

The Ties That Bind by B Nickerson {Rated PG}

Synopsis: *Unexpected visitors arrive and complications ensue.*

“You're walkin' tough, baby, but you're walkin' blind to the ties that bind...”~Bruce Springsteen~

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Jean crossed her arms and regarded her errant husband defiantly. “What exactly is it you want, Scott?”

This caught Scott off guard. He thought it was obvious. “Well, forgiveness for one thing. A second chance, for another.”

“And are you also willing to do whatever it takes?”

“I am,” he replied firmly and without hesitation. He dared not do otherwise.

She regarded him dubiously a long moment before finally heaving a deep sigh. “I don't really *want* to forgive you, Scott.”

His heart fell to hear that, but he remained outwardly stoic.

“...*but*,” she went on, “I *am* going to forgive you and give you a second chance because I love you and I *want* our marriage to work *and* because I was wrong to read your mind without asking.”

Scott nearly fainted with joy. “It was all my fault,” he quickly countered, unwilling for her to have any of the blame, but she put him to silence with an up-raised index finger that she wasn't finished.

“*But*, I will only be forgiving you for this type of offense *one* time,” she warned sternly. “There will be no more second chances. Do it again and we're over. Is that clear?”

“Very,” he solemnly agreed.

“And there will be absolutely no more flying around in Weir's jet without me, *especially* if that hussy of his is on it.”

“Gladly. Anything else?”

She considered a second, then shook her head. “Not right now, *but* that doesn't mean I won't think of something more later.”

“May I add something?”

She hesitated, then nodded.

“I want you to read my mind whenever you want.”

She looked skeptical.

“I really want you to. It will help us both. You'll feel better and it will keep me accountable.” He looked at her, his heart fairly bursting with love and when he spoke, his voice quavered with emotion, “You deserve better than me, Jeannie, but I promise, from now on, I'll do everything in my power to avoid ever doing such a stupid thing again.”

At that, she flung herself weeping into his arms and he held her tightly, agonized to know he was the cause of so much pain. He wished he could turn back the clock and undo it, but the deed was done, the mistake made. There was nothing to do, but press forward.

He stroked her head. “Things will be better from now on, you'll see,” he promised. He knew that with a certainty he couldn't explain. This was more than a second chance--it was a fresh start. It was like a light had suddenly come on in his heart and he just wasn't the same man he'd been before.

The next two weeks passed quite bloomingly for Scott and Jean, a fact apparent to everyone, but things weren't going so bloomingly for Ro.

She set her lunch tray on the empty staff table with a sigh. Here it was almost Christmas break and she had nothing to look forward to. Sure, she would have something to do. All the staff had been required to come up with a fun holiday curriculum to keep the kids that stayed, busy. Jack and Andi were offering a special session in defensive arts. The Professor was doing a mini-astronomy course that would culminate in a field trip to the Long Island Observatory. Scott was offering a math tutorial, mandatory for any student with less than a C-average, which was Scott's kind of fun and Jean had decided on a health and beauty course for the girls. For herself, Ro had elected to do a brief art history course that would include a trip to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Then the big finale for the holiday break would be a Casino Night on New Year's Eve hosted by the senior students, which she heard was going to even include fancy, non-alcoholic

drinks. It would have been fun to have taken Alex to---except he wasn't coming for the holiday. Ro sighed again and morosely stirred the beef stew around on her plate. Unfortunately, Alex said work wasn't going to let him get away, which meant not only her being stuck here alone the whole break, but also further delaying their formal engagement.

She looked up from her plate as Jean and Scott put their trays on the table opposite her, their conduct insufferably lovey-dovey, which bummed Ro all the more. Scott then did something that had, of late, had become a regular habit: he bowed his head in a brief silent moment of prayer for his food while Jean waited politely. Initially this sudden habit of praying over his meals had been a huge surprise to everyone—it hadn't been his custom before, but everyone seemed to be getting used to it. All except Logan, who couldn't seem to resist some grumpy gibe about it whenever Scott did it in his presence, though Scott remained unusually gracious in not reacting negatively. Of course, Ro had asked Jean about it, but her only answer was to mumble something about “personal evolution.” Still, it was clear to her that something was different about Scott. He seemed somehow more at ease, less tense perhaps. Jack attributed it to Scott's prison experience. “Things like that,” he'd told her, “tend to make a man wake up and smell the coffee.”

Andi and Logan arrived then, followed by Xavier. Andi sat next to Jean and Logan naturally sat next to her, which put all the married people opposite Ro—a poignant reminder she would be alone for Christmas. It was at this point she wondered where Jack was. He usually arrived when Andi and Logan did and would sit next to her, but, today, he didn't. She could see Andi was occupied talking to Jean, so Ro lightly tapped the edge of Logan's tray to get his attention.

His is fork came to a pause as he looked at her.

“Where's Jack?” she hissed.

“Off,” he grunted, his fork resuming his course to his mouth.

Ro sat back in surprise and disappointment. In this sea of couples, his company was just such a comfort and she stared at her stew, wondering whether she ought not just leave, since she didn't really feel like eating.

Suddenly Logan's head jerked up and he looked toward the cafeteria doorway with narrowed eyes. Ro looked, too, though it took longer for her to hear the approaching hub-bub. Soon she recognized Jack's booming baritone, though, by then, Logan had already returned to eating, but Ro's curiosity now kept her eyes fastened on the entry. The double doors burst open and in walked---Alex! Ro could've fallen out of her chair with surprise. Jack was beside him and, following them, was a young dark haired man and a lovely tall woman, who looked remarkably like Andi.

“Look what the cat dragged in,” Jack announced, throwing an arm around Alex's neck and pulling him in to nuzzle his head with his knuckles.

Ro was shocked her beau was here, now.

And was also shocked. The tall elegant woman trailing in behind her two sons was her mother. “Mother?” she muttered, astonished.

Logan practically choked on his coffee. “*Mother?*” he gagged, staring at this unexpected in-law.

Ro only had eyes for Alex, however. He twisted away from his brother and came striding toward her wearing a huge grin on his freckled face. She leapt up and ran into his arms, trading happy kisses with him, entirely forgetting her surroundings until a sudden out-break of whistles and hoots from the students quickly reminded her. Embarrassed, Ro stopped and tried to pull away, but Alex didn't let her go. Instead he caught her by the waist and dramatically swung her into a dip, planted a kiss lightly on her lips, then swung her back upright. The room fairly exploded with applause and cries of “Encore!”

Blushing and eager to escape the attention, Ro grabbed Alex's hand and dragged him after her out the doorway and into the hall, out of sight of prying eyes.

