



A Time for Us

Linda Andrews

Diamond

“Let Me See Your Hand.”

“It’s nothing. Really.”

She tapped the toe of her boot. The sound complimented the ticking of the boiler as the metal heated.

“Then it will not hurt to let me see it.”

Closing the distance between them, he thrust his hand at her.

“See. Nothing.”

She clasped his fingers, angling his hand to the light. Nothing but red. At least there weren’t any blisters.

“We’ll soak your hand in cold water, then gather snow and use that to absorb the rest of the heat.”

His long, tapered fingers were strong beneath her touch. The callused pads rasped her skin. Like Eliot’s hands had been from reinforcing the trenches. They’d felt like fine leather on her bare skin. She shivered and glanced up, expecting to see brown eyes. Instead, she stared into the color of spring, of life returning to the land.

Her heart thumped against her breasts. Her lungs labored to work. A pleasant tingle raced up her spine. She’d always loved spring.

Jay’s lips parted. His attention dropped to her mouth. “We should...”

“We should.” Nysia rose on tiptoes. Her head angled to the left. If he just stooped a little they could kiss.

A kiss would be good.

Also By Linda Andrews

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Some Enchanted Autumn
That's Amores

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Ghost of a Chance
Gillian
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Fiona



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by

Linda Andrews



ZUNAYA EMBRACES

AUSTIN TX

2016

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To My Husband...

Who makes every day special.

*To My Friends And
Family...*

Who help me in more ways than I can count.

And To Vijaya...

*Who helped with the French translations and the
French culture.*

CHAPTER I

My lover is coming.

Perched on the stool atop the oriental rug, Anysia Willot froze, her fingers tight on the key of the clockwork toy. The pressed metal couple twirled one last time before the waltz ended on a tinny ping. Holding her breath, she waited a second. Two. In the clock tower two stories above, the gears, cams, and going trains of the tower clock rattled like a persistent heartbeat. She bit her lip.

Had she imagined that zing of electricity? That sparkle of freshness?

Her attention flew around the tiny workroom off her bedroom, taking in the paint chipped off the horses of the wind-up carousel on the warped wooden workbench under the window. Sunlight fractured on the frost snowflaking across the wavy poured-glass panes and sent rainbows onto the rusting bodies of Pierrot and Pierrette. The wheel of one faded Tin Lizzy lay against a strip of wallpaper peeling in a corkscrew curl.

She sighed and wilted atop the wobbly seat.

The same decay. The same emptiness. The same every day. And there had been so many days since she'd left the nothingness to be in the real world again.

Carefully setting the waltzing couple on the workbench, she leaned forward to grasp the crown key of the clockwork Ferris wheel. The handle popped off, causing the white pressed-tin framework to wobble. The tricolored flag of France plinked onto the warped surface.

The air glittered with magic. As time reversed, the flag rose from the bench and returned to the top of the Ferris wheel. The dented lattice straightened. The wallpaper rolled back up onto the wall and brightened to stark white instead of the dingy yellow of a moment ago.

A smile pressed so hard into Nysia's cheeks her face ached. But it was a good ache, a delightful ache. Her lover was coming. To see her.

The clockwork toys brightened to new, their parts reassembling as time scrolled backward. She pinched her cheeks to add color and slid off the stool.

She dug her toes into the bright-green, cream, and red geometric patterns of the carpet through her woolen stockings and finger-combed her hair. Her ebony curls bounced back and brushed her cheeks. *Zut alors!* Why must her hair always be a bother? She glanced at the oil-stained handkerchief then dismissed the idea of covering the unruly mass. Eliot had said he liked her short curls.

But that had been so long ago.

How many winters had she watched frost ice the landscape? How many harvests had she watched from her window under the clock tower? How many had she missed trapped in the nothingness. Clouds fogged her memory, and an ache pulsed between her temples.

"Nysia, *ma chérie.*"

The deep baritone rumbled through the workroom. Her heart fluttered in her breast. Happiness carried her weight as smoothing her black velvet dress, she scampered into her bedroom. White lace curtains filtered the wintry sunshine. Ivory enamel gleamed on the iron bedstead. Wrenches and a hammer lay on her mahogany nightstand. Where was he? Where...? Her breath lodged in her throat.

Eliot Bontemps propped a hip against the gleaming wardrobe. Not a speck of dust marred his horizon-blue French Army

uniform. He held his Adrian helmet in his hands, and golden curls caressed his oval head. Broad shoulders filled out his trench coat, and puttees emphasized his muscular calves. He breathed on the crossed cannons insignia of the artillery unit on his helmet then polished the brass with his sleeve.

He was so handsome. And he was hers! Forever.

“Eliot,” she breathed. Instead of embracing him, she clasped her hands to her chest, half afraid he’d disappear into the ether.

He spun on the heel of his polished boot.

“But, of course, Nysia. How many other gentlemen do you entertain in your bedroom?”

Heat sprinkled her cheeks, and her attention slid to the bed. They had spent one wondrous hour together before he’d left for the front. Her body tingled as the memories poured through her.

“I had imagined a different reunion for us.” Tossing his hat onto the nightstand, Eliot opened his arms wide.

A wrench clattered to the hardwood floor. She didn’t care. Her job no longer mattered. Eliot was here. Finally.

