall. "It's just after nine," she said. Taylor finally gave in to her need and gently ran the backs of her fingers along the uninjured area of Cori's cheek.

Her body roared with pain, but Cori soaked in the warm contact. "Shouldn't you be at work?" she asked lazily.

"To hell with work. I'm right where I want to be...where I need to be."

Cori slowly pulled her right arm out from under the blanket and reached for Taylor. The tall woman took the hand in both of hers and bent to kiss it.

"Tay, that's very sweet, but I don't want you to lose your job because of me. I'll be okay."

"You are the most important thing to me. Besides, I still have a couple of sick days. Don't worry about it." Taylor held her gaze as she paused. Her face then contorted with guilt. "I'm sorry," she whispered thickly.

The blond brows drew together over the backdrop of blue and purple. "What for?"

A tear escaped the sad eyes. "I shouldn't have let you leave last night. You were upset and the roads were too bad. You could have stayed in Travis's room. I should have insisted."

"No Tay, don't do that to yourself. I wasn't upset." Cori tried her best to give the other woman a silly grin to alleviate the tension. "I was a little...frustrated." She wiggled painful eyebrows and Taylor snorted a small laugh. "I didn't cause the accident," said Cori.

"Oh, I know you didn't Sweetheart. I never thought that." Fury suddenly filled the slim face. "That accident was caused by a fucking drunk driver." Taylor took in the surprised features. "I heard it on the news report. Can you tell me what happened?"

Cori inhaled deeply, remembering the terrifying moment. "The truck in front of me crossed the intersection on the green light and was hit by another car that turned into him. They hit me and I spun and hit a post." She turned back to Taylor. "You see it was actually very good timing. A few seconds earlier and..."

The dark head shook harshly, not wanting her to finish the sentence. "How are you?" she asked after a pause. "I'm afraid I was kind of rude to your mother on the phone. I didn't give her a chance to explain. I just rushed over here."

"She'll understand. As for me, it's just what you see." Cori pulled at the blanket. "A few more bumps and bruises under here. And a fractured wrist."

Taylor was slightly relieved, but not totally convinced. "Cori, they don't keep you in the hospital for bumps and bruises. Please tell me the truth."

The blonde gave a properly chagrined look. "Okay. I also have a concussion. But it's no big deal."

Taylor kissed the hand again and brought it to her chest. "It's a very big deal to me. I can't explain how I can love you so much so fast...but God knows I do. When I thought..." The tears came again. "I couldn't stand losing you."

"You haven't...and you won't. Now I think you can do better than that," Cori said, indicating the kiss.

Taylor stood and bent over, pouring all of her love into a proper, but very gentle kiss.



For the remainder of Cori's short hospital stay, Taylor sat by her side even through the patient's frequent naps, leaving only to grab a quick lunch. Later in the afternoon Cori's mother came to visit. Grandpa had stayed home to watch baby Kylie. The older woman was very surprised, but pleasantly so, to find out that Taylor had been there the entire day. She watched as the tall woman saw to every one of her daughter's needs, including helping to feed Cori because it was hard for the injured woman to raise her sore arms to the dinner tray. Barbara Sterling knew at that moment that there was something very special developing between her daughter and Taylor. Happiness filled Mrs. Sterling as she continued to watch Taylor being so attentive to Cori. She couldn't have wished for a better partner for her daughter.

Cori was released around six thirty that evening after a final, negative x-ray. Taylor drove her home and stayed until she finally had to leave to pick up her son. Before leaving, the tall woman overheard a conversation between Cori and her mother. The Sterlings had pledged some time to a local children's home to help them with a Christmas program. This was taking place the next day and Cori was adamant that they keep their plans and not cancel for her. The sitter would be there for Kylie and she insisted that she could care for herself. The dark-haired woman made one quick phone call setting her own plans in motion.

Taylor came into the darkened bedroom and adjusted the pillows and blankets one last time. "I have to go now Hon," she said. "I wish I didn't." Taylor could tell that Cori was just about to fall asleep.

"I know Tay. Tell Travis I said hi. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"You bet. I love you."

"Love you too." Cori slurred the words just before her eyes fell shut for the night.

Taylor kissed her unscathed cheek and stepped out of the room, quietly closing the door. She stopped to tell Mrs. Sterling her plans for the next day, once again re-enforcing the older woman's opinion of Taylor Shafer.

\* \* \* \*

Cori felt the soft lips against her skin and the warm, sweet breath on her cheek. Her head turned slightly and she enveloped those lips in a way that she so desired. She moaned. "Mmmm, Taylor."

"Yessss."

The sexy timber of that voice alone did things to her that should be illegal. Cori faintly heard footsteps nearby as she drifted from deep sleep and the incredible dream. She forced her tired eyes to open, expecting to see the babysitter...but she didn't. The sitter was nowhere near that good looking. "Tay? Is that really you?" A beautiful grin flashed before her.

"In the flesh," said the tall woman standing beside the bed.

"Did you just kiss me?" asked Cori.

"No, but that can be arranged." And arrange she did.

The green eyes blinked. "That's much better than a dream."

"You were dreaming about me?" asked Taylor.

"Since the night we met." Cori reached out a stiff arm and cupped the smiling face. "You should see the ones that aren't drug induced. Now, what time is it and what are you doing here?"

The tall woman took a seat next to the blonde in the queen size bed. "It is just after ten," she replied, "and I am here to take care of you...and your daughter. And before you protest, like I said yesterday, I am right where I want to be. Don't worry about my job. I know what I'm doing. Now, how are you feeling?"

Cori groaned as she scooted up in the bed. "As well as can be expected I guess." Her lips turned up at the corner watching the other woman fussing to fluff her pillows. "You're taking care of Kylie?" she asked.

"Yep. I asked your mother to give the sitter the day off. I even brought Travis over. He is at this minute, availing himself of your cable television. I think Bugs was once again outwitting Elmer Fudd the last time I passed through the living room. Miss Kylie was up at seven and has been changed, dressed, fed and is now enjoying her first nap of the day."

Cori just laid there, her pain forgotten as she listened to her friend talk. "You do know I'm falling in love with you again, don't you?"

Taylor smiled brilliantly. "Well, that's always nice to hear. I love you too." They just gazed into one another's eyes until the blonde twitched. "What can I get you?" the tall woman asked.

Cori moved under the covers and pulled them away from her body.

"What are you doing?" asked Taylor. "Whatever it is I'll get it for you."

Cori grunted as her feet hit the carpeting. "Honey I'm afraid you can't get this for me." She gave another moan as she lifted her stiff body. "I need the bathroom."

"Oh...right." The tall woman scooted in beside her and lent some much needed support as they walked slowly across the room.

"I really want to wash up too," said Cori, "but that better wait until later. Maybe my muscles will loosen up some as the day goes on."

"I can help you with that." Taylor said it without realizing the implications of her words until the blond head tilted and raised the wheat colored eyebrows. The tall woman blushed. "I mean...ahhh..."

After moving at a snail's pace across the room, they finally reached the door to the bathroom. "Thank you," said Cori. She kissed the rose colored cheek and stepped inside.

Taylor waited patiently as Cori attended to her business, glancing absently at her watch. "Cor," she said through the closed door. "I need to take care of something. I'll be right back. Wait for me, so I can help you back to bed." After receiving a one word answer, Taylor slipped down the hall and down the stairs, heading for the laundry room.

\* \* \* \*

*The morning had started out early. Mrs. Sterling was just finishing her coffee when Taylor had shown up just before seven. After a quick conversation Cori's mother headed home to prepare for her day. Taylor's first order of business was breakfast for her son. A nearly full pot of freshly brewed coffee called to her and she quickly answered, removing a cup from the wooden rack hanging on the wall. As Travis ate his bowl of hot, honey drizzled oatmeal, she perused the rest of the large, well-stocked kitchen. Several bottles of breast milk sat in reserve on the second shelf of the refrigerator. Taylor knew that Cori wouldn't be able to nurse while she was on medication, so they were sure to come in handy. A few tiny squeaks came from the baby monitor on the table and she took one out and set in on the cabinet, anticipating that the baby's slumber would very soon be coming to an end.*

*At her son's polite request, the television was soon tuned to the early morning cartoons. Taylor left him sitting on a huge floor pillow, laughing at the antics on the screen as she went to check on the home's other occupants. Taylor quietly opened a door to find the twenty five year old blonde still sound asleep. She smiled and eased herself back out into the hall. Moving on to the next door, Taylor opened it just as quietly and tiptoed inside. Unlike her mother, the four-month old blonde was already wide awake, just waiting for someone to come in. The baby was lying quietly on her back, sucking on her tiny fist. Once she caught sight of the dark haired woman the fist flew from her mouth and her pudgy, little legs began kicking joyously.*

*Taylor couldn't help but laugh at her actions as she reached in and picked up the thirteen-pound infant. "Well look at you Miss Kylie, all wide eyed and gummy smiles. Do you always wake up in such a good mood?" She softly bounced the baby in her arms, remembering how nice it felt. She kissed the side of the fuzzy, fair head as she walked over to the dressing table and laid down the precious bundle. She snapped the safety belt across the plump tummy and searched the shelves underneath for the necessary provisions. "Wow," she commented aloud. "Your Mommy has everything imaginable under here." She started grabbing items. "Let's see, diaper, baby wipes, cornstarch...clothes?" Taylor spied the tall dresser in the corner of the room. "Clothes must be in there," she mumbled. Bringing the chosen garments back to the table, Taylor removed the belt and began undressing the still smiling, but wiggling baby. She tossed the damp sleeper in the direction of the white hamper near the door. The wet, but otherwise clean diaper soon followed. The tender bottom was cleaned, dried and powdered as Taylor remembered performing the same*

*tasks on her own son just a few years before. She reached out and tickled the bare tummy, eliciting a burst of high-pitched giggles. "Guess I don't have to worry about you nailing me in the eye, do I?" Instead she got kicked in the chest as she bent over to blow bubbles on the baby belly. But it didn't faze her a bit. Taylor propped her elbows on either side of the little body and just studied the button nose and blue green eyes. "You are a cutie, aren't you? But then you do look just like your Mommy." The rhetorical question was answered by a yank on her long, dark locks. "Okay, okay I get the point," said Taylor. She quickly released the imprisoned follicles that were headed straight for a slobbery, little mouth. "Let's get you dressed and then we'll get you some yummy milk." A naughty thought flashed through Taylor's mind. The source of that milk would be a yummy treat for me. She laughed aloud at herself as she wrangled the baby into a white turtleneck shirt and then into a pair of red overalls. A pair of ruffled socks completed the ensemble and the pair headed off to the kitchen.*

*Taylor took the warm bottle and her small charge into the living room and sat on the sofa behind her captivated son. When the next commercial came on, Travis looked around, suddenly noticing that his mother had joined him. He climbed up next to her and asked, "What'cha doin Mama?"*

*"Feeding the baby," she replied.*

*Travis got up on his knees for a better look. With one hand on his mother's shoulder, he carefully leaned closer to the crimson clad infant and waved. "Hi baby," he said in his small voice. Kylie stopped sucking and smiled around the nipple in her mouth. She was obviously smitten with this person who was much closer to her own size. "Can she watch cartoons with me Mama?" he asked as she quickly resumed her morning meal.*

*"Sweetie, little babies don't like cartoons. Maybe in a few months, she'll be more interested."*

*Travis shrugged, always believing whatever his mother said and hopped back down onto the floor.*

*Burped and placed into her swing, Kylie seemed content, allowing Taylor to gather a load of baby laundry. With that done and Cori still asleep, Taylor then rounded up the ingredients for a hearty breakfast for the injured woman.*

*For the next hour and a half, Taylor divided her time between Travis and Kylie, until the baby started to yawn. After putting the tired infant in her crib, Taylor couldn't resist and went into her friend's room, where she found the woman moaning...but definitely not in pain.*

*\* \* \* \**

The tall woman dashed back into the rose colored bedroom just as Cori was coming from the bathroom. "Good timing," croaked the injured woman as she held out a hand. "I really need some help."