During all this Andi walked over to speak with her Mother. They were standing about halfway between the staff table and the steam-table and Logan was watching them alertly, able to tell by his wife's body English this was *not* a happy reunion. The two of them looked more like sisters than mother and daughter, though he knew this was a genetic oddity of the family. There was a critical sort of severity in the mother's gaze and carriage Logan didn't care for.

Andi's arms were folded as she faced her Mother. “Why are *you* here?” she asked

“It's Christmas, darling. Why shouldn't I be here?” was her Mother's blithe reply as she offered her cheek for Andi to kiss.

Andi obeyed because it was expected and, in turn, let her Mother lightly peck hers, then regarded her with

exasperation. Her Mother wasn't one for holiday visits, so Andi didn't believe that. Neither was she at all prone to spontaneity. Her Mother *always* first sent a formal request by mail requesting the honor of visit before going anywhere. "Mother, you *never* just show up," she replied.

"Now I couldn't very well have said anything and spoiled my grandson's big surprise, now could I?"

Andi considered this sourly. Her Mother could be as evasive as a sleazy politician, particularly when it came to her personal life. Cassandra Ravannisky had a lengthy past. She'd been born in Europe sometime in the late nineteenth century, though she wouldn't admit any particular date. She would only refer to herself as having been born into, "fortunate circumstances," which probably meant upper class. In any case, her privileged station in life had allowed her an above average education for her ear, not to mention her father apparently doted upon her, thus allow her to evade the confines of a matched marriage. Though how she maintained herself or earned a living during those ensuing years or how she even immigrated to the United States, she would never say. It was only because of her Father, Maurice Ravannisky, now deceased, that any of them even knew he'd met their Mother in Chicago while there for Navy training in 1942, just before deploying to the Pacific. When he returned, they married and he whisked her away to his family's horse farm in Kentucky, where they had seven children whom she'd raised with a imperious hand.

Since her Mother seemed so determined to be evasive, Andi just said, "How about some lunch then?" This got the "royal" nod as acceptable and Andi took her through the lunch line, then to the staff table.

Logan was just rising from the table as they approached.

"Done already?" Andi asked him with mild sarcasm.

He ignored that, turning his attention instead to her mother. "So, *you're* Andi's Mom, huh?"

The corners of her Mother's lips turned down disapprovingly at such a personal address.

"Mother, this is my husband, Logan," Andi quickly interjected. "Logan, my Mother, Cassandra Ravannisky."

Cassandra gave her very tall, son-in-law a dubious look up and down. "You could do with a shave," she observed.

Logan shot Andi a beleaguered look and she just rolled her eyes. He pulled out his chair and picked up his tray. "Okay, here ya go, Mom, you can have my seat," and added with a cagey look at Andi, "Since I was *leaving* anyway."

"Cassandra," she corrected crisply as she sat and centered her lunch tray precisely in front of her.

"Okay. *Cassandra*," he reiterated and was about to turn, but not before he caught Andi mouth the "coward," but he just gave her a cocky smirk before setting off to dispose of his tray.

Meanwhile out in the hallway, as soon as she got Alex out there, Ro had faced him with sternly folded arms. "Alexander Kenan Williams, you lied to me!" she admonished. "You told me you weren't coming for Christmas!"

Alex playfully pulled her, folded arms and all into his embrace. "I just wanted to surprise you," he grinned.

Ro was also only pretending to be mad and easily unfolded her arms to encircle Alex's neck. "You did that," she agreed.

"Forgive me?"

"Just this once," she said, tilting her lips up for a kiss.

It was at this very moment that Logan suddenly strode out of the cafeteria like an on-coming locomotive---practically colliding with them. He screeched to a halt, all parties startled. Then, scowling, he resumed his course, veering around the lovebirds. "This is a school, *not* a motel," he threw back. "Get a room."

Ro and Alex stared after him, then broke into silly giggles like two bad children. As the their laughter faded, Alex caught her hand. "Come on," he said, "Let's get some lunch. I can't wait to introduce you to my Meme and Uncle Buddy."

"Meme?" Ro repeated as she twas being towed back inside the cafeteria.

"It's another name for Grandma," he explained. "She prefers it."

"Ah," Ro said, now casting a glance toward the staff table where she could see her new extended family already seated---except Logan. He seemed ostensibly missing. "Why'd you even bring them?" she asked curiously. It did seem odd.

“Believe me, that was all *their* plan, not mine,” he said, putting a tray on the tray slide-bars. “Uncle Buddy lives in Kentucky and I'd prearranged with him to stop there because it was a good place to lay-over on the drive here. Right after I got there, he said he had to pick Meme up at the airport. I didn't even know she was coming. I just sent her a card at the beginning of December mentioning you and my plans to come here for Christmas. I had no idea she would suddenly decide to fly up and have Uncle Buddy drive her all the way here behind me.” He shook his head. “Big surprise.”

“You *drove*?” she asked incredulously. “Why didn't you just fly?”

“Well, I couldn't very well fit all my worldly possessions into just one suitcase, now could I? I rented a U-Haul.”

Ro's eyes widened as the full impact of what he was saying hit her. “All your...” she echoed as the implication sank in. “You mean...this just isn't just a visit? You're *staying*?”

“Yup,” he grinned. “Forever and ever.”

She beamed at him and wanted to jump up and down with happiness, but she restrained herself, remembering this time where she was. She settled for giving him a quick squeeze.

Mrs. Honeycutt had already ladled-up a plate of stew for Alex and, after plopping two fat squares of cornbread on top, handed it over. “Here you go, honey.”

“Thanks, it looks delicious,” he replied.

She had another plate loaded and held out to Ro before she could stop her. She'd been too blue to feel hungry before, but now she was too excited. “Oh, you don't have to do that,” she protested, “I've already had a plate.”

“Nonsense, child,” Mrs. Honeycutt admonished cheerfully. “Mr. Gambit cleared that one away. He said you barely touched it.” Then as if that settled the matter, she plopped two more squares of cornbread on top and held it out with a toothy smile.

Alex saved her by graciously taking the plate and adding it to his own tray. Ro just gave Mrs. Honeycutt a weak smile of thanks, then happily followed her beau toward the staff table. As she saw Andi seated there, her happiness slowly ebbed away. She was quite aware that some sort of problem existed between herself and Andi over Alex, but didn't know what it was and neither did he. All she did know, however, was a silent wall of ice seemed to stand between her and Andi about it, which—when Alex had been far away—had been easy to just ignore, but now that *here*, she didn't see how Andi could go on pretending it wasn't real.

Reaching the staff table, Alex held Ro's chair, seating her next to Jack, which awkwardly put her right in front of Andi. Their eyes met briefly and they traded perfunctory smiles. *'Still the ice queen,'* Ro thought.