She dashed in front of the bedstead on tiptoes. A hot tear streaked her cheek. She fell against his strong chest, and his arms banded her torso. She turned her face to his, mouth open for his kiss.

His lips slanted against her mouth, cool, yet firm. His tongue danced with hers.

Gone were the heat and tang of black coffee. Even the tingles racing across her skin seemed muted. Yet, she always expected...different. Silly, of course. He was dead, while she remained trapped in boundless time, between life and death.

The nothingness.

A shudder rippled through her, and she pulled away. Why must she always ruin their precious time together?

“I’ve missed you.”

He suckled her exposed neck, and his tongue flicked over her pulse. His fingers stroked her back, trailing down to the edge of her corset. Backing her toward the bed, he teased the strap of her chemise through her dress.

“Tell me how you imagined our reunion would unfold.”

Heat shimmered through her. Not the inferno of before, more like a banked fire on a wintery night. Still, so necessary for her existence.

“I imagined you...” She hooked her fingers through his equipment belt and tugged him toward the bed. “And me...” She worked the buckle free. His trousers dropped low on his hips. “...warming my bed.”

The feather tick mattress scratched the back of her legs. Rising on her toes, she kissed his jaw. The skin was pliable yet cold. She would warm him up. And he...

He would make her feel alive again.

Eliot cupped her shoulder blades.

“And did you imagine a stranger next door?” His words were vapor in her ear. “Hearing your every moan of pleasure?”

Fear cooled her passion. Her numb fingers released the lapels of his greatcoat, and her hips evaded the grind of his.

“*Oh, la vache, c’est vrai?*”

“*Oui, ma chérie.* It’s true.” He clucked her under her chin. A soft smile played with his lips.

They had so little time together as it was. She stomped her foot before gripping his greatcoat again.

“I don’t care.”

One yank, and he stumbled against her. He tugged playfully on her curls.

“Don’t you? I’ve heard you cry because the villagers whisper about the bad ghost in the clock tower. I see how you cringe when the older boys rush inside and shout insults at you on a dare.”

Of late, more girls had braved her home. Their taunts stung deeper than the boys’. They always had. Tears prickled her nose, and she rested her head against Eliot’s chest. She heard no reassuring heartbeat.

“They were not nice to me when I walked among them. Why would I expect them to be nice to me now?”

And why do I always respond to their taunts?

Eliot pressed a kiss into her forehead.

“Ah, *mon petit chou*, I know what softness lies under your brave façade.”

Nysia slid out of his arms and plopped onto her bed. The soft feather tick sighed around her bottom as the cast iron bedstead squeaked from her weight. Digging her fingers into the blue-and-yellow coverlet, she glanced at her lover.

“Shall I chase the boy away?”

Inside, she cringed at the thought of revealing herself. Few had seen her since she’d passed into the nothingness. She preferred it that way.

“Ah, but this is not a boy.” Eliot turned toward the door of her grandfather’s old bedroom.

Pépère had died before she had crossed. What right did someone have to use his bed? Her fingernails dug into her palms. Jerky strides carried her toward the room. She would chase away the interloper.

The glass knob was icy against her palm. She twisted it and yanked open the door. A floorboard creaked, but the door hinges remained mute.

A quilt in reds, greens, and white covered the heap in Pépère’s bed. Chubby Santa Clauses adorned midnight-blue socks hanging over the footboard. Nysia slowed her brisk strides. He was a big man. A very big man. Would he be frightened of ghosts?

With a snort, the interloper rolled onto his back. Long black hair fanned over the blue cotton pillowcase. His hand rested palm-up near the edge of the pillow. Muscle played under the white sleeve of his longjohns. Calluses dotted the pads of his fingers, and a pink line from a cut bisected his palm.

A workingman’s hands. Workingmen weren’t that easily duped. Her heart raced inside her chest, and her breath came in short bursts. A workingman definitely wouldn’t fear a ghost who bumped into walls.

And she would. She’d always been clumsy, except when it came to the clock and her toys. The jig would be up when she yelped in pain.

Because Eliot’s return made her as substantial as every living soul beyond the clocktower and its yard.

Hugging her waist, she backed away from the interloper. A wall of soft muscle prevented her retreat. Eliot set his hands on her back and pushed her toward the stranger.

She shook her head.

“Let me leave.”

“You must face this. Face *him*.”

Despite her squirming, Nysia couldn't break Eliot's hold. Her shoulders sagged in defeat and she stopped resisting.

“Why? Why must I face him?”

A water stain spread across the ceiling. Paint appeared on the wood paneling then slowly blistered and flaked off. The washstand dissolved in the slow burn of decay. Her lover was leaving her again.

Leaving her alone.

With a stranger.

She grasped for Eliot's hand but found only her own shoulder. Her heart constricted.

“He is here to fix the clock.”

Eliot's words were an arctic blast. Her ear needled from the cold. The grind of the gears in the clock tower nearly shattered her skin.

“Fix the clock?”

Her teeth chattered. Her job had been to keep the clock ticking. The Willots had always kept the clock ticking for Chronos, the god of time, and made certain the past, present, and future remained separate. She'd inherited the duty from her grandfather, and his father, and his father before him. Others like this black-haired man had come and gone since she moved into the nothingness. She'd resented each and every one.