"You got it."

Once tucked back into bed, Cori remarked, "It almost hurts more today than it did yesterday."

Taylor chuckled sympathetically. "That's probably because you were pretty doped up yesterday, not to mention that you slept most of the day. Speaking of that, do you have any medicine to take?"

"Yeah, some muscle relaxants. I just took one. But I don't want to have to take any at all after today, so I can go back to nursing. Speaking of which..." Cori pointed to the closet. "I need a little relief in that area. Could you please hand me the pump and a bottle from the top shelf."

Taylor retrieved the odd, but necessary device and laid it on the bed next to Cori. Of course, having adopted she had never had to attend to such matters, but being a woman she certainly understood. She wanted to give Cori some privacy. "I think I'll go and get you some breakfast," said Taylor, retreating toward the door. "Unless you need some help," she asked at the last moment.

Cori smiled. "That's okay. I think I can get it."

The dark haired woman returned twenty minutes later with a full breakfast tray.

"Oh that looks good," said Cori when the food was placed over her lap.

Taylor reached for the knife and fork. "I'll cut it up for you, since you're kind of short a hand."

When the other woman was done, Cori grabbed the fork and momentarily pointed at the milk bottle sitting on the nightstand. "Could you pour that out for me, so we don't get it mixed up with the good stuff?" Cori stabbed a piece of the golden fried bread and stirred it around in the extra syrup on the side of the plate. She chased that down with a piece of crisply browned bacon. "Tay," she said as the tall woman re-appeared. "This French toast is delicious."

Taylor sat on the edge of the bed and accepted the slice of bacon offered by the generous blonde. "Thanks. I like to cook, but with just the two of us and me usually working so late, I don't get to do it very often. How about you, do you like to cook?"

"Oh yeah."

Their conversation lasted several more minutes until the last sip of orange juice was downed.

Travis chose that moment to come and see what his mother was up to. "Mama?" He called out from the hallway, confused by the many doors.

Taylor stepped to the open doorway. "In here Baby."

The sullen three-year old brightened up when he saw the blond woman. "Cori!" He yelled and ran into the room. Taylor caught him just as he was about to pounce upon the bed.

"Hold on there tiger." She lifted him into her arms so he could see. "Cori doesn't feel good. You have to be careful."

The photographer smiled lazily at the adorable child and his adorable mother. "Come here Sweetie." She was talking to the child, although sometime in the future it would definitely apply to the taller one as well. "Sit by me and tell me what you've been doing."

Taylor gently deposited Travis onto the big bed and he crawled up to the offered space. He snuggled in when a loving arm was placed around his little shoulder. She left the two to talk as she took the dishes back to the kitchen.

\* \* \* \*

Later that evening, after dinner, Taylor brought the children into the bedroom to spend time with Cori. Taylor stretched out her tall, tired frame on the far side of the bed with Kylie between the two adults. Travis sat near the footboard playing with half a dozen small cars that he pushed up and over his mother's jean clad legs and over the blanket covering Cori's feet. Every once in a while she would wiggle the roadway and make him giggle. The television in the corner was on and showing some movie that was suitable for the entire family. However, none of the quartet was really paying attention. They were too busy enjoying each other's company.

"I know this sounds funny," said Cori, at one point in their conversation, "but I actually like going shopping the day before Christmas, even if I don't have anything to buy." She paused and held up her casted arm. "But I think I will skip it this year."

Taylor was busy playing with the pudgy, little toes beside her. "Boy not me," she said. The blue eyes drifted down to the child paying by her feet. "There is only one thing that could get me out there on Monday." She did anticipate having to trudge out into the last day stampede. Rumors at work said there would be a Christmas bonus and she would be able to buy Travis the train he wanted. Taylor changed the subject and tipped her head to the baby next to her. "She has some powerful legs."

"I know." Cori smiled. "That's why I..." She caught her verbal slip, suddenly spying the older child. "That's why I asked Santa to bring her that toy where babies make music by kicking their feet."

Taylor tickled the baby's belly. "Oh boy! That'll be fun."

Cori reached out and entwined her fingers with Taylor's above the baby's head. "This is nice isn't it; the four of us here like this?"

That drew a big smile from Taylor and a big coo from Kylie. "Yeah," she said. "It feels so natural too."

"But I don't think this is what you had in mind when you suggested we spend some family time together today."

"No. But the important thing is that we are here together."

Cori agreed with a sluggish nod.

Together they watched the animated Grinch steal Christmas from the Whos. Taylor had let her son stay up just a little past his bedtime because of the special circumstances.

"Could I give Travis a bath?" she asked when the program was over. "He didn't get one last night because I got home so late."

"Of course you can. I want you to feel free to do anything you need to when you're here."

The tall woman tickled her son in the side with wool-covered toes. "Come on little man, bath time."

"No."

Taylor rose up to her elbow. "What was that?" she asked in a slightly stern voice.

He finally looked up from his toys. "Do I have to?" he whined.

"I'm not even going to answer that." Taylor got up from the bed and headed for the door. She returned just seconds later with a black gym bag. She tossed the bag in a nearby chair and rummaged through it, coming out with a rolled up bundle of green flannel clothing dotted all over with brown dinosaurs. "Besides," she said returning to the previous topic. "No bath, no story."

The little body twisted around and hopped off the tall bed with a thump. "Okay." He agreed. Travis loved his stories. But truth be told, his mother loved their story time even more than he did. Those quiet moments at the end of the day, when mother and son were in their own little world. A place where everything was perfect and peaceful.

While Travis was getting clean, Cori sat with her daughter, studying the rounded cheeks and dimpled hands, marveling at the daily changes taking place in the growing infant. Born at a respectable seven pounds eight ounces, Kylie quickly began adding on the ounces and filling out, a pattern that Barbara Sterling swore baby Corridan followed to the letter, right down the weight. The blonde ran her fingertips across the baby's light hair, marveling at its softness. Cori was sure that it was just the new mother thing, but she performed the same routine every night, falling deeper in love with her daughter every time.

Kylie spit out the pacifier and a tiny pink tongue made its first appearance along with a grunt of dissatisfaction. "Careful with the comments on my mothering skills there little girl." Cori replaced the neon pink implement and waited just a few seconds later for it to be propelled away again. And it was. This little game re-played no less than three times. The tasteless, rubber implement would no longer pacify little Kylie Marie. But Cori also knew that the wide-eyed little wiggler was far from ready to visit the sandman.

The two bed ridden blondes were soon interrupted as the now clean Travis made his grand entrance from the bathroom dressed in his warm, flannel pjs.

"That didn't take long," said Taylor, taking a cursory glance at her watch.

Without being told, Travis began gathering his cars and dumping them back into the plastic carrying case.

Cori suspected it was bedtime for three-year olds. "There are sheets and blankets in the hall closet for the futon in the guest room."

Taylor just nodded and ducked out the door. She quietly returned minutes later to find both children listening with rapt attention to Cori's lilting voice as she read from the book in her lap. Travis was snuggled up close under one arm and Kylie grabbed for her mother's hand each time the page was turned.

Cori sensed the new presence and lifted her gaze from the colorful images and black print. She caught the tall woman's smile and the blue-eyed wink as she finished the last few words on the page.

Travis finally noticed his mother standing in the doorway. "Your turn Mama," he said as he took the book from Cori's grasp and climbed down from the bed.

The dark haired woman tucked the book under her arm. "Say goodnight to Cori and we'll finish the story in when you are in bed." Feeling a tug on her shirttail, Taylor bent down to her knee. A question was whispered in her ear and she pulled back with a big smile. She gave him a quick hug and a nod.

The slippered feet trotted across the carpet to the far side of the bed. He pulled himself up with a little help and threw his arms around her neck. "Goodnight Cori."

"Goodnight Honey. Sweet dreams."

"I love you Cori," he said sweetly.

The green eyes misted over as they met with Taylor's and her throat constricted. But she quickly swallowed the emotional lump and squeaked the heart felt words. "I love you too Travis."

He scurried away from the bed, adding as an afterthought, "Night Kylie."

Cori wiped the tears from her face as the pair disappeared into the hallway. With a smile on her face and a chubby hand in hers, she dropped her head back into the pile of pillows behind her, loving her life.

Taylor returned once again and sat on the edge of the soft bed. "You okay?" She asked when Cori didn't open her eyes right away.



"Yeah. I think my concussion is wreaking havoc with my emotions." Cori dried a last tear.

Taylor rapidly blinked away her own teary curtain. "Then what's my excuse?" She took the hand that reached for her.

"I don't think we really need an excuse," said Cori. "I think we are just two big old mushballs, feeling lucky to be alive and reveling in the pleasures that God has given us."

"I think you're right."

"I hope you don't mind that I was reading to Travis," said Cori. "He wanted me to read him half and you the other half. But I know that's your special time together."

Taylor leaned in and kissed the bruised forehead. "I'm glad that you're bonding with him. After all you did say we were a family." She hopped over the covered legs to the other side of the bed and began tickling a small tummy. "Miss Kylie and I did some bonding of our own today." The baby giggled and awkwardly slapped at the hands on her middle. "We had a very interesting conversation while I was making dinner."

"Oh really?"

"Yeah...but it's confidential." Taylor spoke with a teasing smile. "So, does she get a bath too?"

"If you could. I think she's a little wound up with her new friends around. She loves it, but if you pour a little of the night time bath liquid in the water it will help settle her down. Her baby tub is in the nursery. Like I said, she gets excited and likes to splash, so I usually put it inside the big bathtub so there's less mess to clean up."

"Gotcha." Taylor grabbed the baby, rolled off the big bed and headed out the door.

Just minutes later, Cori lay there listening to the activities in the bathroom.

Taylor's voice drifted in loud and clear. "Wow, you do need a little soap and water don't cha. I forgot you spit up all over yourself this afternoon. Come on ya little stink bug, let's get you clean."

*Baby giggles.*

*A little splash.*

*More coos and squeals.*

*Huge splash.*

*Big girl giggles.* "That was a good one, Punkin'. Now I'm all wet. Guess I'll have to take this off."

Soon the tall woman exited the bathroom with a big, striped towel draped over her shoulders, mostly hiding her bra-clad torso. In her arms she carried a content bundle wrapped in a thick, yellow, terry cloth towel with an orange duck embroidered in the corner. The attached hood drooped down over the baby's face, obscuring her view as she turned at the sound of her mother's voice.

"Sounds like you had a good time," said the injured photographer.

Taylor smiled and placed her squirming package on the bed near Cori. "You were right, she sure likes her bath." She gently rubbed the remaining moisture off the chubby body then squirted a dollop of pink lotion onto her palm.

The dancing green eyes looked directly at her tall friend who was now kneeling beside the bed. "Actually, I was talking about you."

Taylor returned the smile and shrugged. "I guess I forgot how much fun it is taking care of a baby." She proceeded to fasten on the disposable diaper covered in teddy bears.