Alex, after sitting, gestured to the handsome man on the other side of Jack. “Ro, this is my Uncle Buddy.”

Uncle Buddy, who hardly looked older than his nephew, leaned around Jack to give her a shy smile. He had deep midnight blue eyes, the same nutmeg spatter of freckles over the nose as his sister, Andi, and a stack of thick curly black hair.

Ro returned a smile. Alex then introduced her to “Meme,” who had the same youthful looks, the same deep midnight blue eyes as her son and the same raven black hair, though hers was long and smoothly pinned back in a chic chignon at the nape of her neck. She had an distinctive air of class and polish about her that belied the casual tan blazer she wore over a light blue blouse with new looking jeans.

“And this is my grandmother, Cassandra Ravannisky,” he said, then to Cassandra said, “Meme, this is my lovely future bride, Ororo Munroe.”

Ro put on her most winning smile as she endured the beautiful matriarch's solemn appraisal.

“I'm pleased to meet you,” Ro offered, thoroughly intimidated. She didn't know what she was going to do if *Grandma* didn't approve of her.

After a moment that seemed an eternity, Cassandra graced her with a measured smile. “I'm pleased to meet you. Alex has had nothing, but good to say about you, my dear.”

Ro blushed with pleasure—and relief. So, she had the blessing of one matriarch. Now, if only she could win the blessing of the other.

Alex then stood up. “If I could have everyone's attention,” he said.

The buzz of cafeteria conversation quieted and everyone gave him rap attention.

“You know, in the past I've just been here to visit,” he announced. “But not this time. This time I'm here to stay, so I can be with the love of my life everyday.” He punctuated this by leaning over and planting a kiss on Ro's cheek.

“Here, here,” Scott said. “It's about time.”

Jean was beaming. The Professor looked approving. Even Gambit, who'd been obsequiously fawning around the table refilling glasses and coffee cups so he could listen in, had a thumbs up for her. Everyone seemed pleased ---except maybe Andi, who was just smiling woodenly.

“So, you'll be moving in with Ro then?” Jean abruptly asked Alex.

Ro cringed. She'd worked *so hard* to avoid explaining to anyone anything about why she and Alex *would not* be living together in advance of being marriage or why they were “*waiting*” for the honeymoon. She just didn't want all the stares and questions and whisperings behind her back. To that end, she'd just been allowing everyone to assume what they wished without bothering to correct them. Nor had she explained any of this to Alex---so Alex had no idea that what he was about to say *might not* be what *she wanted* said. If he hadn't arrived unexpectedly, if they could've have time to talk, she certainly would've briefed him on what should and should not be said, but as it was....she braced herself. The beans were about to be spilled.

“Not until after the wedding,” Alex glibly replied. “Until then, I'm bunking with Jack.”

There it was. Out in the open, served up like a hardy helping of liverwurst topped with chocolate sauce. Ro wished she had the mutant ability to shrink to the size of a mouse so she could skitter away.

Jean threw her a confused, inquiring glance. Others stared with open curiosity or surprise. Ro just kept a smile pasted on her face. Her back teeth were gritted together, but she was *still smiling*, probably exactly the way Andi was right now--teeth gritted, totally fake.

Her one single consolation in the entire affair was the glitter of approval she saw in Cassandra Ravannisky's eyes.

Logan, once past the Ro-Alex obstacle in the hall, had gone directly to the gym office, where he was presently stretched out on the old plaid sofa, arms behind his head, happily watching ESPN on the TV atop the frig, wiling away time until shop class. He heard the light measured steps of his wife coming, then stop in the doorway behind him. “Everyone gone?” he casually asked.

“For now, you big chicken liver.”

He smirked and muted the TV. “They're *your* family, darlin'.”

Andi sighed into Jack's office chair opposite him. “*Tell* me about it.”

He looked at her. “At least now I know where you get your looks from.” His effort to distract her by his cleverly contrived compliment failed.

“But, *darlin'*, you left before the *really* big news,” Andi continued undauntedly. “Alex is moving in with Jack because he's here to *stay*.”

Logan grimaced. There it was again, that inscrutable problem of Alex and Ro. Why she couldn't settle with it, he didn't know. “We knew that was coming,” he rumbled.

“Yes, but what I don't understand is why my Mother came with him.”

Logan's brows rose. This was a new turn. “Why not? It's her grandson.”

Andi shook her head. “Babe, you don't understand. My Mother never *once* visited me and the kids the whole time we lived in California. They only know her at all because *I* took them home a few times while Dad was still alive. Once he died, Mother up and moved to Australia and has never been back---until now.”

He detected bitterness in her tone. “Not the grandmotherly type, eh?”

“No.”

'Apparently, not the Motherly sort either,' he thought. No wonder all the stories about her home life as a kid centered around her Father. “Why's she here, then?”

Andi threw her hands up. “I have no idea, but whatever her real reasons are, I think she's going to tell them tonight.”

He frowned. “What's tonight?”

She got up, motioned for him to move over and, when he'd shifted his hips to give her room, sat beside him on the sofa. His gut warned him this was no move of simple affection. Then when she smiled that impish smile of hers that could melt frozen tundra, he knew something was up.

“Jack's throwing a chili dinner at his house tonight for the family and *we're* invited---though, if you don't want to come, I'll understand. My Mother can be pretty hard to take.”

This close, the naturally sweet scent her skin was giving him other ideas. “No rule says ya havta go either, Angel.”

“Ah, but I do. I've already promised her. When I walked her and my brother out, she was *awfully* interested in whether I was coming or not. That's why I'm pretty sure she's planning on announcing her real motives tonight.”

“I'll think about it,” he replied vaguely.

Andi nodded and made to rise, but he caught her and pulled her back to him for a kiss or two before she finally extricated herself and left.

Turning on the TV sound, he resumed watching his game. Of course, he'd already made his decision. He might not *have* to go, but he was going to go. Someone needed to look out for Andi's best interests and that someone was him.

That night he and Andi drove over to Jack's house, a mere five minutes away in a neighboring townhouse sub-division. As soon as they walked in, Logan saw the only guests on premises were Andi's Mother and brother. No sign of Alex or Ro yet and that meant Alex was probably picking her up.

“*This is gonna be fun!*” he thought, as he took Andi's coat and sent her on ahead into the living room to join her family while he hung it up in the hall closet along with his. After that he proceeded directly to the kitchen. Jack was just sliding a large pan of cornbread into the oven when Logan strolled, going right to the frig. “I should kick your butt,” he said as he drew out a bottle of beer.

“Oh, yeah? For what?” Jack replied, closing the oven door, then turning a grin on his pal.