Had rejoiced at their leaving.

Since the last clock man had departed a while ago, she'd been determined to let the clock wind down. To stop time. Just for a second. So she could die and spend eternity with Eliot.

But Chronos had prevented her. After the last sabotage attempt, she'd been banned from touching the clockworks. With winter's breath fogging the window, December 31st had to be close.

Straightening, she glared at the interloper in the bed. He kept her from her lover.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Seduce him.”

Pain spiked her heart. Eliot would ask her to be with another? Her knees shook. What about his vows of eternal fidelity? He'd sworn to be faithful to her, as he expected her to be to him.

"But you—"

Plaster dusted the floorboards as a crack traveled from the foundation and reached the ceiling. Eliot disappeared, leaving only a chilly imprint.

"You must, *ma chérie*. It is the only way for us to be together."

His voice faded just as he did.

But she remained in the world. Trapped.

Nysia pressed her fist against her chest. Her gaze pinned to the man on the bed, she backed out of the room. She must seduce him. But how? She'd never seduced anyone in her life. Eliot had taken the lead in their courtship—she'd been too interested in gears, cams, and drive trains.

She shut the door and locked it.

Still, seduction couldn't be too hard. She'd observed enough of the village girls flirt with the soldiers passing through.

And she was French down to her *sabots*. Too bad termites had devoured her wooden shoes ages ago.



Jay Dugan winced at the hammering inside his head. By Kringle, he hadn't had that much eggnog last night, had he?

He cast his memory back to the night before. Two glasses with dessert, but the eggnog hadn't been spiked then. His four brothers had waited until their children were put to bed before adding the brandy.

And then he'd had three—no, four cups. Tiny cups, but they made his mother's gingerbread men taste so much better. Sugar cookies, but he had a hangover!

He folded the feather pillow around his head like a skull tortilla. The pounding intensified.

Jay gritted his teeth. *Nice job, dipped cookie. Showing up sick on the first day of the new job is bound to make an impression. All of it bad.*

He growled then massaged a hand down his face. He'd best start sobering up now. He still had a bit of packing to do before he found the magic portal to take him to Saint Sylvestre, France.

Shoving aside his brand new Christmas quilt, he swung his legs over the side. So far so good. His stomach wasn't trying to turn itself inside out. Maybe his hangover wouldn't be so bad. Cold leached the heat from the soles of his feet despite his Santa Claus socks. Great. He'd apparently forgotten to set the timer for the pellet stove. He'd give up eggnog for a year, if his day would start improving now.

A yawn threatened to unhinge his jaw. Eyes watering, he peeked at his surroundings. Light stabbed the back of his skull. He squeezed his eyes closed. Seeing was highly overrated. Besides, this was his apartment. He knew the space above his parents' garage by heart.

Two steps across the wooden floor, his little toe slammed into something hard. Pain zipped up his leg and pingponged his eyes in his skull. What in the world? He never left anything on his bedroom floor. Must be his doofus older brothers. Hopping on one foot, Jay blinked the offending article into focus.

His tool box sat in the middle of a rug that was more dust than carpet. Water stained the ceiling in rings of brown and rust. Blobs of plaster dotted the floor like unmelting snowballs. The scent of mildew made his nose twitch. The mattress sagged, the head and footboard caving in as if to meet in the middle.

This was not his bedroom.

Not his apartment.

Was this some kind of prank? His brothers had threatened the night before to do something, one last hazing for the youngest Dugan sibling. Relocating him to some Grinch pit would do it. Jay ran his tongue over his fuzzy teeth. Maybe he didn't have a hangover but was suffering the aftereffects of being drugged. He cracked his knuckles. There should be time to teach his brothers some manners before he left for his new job.

Shaking off his fatigue, he glanced around the room. Wind whistled through a crack in the windowpane over the bed. The wall sconce over by the door dangled by bare wires. His two

bags stood near a decomposing washstand beside his boots. That settled it. He must be in Pumpkin. Only in a town dedicated to Halloween would someone make a place look this bad. Which meant he had a long walk home ahead of him. In the cold, snow, and uphill.

His brothers better not have unpacked his clothes. No man wanted his jingle bells frosted.

Rolling his shoulders, he crossed the room. The wooden boards creaked underfoot. *Please don't let me go through. Please.* He held his breath, making himself as light as possible.

Reaching his luggage, he dropped to the floor and unzipped his bags. His neatly stacked clothes lay nestled inside. He selected a Doctor Who T-shirt, a gray flannel shirt, and tan cargo pants. Quickly dressing, he laced his boots then gathered his belongings. His coat and gloves had better be near the door, or he'd find the nearest phone and have his dough-head brothers come fetch him.

No way was he risking his tools to the damp and cold. Those things worked magic.

Setting his luggage near the door, he reached for the glass handle. It turned before his fingers touched it.

The skin at his neck prickled. By Kringle, if they'd stashed him in a haunted house, he'd wring his brothers' necks. He hated ghosts. And Pumpkin was full of dead things. Jay stepped back. He raised his fist then swore. Punching a ghost wasn't an option.

The hinges groaned, and wood ripped as the door swung open. A stooped old man shambled inside, a scythe-shaped cane thumping the floor every other step. He consulted a gold watch before tucking it back into his trouser pocket. Clear blue eyes looked up, pinning Jay.