Cori reached out and let her daughter grab a finger while Taylor dressed Kylie in a heavy, mint green, one piece sleep suit. "Well, you're a natural," said the blonde.

With just a hint of a blush gracing her cheeks, Taylor propped the infant against Cori's body and handed the blonde a tiny hairbrush. The photographer smoothed down a few strands of unruly golden hair atop the delicate head.

"I hope you brought something else to sleep in besides your shirt?" Cori asked when her friend returned from cleaning the bathroom.

Taylor poked into the big bag she had brought in earlier and brought out two pieces made of soft, red and black cloth. She shook the bundle in Cori's direction. "Yeah I brought pajamas. I'll be right back." She ducked into the adjoining room.

Taylor flipped off the light switch as she left the bathroom. The only illumination left in the room came from the bedside lamp. Cori's tired eyes perked up when she got a good gander at the tall woman as she approached the bed. She wished, just for a fleeting second, that Taylor was coming to her for a much different reason. But that would happen in time. "Will you be insulted if I tell you that you look completely adorable in those?"

The tall woman looked down at her attire as she rounded the bed and took a seat next to Cori. "No, and thank you." She leaned over and gave the photographer a light kiss. "But I might be if that's what you say about my appearance when I come to spend the night in this bed."

Cori traced the side of the angular face. "No chance of that Honey. I'm sure my words will be something like, absolutely stunning, totally sexy and incredibly beautiful. I love you."

"I love you too."

A loud, hungry baby suddenly interrupted their mutual admiration banter.

## Chapter 6

The long leg unconsciously pushed off the heavy blanket as the furnace released a long hiss of freshly heated air. The attached foot hung over the side of the bed as the dreamer slept peacefully on. Raven hair spread out behind as the face sank deeper into the plush pillow. Visions of a fair haired, earthly angel danced in her head, bringing a smile to the relaxed face. Hand in hand they stood on a snow-covered hill, encircled by a ring of brilliant red roses that rested on the fluffy blanket of white. They smiled, looking out upon the faces of the one's they loved. The small gathering of smartly dressed people began to applaud and cheer the happy couple. Taylor felt a tug on her hand and she gazed down upon the woman she loved with all her heart. Cori's beautiful lips parted to speak.

"You really made a mess for me to clean up this morning, didn't you stinky?"

One blue eye popped open and the brow above it furrowed at the unexpected comment. Still drowsy, Taylor heard the disembodied voice again.

"We certainly don't want that cute little butt to get sore now, do we?"

This time the dark head came completely off the pillow and both eyes snapped wide open.

There was a kissing sound and the voice said, "Ohhh, I could just eat you up."

Taylor shook the last vestiges of sleep and her gaze drifted to the small white box on the table next to her head. She smiled and dropped her head back to the pillow as she listened to Cori and Kylie on the nursery monitor.

"There you are Sweetie. That's much better huh? Did you miss me yesterday? I really doubt it since you seem to have fallen in love with Taylor too. But you can't have her, she's mine. She is wonderful, isn't she? I love her so much." There was a long pause. "I just hope I don't do something to ruin what we have and could have."

Taylor's forehead wrinkled with concern at the last comment. Cori was always so confident. Where was the self-doubt coming from? She didn't have long to ponder the thought because a little body pounced on her from behind.

"Hi Mama."

Taylor turned on her back under the slight weight, cradled her son and kissed the crown of his head. "Mornin' little man."

"Is it Christmas yet Mama?" he asked, excitedly.

"Not yet. Two more days." She held up that many of his small fingers to help him understand. She expected him to ask about his presents next.

"Mama, can I get Cori a Christmas present?"

Taylor smiled, exceptionally pleased with her three year old son's unselfish generosity. She hugged him and kissed his cheek. *I do have that money Cori insisted I take the other night. I can't think of a better thing to do with it, but spend it on her and Kylie.* "We'll see what we can do about that," she told him. "But that means you have to go shopping."

"That's okay. I love Cori. I got something for Uncle Ben and I don't want to hurt her feelings." He suddenly jumped down from the bed. "Bafroom Mama," he announced heading for the door. When she started to join him he mildly protested. "I can do it by myself."

"Remember, we are at Cori's house. You know where the bathroom is?"

"Yeah." His voice warbled as he ran down the hallway.

Taylor nearly cried over her little boy who was growing up so fast. She propped her hands behind her head at stared and the ceiling, listening to Cori humming to her daughter. Deciding maybe they needed a little time alone before she joined them, Taylor finally hopped out off the bed and headed off to the bathroom herself. She met her son in the hallway and sent him to the living room to watch television until breakfast was ready. The comment Cori made earlier still concerned Taylor; she would have to find a way to gently approach the subject. Taylor wanted this relationship to work more than anything else in the world. She had to convince Cori of that and ease the woman's fears.

The last snap closed under Cori's fingers, enclosing the vulnerable baby in a soft fleece outfit of pink and white. She grabbed for a matching sock when long arms suddenly, but gently encircled her from behind.

The husky voice whispered in her ear. "Good morning."

The warmth of that touch and that voice cascaded over her injured body and settled into her heart, chasing away her pain. "Good morning." Cori turned in the embrace and snuggled down into the tall woman's chest.

Taylor rubbed soothing hands over the shorter woman's back. "How do you feel today?" she asked.

"Better." She pulled back and smiled, looking into Taylor's eyes. "Especially now."

"I'm glad." The dark haired woman leaned down and tenderly captured Cori's lips.

A loud squeal suddenly sounded in their ears. Taylor pulled back, but her gaze remained on Cori's face. She tipped her head to one side in a quick motion. "Is someone jealous already?"

Cori reached up and grabbed another kiss, eliciting another baby noise. She giggled. "I think so. But she's just going to have to get used to sharing you."

Breakfast smells soon began to fill the bright yellow kitchen. Cori wasn't quite up to cooking, so Taylor took on those duties once again. She stood at the stove preparing omelets, while Travis sat at the table eating his favorite Rice Krispies. Cori had managed to get a few spoonfuls of baby cereal into her daughter and now Kylie was lying in her little bouncy seat sucking away on a warm bottle.

Taylor placed two plates on the small table and took the seat across from Cori. Travis wiped away his milk mustache and asked to go back and watch cartoons. With his seat vacated, the tall woman scooted over to be even closer to the woman she loved. With a cast on her left arm that extended well onto her hand, it was difficult for Cori to cut into her food and still hold Kylie's bottle. Without a word, Taylor gently replaced the smaller woman's hand and took over feeding the baby. Cori gave her a thankful smile and dove into her food.

Saturday was Taylor's regular day off this week, so once again she and Travis spent the time with Cori and Kylie. They did have a couple of errands to run and found the perfect opportunity when Mr. and Mrs. Sterling arrived in the afternoon to visit with their daughter. They also brought along Jack and Taylor was afraid that she would lose her son's attention, but after a few conspiratorial whispers between mother and child, Travis grinned and led the way out to the car.

\* \* \* \*

"What do you think of this one Travis? Will Kylie look pretty in this?" Having never shopped for little girl's clothes before, Taylor spent a long time admiring the tiny, adorable dresses. There were at least half a dozen she would liked to have gotten for the equally adorable baby, but after some indecision she finally narrowed it down to one.

He looked up at the small, frilly, green and white dress his mother was holding. "Yeah Mama." He agreed. "Can I get Kylie a toy for Christmas?"

"You bet." She put the chosen dress with their other selections in the front section of the metal cart. Travis was taking up most of the cart's main basket, having asked to ride when his little body was getting shoved in the over-active crowd. One more stop in the toy department and their shopping would be finished. Taylor had already helped Travis choose a suitable present for Cori and she herself had spent a fair amount of time at the jewelry counter perusing the items that were within her price range. She remembered the clerk's comment she had made the purchase.

*The brunette dropped the sales receipt into the red bag and handed it to Taylor. "I hope your wish comes true," she said with a friendly smile.*

*"Oh, it already has," replied Taylor.*

With some difficulty, Taylor finally managed to explain to Travis that Kylie wouldn't be interested in a metal racecar. They looked around for a few more minutes then something high on a shelf caught Taylor's attention. "Hey Trav, what is your favorite cartoon?"

"Winnie the Pooh," he claimed quickly.

She grabbed the classic Winnie made from soft, yellow chenille and showed it to him. "Do you think Kylie might like this?"

He took the stuffed toy and gave it the squeeze test, hugging it to his face. Travis smiled. "She'll like this Mama."

"Good," she said, "lets get back home."

Glad to be free of the bustling crowd, Taylor took the shopping bag in one hand and Travis's hand in the other. They moved out into the mall and started for the exit when a flash of red caught Travis's eye.

"Can I go over there and see Santa?" he asked.

Her forehead scrunched with confusion. Taylor led them to a wooden bench and sat down. "Honey I thought you were afraid of Santa? We tried to see him a few days ago and you didn't want to."

"I don't member bein fraid Mama. I wanna tell Santa bout the train so he won't forget."

Taylor shook her head at his sudden change of attitude, happy that he was no longer afraid, but puzzled by the whole ordeal. She finally just smiled and hugged her son. "Okay, we'll go see Santa."

\* \* \* \*

Barbara Sterling prepared a healthy lunch despite Cori's objections. The older woman smiled and dropped a pinch of salt into the concoction she was stirring. "I bet you didn't tell Taylor that you didn't need her help." She teased.

Cori blushed and dipped her head. "That's...that's different Mom."

Barbara reached into the cabinet for a bowl. "Oh, how so?"

The blonde head popped back up. "Well...Taylor is...she's my partner. We're in a relationship and that means sharing...the good and the bad."

Mrs. Sterling joined her daughter at the table while her meal simmered. "That sounds serious Dear. Let me play devils advocate here and ask, are you sure you are ready for that?"

"No doubts Mom. When I'm with Taylor..." Cori closed her eyes, searching for the right words to explain her feelings. Her mouth opened once then twice; nothing escaped. "I just feel..."

Barbara covered a fidgeting hand with her own as she finished Cori's thought. "Complete."

Cori let out a small gasp as the meaning really hit her. "Yes. After the accident the other night...my last thought was of Taylor. I didn't want her to be alone again. I wanted so much more time with her...a lifetime with her. I love her so much."

"And you're sure she feels the same?"

Cori wasn't angry at her mother's questions. As a mother herself she understood the concern behind the words. "She has told me she loves me and I believe her. But it's so much more than just the words. It's the little things she does, the touches and the smiles. And when I look into her eyes I see her soul and I know that soul loves me." *And I will try my best to make sure that look never disappears.*

\* \* \* \*

Cori slowly lowered her stiff body into the mound of bubbles and warm water. Careful not to get her cast wet, she sank into the liquid luxury, moaning languidly as her sore muscles were enveloped and soothed. After carefully scrubbing away three days worth of sweat and dirt, she scooted further down in the huge garden tub until the frothy, berry scented bubbles tickled her chin. Taylor was putting the children to bed and all was quiet in the Sterling house, which now seemed so much more like a home, even though Taylor and Travis were not permanent residents...yet. That move was still some time away, but she was very patient, especially with something so important. But that didn't stop her fantasies. Cori rested her head against the soft pillow behind her neck. Her eyes slipped shut and a lazy smile graced her face as she thought about Taylor coming home to her every day, Taylor sleeping beside her every night, Taylor... A slight knock interrupted her thought. "Come in."