“For not giving me any heads up on Alex coming.”

“Oh, come on. My brother asks me to keep something special he's up to a secret, what am I gonna do? Talk him out of it? It was a done deal that he was coming. Besides, Alex can be pretty stubborn when he wants to be.”

“Yeah, it runs in the family,” Logan commented, glancing over the open breakfast bar into the living where he could see Mother, brother and Andi seated in a huddle, intensely focused on their conversation. Again he could tell by Andi's posture it wasn't a happy conversation. So, moving to the breakfast bar, he leaned against in order to keep his ears on what was going on and what he heard put a whole new spin on things:

“It's your brother, Lonnie I'm worried about,” Andi's Mother was saying. She looked between her two children. “When was the last time either of you heard from him?”

To Andi, this seemed an odd question, since she didn't think anyone had actually *seen* Lonnie in years. He was the youngest boy in the family and, though he'd started well, in the end he became the “black sheep” of the family. It had been at least twenty-three years since she'd seen him and that had been back in California when she was still working at Santini Air for Dominic, back when the first Desert Storm was gearing up. He came by the hanger to visit. That had been right after he'd finished his Marine training in San Diego. He didn't even tell anyone he was going to enlist. He just abruptly quit college and enlisted. She remembered how proud he was to be part of something he believed both significant and noble—but the grim reality of war didn't measure up to his ideals. Apparently, according to Buddy, as soon as Lonnie was discharged, he returned to the family farm, packed a back-pack, then had Buddy drop him off at the local truck stop never to be heard from again.

Andi shook her head. “No, Mother, not since right after boot camp.”

Her Mother's gaze automatically shifted to Buddy, who shook his head, then she nod absently, as if this confirmed something.

“Why do you ask?” Andi said.

“Because he's missing,” her Mother replied.

Andi and her brother traded incredulous looks.

“I'm *not* crazy,” Cassandra tartly informed them. “Lonnie used to call me every three or four months—until about a year ago, when his calls just suddenly stopped.”

Andi gaped at her Mother. To find out that her Mother and Lonnie had been maintaining a steady communication was surprising enough, but more surprising was the fact she'd apparently let his disappearance go a *whole year*. “Mother, I can't believe you,” Andi retorted. “How could you let it go this long before saying anything to anyone?”

“Do *not* take that tone with me, daughter. I didn't say I didn't *do* anything for a year. Everything that was appropriate to do, has been done.”

Andi regarded her Mother irritably. Her brother, however, pressed on to the next logical question. “Where was Lonnie last time you heard from him?”

“Alaska.”

“Working?”

“Of course. He'd been with the same seafood processing company for nearly two years when I stopped hearing from him.”

It was at this point Cassandra politely excused herself for a bathroom visit. As soon as she was out of earshot, Andi let loose on her brother. “This is unbelievable!” she hissed to him. “Lonnie could've quit the seafood business and gone to Africa to lead safaris for all we know!”

“Or worse,” Buddy said. “I wouldn't say this in front of Mother-- but what if he's dead?”

Andi gave this quick thought, then immediately shook her head. “If a body had turned up, he'd have been identified and the military still has his fingerprints and dental records on file as well as the farm being his home of record. You probably would've heard.”

“Bodies don't always turn up,” he suggested ominously, then signaled silence. “She's coming,” he whispered.

Andi wasn't sure secrecy was really necessary. Surely, her Mother had considered this possibility.

Cassandra had just returned to her seat when a light rap was heard on the front door, then it opened and Alex walked in with Ro on his arm, then disengaged himself to take her coat and hang it up.

As Andi observed them, feeling for a fleeting moment a slight regret that her relationship with Ro seemed destined to be as estranged as her own with her Mother, but the feeling was quickly pushed aside by that same nebulous anxiety that kept bothering her.

Ro nodded to the family as she walked through toward the kitchen while Alex stopped to speak to them.

Logan gave her a nod of acknowledgment as she sauntered in, which she returned, then joined Jack at the stove to peer into the pot he was stirring on top. Shortly after that Alex also walked in, making the kitchen a little too crowded for Logan's tastes, so he moved around to the living room side of the breakfast bar, where he could sit on a stool and still eavesdrop without being obvious. Unfortunately the oven-timer went off, signally the cornbread was done and Jack called everyone in to dish up.

Since Jack had no dining table, he'd borrowed three extra folding chairs from the school and arranged for everyone to sit in the living room to eat. Logan, of course, chose the comfort of the leather sofa over a folding chair and Andi sat next to him. Her brother, Buddy, sat on her other side and Jack took the matching leather recliner leaving Cassandra, Alex and Ro to sit in the folding chairs across from them. A tall glittering Christmas tree stood at the window behind them, and the glowing gas fireplace in the corner lent a warm ambiance to what might've been an idyllic family gathering—had they been one.

“Angelique,” Cassandra said.

Andi looked at her Mother. The woman hated nicknames and would only ever refer to her by her full “proper” name. “Yes, Mother?”

“I understand that you suspect someone of our *kind* has been recruiting others for some nefarious purpose?” Cassandra asked, her special emphasis on “*kind*” giving Andi to know she meant someone of *their* long-lived race.

An uncomfortable silence fell and Andi's lips tightened with displeasure. Clearly, her Mother knew things she wasn't supposed to know. But who had told her?

“*That* is privileged information, Mother,” she ground out with an interrogating glance at Jack, who ever so slightly shook his head that it hadn't been him and implicated his brother with a quick shift of his eyes in that direction. Andi now locked eyes on her youngest son, his name hissing from her lips like a curse, “*Alex!*”

His face turned scarlet. “I *only* spoke in generalities, Mama.”

Logan eyed him with aggravation. “Kid, haven't ya ever heard, loose lips, sink ships?”

“It's my fault,” Ro quickly interjected. “*I'm* the one who told him.”

“Like I said,” Logan replied.

Ro bristled, but Alex came to her defense. “I decided Meme ought to know--for her own safety,” he said.

“*That is* a good point,” Jack diplomatically observed.

“There is no need for blame,” Cassandra Ravannisky interrupted calmly, drawing everyone's eyes. She

was seated on her folding chair in a lady-like manner, her ankles delicately crossed and her plate with it's bowl of chili and nibbled cornbread balanced on her palm. "Alex only made a cursory mention of this matter in his card, but it was enough to give me hope," she explained. "You see, my son Lonnie has been missing for at least a year." She lifted her chin proudly. "Naturally, I understood this wasn't something to be discussed publicly, so that's why I am here. To discuss it in person."

Andi and Logan traded a brief glance, a silent affirmation that she'd been right about her Mother revealing her real motives.