"Leaving us so soon? You just arrived."

Jay's heart plummeted near his knees. This couldn't be...

"Mister Chronos? Sir?"

How did one address the god of time—his new boss?

"Just Chronos." Gnarled fingers smoothed the fringe of white hair around his pink scalp. "Not sir or mister."

"Yes, sir, er, Chronos." Jay's tongue wrapped around the name. He was already in Saint Sylvestre. He eyed the water-

stained wall. Maybe the place decayed as the year progressed and renewed at the stroke of midnight on New Year's Day.

The old man grunted. "Scared you off, did she?"

Jay blinked, bringing his attention back into the conversation.

"She?"

Chronos's eyes twinkled with the light of galaxies.

"No. No, you haven't met her in the past or present. Yet."

After a quick inspection of the dresser, Jay lowered his toolbox to the floor.

"I don't know who 'she' is, but I thought I..." He swallowed the words. Not all holiday towns liked being compared to others. "I didn't know where I was."

"Ahhh." Chronos stroked his white beard and twirled the end around his finger. "Got a muzzy head, a fuzzy tongue, and a buzzing in the ears?"

"Yes, yes, and no," Jay answered the questions in order. "I hear a thumpity-thump of..." His heart pounded. Since he was in Saint Sylvestre, then... "That's the clock."

The clock. The one that kept time for the universe. He eyed the cracked and stained ceiling. This was better than the TARDIS because it was real.

"Yes, yes. The one you were hired to look after, but first there are things we must discuss."

A muffled sob penetrated the door Jay had assumed lead to the bathroom.

"Is someone else here?"

Chronos's blue eyes narrowed and turned black. Bits of glitter were the stars in his eyes.

"I see how things lie."

"Chronos?"

"Hmm?" The old man jerked his attention to Jay. "Well, some things are inevitable, I suppose." He shambled across the wood floor. With every thump of his cane, plaster returned to the walls, water stains faded on the ceiling, and the cracks zipped closed. Only the furnishings remained shabby. "Come, I will buy you breakfast while we discuss...things."

More sobbing echoed in the restored room. The clockworks clanged.

Jay's hair stood on end. If he didn't know better, he'd say the place was haunted.

Tugging on the neck of his T-shirt, he scuttled after the old man. He could put up with anything, as long as it wasn't a ghost.

CHAPTER 2

“You’re not here to fall in love, are you?”

Descending, Jay tripped on the last step and stumbled into the newel post. His fingers dug into the grime and dirt coating the golden walnut wood.

“Love? No. No. Definitely not.”

He shuddered at the idea.

Chronos thumped his scythe-shaped cane on the floor of the living room. The cracked black and white marble tiles of the floor knit back together. The *trompe-l’œil* landscape above the fireplace in the center of the wall opposite the staircase brightened. Lacy spiderwebs hung from the beamed ceiling like ghostly bunting.

“You don’t believe in love?”

Grabbing his wool coat off the bannister, Jay stuffed his arms down the throat of the sleeves. Why was the god nattering on and on about love when his power was time? Sweet, uncomplicated time.

“I believe in love.”

He just wanted to find it himself, not be hunted for it.

“Ah, yes, the Dugan family curse.” A green velvet cloak materialized on the old man’s stooped shoulders. A rusty chuckle stirred the strands of beard on Chronos’s chest. “Destined to

find your soulmate then watch as Fate tries to take her away three times.”

Just the idea iced the marrow in Jay’s bones. He was *not* ready to face the prospect of finding someone, knowing his love imperiled her. No. No way. He’d watched the desperate women stalking his brothers stage their own near-fatal encounters. They’d scared the cranberries right outta him. To imagine it happening for real to someone he cared about? Maybe he could stomach it at thirty-five, but thirty-two was too young.

“I’m not ready to find her yet.”

“Love finds you in its time, not yours.” Chronos shuffled toward the double entryway doors on the right. Gray sunshine pressed against the etched glass panels embedded in the carved wood.

“My family has an in with Cupid.” Not that it meant anything to a god.

Jay jerked his gloves from his pockets and molded them onto his fingers. His breath fogged the air. He eyed the empty hearth. A nice fire would go a ways toward warming the place up.

A smile played with Chronos’s lips. His eyes twinkled with starlight seconds before a fire ignited behind the iron screen.

“I forget mortals require certain comforts. You now have running water, clean flues, updated appliances, and a functioning oil boiler.” He waved a gnarled hand at the broken furniture and flaccid cushions. “The rest is yours to clean and make livable.”

Flames gnawed at the log on the grate and were reflected in the dusty crystals of the chandelier overhead. The heat would take a while longer to fill the room.

Tucking his ears under his crimson cap, Jay turned up the collar on his jacket.

“I’m to stay here, then?”

“Yes. My wife’s idea.” Chronos opened the front door to the outside. “The place has been deserted since the war. Ananke thinks you living here will change things. I have learned to never argue with the woman. She inevitably wins.”

“Isn’t she *associated* with inevitability?” Jay crossed to the heavy, carved wood front door with its panels of etched glass.

His palms itched. He loved to restore old things to new. He loved the history in old places and things. This place had both.

He stepped out onto a cobblestoned portico. Three pointed arches faced the town square. Christmas lights swayed across the open space beyond and converged on a pole in the center of a rock garden.