Taylor cautiously stepped around the door, trying to avert her eyes to protect her partner's modesty. "I...just wanted to see if you were doing okay."

Cori smiled, but didn't laugh. She held out a bubble-covered hand. "Come over here." Taylor's gaze finally met hers and the tall woman walked barefoot across the tiled floor. Cori kissed the back of the hand she held onto. "Do you know how cute you are when you get all shy?"

Taylor pursed her lips and watched the daring green eyes. "I'm not shy," she finally said. "It's just that we haven't even...and it's just a little awkward...until..."

"I understand. And I still think you're cute...sexy, but cute."

Taylor took a deep breath determined not to blush as she asked her next question. "Could you use some help with your hair?"

"Yeah, thanks."

Taylor moved to the end of the tub and knelt, reaching for the bottle of shampoo on the tub's rim. She took the big cup that was used for bathing Kylie and scooped up some of the bubbly water and slowly poured it over the blonde locks. Squirting a dollop of the clear liquid into her hands, Taylor gently worked it into the short hair. Careful of the still visible bruise, she took her time not only washing away the dirt, but the pain and weariness as well.

"Mmmm, that's nice," murmured Cori.

"Thank you." Taylor's long fingers continued rubbing in slow, circular motions. Both of them were immensely enjoying the sensuality of the lingering moments.

"Wow," said Cori, "you can cook, you're great with kids and you give incredible scalp massages. You do have many talents, don't you?"

Taylor took the filled bucket and began rinsing away the soap. She shrugged a shoulder. "Nah, not talents...skills maybe."

Cori chuckled as Taylor finished with her hair, kissed a wet temple and rose to leave. "Honey," the seated blonde called out. "I need some help getting up."

Taylor's features softened with love, long passed her embarrassment. She grabbed the huge, light blue bath towel and tossed it over her shoulder. The strong hands gently grasped Cori's left bicep and supported under the photographer's right arm. Cori pushed off the tub's rim and together they lifted her slight body out of the water. Once she was steady, Taylor let go and held out the terry towel. With the towel tucked around her damp flesh, protecting her from drafts and with Taylor's help, Cori stepped over the rim of the white tub. The tall woman took another small towel and began drying the blonde hair. She tossed the wet cloth aside and took a step closer placing a kiss on the warm, pink lips.

Cori smiled. "Thank you. Not just for the help, but for coming into my life."

Taylor caught a drop of water as it slid down the side of Cori's face. "We both have so much to be thankful for." She took just a step back to ease some of the tension. "Unless you need more help," she said, "I'll let you finish up and I'll get changed."

Cori nodded and kissed Taylor on the chin. "I'll see you in a few minutes?"

"Count on it."

Taylor returned to Cori's bedroom to find the blonde dressed in a pair of heavy pajamas and lying on top of the folded down blankets. "I turned the heat up a few degrees," said Taylor. "Big surprise, it's gotten colder outside and I don't want you to catch a chill and get sick."

Cori tipped her head and sighed. "You take such good care of me."



The raven-haired woman took a seat on the far side of the bed. "My pleasure," she said patting Cori on the leg.

"Can you lay here with me for just a few minutes? I need to cuddle."

"Of course, but first..." Taylor wiggled her ten digits. "How about some more of my magic fingers?" The blonde nodded dreamily and Taylor scooted in behind the seated woman. She set to work on the neck and shoulders before her. Her strong thumbs pressed deeply into the tight bands of muscles, releasing the strain of the last seventy-two hours. Moans of pleasure began to slip from Cori's parted lips as the medicinal massage was doing its job. "That better?" Taylor asked after many, many strokes of her fingers

"Much." Cori leaned her body back against the taller woman, who placed her chin in the crook of the offered neck.

Cori snuggled in tighter and hummed. "Wonderful."

Taylor continued idle massages with her thumb gliding across the flat belly under her right hand. She felt the muscles expand and relax with each breath, but she knew her partner was still awake. The taller woman softly cleared her throat. "Cori, I want us to be able to talk about anything. Two people who are in love and totally trust each other have to be able to do that right?"

Cori tensed just a little, wondering where this question was leading. "Absolutely," she said without turning around.

Taylor continued. "Well...do you have any doubts at all about us, about this relationship?"

Cori hesitated only a second. "No, Sweetheart of course I don't. You are wonderful and you are everything I've ever dreamed of in a partner. I knew it before, but these last few days have only proved it more. You put the family first and foremost." She tipped her head up to glance through her long lashes at Taylor's chiseled face. "You know I would have done the same, don't you?"

"I know."

"I love you so much Tay. You do believe that, don't you?"

The long arms tightened around her. "Of course I believe you Honey. And I love you very, very much. But...I'm just concerned. Are you afraid of something, something about us?"

Cori ceased all motion. Somehow Taylor suspected something. *She deserves the truth*, thought the photographer. She sighed and eased away slightly from the firm body. Her shameful head dropped. "Any doubts I have are about me," she whispered hoarsely.

Taylor pushed back some of the golden strands that obscured her vision of the troubled face. "Why Honey? I mean, don't take this the wrong way because I am very glad at how things

happened, but you were the aggressor. You asked me out...twice. Why do you doubt yourself now?"

"In order to explain that, I'll have to tell you about my first relationship." Cori pulled a hand into her lap needing some contact while avoiding Taylor's eyes. "I had always suspected that I was gay, but had never acted on it before college. I casually dated boys in high school and that really proved to me that I would never marry a man. When I was twenty, studying hard in my second year of college, I met Alicia, one weekend at the library. We sort of flirted for about an hour before she approached me and after we talked awhile, she asked me out. We had fun and she asked me out again and we started seeing each other exclusively. Everything was great...for a while. About three months later she came over to my apartment one afternoon and she...she had just totally changed. She yelled at me about some stupid little thing and she had never raised her voice before. After that, her personality had done a complete 180. I tried to talk to her and ask her what was wrong, but that would only make her angrier." Cori took an emotionally painful breath then she felt a hand caress her arm comfortingly before she continued. "She became verbally abusive, telling me what a lousy partner I was and how I didn't satisfy any of her needs. She would say that night after night and it went on for weeks. I know you're going to ask me why I put up with it. And to tell you the truth...I don't know. When things were good between us I was very happy. It felt good not to be alone. I guess I had hoped things would change back. I wanted to be in a relationship, but I was so naïve as to what a real committed relationship was. I finally got snapped back to reality by a slap in the face...literally." After those words Cori got the courage to look at Taylor. What she saw there let know that she had made the right decision in making this confession. "But that's all it took. I told her to get out. She did, but not before leaving me with a few more choice comments about my personality and my prospects for any future relationships. After that, I decided that I would make the decisions about who I dated." She gave Taylor a pinched grin and playfully tugged on the hand in hers. "I guess that's when I became the aggressor." She chuckled, but looked away again. "Most of me didn't believe the things she said...but I guess there is just a small spot in my soul that worries about being a good partner to you."

Taylor put two long fingers under the lowered chin and lifted the green eyes to meet hers. "Let me put an end to those concerns right now," she said, pulling their joined hands to her chest. "I have never been so sure of anything in my entire life. You, my love are an excellent partner. We may have only been together for a little over a week, but like you once told me, sometimes you just know." She kissed the small hand. "And I know. So no more doubts, okay? In fact, we should take a vow right here and now to share all of our thoughts and feelings. We'll enjoy the good ones and together work out the bad ones." Taylor raised her right hand and so did Cori, who also gave a tiny, relieved giggle.

After their pledge, Taylor pulled the small woman into her arms again and they scrunched down into the soft surface behind them.

"To honor our new pact," said Cori, "I'd like you to tell me about your parents. Do they have a problem with you being gay?"

"Partially. When I first told them, their reaction was pretty calm. Their only comment, 'Just don't flaunt it in front of us or our friends.' While that did hurt, it wasn't really a problem since dating wasn't a big thing with me. I just thought they deserved to know so they could get used to it before I met someone important. The terrible part came when I decided to adopt Travis. They were livid, asking how could I expose an innocent child to such a situation. My father stopped just short of calling it a perversion. They said it wasn't fair for the child to never have a father or a chance at a normal life. But I never let them sway me one bit and I walked out the door. That's when he said the words that I can never forget. He said no real daughter of his would have ever done such a thing." She huffed. "I always knew that I was adopted, but I always thought I was their real daughter anyway."

Cori sat forward, reached around and tugged gently on Taylor's shirt until the tall woman was lying by her side. She wanted the woman she loved to be able to see the truth in her eyes. "Travis is your real son," she said. "And you are a great mother. I know you love him enough for two people...but I love him too and I really want to have a special place in his life."

"You already do have a special place in his life." Taylor thought back to the conversation that she had with her son earlier that morning and she smiled. "And in his heart," she added.

Two heads, one dark and one light came to rest face to face on the soft pillows. They studied each other closely, satisfied to exchange only soft touches and light kisses.

"As much as I want to be with you," whispered Cori, "right now the most important thing is just being with you."

Taylor smiled and placed a goodnight kiss to the button nose. "I agree totally. Sleep well my love. Can I hold you until you fall asleep?"

"You'd better." Cori mumbled. "Love you."

"I love you too Cori."

Continued in Part 5.

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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## ~ Twelve Days ~

by Colleen

**General Disclaimer:** This is an alternate uber story. The physical descriptions of the two lead characters may remind you of two others we all know and love, but all characters in the story are from my own imagination. This story is an original work and is copyrighted by the author. It cannot be sold or used for profit in any way.

**Love/Sex Disclaimer:** This story depicts a loving relationship between two consenting, adult women and contains scenes of intimacy, but nothing explicit. If you are under 18 years of age or if this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you live, please do not read it. If depictions of this nature disturb you, you may wish to read something other than this story.

All comments are welcome at [coleen30@webtv.net](mailto:coleen30@webtv.net)

I have also created a group for discussions of this, past and future stories. Maybe some sneak previews as well.

Join us at [http://groups.yahoo.com/group/colleens\\_corner](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/colleens_corner)

## **Part 5**

### **Chapter 7**

Taylor felt a soft tap on her shoulder. Thinking it was a dream she ignored it.

"Mama."

This time she heard a small voice along with another tap. She pried her sleepy eyes open and saw the toothy grin in front of her face. "Travis. What are you doing up Sweetie?"

"It's mornin' Mama, I just woke up."

She rubbed her blue eyes to help them focus as she glanced over at the small clock on the nightstand. "Oh, I guess it is." Taylor gave a nervous glance at her bed partner, who was turned the other way and still fast asleep...but not for long.

"Cori! Cori wake up!"

Panicked green eyes popped open as Taylor tried to gently hush her son. The dark haired woman tossed her legs over the side of the bed. "Let's be quiet Honey, Cori doesn't want to get up yet."

Travis whispered loudly, "Why did you sleep in here Mama? Was Cori afraid?"

"No Honey, she wasn't afraid. She was just lonely." And that wasn't a total lie. "Why don't you go on to the bathroom Trav. I'll be in to help you brush your teeth in a minute."

The child scurried off without a problem and Taylor felt the bed shift. A larger hand landed on her shoulder.

"I'm sorry Tay," said Cori as she rubbed up and down the long back.

The tall woman turned and kissed her. "Don't ever be sorry about needing me Sweetheart. I love that feeling." She took a breath and smiled. "I didn't wake up all night long. I guess I was just so

comfortable." Taylor reached up and scratched her jaw. "I think Travis and I will have that talk this morning." She gave a small laugh and looked down the length of her body. "At least we're fully clothed."