Cassandra's gaze now came to rest on Andi. "Do you think it's possible that your brother has somehow fallen prey to this...person you call the Spider?"

Andi hesitated. Though her brother's status as a drifter and his past longings for significance *could* hypothetically make him a target for the Spider's people, but she felt strongly that Buddy could as easily be right about him being dead.

"What makes you think he's not just dead?" Logan brusquely replied.

Cassandra locked a withering look on him that, if she'd had the ability, would've turned Logan to a pile of ash.

Andi quickly said, "Alright, Mother, why don't you tell everyone what it is that has led you to believe Lonnie's missing."

"The private detectives I hired couldn't find any trace of him."

"You *hired* private detectives?" Andi repeated, stunned her Mother would hire strangers before asking for *her* help, since she'd worked in the PI profession for many years. "You could've asked *me*. I would've done it for you for free."

"I thought you had enough on your plate."

Andi bit back what she wanted to say. Her Mother was a stubborn and pragmatic woman who did as she liked. No words would change that. Instead she focused on the facts. Having run missing person searches many times, she knew her Mother's investigators would've checked with Lonnie's last known employer for reference requests and interviewed friends, neighbors and co-workers. They would've also researched all the usual electronic paper trails, such as his social security number, credit card and ATM use, utility records, vehicle registrations and tax records. To come up with nothing, not even a rumor of where he might've gone was *highly* unusual.

"No trace of Lonnie? Absolutely nothing?" Andi echoed, a little amazed. Falling off the electronic grid *entirely* was a near impossibility. It took a level of expertise both costly and illegal--which *could* conceivably substantiate her Mother's hope that Lonnie had been recruited by the Spider's organization somehow, but it was still a knee-jerk conclusion without the slightest proof.

Her Mother heaved a small sigh. "I even had them check hospitals and morgues all over Alaska." She looked hard at Logan, adding, "And found nothing."

Obviously, her Mother *had* considered that possibility. Though their differences were many, Andi felt a small point of compassion for her Mother, who had already lost two children to death due to their lack of having inherited the long-life gene and Andi herself knew how terrible it was to lose a connection with a child, even though her daughter was not dead, but only treated Andi as if she were. Because of this Andi knew what her Mother needed most right now *was* hope and chose her next words very carefully. "You *could* be right, Mother," she said. "Maybe that's exactly what happened to Lonnie."

Andi drew satisfaction from the happy light this put in her Mother's eyes, but Logan looked at her like she'd just coughed up a fur ball.

He abruptly set his empty plate and bowl on the foot-locker that served as Jack's coffee table. "I need a beer and a smoke," he grunted, heaving to his feet.

"All righty then, who's up for a game of Crazy Eights?" Jack interjected.

Alex, Ro and Buddy all shot their hands up.

Cassandra leveled her gaze on Andi as Logan walked away. "*Really*, daughter," she said. "I don't know *what* you see in this one."

Andi just gave her an aggrieved look. Her Mother had said the exact same words about both her previous spouses.

Logan, with his keen hearing, naturally heard that and sizzled all the way to the coat closet. Opening the door, he just stood there, contemplating grabbing both their coats and signaling Andi it was time to leave, but

then decided he didn't want to give her Ma the satisfaction. So, he only grabbed his own, because it held his cigars, then sauntered back through the living room to the kitchen like he hadn't heard a thing, got another beer, then went out the sliding glass door.

It wasn't until he and Andi were in the Firebird on their way home that he informed her he wouldn't be attending any more family gatherings. "You did say I didn't have to come," he reminded her.

"Okay," she replied. "But will that include *not* coming to Christmas dinner at school on Saturday?"

In the darkness of the car, Logan grimaced. He'd forgotten about that and *had* promised Rogue to be there. Plus there was still this whole thing with Alex and Ro to consider. No telling what Alex might do. Dang, if the kid didn't like a public forum for airing his stuff.

"Except *that*," he relented gruffly. "But that's it."

Christmas Eve was Saturday morning and Alex on Professor Xavier's kitchen doorstep promptly at ten a.m. He had an appointment with him, an appointment so important he'd worn a suit. Taking a deep breath, he gave the door a light rap.

"Come in," Xavier's voice called.

Entering the warm yellow and white kitchen, Alex found the Professor pouring hot water from a kettle into a ceramic teapot.

"Good morning, sir," Alex offered politely, his palms already damp with nervous perspiration.

"Good morning," Xavier returned with a smile, then hummed over to the white-tiled table where a tea tray and two tea cups were waiting. He placed the ceramic pot on the tray and gestured Alex should have a seat.

Alex removed and folded his winter coat over an adjacent chair, straightened his jacket sleeves, then sat down and tried not to fidget under Xavier's penetrating gaze. Naturally, he wondered whether he might be reading his mind, but remembered Ro's assurance that the Professor respected others privacy.

"So, Alex, what is you wished to see me about?" Xavier inquired.

Alex didn't know why he should be so nervous. It wasn't like he was actually Ro's father or anything. Taking a deep, silent breath, he cut to the chase. "Professor, you're all the family Ro has, so I'm here to ask you for your permission to marry her."

"Well...hmm, let's see. May I ask how you intend to support her?"

Alex hesitated. He didn't know if the Professor was pulling his leg or not--but upon observing him raise a brow for an answer, Alex decided he was serious. "I applied to several local police and sheriff departments here before I left California," he explained, "and right now, the Newboro police department seems the most promising. They want me to call them for an interview."

"And if that doesn't work out?"

"Well, I guess in that case, I'd maybe look into private security work."

"I see." Xavier lifted the ceramic pot and poured tea into his waiting cup. "Tea?"

"Sure," Alex agreed and, while the Professor was pouring, said, "Ro and I would like to go on living here at school, if that would be alright."

"Of course. Ororo has worked very hard on fixing her new quarters with that in mind." Then Xavier regarded him critically. "You did say, didn't you, that you wouldn't be moving in until *after* the wedding, correct?"

"Correct. I'm staying at Jack's until then."

Xavier stirred his tea, nodding. "Quite commendable. Good example for the children."

Alex blushed slightly. "I don't want to be excess baggage, Professor. I'd like to pull my own weight and help out while I'm waiting for a job and even after I have a job."

"Extra help is always appreciated. I've heard you have quite a talent for singing and even performed in a musical production or two?"

He felt his cheeks redden even more. "Strictly amateur, sir."

"Quite a few students here have good voices and would benefit from a little training. Perhaps a chorus group might be up your alley?"

"I'd be willing to try."

"Good. I'll look forward to it."

“Uh, Professor, you haven't answered my question about Ro yet, sir.”