A door slammed overhead.

Someone was here. And they'd been crying. Jay leaned back toward the open door.

Chronos shut it in his face. Tumblers clicked in the locks.

"I see you've done your research on my family."

"Gods have a history of meddling in human affairs."

Of toying with them for their own amusement. Stuffing his hands in his pockets, Jay followed the old man along the edge of the square. The frigid wind scrubbed his cheeks.

"I already have women chasing me because of the family curse. I don't need immortals mucking things up in my life."

Insulting the gods, he reminded himself, might not be the best way to avoid that.

Turning right at the corner, Chronos lead him away from the square.

"Your mate was chosen at birth. I will not interfere."

"Thank you." Jay bit his tongue before he asked the obvious question. Of course the god knew his soulmate's name. Chronos linked the past, present, and the future. Her identity was Jay's to discover. What was she like? Was she blonde? He'd always liked blondes. He hoped she wanted adventure, believed in magic, and craved travel.

Frost dulled the shine of the BMWs and Land Rovers parked along the curb. Skiing equipment remained clamped to their roofs. He was happy to know the magical village of Saint Sylvestre had opened itself to the world. So many other magical places lay concealed from human eyes.

Snow collected like dirty linen between the cobblestones. Crowding the narrow street, gray stone buildings leaned against each other as they climbed three stories into the air. Shutters in greens, creams, and terra cotta concealed the mullioned windows of the upper levels; and brown vines splintered the stone

edifices, waiting for spring to fill in the empty spaces with green leaves and flowers.

The skin at his nape itched, and Jay glanced over his shoulder. Lace curtains fluttered on the second floor of his new home. He glimpsed a mass of ebony hair framing a pale face before both disappeared.

“Ah, yes.” Chronos skirted a cypress hedge and disappeared through a stone arch.

Stone steps curved down the hill, and the view opened for a moment. Dormant trees and fallow fields marked the farmland below. Here and there, evergreens dotted color among the blue slate rooftops. A turn around a circular tower ended the panoramic view.

“I suppose you want to know a little about your housemate.”

“Yes.” Jay hunched into his jacket. He wasn’t spying on the woman, exactly. Just being curious. “She seems sad.”

Maybe she didn’t like the condition of the house. Not everyone liked old things.

“She is...confused.” The old man jabbed his cane onto the cobbles. A daffodil sprouted in the crack, bloomed, and crumbled in the span of a heartbeat.

Jay swallowed. He should probably refrain from souring the god’s eggnog. Still, he wanted to know about the woman he would be sharing a house with. He hated mysteries. His mother always fretted because he dismantled his toys to see how they worked. Most of the time he managed to get them back together and functioning.

“Does she have a name?”

“Anysia Willot.”

At the landing, Chronos left the stairway down the mountain and picked his way through the streets. The air thickened with the scent of fresh-brewed coffee and baking bread.

“Nysia’s family used to tend the clock in Saint Sylvestre. You are staying in her family home.”

So, the condition of the place *was* probably what made her cry. How long had it been since she’d last visited? Years, for that much decay to set in. Then again, time might move differently in the village.

Stomach rumbling, Jay shoved aside the thoughts for later. He might be an American, but he had manners. Manners that would prevent him from restoring the house without her permission.

“Do you think she’ll be offended if I offer to help around the place?”

“It’s expected as part of your job.” Chronos’s white eyebrows wiggled like shaggy caterpillars over his blue eyes. “She’s been living among the ruins for too long. It’s time she realizes there’s more to life than the past.”

Jay swallowed a snort. Did the old man even know when he cracked a joke?

A red Peugeot rolled to a stop in front of a trio of stores twenty yards ahead. A bank of windows displayed fancy stilettos on the right, a mannequin in a flowing white dress holding a bouquet of roses in the middle. The left one used gold stenciling to identify the shop as a *boulangerie et patisserie*.

A couple helped two little girls no more than seven and eight years old from the back seat of the Peugeot. Blond braids slapped their ski jackets; they used their pink mittens to shield their eyes as they pressed their faces to the glass. Their parents brushed shoulders and kissed. A quick touch of the lips. Laughing, they called to their children, and with a tinkle of a bell, they entered the bakery.

Jay’s insides clenched. He’d have that. Eventually.

Chronos headed for the bakery, too.

“Nysia’s lover doesn’t appreciate her, just her potential, although he does nothing to foster it.”

The old man yanked open the door. The brass bell clanked against the glass insert before settling down for a proper ringing.

So, his hostess had a lover. A bad one, apparently. Yet, the old man obviously didn’t want anyone interfering with them and had warned him off with that comment about love. Jay could handle that.

“I’ll fix up her house, maintain the clock, and be a big brother to her if she needs it.”

He followed Chronos inside the bakery. His nostrils twitched at the yeasty scent of bread, the sweetness of honey, and the

tang of vanilla. Pastries lined the bottom shelf of the display in the window, staring back at him with eyes of lemon, raspberry, and blueberry. Éclairs, tarts, turnovers, Napoleons, and pies crowded the other three shelves.

Jay's mouth watered. He didn't know what everything was, but he wanted one of each. His contract was for a year and a week. He had time to eat his way through the case. Still, ten different delicacies would be a good start.