Cori joined in the chuckle as she leaned over to kiss Taylor, but the gesture was drastically shortened as two separate bellows sounded from down the hall.

"Ah," said Taylor, "mine and yours."

\* \* \* \*

Taylor rinsed of the breakfast dishes and handed them to Cori who slipped them into the dishwasher. "What are you going to do today?" the taller woman asked.

"Well, since I'm feeling much better I think Kylie and I will go to our Mommy and Me playgroup this afternoon. We're supposed to have a little Christmas party and then Mom and Dad wanted Kylie and I to go to church with them at five o'clock." Cori's bright-eyed expression suddenly faded to sadness. "I want to say a prayer for those two men that died in the accident."

Taylor wiped her hands on a towel and pulled the smaller woman into her arms. She rested her chin on top of the blonde head. "That's a good idea Honey. That'll help you to feel better." Taylor remembered the scene she had walked in on the day before when she returned from shopping.

\* \* \* \*

*The front door to Cori's house opened, but before Taylor could say anything she was assaulted with the sounds of an argument. She clearly heard Cori's angered voice coming from upstairs.*

*"How could you keep this from me?! I can't believe this!" The sound of a slamming door followed.*

*Taylor felt a squeeze on her hand. "What's wrong Mama?" Travis asked with a nervous squeak in his voice.*

*The raven-haired woman quickly set her purchases aside and shed her coat. She led her son to the sofa and helped him off with his heavy jacket. Then she smiled and smoothed out his hair. "Cori is just upset about something, Sweetheart. She still doesn't feel good. Everything will be fine." Taylor stepped to the large entertainment center and grabbed a video from the top shelf. "Here, why don't you watch Santa Claus is Coming to Town?" She slipped the cassette into the VCR and stayed just a few minutes longer until Travis was fully engrossed in the show.*

*Taylor had seen Mrs. Sterling come down the stairs and slip into the kitchen so that's where she headed, determined to find out what had Cori so upset. "Barbara, what is going on? I've never seen Cori so mad."*

*The older woman sighed and dropped into a chair. "Cori found this." She tossed a two-day-old newspaper onto the table. "I thought I had gotten rid of it."*

*Blue eyes scanned the newsprint. At the bottom of the front page was a small article entitled 'Fatal Accident on the West Side'. "I don't understand," she muttered.*

*Barbara nervously shredded the paper napkin in her hand as she tried her best to explain. "On the night of the accident, after Cori had been examined, I was waiting in the emergency room with her. A police officer came in to take Cori's statement. She told her what happened and then asked about the other victims. The officer said that there were two and that they were also in the hospital. Cori took that to mean that they were still alive and at the time I guess they were...they passed away later. I knew the news would be very upsetting to Cori and she had enough to deal with, so I never told her otherwise and she never asked again...until she saw this. She's furious with me." Barbara finally made eye contact with Taylor. "I made the best decision I could at the time."*

*"I'm sure she will come to realize that," Taylor said. "It was just a shock. I'll go and talk to her."*

*Cori heard the knock, but thinking it was her Mom, she didn't respond. She pulled the thick robe tighter around her chilled body as she listened to the door open and the soft footsteps move across the room. She immediately recognized the touch that landed on her arm. "I had a right to know," she whispered. "Why did she keep it from me?"*

*Taylor eased herself onto the mattress and rubbed a hand down Cori's arm and took her hand. "Sweetheart, she's a mother. Put yourself in her place. If Kylie was injured, wouldn't you try to keep her from any further hurt...physical or emotional?"*

*Cori shuddered at the thought then exhaled a shaky breath. "I...I guess...yeah I would." The petite woman turned onto her back and caught sight of Taylor's small, sympathetic smile. The blonde head shook. "A concussion really messes with you...I don't recommend one." She chuckled. "I owe Mom an apology."*

*Taylor agreed with a nod. She slipped off her shoes and snuggled down next to the confused woman, hugging her tight.*

*Cori was quiet for a very long time as she tried to process the disturbing information. "Am I remembering right, did you say the driver had been drinking?"*

*"Yes."*

*"Why do people do that?" she asked in a tiny voice. A tear slid from the corner of her eye and down the side of her nose. "It's so ridiculous to think that your abilities won't be impaired. I wish people would listen to the facts." Taylor was conspicuously quiet triggering a thought in Cori's haggard mind. "Tay, when you tend bar...?"*

*The dark haired woman answered before the question was finished. "I always make sure there is a designated driver program in place and that it will be enforced."*

*Cori tugged on a handful of Taylor's shirt. "Good." A few more minutes passed and the feelings of gloom settled even more heavily on her heart. She just couldn't shake the fact that she had gone all that time without knowing. "Taylor, why didn't you tell me?"*

*Taylor kissed the bruised forehead. "I honestly thought you knew Sweetheart."*

*Cori pulled back with a shocked expression. "You thought I knew? I was involved in something that took two lives and I've been acting like..."*

*"You have been acting like a person who is grateful to be alive." Taylor brought her hand up to caress Cori's injured cheek. "There is nothing wrong with that. You did not cause that accident; you were an innocent victim. You certainly can mourn the loss of two human lives, but there is no need for you to feel guilty."*

*Cori looked away and blinked. "I guess you're right." She put her tired head back down on the strong shoulder as the pain started to pound behind her eyes. "Do you know if they had families?" she asked.*

*"No I don't, but we could find out."*

*Cori nodded. "Yeah. I'd like to send my condolences." Her breath soon evened out and she fell asleep.*

*Knowing that Mrs. Sterling was around to look after Travis and the baby, Taylor soon joined her fragile friend for a nap.*

\* \* \* \*

Taylor gave the yellow hair a kiss as they stood in the kitchen. "Sounds like a full day," she said. "Try and have some fun."

Cori smiled. "I will. What about you?"

Taylor answered as they moved into the living room arm in arm. "I'm not sure how late I'll have to work since I've had a few days off. I'll give you a call. Travis, grab your coat." She told the child who was sitting on the couch with a coloring book and crayons. "We have to go home now."

Travis stuck the art supplies into his backpack and hopped off the sofa without a protest. The adults exchanged goodbye kisses until he returned, fully dressed for the cold weather. He walked right up and hugged his new best friend. "Bye Cori. Can I come back again? It's fun here."

"You sure can, anytime you want." Cori returned a voracious hug. "I love you Sweetheart."

"I love you too Cori."

Mother and son headed for the door as Taylor gave her girlfriend one more kiss.

"You heard him," said Cori. "Guess you'll just have to come back tonight."

The dark brows wrinkled. "Are you sure Honey? You don't need a little break from us?"

The blonde playfully slapped her on the arm. "Of course not! You both are welcomed here anytime."

"Okay. Talk to you later." Taylor added one final instruction. "Take it easy when you go out today."

The blonde smiled. "We will, I promise."

\* \* \* \*

Arriving back at their apartment, Travis started to run for his bedroom.

"Hey sport, let's talk for a minute." He walked back and Taylor lifted him into her lap. She smiled down at him to let him know he wasn't in trouble. "You like spending time with Cori and Kylie don't you?" she asked.

"Yeah Mama."

"Good, because so do I. You know how much I love you right?" He nodded. "Well, I love Cori and Kylie a lot too. All four of us are going to be a family," she said gently. "Would you like to have a bigger family?"

"With Uncle Ben too?"

"Yes, Uncle Ben is part of our family. But you and I and Cori and Kylie will be a very special family."

The blonde head cocked to one side and he thought about that. After the short contemplation Travis grinned. "Okay. I like that."

She hugged him. "Good. Now I want to tell you something else. When two adults love each other like Cori and I do they like to sleep in the same bed so they can be near each other."

"So they won't be lonely," he stated, remembering their conversation of earlier in the morning. "That's why you slept with Cori."

Taylor beamed. "That's right." She wrapped her arms around him again. "I am so proud of you Travis. Now we are going to learn something that all big boys know how to do." Taking him by



the hand, she led them into the hallway and pulled her bedroom door shut. Taylor bent to his level. "When you go up to anyone's bedroom and the door is closed you always knock, like this." She proceeded to knock twice. "And you don't open the door unless someone inside says it's okay. Ready to try? Okay, lets pretend that you want to tell me something."

He nodded and she stepped inside the room and shut the door. She barely heard his little fist rap twice. "Who is knocking please?"

"It's me Mama."

"Okay, you can open the door." He did and she rewarded him with a hug. "Good boy," she praised. "Let's try it again. Go back out here and knock on the door."

Knock. Knock

"Who is knocking please?"

"It's still me Mama."

"Wait right there just a minute Travis." Taylor waited about ten seconds. "Okay, you can come in now. Very good," she told him when he entered. "Now you have to do this no matter where we are, especially if we are at Cori's house. Okay?"

"I will Mama. I'm a big boy."

"You certainly are."

\* \* \* \*

Later in the evening, Cori answered the door with a content baby on her hip. "Hi," she said, giving the visitor a kiss.

"Hi Honey." Taylor greeted her friend and caressed the baby's soft cheek with the back of a finger. She walked into the living room and removed her coat. She turned to find Cori still standing at the open door.

"Where's Travis?" the blonde asked, slowly shutting the door.

The backpack dropped to the ground with a plop. Very drastically, Taylor dropped her head to her chest sighed heavily and covered her wounded heart. "I knew it," she accused. "You only love me for my son." She flopped bonelessly onto the sofa and shook her head dejectedly.

Cori laughed at the mellow dramatics and joined her silly partner. "So where is my little boyfriend?" she asked with fluttering eyebrows.

Taylor played with a tiny, baby hand as she explained. "I got a call from Ben this morning. I told him all about you and he's dying to meet you."

"I can't wait to meet him too."

Taylor was momentarily distracted, caught in the fathomless emerald eyes. Cori smiled, waiting for the rest of the story. "Anyway," Taylor continued. "He had been out of town for a while and just got back yesterday and he's leaving again tomorrow, so he wanted to do Christmas with Travis today. They like to camp out in the living room," she explained. "He informed me, in his not so subtle way, that he would be there all night...in case I wanted to stay somewhere else."

"Ohhh, now I know I'm going to like Ben." Cori pulled the tie from the misaligned, dark ponytail and untangled the long strands with her fingers. She asked with just a teasing, little grin. "So...do you have somewhere in mind that you would like to stay tonight?"

Taylor pretended to think really hard. "Actually," she finally said. "I thought about the same place I stayed last night. The accommodations were great and the company was excellent." She finished with a brilliant smile.

Cori informed her, very seriously. "You know there just happens to be a vacancy, but you will have to share a bed."

Taylor gently pounced on the duo, sending the baby into a fit of giggles. "I would hope so," she said, kissing Cori's lips. She paused then addressed the baby. "Do you think I'll fit into your crib?"

\* \* \* \*

After a light meal, Cori turned on some Christmas music and Taylor started a fire. Just a few moments later the blonde was snuggled in the corner of the sofa with a dark head in her lap. She was rubbing the weary temples as they both watched Kylie, who was on her belly on a big blanket in the middle of the floor. The infant was chewing on a ring of large, rubber beads as she struggled to accomplish her latest developmental task...turning over.

"How did your talk with Travis go?" Cori asked, breaking the comfortable silence.

"As well as can be expected for a three year old I guess. We also had a lesson on knocking before entering a bedroom."

"Ah, always a good one."