Resting his teacup back in its saucer, Xavier regarded him gravely. “I trust you understand the nature of our work here, Alex, and I don't mean just the school.”

“Yes, sir, I think I do.”

“And if you should receive that position as a police officer, have you considered the ramifications of being married to a mutant engaged in the activities we're committed to?”

Alex had heard this same question from his Mother. “I have,” he answered confidently. “I've already set up a separate post office box, so none of my mail will be coming here and I have my own cell, so no one will be calling me here and, if I get the police job, I'll be commuting in civilian clothes. If anyone asks me about my wife and what she does, I just plan on just saying she's a school teacher and evade any specifics.”

Xavier nodded. “What about relating to mutants in the community as a police officer? Will you be able to do what's asked of you, without favoritism or prejudice?”

Yet another familiar question. “Yes, sir. I have arrested a mutant or two in my time and I think my record speaks for itself; that I'm willing to serve and protect *every* person regardless of race, gender or creed or genetic diversity.”

“What about the possibility of injury and death on the job? Have you and Ro discussed that?”

Alex could feel the sweat trickling down his chest under his shirt. This was more intense than he'd anticipated. “Yes, sir. I think she understands police work entails some danger.”

“Actually, I meant the possibility of *her* injury and death,” Xavier replied. “Our mission field is the world and there are lots and lots of mutants out there, some of whom have very dangerous powers. As much as I hate to suggest it, Ororo could be hurt or worse and you wouldn't be either able to help her or even be with her.”

It was a painful picture, one that made Alex's heart squeeze to hear. He couldn't specifically say he and Ro had discussed this, though he thought they both mutually knew what they each did had its dangers. “I think,” he said carefully, “I can safely say that Ro and I both know our professions entail certain inherent risks.” Then Alex, looked at the Professor hopeful he'd answered satisfactorily.

Xavier offered a nod and a smile. “Good.”

A wave of relief swept over Alex.

“It seems to me, Ororo has made a good choice in you,” Xavier said, “and if marrying you is agreeable to her, then it's agreeable also to me.”

Alex grinned. “Thank you, Professor. I don't know yet what kind of wedding Ro wants, but we want you to know that we don't expect you to pay for it.”

“That's kind of you, but I would *like* to contribute something. Perhaps the bridal gown?”

“Whatever you want to do would be great. We just didn't want you to feel obligated.”

“Well, I appreciate your consideration. May I ask when you intend to pop the question?”

“I want it to be a surprise.”

Xavier made a zipper-motion across his lips with his fingers, then held one hand up in a boy-scout pledge assuring his silence.

“Tonight,” Alex confided.

“A Christmas Eve proposal? Sounds lovely.”

“It will be,” Alex assured him as he stood. Then, after shaking his hand and thanking him again, he left. Xavier then let out all the chuckles of amusement he'd been stifling. He had deliberately laid it on a little thick. “That was the most novel conversation I've had in a long time,” he observed to his black cat, Celine, stretched on the sill. She just returned a sleepy wink.

That night, Ro hardly tasted anything she ate at the fancy restaurant Alex took her to. She was so nervous. She kept expecting him to pop the question at any moment, but him popping the question making her nervous. It was the bad news she was going to have to give Alex once he did.

No proposal came, however, which surprised her. The meal came and went without event and now they were on their way back to the school. She didn't know whether to be disappointed or relieved.

It was midnight by the time Alex walked her back into the school. By then, she wasn't expecting more than the usual farewell kiss at the staircase, so it caught her off guard when he suggested they “go have a look at the Christmas tree.”

Walking to the parlor, they beheld the magnificent conifer where it stood centered in front of the bay

windows overlooking the snow-covered south lawn. Tall and glowing with lights, it had a huge pile of gifts surrounding it, awaiting distribution in the early morning.

“Sit here,” Alex said, directing her to the sofa, then left her to go to the tree, select a rather large wrapped package from behind it and return with it. “For you,” he said.

“For me?” she repeated, gingerly excepting it, any concern about a marriage proposal entirely forgotten. “It’s so big.” She then looked around guiltily at the other waiting gifts. “Are you sure we shouldn’t wait?”

Sitting beside her, he pointed at the clock at the mantel that read five after midnight. “No, go ahead. It’s officially Christmas morning.”

Ro examined the package with sparking eyes. In her life, gifts had been a rare thing and this one from Alex, precious above all others. She opened it carefully, trying to keep the paper intact, then, once the paper was off, opened the box--only to find *another* slightly smaller wrapped box inside. She could already see where this was going and gave him an aggrieved, “you’ve-kidding” look.

“Just keep going,” he replied, trying to keep the smirk off his lips.

Ro obligingly unwrapped this one as well and, just as she suspected, inside was *another* smaller package. Alex couldn’t contain himself. He snickered.

“This had *better* be worth it,” she admonished dourly as she unwrapped it, then the next and the next and the next until, finally, she reached a last very small box. Unwrapping it, she discovered this one held a velvet ring box. She opened it with trembling fingers and pounding heart, then beheld the brilliant solitaire with a gasp. It was lovely. She also knew Alex had it especially designed to nest with a matching wedding band that had once belonged to his Mother that she’d given him as a memento of his father and, if she couldn’t smooth things over with Andi, then it would forever remain symbol of their discord. Tears came to her eyes--but they weren’t tears of joy.

Alex slid from the sofa to one knee. “Ororo Munroe, will you be be my wife?”

She stared at him smiling up so endearingly at her, his freckles barely visible in the shifting light of the blinking tree. She couldn’t speak, she couldn’t even breathe.

Alex’s smile faded a bit as he recognized her hesitation. “Ro?”

She took a deep, quavering breath and sadly shook her head. “No. I can’t.”

He somehow managed to look both astonished and crushed at the same time.

It broke her heart, but she steeled herself and quickly continued. “At least--not yet. You have to do *one* thing for me first before I can say yes.”

A comprehending smile came to his face. “Ah, you wish your knight to perform some errand and thus prove his love?” Then he nobly placed his hand over his heart. “Speak, fair maiden, I will slay whatever dragon you command.”

‘*An ironic choice of words,*’ she thought. “I want you to ask your Mother for her permission for us to marry. If she says it’s okay, then I’ll say yes.” Closing the ring box, she offered it back. It was probably the hardest thing she’d ever had to do.

Alex accepted it with obvious reluctance. “Are you sure you want to open that door?” he asked dubiously.

Ro didn’t want any secret objections on Andi’s part to come back and bite them later. “I *need* this, Alex,” she said.

He looked frustrated. “Trust me, Ro, she’s *not* going to say no.”

“Good, then I we can marry and I’ll have peace in my heart.”

“That’s what this is about?”