Unbuttoning his coat, he patted his flat stomach. He was a growing boy.

"My usual American breakfast, Melisande." Waving at a brunette in a white chef's coat behind the marble counter, Chronos picked a path through the intimate tables and selected a seat in the back of the room. Rows of bread filled the wooden racks behind the counter. Their tan, golden, and pumpernickel-brown colors complemented the cream walls.

Looking up from carrying a round loaf of bread, Melisande grinned at Chronos. Her gaze slid to Jay, and interest flared in her brown eyes.

"Your order is waiting for you, Mayor."

Jay stumbled on the stone floor. She spoke English? Now that he thought of it, so had Chronos. But Chronos was a god. The woman wearing the coat and sporting crumbs on her cheek looked mortal.

"Make it two, Melisande, and I'll introduce you to our new guest when you have a moment." Sitting at the square table for two, Chronos pointed to the wooden chair opposite him. "Don't look so astonished. The enchantment around Time allows everyone to communicate freely. Most don't notice it, but then, you grew up in a magic village."

"Yes. Holly is devoted to Christmas."

Hooking the chair with his ankle, Jay dropped into the seat. He hadn't known about the language trick, but he now realized he hadn't noticed that anyone spoke other than English at home.

Holding his daughters' hands, the young father from the Peugeot allowed them to order their own breakfasts. Chronos cleared his throat.

"Nysia may resent your presence in the *hotel de ville*, but you must stick it out."

“She lives in a hotel?” Dragging his attention from the family, Jay faced his boss. This *was* a business meeting, after all. And he needed to impress Father Time. No pressure.

“*Hotel de ville* is what you’d call city hall.”

So, some words translated, and others didn’t. Jay should have expected it. Magic played by its own rules, and recalling the inscription on the window, apparently it didn’t do writing.

Melisande the baker disappeared into the back. Through the doorway, Jay spied stainless steel racks, bowls, and cookware. Despite the town’s medieval feel, everything was quite modern. Except the city hall.

“Why has the city hall been allowed to deteriorate?”

“Nysia can be quite formidable when she wants something.” Chronos tossed the tip of his beard over his shoulder. “And she wanted to be left alone. Which we did. For far longer than was prudent, I think. You’re going to prod that girl into living again.”

Jay’s skin prickled. The old man couldn’t possibly mean Nysia was dead. She had to be alive, didn’t she? Maybe she’d been living alone in another village and had just recently returned. Maybe a lot of things. He’d ask the woman herself once they spoke.

Fabric swished. The baker hustled toward them, balancing an assortment of plates on her arm. A round loaf of bread filled one. Three wedges of brie lay like flower petals on another. Two slices of country ham and smaller rounds of salami decorated the other plate.

Breathless, Melisande arranged the plates on the small table. Her gaze flicked from the serving plates and jam carousel to Jay then back again. Color accented her wide cheekbones, and her lips were glossy red as though her lipstick had been recently refreshed.

Stomach clenching, Jay slouched in his seat. Nothing. Nada. Zip. That spark his brothers and father claimed let them know they’d found their mate was missing. He forced a smile as he accepted a plate and silverware.

“Mel, this is Jay Dugan from the Christmas village in Arizona.” Chronos picked up his knife and stabbed it in Jay’s direction. “Jay, this is Melisande Beaumarchais. She is quite the

famous baker. People come from all of Europe for her to design a wedding cake for them.”

Ducking, Mel frowned. After a little shake of her head, she wiped her slim hand on her coat before offering it to Jay.

“It is a pleasure.”

“If your baked goods taste half as good as they look, I imagine you’re the gatekeeper to tastebud heaven.” Jay slipped his palm across hers. Her hand was warm and soft but did nothing to his insides. Not that he was looking for love.

She blushed and delicately broke off their handshake.

“What is it you do, Mr. Dugan?”

“It’s Jay.” The stiffness melted from his smile. No need to worry about being hunted by the baker. The non-attraction was mutual. “And I’m a self-proclaimed tinker. I can fix pretty much anything mechanical. But I specialize in creating customized parts, like gears, cams, and drive shafts. I’ve even cast a bell or two.”

“And ovens?” Mel removed a folded napkin from a nearby table and swiped at the crumbs on the tablecloth. “Can you repair them?”

Leaning back in his chair, he glanced toward the kitchen. Not an oven in sight.

“Depends on the model. The fancier ones with computers are more my brother’s forte than mine.” Setting his napkin on the table, Jay half-rose from his chair. “I can take a look if you’d like.”

Mel’s eyes twinkled. “I think there’s a clog in the gas line.”

“I like a woman who has a mechanical bent.” Jay’s chair legs scratched stone when he stood.

“Sit. Sit.” Chronos tapped his cane twice. “There. Your ovens are back to as good as new, Mel.” He switched his attention to Jay. “Now, you—eat. You have a lot of work to do on the *hotel de ville*.”

“Yes, sir.”

Jay sat. He hoped to live a long, long life, and the god before him had the power to snip off a few years at the end. Scooting his chair closer to the table, he selected the heel of the bread, cut a pat of butter from the metal serving dish, and scooped out apricot preserves from the pot in the carousel.

Mel splayed her fingers across her chest; her cheeks turned the color of flour.

“The old city hall? But...but, surely...”