"Speaking of Travis, the oddest thing happened yesterday when we were at the mall. We passed by the Winter Wonderland display and he wanted to visit Santa."

Cori's eyes went wide. "Really?"

"Yeah. When it came his turn, he walked right over and climbed in his lap and rattled of his list like it was the most natural thing in the world. He told me he didn't remember being afraid the first time."

"That is strange." Cori laced the fingers of her uninjured hand with Taylor's before she made a confession. "You know, that night I spotted you way back in the line and I kept my eye on you."

Taylor broke into a silly grin. "You did huh?"

"Ummm. I really wanted to meet you...but if Travis hadn't been scared, you would have had your visit and walked away." The blonde chuckled. "I wouldn't have followed you in my gray wig and padding like some crazed stalker. My main goal that night was to help Travis, but meeting you was the best moment of my life."

Taylor raised their joined hands and kissed the smaller palm. "Mine too."

They chatted a little while longer before letting the quiet serenity drape over them again. The dark haired woman closed her eyes and relaxed under the gentle ministrations of her partner's hands.

Ten silent minutes passed before they heard a few loud grunts coming from the floor. The sounds could mean one of two things: one very good thing or one very smelly thing. A smile slowly spread over Cori's face as she watched and realized just what the sounds signified. "Taylor," she whispered and nodded her head toward the yellow blanket. "Look."

The blue eyes opened and glanced to the floor. Kylie had both arms pulled up under her chest and she began rocking to one side. The tall woman squeezed Cori's hand as they mentally cheered the infant on. A series of short, high-pitched snorts and a determined push from a chubby leg sent the delighted tot over onto her back. She chewed on a fist in victory.

"Yeah!" The simultaneous shouts were accompanied by joyous applause. Both adults dropped to the floor and Cori scooped up her daughter, smothering her with kisses and exuberant praises. The smiling baby was soon passed off to Taylor, as she would be to a second proud parent. Cori sat there grinning ear to ear as she watched her two favorite ladies enjoying the special moment. Life was good...and precious.

\* \* \* \*

Taylor rapped softly on the door to the nursery before entering. Her stocking feet pattered across the plush carpeting and she came to a stop beside the rocking chair by the window. The only illumination in the fairy tale decorated room was a single nightlight and the rays of a full moon shining through the glass panes. But the moody lighting beautifully highlighted the sweet scene before her.

Cori caught the faint wink as the tall woman knelt down beside her. Taylor placed a fist on the arm of the chair and propped her chin on it as she watched the nursing baby. "This is the only

thing I regret about adopting." She whispered, touching the back of the infant's head with her free hand. She looked up to see the compassionate smile and returned it.

"She's had a busy day," Cori said. "I think she'll sleep most of the night."

Taylor rose to her feet and stepped away as the blonde carried her sleeping daughter to the oak crib in the corner. Cori settled the baby with a few final pats to her tummy as she felt the tall woman settle beside her. A long arm slipped around her shoulder and a kiss was placed to her temple.

Taylor leaned over the crib and whispered. "Goodnight Sweetie."

Cori reached up and clasped the hand on her shoulder and they walked out of the room together.

\* \* \* \*

Taylor flipped off the light in the bathroom and walked toward the bed. She suddenly stopped when she heard the voice.

"Absolutely stunning, totally sexy and incredibly beautiful." The blonde on the bed beamed as she perused the approaching woman clad in a deep blue, silk pajama bottom and matching sleeveless top. The top was cut sort and with every movement showed off a very flat stomach. Her skin was still pink from the heat of the shower and the tips of her long hair still damp, adding to her allure. "Did you buy those for me?" asked Cori.

The question took her by surprise. Taylor looked down and hesitated. "No...I ah...well in a way yes. I bought these a few years ago. Travis was about two...actually it was around Christmas I think. Looking back, I guess I was feeling..." She plucked at the short top. "...blue." Taylor chuckled then her eyes turned very serious. "Lonely." She moved closer to the bed, shrugged a shoulder and continued. "I put them away in the closet because there was no around to appreciate them...and I made a tiny wish that someday there would someone. But at the time I didn't give it a lot of thought, I just concentrated on my son."

Cori held out a hand. "Well, I'm glad you have a reason to wear them now."

"You're my reason for everything." Taylor took the hand and bent down to kiss her soon to be lover. The intimate touch continued as she slid one leg onto the bed. She pulled back as a chill ran across her bared arms, raising goosebumps...among other things. She laughed slightly. "Winter in Minnesota is not really conducive to nocturnal, romantic activities."

Cori gave a sly grin as her eyes drifted a few inches below Taylor's chin. "Oh, I don't know about that," she purred sexily. "There are some very definite benefits to the cold."

Taylor lifted the lowered chin. "That's not from the temperature," she said. "That's your personal brand of magic."

Cori answered the compliment with another kiss. Her lips moved over the smooth surface, tasting the remnants of mint-flavored toothpaste. "Maybe we should get under the covers and keep each other warm, just to be sure."

"Actually, I'm warming up very nicely with every kiss." Taylor's expression suddenly switched to one of concern. "Are you sure you feel all right? Just two days ago you could barely move."

"I feel fine...just a twitch of soreness once in a while. Nothing in the world will make me feel better than to have your arms around me." Cori let a finger slide up the long arm, over the lightly defined bicep to a shoulder, where she lowered a thin, sapphire strap. "As sexy as this is, can I take it off? Because I really want to take it off," moaned Cori.

Taylor nodded and watched as Cori's hands drifted to the edge of the material at her waist. "Then I get to return the favor," the taller woman said.

The photographer's itchy finger's grasped the blue hem and the material went slowly up and over itself and was soon flung aside, landing...somewhere. "Oh god, you are beautiful," she proclaimed. The lower half of the satin ensemble soon joined its mate.

Once Cori was also stripped of her sexy nightwear, Taylor matched the compliment and gently lowered the petite body to the pillow-topped mattress. Their lips were drawn together with magnetic force and they spent a lovely span of time just kissing.

Cori ran her hand from a soft breast to a hip and beyond. She cupped the rounded muscles and pulled the taller body to her own. Skin met skin and...and Cori felt that same body stiffen. She pulled back from the kiss to see the tinge of embarrassment on the sculpted cheeks above her. "Tay, are you all right?" She asked gently, also spying the uncertainty in the icy colored orbs. "If you don't want..." Two fingers immediately hushed her.

"No Cori, don't say it." She removed her digits and kissed the bruised lips. "Of course I want to make love to you...very much. It's just..." The dark head dropped. "I've never..."

Cori approached her next words with a tender tone. "Sweetheart, why didn't you tell me? Please don't say you're ashamed, because that is the most special thing you could have said to me. I only wish I had that gift to give you."

Taylor looked back up. "You are a gift to me," she said. Their eyes held for a long second as she gathered her thoughts. "I know what to do...I just...I'm afraid I won't be good enough to make you happy."

Cori gave her another soft kiss. "Taylor, I know you know that I love you, but I need you to understand just how much I love you; not just for tonight or a few months or a few years...but forever." Cori's unencumbered hand came to rest on Taylor's cheek. "I know you feel the same Tay, because I can see it in your eyes and hear it in your voice. And knowing that, any other way you choose to show me that love couldn't be anything but perfect."

All of Taylor's insecurities melted instantly. "God, it is true...I do love you." She proceeded to demonstrate that intense love with a kiss and another and one deeper still. Her body moved over the compact one beneath her and the caresses ignited her skin. Lips sought out a succulent neck as long fingers passionately examined the pleading flesh under her hands. Sounds of love soon filled the room as Taylor reached her goal in pleasing her...soulmate. She took Cori to the pinnacle with many well-chosen strokes and her own heart pounded in her chest as her name was proclaimed to the heavens.

Only seconds later, Taylor was placing butterfly kisses on the damp, quivering skin beneath her lips.

"Just...as...I thought," said Cori through panting breaths. "Perrrrfect." She ran her fingers through the midnight satin lying against her belly as Taylor's head rose and fell with each calming breath the blonde took.

The dark haired woman smiled and whispered a thank you next a nearby navel.

"Now," said Cori. "Come up here and allow me to make my dreams come true." Her hands moved leisurely, sliding over the sculpted form of muscle and bone, feeling the skin twitch with excitement under her fingertips. She shifted one leg between the hard thighs and rolled Taylor to her back. Cori stared deeply into the beautiful eyes and whispered her profound feelings, drawing tears, which she kissed away. Tenderly, Cori devoured her new lover, tasting points north to south and back again. Her right hand finally came to rest over the heart she vowed to protect and they both settled into the peaceful sounds of mated souls.

On the night before the night before Christmas, Cori and Taylor fell asleep in each other's arms, snuggling under the heavy comforter, but basking in the warmth of an eternal love.

Continued in Part 6.

### The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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## ~ Twelve Days ~

by Colleen

**General Disclaimer:** This is an alternate uber story. The physical descriptions of the two lead characters may remind you of two others we all know and love, but all characters in the story are from my own imagination. This story is an original work and is copyrighted by the author. It cannot be sold or used for profit in any way.

**Love/Sex Disclaimer:** This story depicts a loving relationship between two consenting, adult women and contains scenes of intimacy, but nothing explicit. If you are under 18 years of age or

if this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you live, please do not read it. If depictions of this nature disturb you, you may wish to read something other than this story.

All comments are welcome at [coleen30@webtv.net](mailto:coleen30@webtv.net)

I have also created a group for discussions of this, past and future stories. Maybe some sneak previews as well.

Join us at [http://groups.yahoo.com/group/colleens\\_corner](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/colleens_corner)

## **Part 6 (Conclusion)**

### **Chapter 8**

Morning came much too soon. They both could have slept on forever in the delightful cocoon. But Kylie would be waking very soon and Taylor would have to leave for home. The taller of the two sleepers twitched a nose then an eye, as the morning drew her from a deep slumber. Taylor smiled when she felt the soft body spooned against her. Visions of the night before danced behind closed eyes and she leaned forward to kiss the blonde head. Her lips came up empty. The blue eyes snapped open to find nothing but a rose colored pillowcase in the general vicinity. *Hmmm, I know she's in here somewhere.* A soft squeeze told her that what she had a hold on wasn't her own. She released her handful and lifted the thick covering from her shoulder to find the yellow head tucked against her chest. She smiled at her chilled lover and bent to deliver that kiss. Taylor scooted her body lower and wrapped her arms around her Christmas angel. She hated to have to wake the content woman, but time was slipping away.

Subtlety didn't seem to be working. Taylor had been administering teasing kisses and licks to the soft neck for almost ten minutes. *Okay, onto plan B. What is plan B? I could tickle her again. No, that's too cruel. Maybe I...*

"Why did you stop?" asked the muted voice.

The dark haired woman smirked. "Have you been awake all along? Maybe tickling was a good idea," she muttered.

"No! No! Taylor don't!" Cori turned under the encompassing arm. She giggled and flashed the puppy dog eyes. "I'm sorry, I was just enjoying the attention."

Taylor gave her a lopsided grin. "That's okay, I was enjoying it too. Good morning."

"Good morning."

They traded kisses for another sixty seconds until Cori's hand strayed into dangerous territory.

Taylor jumped and quickly trapped the intruder between her thighs. "Baby, as much as I would love to answer that invitation I do have to leave shortly. Can we just hold each other for a few minutes? Because I never want to have to rush in loving you."

Cori smiled. "Okay. Having you in my arms is my very favorite thing in the world. Can I tell you again how wonderful you were to me last night?"