She inclined her head that it was. “Will you slay my dragon, sir knight?”

He sighed as he took her hand, then kissed it. “On my honor, my lady. If it’s peace you want, then it’s peace you shall have. I’ll talk to Mom first thing tomorrow morning, then call and let you know her answer.”

True to his word, the next morning Alex was on Andi’s and Logan’s front doorstep. It was Christmas morning and even though he arrived at nine a.m., Alex ended up pacing a whole half hour in the freezing cold before finally working up enough gumption to ring the doorbell.

It was Logan who opened the door, indecorously clad in plaid flannel shorts and a wife-beater.

Alex managed a smile. “Merry Christmas,” he said through clattering teeth.

“Same,” Logan drawled, showing no intention of inviting him in.

He felt as welcome as a salesman and wondered again what exactly his Mom saw in this guy. “Can I

come in?" he asked.

Logan stepped back with an air of grudging reluctance to allow him in, then closed the door and faced him with folded arms and an interrogating look.

Alex lowered his voice to a whisper. "I'm here to talk to Mama. Alone---if you wouldn't mind."

"Kitchen," he said, jerking his head in that direction, then turned and padded up the stairway leaving Alex on his own to make his way to the kitchen. Of course, Alex didn't realize that, as soon as he was out of sight, Logan immediately snuck back down and seated himself on a bottom step where he could keep an eye on the situation with his ears. The kid being there that early spelled nothing good.

Andi was seated at the breakfast table in the kitchen where she and Logan had been pleasantly sharing Danish and coffee. He'd been reading his motorcycle magazines and she working crosswords in her crossword book---until the doorbell. She, of course, immediately recognized Alex's voice. With a sinking feeling, she had no idea why he was here rather than at school with Ro, opening presents---except that he'd popped the question and now wanted to tell her. Andi stared down at her puzzle with a sigh. She really wished she could be just glad about their romance, but she had a deep inner resistance against it constantly plagued her. Nor could she explain why she had it. She didn't remember feeling this way about Alex's few girlfriends in high school. Neither with any of Jack's. As far as she could tell Ro seemed a nice girl. Her abilities as a teacher and her dedication to Xavier's cause were unquestionable. Of faults, Andi could only say Ro had a bit of a temper and, professionally, she hadn't the slightest qualm about working with her in the field or in the school---until it came to this relationship with her son. That's where she bulked. She just had this dreadful feeling about it and trying to explain it to Alex or Jack or even Logan had quickly proven fruitless. It just frustrated everybody, including her, and, of course, they thought her position ridiculous, but she couldn't help herself. The problem was real enough that it gave her indigestion to even think about, so she found avoiding the subject entirely eased her discomfort and quit trying to get them to understand. It was her burden and hers alone apparently and clearly her feelings on the matter weren't going to alter Alex's course.

She heard his footsteps, then he rounded the corner into the kitchen, his cheeks still rosy from the cold. He was the first child of her second marriage. He was five-ten in height with frizzy-curly wheat colored hair like this father's, his same summer-sky blue eyes, but the spatter of freckles and the way he smiled---that was her contribution to his DNA.

"Merry Christmas, Mama," he said.

She rose and gave him a brief hug and kiss. "Merry Christmas, honey." Then she got her mug from the table and moved to the coffee maker on the counter. "Want some coffee?" she asked.

He peeled-off his down-jacket and hung it on the same chair Logan had earlier occupied, then rubbed his hands together to warm them. "I sure do."

"Mugs are in the cabinet," she said, tapping a door. He picked out one and handed it to her, then she filled both of them. She added sugar and dry creamer to hers, then returned to her seat at the table. He added sugar to his coffee, then leaned against the counter, both hands wrapped around his mug.

Andi could tell by how pensively he was contemplating it's contents that he was trying to put his words together. Despite her difficulties with the matter, she didn't think her demeanor so negative he couldn't just say they were engaged. "What's going on?" she asked, just to help him along.

Alex looked at her. "I have to ask you something."

It wasn't exactly the diatribe she was expecting. "Oh?"

"I asked Ro to marry me," he continued, "but she said no."

Andi's eyebrows flew up in astonishment. "She did?"

Alex nodded. "She said I had to ask your permission to marry her first before she would say yes."

She sat back, stunned. Ro was *giving her* an opportunity to forbid the marriage. "I don't know what to say," she replied.

"You can say yes."

She tasted acid, but smiled reassuringly. She *would not* risk embittering her son against her. She *would not* be her Mother. Besides Alex and Ro were of age, able to do what they wished and asking merely a polite formality. "Of course, you have my permission," she replied.

Alex's face lit up and, leaving his mug on the counter, he rushed over to hug her where she sat. "Mama, you're the best!" he declared. "You've just made me the happiest man in the world!" Then pulling away, he

grabbed his coat. "I've got to tell Ro! I'll see you at dinner."

Andi returned a brave smile, then he vanished around the corner. A moment later she heard the front door open and close, then put her elbow on the table to lean her forehead into her hand, wondering for a thousandth time why she couldn't just get over it. A few seconds later she heard Logan's bare feet padding into the kitchen, followed the creak of his weight settling into his chair. She felt his hand rest on her head and raised her eyes to look into his inquiring golden-green ones, reading the unspoken '*are you okay*' in them.

"You heard all that?" she asked, though she knew he had. Logan could hear a bee snoring in a tree a block away.

"You did right by him," he said. "No one could ask for more."

She sighed. She could ask to feel better about it.

Meanwhile Ro waited in her room, puttering about, anxious for Alex to call with a report on Andi's response and when the new cell jingled she grabbed it eagerly. It was just a pay-as-you-go cell.. It'd been Alex's idea, though getting it had proven a *major* negotiation. The Professor was adamantly against *anyone*, staff or student, having *any* sort of contractual cell phone because of the GPS chips they contained. He considered them too high a security risk. The exception was Andi and Jack, who both had secure global Iridium satellite phones given to them by Ben Weir, which were non-locatable and scrambler enabled. Ultimately, after a lengthy debate, the Professor and Scott *finally* consented to her and Alex having these *pre-paid* cell phones because they were the lowest risk, conditioned it on them being careful about what they discussed and they were used frugally. The terms were stiff, but they'd agreed, Alex perhaps more readily than she.

Putting it to her ear, Ro heard Alex's excited voice. "Mama said yes, Ro!"

"She...did?" Ro managed, not quite able to keep the surprise out of her voice.

"You didn't think she would?"

"I...wasn't sure," she answered vaguely. Somehow, having Andi's consent didn't really comfort her as much as she'd hoped it would.

"When can I see you?" Alex eagerly asked. "We have a little unfinished business."