“He’s staying with Nysia. She can use the company.” Chronos speared a slab of country ham and shifted it to his plate. Slices of brie quickly followed, dotting the pink meat. He pursed his lips and scanned the table. “No tomatoes?”

Gripping the hem of her coat, Mel twisted it clockwise then counterclockwise.

“I—I’ll get them.”

She spun on her heel and dashed for the kitchen.

Jay’s teeth sank into the bread. The crust flaked off, giving his plate a gold-colored shower. The sweet, just-ripe flavor of apricots rolled over his tongue. Closing his eyes, he fell into the summer day captured in the bite of fruit.

“Good, isn’t it?”

“Amazing.” He licked crumbs from his lips and stared at his boss. He was a foodie, and foodie heaven was France.

He snatched another slice of bread, feeling no shame. Instead of the other jellies, he smeared the soft cheese on this one, then added a few rounds of salami.

“You should take some *pain au chocolat* to Nysia.” Working clockwise, Chronos cut his ham into sections. “I have never known a woman who could resist chocolate.”

Taking a bite of his bread and cheese, Jay nodded. The delicacy was a croissant filled with chocolate. It was one of his favorites.

“I’ll ask her when — “

Mel bumped his arm before dropping something on the table. A platter of sliced tomatoes glistened with olive oil. Sprigs of fresh basil broke up the blades of red.

“Your favorite, Mayor.”

Using his fingers to tear apart the bread and cheese, Jay waited for his turn to speak. Something had scorched the woman’s burners. She was jumpier than a cat in the rain.

“Melisande, may I have a dozen *pain au chocolat* to take with me?”

“But, yes.” Mel gripped his elbow and yanked him to his feet. “Come with me to pick the ones you want.”

Jay shifted to avoid being unmanned by the edge of the table. Obviously, the woman wanted to talk to him. He could handle it. Just maybe not in the kitchen where there were knives. Leaving his food behind, he stumbled behind the baker.

Sitting with his family near the door, the young father grinned at him over his coffee cup. Jay flashed his eyeteeth then dodged the serving counter and a wooden cooling rack before staggering into the kitchen. A brick oven sat between two gleaming chrome ones.

Releasing him, Mel fumbled in her chef's coat pockets before pulling out a folded square of paper. She thrust it at him with a shaking hand.

"Take this."

"What is it?" Without thinking, Jay plucked it from her fingers. The warm paper crinkled in his grip. *Smooth move, Blitz. What if it's some secret that'll cost you a decade?*

"It's the telephone number of Father Petain, the pastor at the new church." Biting her lip, Mel leaned to the right and peered past him into the dining area.

"O-kay." So, not something worth lopping years off his life for.

Mel inhaled a deep breath and launched into action. Deft fingers assembled a pink box. Using tongs, she layered the *pain au chocolat* inside.

"Call him. After you meet Nysia." Her attention darted to the dining room again, and she lowered her voice. "Father Petain can perform an exorcism or..." She swallowed hard. "Or a funeral service."

"A what!" Jay grabbed the edge of the marble worktable. He hadn't come all this way to be threatened by a woman with crumbs on her cheek.

"Shh!" Mel pressed a finger to her red lips. "Everyone who has tended that clock has died or was driven mad within four months of taking the job. And *they* lived in my cousin's bed-and-breakfast. But you..." She snapped the tongs at him. "...are living in *her* house. I give you a week until she drives you mad enough to commit suicide."

Oh, no. Not going to happen. He hadn't signed up for this. Jay stomped out of the kitchen, then drew up short.

Chronos was gone.

The food was gone.

Everything had been erased. Poof. Just like it had never been.

Jay hoped the god of Time didn't intend to do the same thing to him.

CHAPTER 3

Why am I always waiting on a man?

Nysia's breath fogged the windowpane. Leaning forward, she rested her forehead against the glass and looked down at the village hanging on the mountain slopes. On her left, white veiled the gray, craggy Rhone Alps and frosted the evergreens. Around the squares of rock gardens in the yards below, bare trees grasped at the frigid air with skeletal hands.

A family exited the hotel facing the town square. The children's excitement and glee brought smiles to the adults' faces. The man checked the shiny red skis secured on the top of a vehicle before leaning to kiss the woman's cheek.

Inhaling at the jab of jealousy, Nysia jerked away from the window. The lace curtains disintegrated in her hands; pieces swayed like cobwebs from the rusting rod above the mullioned window. Biting her lip, she swallowed a sob then scrubbed her cheeks. She was done with crying. What had she ever gained from it, anyway?

Chronos hadn't visited since she'd tried to stop the clock.

Eliot could barely muster the energy to cross to the physical world. And she was stuck in the village, waiting for this...this interloper so she could seduce him, convince him to do her bidding.

As if a man had ever danced attendance on her.

Wiping her hands on her skirt, she paced the room. The warped floorboard in the center had smoothed out, but her feather mattress had melted into a dollop of gray in the middle of her bedstead. Dust bunnies twirled across the floor before rolling to a stop against the peeling paint of the baseboard. This was not how she remembered things.

Just how much time *had* passed since she'd last inhabited the material world?

Turning on her heel, she marched toward the crumbling armoire. The doors had rotted from the hinges and lay drunkenly propped against the missing drawer slot at the base. The blue-and-white pitcher lay in pieces on the marble-topped washstand. Her towel was a pile of threads underneath.