"If you must." The tall woman teased in a haughty tone. "Seriously though, you were and are beautiful. And I'm so glad my first time was with you. I love you."

"And I love you."

\* \* \* \*

Barbara and Ken were already there when Taylor and Travis arrived at Cori's for Christmas Eve dinner. The photographer knew the minute she opened the door that something was bothering Taylor. The dark haired woman tried to cover with small talk and pleasantries, but her smiles were forced and her attention distracted. She ate very little, even though she agreed when Mrs. Sterling complimented the cook. Cori didn't think it was anything she had done. The tall woman was extremely happy when she had left earlier that morning. But something was definitely off balance.

After dessert, Cori and her parents exchanged gifts. The Sterlings also doled out several fun presents to their granddaughter and surprised Travis with a present. Cori had advised them not to get anything for Taylor this year because she didn't have the funds to return the gesture and would have felt bad. The three year old was another matter all together. When all the wrapping and bows were put in the trash, Travis politely asked Mr. Sterling to play with him.

The two of them were on the floor, near the tree, playing the memory game they had gotten him. Barbara was cooing over her granddaughter and Cori and Taylor were on the couch just taking it all in. The photographer lazily leaned into the body beside her and immediately felt the unease in the twitching muscles. Several deep, sighing breaths assailed the back of her head, even though she could feel Taylor fighting the impulses to do so. Cori rubbed her hand across the cloth-covered thigh and looked back. She was greeted with a thin smile. She was about to whisper a question when a delighted yell filled the room.

"I did it again Mama!" Travis stated proudly. His cheer came at his second defeat of the older gentleman.

"You sure did Sweetheart. I'm very proud of you." Taylor smiled once at her son then removed herself from Cori's grasp and left the room without an explanation.

Cori let her go for the moment.

Ten minutes later, Grandma offered to put baby Kylie to bed. Travis and Ken were well into their third game and the tall, sullen woman had not yet returned.



Cori finally tracked Taylor to the darkened kitchen. She was sitting with her back to the door and her shoulders slumped. The blonde approached quietly and slipped her arms around Taylor's neck.

There was a sigh and Taylor reached up with both hands to squeeze the loving arms. "I'm sorry I've been such a drag tonight," she said. A kiss was placed to her temple.

"Wanna tell me what's wrong?"

A heavier sigh. "It's about Travis."

Cori nodded slightly. She had suspected as much.

"He wanted a train like the one at the Santa display. I expected a Christmas bonus and I figured I could something at least close to it when I got off work this afternoon."

"And you didn't get that bonus?" Cori asked, taking the chair next to her.

Taylor snorted. "Oh I got a bonus all right, a fifty-dollar gift certificate for the grocery store. But I don't think they stock too many toy trains." Taylor looked away, almost disgusted with herself at her actions. She turned back when Cori took her hand. "I am grateful and we can use it," said Taylor, "...but... I know he's going to be disappointed. I also know that he going to have some disappointments in his life, but they shouldn't have to start this soon. How am I going to tell him Santa couldn't bring him what he really wanted?"

Cori stood and pulled the tall woman with her. "Come with me."

A confused Taylor followed her partner up the stairs to the bedroom, where she was led to a seat on the bed. Cori did not join her however. She stepped into the huge walk-in closet and returned with a large, square, unwrapped box.

"What is this?" Taylor asked when she was handed the package.

"Please open it."

The dark haired woman sat the box on the bed beside her and proceeded to lift the lid. She took a brief look inside and then fixed Cori with a perplexed stare. The petite woman sat down on the other side of the box and removed the first item from inside. She handed the metallic, blue train engine to her lover.

Taylor gave a slight shake of her head. "Cori this is just like the one at the wonderland display."

The blonde smiled. "Take a closer look."

The piece was inspected further and only then where the faint scratches and dents noticed. The name on the side of the engine was also faded in spots. Taylor glanced at the other pieces in the

box to find them in a similar state. It all started to come together. "Is this the same one?" She asked for confirmation of her suspicion.

"Yes it is."

Taylor's mouth hung open with confusion. "I don't understand."

"This train set is mine. I have loaned it for the display for the last three years. It was left to me by my grandfather." Cori paused and her green eyes misted slightly at the memories. "When I was little and went to visit him, we would go into the garage where he had this elaborate set up. He would tell me stories about his days as an engineer." Cori looked fondly at the piece in Taylor's hand. "I wasn't all that interested in the train itself, but I loved spending the time with him." She lifted her gaze. "If it's all right with you, I would like you to give it to Travis for Christmas."

"Cori that's incredibly generous of you, but don't you want to pass it on Kylie one day?"

"Actually, I doubt Kylie will be any more interested in it then I was. Like I said, it was being with Grandpa that I loved." She smiled broadly. "Besides, it will still be in the family."

Taylor gently placed the piece back into the box and as the tears fell she pulled Cori into her arms. It was several minutes before she could push aside the lump in her throat. She finally pulled back, stared deeply into the bright eyes and placed her palm over Cori's heart. "You are truly the most beautiful person I have ever known." She whispered heavily, the emotion returning. "I love you. And I would be honored to accept this gift."

Cori wiped away the tears. "I love you too." She cleared her throat and smiled slightly. "Now I have a very selfish request to make. Would you and Travis spend the night here? I'd like all four of us to spend our first Christmas morning together." She saw the flash of hesitation fly across the chiseled face. "Once Travis is asleep, you can take the rental SUV and go get all of his presents."

"There is only one problem," said Taylor. "Travis doesn't have anything to sleep in. His clothes would be to uncomfortable."

Cori smiled openly and left the embrace. "I'll be right back." She returned from the closet with a small sack. She pulled out the colorful pajamas and handed them to Taylor, who regarded the garment with a small headshake. Cori explained. "I thought we could keep these here...for back up."

\* \* \* \*

A light snow had begun to fall at the break of day, adding to the heavy ground cover and making it a picture perfect Christmas morning. Taylor was the first in the house to wake up. She spent the few quiet moments pondering how different this day would have been without her new family.

A hand brushed across her middle and wormed its way under her cotton shirt. No words were spoken as both parties soaked in the wonderful, quiet moments.

"What are you thinking about?" Cori asked as she watched the blue eyes scan the white ceiling.

Taylor removed her hands from behind her head and turned to her side. She reached over and kissed Cori. "Morning. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas. You didn't answer my question."

A smile slowly graced the taller woman's face as her fingertip traced the soft lips of her partner. "I was just appreciating how wonderful this day is going to be. You and Kylie have expanded my world in so many ways that I can't even count. Travis and I both will always be better people just for having met you."

Cori mouthed a thank you. She hugged her lover and nuzzled the soft, dark hair. The house was totally quiet and they had no trouble hearing the slight knock on the door.

"Mama?" The voice behind the door spoke excitedly. "I think Santa came. I heard him last night."

The two women smiled at each other.

"Come on Mama! My presents are here!"

The blonde echoed the little boy's words, paraphrasing just a bit. "Yeah Mama, Santa came last night."

Taylor gave her a deliciously evil twinkle. "She certainly did."

\* \* \* \*

The adults didn't have the heart to make Travis wait until they had breakfast, but he did have to wait until the baby was awake and changed. But within a span of fifteen minutes the youngster was scurrying down the carpeted stairs, only mildly admonished once for safety reasons. His green eyes went saucer sized as he spied the colorful gifts beneath the tree, including the little blue bicycle. A light flashed as Cori caught the expression with her camera. She snapped a few more pictures as he dropped to his knees and surrounded himself with presents before he tore into the paper covering the first box.

Taylor smiled as she watched him yell a cheer when the first toy was uncovered. She had put the biggest box, containing the prized train at the very back of the pile. Together, she and Cori had wrapped the big box the night before. While the tag read from Santa, Taylor planned to tell Travis the origins of the very special gift when he was old enough to truly appreciate its meaning.

Cori placed Kylie on Taylor's lap so she could open the first of the four presents from Santa/Mommy. The tall woman clapped the baby's hands together as the wrapping fell away from the second gift, revealing a music box that would replace the one that played soft heartbeats, which was now attached to the side of her crib.

The photographer grabbed a gift that she didn't immediately recognize, but the tag that read from Taylor to Kylie brought a wink from one green eye. "Taylor it's beautiful," Cori said once the lid was lifted. She held the forest colored dress under her daughter's chin, careful of the slobber that dribbled down. The dark garment brought forth the emerald hue in the bright eyes, matching them even more to her mother's.

Taylor stared into the older eyes as Cori leaned over and gave her a thank you kiss.

The last present in Kylie's pile was from Travis. The raven-haired woman asked her pre-occupied son to come closer as the baby's gift was opened. Cori smiled at the cuddly character and held it close for Kylie's approval. The little hands quickly grabbed for it. "Look at this Kylie. Isn't he cute?" Cori looked back to the child standing before her. "Thank you Travis. That was very nice of you. She loves it."

He gave a fast nod. While having mastered thank you, he wasn't quite sure about the 'you're welcome' part.

Winnie's soft, yellow and black nose went straight for a voracious mouth, signifying her hunger. Taylor bounced the stuffed toy and spoke in a Pooh like voice, entertaining the babe as Cori went to prepare breakfast.

\* \* \* \*

After the meal, it was time for the couple to open their gifts. Travis was busy building Lego mountains for his rescue hero figures to climb and Kylie was on her back serenading the group with a selection played by the ten little piggies orchestra.

Cori and Taylor sat close together on the sofa giggling with childlike glee over the prospective gift exchange. The dark haired woman asked to go first and handed Cori a small box covered in purple and gold paper. After excitedly ripping off the covering, the blonde gazed upon the enclosed gift with a questioning, but delighted eye.

Taylor gave her a smile and a small explanation. "This is called a wish pearl." She pointed to one of the plastic coated items and with the other hand lifted a silver chain from its nest of blue velvet. "You open up the oyster and find the pearl inside. There are six different colored ones and each color means something different."

Cori smiled and held up a finger. "Hold that thought." She ran to the kitchen and returned with a small chisel. Cracking open the hard shell with ease, Cori fished around inside and came out with the little, round prize. Hiding it from Taylor's curious view, Cori matched it to the enclosed chart.

Taylor watched the twinkling eyes above the card, anxiously awaiting an answer. "So what did you get?"

Cori leaned forward about a foot and kissed the questioning lips. "Love," she whispered. "You gave me love. You made that wish come true." She kissed her again. Enclosing the small sphere in its heart shaped cage, she handed the chain to Taylor, who fastened it around the slender neck. Cori looked down at the gift nestled in the hollow of her throat one more time. "Okay, now my turn."

Taylor was momentarily distracted by a question from her son and she didn't see Cori shuffle over to the closet and return with a huge box in her hands. Only after she gave a satisfying answer to the child did she turn around. "Cori, where...?" Seeing Cori's arms full, the dark head tipped and the blue eyes squinted.

"Don't give me that look," said the blonde. "It's not as bad as you think." She plopped down next to the bewildered woman and dropped the huge box in her lap.

With some reluctance, Taylor pulled away the big bow and slowly lifted off the lid. Pulling back the bronzed tissue paper, the blue eyes went wide. She grabbed the black, suede coat by the shoulders and lifted it for a better appraisal. Her mouth went dry. "Cori...it's beautiful...but..."

The photographer interrupted. "Before you say anything let me explain something. I got this at that charity auction last week. I was going to give them a donation anyway, but I saw this and new it would look gorgeous on you." After a short pause, the soft expression turned in her direction. "You need it Honey," said Cori, "and I have a very vested interest in keeping you healthy."