Ro glanced at the time. It was eleven a.m. "I'll meet you in my classroom at twelve-thirty."

"*That* long?" he groaned.

She laughed, "I haven't even showered yet, silly!"

"Okay, twelve-thirty it is. I guess I can wait *that* long," he replied, then clicked off.

At the arranged time, Ro was waiting in her classroom, pacing about, deep in thought over her issue with Andi. Having her 'official' consent was generally good in the sense it meant she wouldn't be able object later, but it didn't make them one big happy family. Up to now she'd left it up to Alex to try smooth things out with Andi, though he insisted she would, once faced with the reality of their marriage, would come to terms with it on her own---eventually. Therefore, Alex didn't see any reason to worry about it and repeatedly told her she shouldn't either. Trying to get him to embrace her concern about it was proving a useless battle. It *was* important to her that the whole family be one with a marriage, but she couldn't really get him to see that. Perhaps it was her cultural background. In any case, she wasn't so sure Andi would *ever* reconcile with her about marrying Alex and Ro was starting to think if she wanted anything done about it, she was going to have to step up and do it herself. The sudden sound of a door interrupted her train of thought and she looked. It was Alex. She self-consciously smoothed her skirt. She wasn't much for dresses, but Jean had talked her into this one. It was a shimmering copper-colored tea-length dress with three-quarter sleeves and a high empire waist. The lace-covered bodice was high to her throat, but in back it scooped low to her mid-back and edged with three fabric rosettes. Coppery shadow and lipstick, taupe nylons and low brown heels completed the outfit and she'd pulled her hair into a soft bun on top of her head.

He stopped when he saw her. "Wow," he exclaimed in an awed tone.

She smoothed her skirt again, pleased. "You think?"

"Yeah, I think," he answered, walking toward her. He had on jeans and a dark blue V-necked sweater over a white t-shirt that made his blue eyes seem even bluer.

Meeting face to face, he caught her left hand and dropped to one knee. "Ororo Munroe," he said, "will you be my wife?"

Ro nodded and Alex was finally able to slide the sparkling ring onto her finger.

The school's annual Christmas dinner was held in the cafeteria in the early afternoon for the staff and whatever students remained over break, which were quite a few this year. Everyone was milling around waiting for seating to be called, including Andi's mother and brother. Logan prudently chose to stand with Rogue and Bobby and Uncle Buddy was hanging out with Jack talking with Jean and Scott leaving Andi alone next to her mother, who was taking in everything with imperious gaze. When it was time, Xavier hummed to the head table, picked up a knife and lightly tapped a crystal glass to call everyone's attention and the buzz of conversation quickly died down. "If you would all find your places," he announced, "We'll say grace and dinner will be served."

There was a sudden swarm for the huge U-shaped table. It was comprised of all the individual tables pushed together and festively covered with red table cloths. Red and green pillar candles nested in garland rings were spaced out along the tables as decor and places were set the house china, crystal and silver. Another row of tables in front of the windows served as buffet and were stacked with food and, in the fireplace, a yule log was burning gaily while soft instrumental Christmas music played in the background.

Place markers had been made with everyone's name thus assuring a equal distribution of staff members among the students. Xavier, Scott and Jean were all seated along the top of the 'U'. Coach Jack and his Uncle Buddy along with the cook staff, including Gambit occupied one arm, while Logan, Andi, her family members and Ro would occupy places on the other, though Ro and Alex hadn't yet arrived. When they did, Ro saw, to her dismay, the only open seats left were right *in front* of Andi and Logan. She glanced at Alex, who patted her hand in his elbow reassuringly, then escorted to the table and decorously seating her in front of Logan. She was careful to keep her left hand out of sight so not to spoil Alex's big announcement.

Logan and Andi and Cassandra were on the inside of the U-arm and seated next to Logan was Rogue and next to her, Bobby. Bobby smiled at Ro. "You look nice, Miss Munroe."

Unfortunately his compliment occurred right in a break in conversation around them so everyone close heard and made them stare in Ro's direction and she felt her cheeks grow hot.

"You do," Rogue kindly affirmed.

"Thank you," Ro replied, noting disparagingly that not one of her eminent in-laws said a word. "You look nice, too," she told Rogue, noting her filmy black blouse she wore with satiny black opera gloves. Bobby was likewise dressed up, wearing a maroon dress shirt and matching black striped tie. Logan had opted for his usual white shirt with a black string tie at the collar and a black leather vest. Andi was wearing a black blazer over an olive green turtle neck that brought out her moss-colored eyes and her mother was elegant in a velvet blazer with a bejeweled Christmas brooch on the lapel.

Xavier tapped the glass again quieting everyone. "Agatha will now say grace."

The honor of saying grace always fell to the youngest student. Last year it had been Elliot. This year, it fell to Agatha, who was only seven. Her parents, both doctors and long time friends of the Professor's, had recently sent her to him for safe keeping while they remained behind in the Republic of Suriname, which was presently in civil turmoil over the hiring of Tau Omega's services.

The small girl, her hair a halo of blonde ringlets, clasped her palms together, bowed her head and in a tiny voice only slightly touched by a French accent, said, "Bless us, O Lord, for the food we are about to eat and please keep Mommy and Daddy safe. Amen." Then she crossed herself and looked up. After that, Scott directed small groups of people to the buffet.

Alex waited until everyone was helping themselves to dessert to stand-up and garner everyone's attention by tapping his own crystal glass. "If I could have your attention," he said. "I have a special announcement."

Ro kept her eyes and smile locked on him as he glanced down on her proudly while he waited for conversation to die down, then surveyed his audience. "I've asked Ro to marry me and she has said yes."

Scott and Jean clapped, inspiring a general round of applause.

"When's the wedding?" Scott called.

"We haven't set a date yet," Alex responded, "but I'm *pretty* certain it will be soon," then after a wink at Ro added, "We're not interested in a *long* engagement!"

This caused a ripple of laughter and Ro blushed.

"But whatever the date," Alex continued, "it will be held here and you're all invited." This incited another round of applause as he sat down.

From the back of the room a male voice suddenly said, "I suppose congratulations on your engagement are in order then."

That brought a sudden quiet to the room and everyone looked toward the cafeteria entry. There stood Ben Weir, suavely attired in a tux, and beside him, his beautiful petite assistant Sam Hamblin, wearing a frilly, curve-hugging little black dress that amply showed off her shapely, black-nyloned legs.

A low wolf-whistle echoed, causing a stir of snickering.

By the briefcases each carried Andi immediately knew they were here for business, not pleasure. "Excuse me for a moment," she said, rising from her chair," and I'll see what our two visitors want."

To be continued in "The Ties That Bind, Part 2"