Taylor looked down at the garment and then back to her lover. "Thank you Sweetheart. It's perfect."

"Try it on," Cori said against the lips touching hers.

Taylor did as asked to a chorus of catcalls and whistles.

"What do you think Travis?" asked Cori. "Does Mama look good in her new coat?"

The child briefly looked up from his toys and nodded.

The tall woman chuckled. "A fashion critic he's not." She turned her attention back to Cori. "But your opinion is the only one that matters." Taylor held out her arms. "Care to test it's snuggle ability."

The smiling blonde stepped into the loving circle. Taylor pulled back as she felt hands rooting inside the coat's pockets. "What are you doing?"

Cori looked down with one of those caught in the cookie jar looks. She raised the black, leather items in her hands. "I...ah...you need gloves too."

Taylor put them on and playfully pinched the sides of Cori's neck. "You are too much."

A tinge of rose fell across the photographer's cheeks. "Well...there is one more...thing." Cori timidly slipped the long, black scarf around the tall woman's neck.

Taylor let out a huge roaring laugh and engulfed her small lover in a bear hug.

Ten minutes later she was finally allowed to remove the new coat. Placing it on the wooden rack in the corner, Taylor took an envelope from the pocket of the older coat hanging next to it.

Cori had moved to the floor to check on her happily occupied daughter. Taylor joined them and smiled. "I happen to have one more gift for you too," she said, handing the envelope to Cori. She tickled the baby's tummy. "Actually this is from Kylie and me."

The photographer lifted the flap and removed the Christmas card. She opened it and emitted a huge, lovable laugh at the enclosed item. "Awww, Taylor it's so cute." The 4x6 photograph in her hand showed a picture of Taylor, dressed in a Santa hat and beard, holding a grinning Kylie. With a little help, the baby was waving at the camera. Written at the bottom were the words, Hi Mommy. Thank you for making my first Christmas the best Christmas. "Honey it's perfect. Thank you." Cori crossed the room and placed the photo on top of the fireplace mantle, right next to the one of Travis and herself dressed as Mrs. Claus.

\* \* \* \*

After the big, mid-day dinner the children were put down for an afternoon nap. Cori returned to find Taylor standing at the fireplace looking at the two photos. The blonde stopped at the foot of the stairs. For several minutes she just watched her tall lover as her relaxed features eased into a smile and a near chuckle. Cori's presence went unnoticed until she walked across the room and took Taylor's hand.

"Everyone asleep?"

"Yep. Come here." The smaller woman led them over to the front door and handed Taylor the new coat.

"Where are we going?"

"Outside."

"Obviously. Let me guess, you want to build a snowman?"

The green eyes gave a momentary, misleading twinkle. "No," she finally said. "We're just going right out here." The air was frigid. The enclosed porch guarded them from the biting wind, but

not from the sounds of laughter and mock battles that rang out from the surrounding yards. The neighborhood children were having snowball fights and Cori found such innocent, childlike behavior very refreshing. She wrapped her arms around the solidly filled, heavy, black coat and snuggled her face into the overlapping, front flaps. She looked up and kissed the nearby chin. "I just thought we should test this out. Are you warm?"

Taylor smiled. "Very."

Cori suddenly stepped away and lifted the baby monitor to her ear when she thought she heard a noise. "All clear," she said, shaking her head. "Must have been the wind." She set the white box on the ledge and turned back to the dark haired woman, stopping about two feet from her.

Taylor was standing there hanging on to both fringed ends of her new scarf. "You know what I like best about this?" She asked of the woolen accessory.

"What?"

"This." Taylor flipped it up and over her head and the blonde one, landing behind Cori's back. She tugged forward, bringing the photographer back in close. "I can capture you anytime I want."

"Newsflash! You don't need that to capture me." She whispered her next thoughts, adding wiggling, yellow brows. "But you could tie me up with it sometime."

"Now there's an idea." Taylor brushed aside some of the unruly, golden hair with leather covered fingers. "I have another one too...idea that is. I'm working a party on New Year's Eve, but we are allowed to bring a date. I won't be able to spend a lot of time with you throughout the night...except for breaks, but we can be together at midnight. Would you be my New Year's date?"

Cori hesitated. "Was I your first choice?" She asked teasingly.

"My only choice."

"Then how could I refuse? I would love to be your New Year's date."

\* \* \* \*

Cori handed the warm mug to her partner and took the space beside her on the sofa. Taylor took a sip of the sweet beverage and savored its aroma. The three year old also got a whiff.

"Mama, I want hot chocolate too."

"Sorry sport, it's too late for you to have liquids." Taylor took in the pouting lip and compromised. "Here, you can have one sip of mine." She blew on the hot, dark concoction before lifting the cup to his mouth. Taylor chuckled at the sight of his chocolate mustache and

wiped it away with her thumb before sending him back to play. She unexpectedly got a kiss on the cheek with her thank you.

Travis quickly resumed his place among his new playthings and Taylor settled back against the sofa. The curtains had been closed almost an hour before at the early winter's sunset and the tree had been once again illuminated. The twinkling lights danced against the silver, metallic garland doubling the effect. Two prominent ornaments sat along the evergreen boughs halfway down the front of the tree. The round, pink and blue colored bulb proudly proclaimed 'Baby's First Christmas 2001'. Next to it hung a ceramic heart shape. Taylor had surprised her lover with the commemorative gift just two days before. The hand painted ornament was personalized with their names, the date and the phrase 'Our First Christmas'.

As Cori gazed at the tree, losing herself in one particularly bright red light, she remembered how empty the previous Christmas had been. She had installed the various brightly colored decorations all around her house, but the festive quality was severely lacking because there was no one to share it with. Her parents were out of town and she was alone for four days. She tried not to indulge in the obvious pity party, but it was a little inevitable. Having already devised her plans for motherhood, Cori had fervently wished that by the next December 25th she would no longer be alone. Little did she know that that wish would come true in abundance. Cori returned to the moment and laid her head against Taylor's shoulder.

The tall woman leaned down and kissed the blonde crown. "I can't believe it's only been twelve days since we met."

"Yeah, twelve days of Christmas." Cori chuckled. "Just like that song."

They looked at each other, smiled and began a chorus of the holiday standard. "On the first day of Christmas, my true love gave to me a partridge in a..."

They paused as the memory struck like thunder. "Pear tree!" They exclaimed simultaneously.

Cori shook a single finger. "That restaurant we went to..."

Taylor finished the thought. "...that first night was called The Pear Tree."

They both had a good laugh at the coincidence. "Say, you don't think..." Cori pondered their second date. The second day's verse was spoken. "Two turtle doves."

"We went to that movie...and..."

"And?"

Taylor shrugged. "I gave you those two pieces of candy."

The green eyes went wide. "Oh my gosh, they were Dove chocolates!" Cori got very excited. "Oh, we have got to try and finish this now. Third day, third day..."



The dark haired woman swallowed the last of her drink before helping. "Three French hens."

"Okay. Let's see, you brought lunch and we ate in the studio."

Taylor tipped her head. "We had chicken...that's hen."

Cori smiled. "I'll take it." Words were whispered into her ear bringing a tiny blush to her fair skin.

"We had our third kiss and it was of the French variety." While they both very much wanted to repeat that particular experience, with the presence of the children they indulged in a much tamer, but just as satisfying kiss.

For the next day they realized that Taylor had called a total four times. She might not be a bird, but Cori jokingly suggested the nickname pigeon. The suggestion was quickly and totally rejected.

Five golden rings came to Cori right away. She ran to the corner and brought back Taylor's new coat. Noticing the questioning eyebrows, the blonde revealed an inside label, which sported a stylized version of five interlocking circles. "Apparently the company that manufactures this coat is an official sponsor of the coming Olympics."

Six and seven brought back bad memories, but Cori tried to ease the tension by combining them and lightening the mood. "I had seven stitches and with that goose egg, my head was certainly swimming."

The corners of Taylor's lips turned up just a touch and she traced her thumb under the wound in question.

On to eight and those milking maids suffered greatly in the translation. Although it did provide them a laugh that nearly sent Taylor to the floor. She managed to recover enough to tell Cori, wiping away her tears as she did, "Do you know what the best part about being with you is? I have so much fun with you. You just make me feel happy."

Cori smiled. "I'm happy too. Thank you. No one has ever said that to me before." She stared into the blue eyes for a long time. "The ninth day was Saturday," she finally murmured, returning to their little game. She reviewed the day's events aloud, but nothing seemed to fit. She thought about it a little more and a smile slowly appeared across her face.

"What?" asked Taylor.

Cori took both of the tall woman's hands and began kissing the tips of each of the long, slender fingers.

The intimate sensations flustered Taylor's senses. "Ah...Cor...what...?"

The green eyes tilted up as her lips caressed a thumb. Cori was extremely pleased with herself whenever she could tease her lover. "These nine ladies danced across my sore muscles with a healing massage."

Taylor's eyes rolled skyward, partially in response to Cori's answer, but more so because the little blonde started adding tantalizing licks with her talented tongue. The raven-haired woman shivered once then cleared her throat. "You weren't very good in math were you? I have ten fingers."

Cori grabbed the wiggling digits and squeezed...but not too hard. "Don't nitpick, I'm on a roll."

Taylor discovered ten and eleven...but they're too personal to mention.

A ringing phone suddenly drew their attention. Thankful for the distraction from the amorous thoughts, Cori leaned away from her partner to answer the call.

Taylor carried the dirty cups into the kitchen and returned at the tail end of the short conversation. She glanced at the clock on the wall and at her busy son. With just a second's thought, she decided to let him stay up half an hour passed his normal eight o'clock bedtime on this special day.

Cori ended her call. "I will Mom. Merry Christmas. Bye."

The tall woman resumed her place beside the blonde and pulled her close. "Everything okay?"

"Oh yeah, Mom just likes to check in every night. I guess some adult children might find that a little annoying, but not me."

Taylor asked absently. "Do you think you will call Kylie every night once she moves away?"

Cori hesitated. "I...doubt it. No."

Taylor agreed. "Yeah, so will I."

They continued to watch their children sitting next to one another on the floor in front of them. Travis was scanning every inch of the dark blue train set. He had been absolutely ecstatic when he opened the big box. He jumped up and down for a full minute until he dropped to his knees and removed all the pieces. Taylor took the opportunity to tell him how very special the toy was and that he had to be very careful when playing with it. With some doing, she had finally convinced him that he had to wait until they got back to their apartment before she could set up the train track. It would fit quite well in their sparsely furnished living room.

Travis picked up the engine and began explaining. "This is where the engin drives the train."

"Engineer." Taylor corrected.

"Engineer," Travis said. He set it down then gently grabbed one of the others parts. Holding it out for inspection he explained, "And this is the one where all the people ride. See Kylie?"

The snowman head bobbed up and down as Kylie sucked voraciously on the character shaped pacifier. She listened with rapt attention and wide eyes as the little person next to her rattled on about his prized, new toy.

Cori sighed as incredible warmth cascaded over her. "I don't know about twelve drummers," she whispered, "but my heart pounds a glorious beat every time I lay eyes on them." She moved her head to gaze at the face behind her. "...and you...us...the four of us."

"Yeah. What started just twelve days ago is going to last forever." Taylor leaned down and kissed the smiling lips. "I love you."

"I love you too. Forever."

The End.