Cold prickled her skin through her thin sleeves, and she rubbed her arms. Living hurt so much. Why hadn't Chronos returned her house to the way it had been? Why had Eliot left her behind?

But she knew. It was up to her to reunite them. Only she could stop the clock for an instant so she could slip into the afterworld with her lover. For that, she needed the interloper's help. Chronos would never allow her to touch the clockworks again.

The interloper must be seduced. But how?

She patrolled the border of her room, pausing only to shut the door to her workshop. With his raven's-wing hair, strong jaw, and large frame, he was almost certain to have his pick of lovers. She plucked at her shirtwaist. She had never attracted any attention until Eliot noticed her.

Unless the girls in the village were making fun of her clothing.

She shook off the memories. Most of them had been old women in the sixties while she was still young and...

And cold. Her breath formed clouds on the air. She should stoke the boiler. Working always helped clarify her thoughts. Just like building one of her clockwork toys, she would create a plan as she shoveled coal.

A seduction plan.

She could do this.

Striding to the door, she yanked it open. The scents of pine, cinnamon, and an exotic spice teased her nose. Among the decomposing bed, nightstand, and dresser, the interloper's bags and possessions stood out like shiny beacons. She stopped by the bed and ran her fingers over the quilt. The tiny stitches created valleys and hills on the colorful fabric.

It was a masterpiece of love. Made by a woman.

Her heart tripped over a beat. Had he a wife or fiancée? Would there be two people invading her home, ruining her one chance at happiness?

Showing the quilt away, she stomped from the room. He had arrived alone; he had better remain alone. This was *her* house. There would be no other mistress. Not while she was alive.

Even if she was here only temporarily.

Her heels clacked on the mahogany stairs as she descended. The clatter echoed around the living room. Embers glowed in the bed of gray ash in the fireplace. Looking for wood and kindling, she paused on her way to the door to her grandfather's workshop and the boiler in the walk-out basement to check the woodbox.

Nothing.

How like Chronos to supply enough for one fire but not any to keep the blaze going. She would have to retrieve some from the pile in the back yard. A shiver rattled up her spine. She'd always been safe in the back yard; no reason to think the rules had changed. As a bonus, the walls were high enough no one could see her. Or mock her.

Rounding the corner leading into the kitchen, she opened the door to the basement, which opened onto the terraced back yard. Sunshine created a gray patchwork on the stone floor below. The scents of oil and mildew wafted up. Closing her eyes, she inhaled deeply. Her lungs seized at the absence of her grandfather's gingerbread-scented tobacco. It had been here the last time.

But time had moved on. Without her.

Shaking her head, she padded down the curving stone steps. The precaution was unnecessary—Pépère had long since stopped working in his shop. But old habits muffled her footfalls, and a hand on the wall helped keep her balance.

Mice scampered in all directions when she reached the workshop. They darted through barrel slats scattered like fallen petals, skirted bits of broken jars, and disappeared into the cracks in the walls. Beyond the French doors on her left, dead grass sprouted through the cracks on the terrace; apples in the sloping yard rotted on beds of ice; and brown dirt formed pyramids beneath cracked urns.

Shaking out her skirts, she stamped her feet to discourage the vermin from coming closer and continued into the boiler room. The stained remnants of the workbenches disintegrated into sawdust. Gears, cams, and other bits of metal rusted on the stone, while broken pottery marked the once-organized space.

“Oh, Pèpère! How it must pain you to see this.”

Debris crunched underfoot as she made her way to the darkest corner of the basement. Nearing the wall, she reached for the bubble switch at the side and pressed the button in the center. The bare bulb dangling from the ceiling fizzled then burst in a burst of light and glass.

Flinching, she set her hand over her pounding heart. Oh, how she hated electricity! It was so unreliable.

Returning to the remains of the worktable, she used her shoe to search through the debris. There, against one rotting table leg, she spied the stub of a candle. Bending, she picked it up.

Now, where are those matches? And would they still work?

A door slammed overhead. The interloper! He must have returned. Her nails bit into the hard wax of the taper. Had Chronos and the townspeople filled his ears with bad reports of her? Not that she cared.

Zut! She *had* to care. If her plan was to work, she had to make *him* care.

Not that she had a plan, exactly.

Still, she needed to do something, make some progress, in case Eliot managed to visit her again.

Tucking the candle in her pocket, she retraced her steps. Across the basement. Up the staircase. This would be easy. She was French. The other girls in the village could do it, and she was smarter than they. She would be pleasant, charming. She'd toss her hair and bat her eyelashes. She'd smile and laugh at his jokes.

Whistling echoed in the salon. A jaunty tune. One she didn't recognize. Her steps mimicked the beat. Then she was in the salon. With him.

The interloper was tall, nearly six feet. Black hair brushed his wide shoulders, and snow dusted his coat. He drew back at the sight of her emerging from the dark stairwell. His tune ended in an ear-splitting shriek.

But it was his eyes that caught and held her attention. They were the green of spring leaves.

And filled with fear.

Of her.

The pain of rejection punched her in the chest. She was five again, newly arrived in Saint Sylvestre after her parents' death and forgotten at the train station. She was seven again, shunned by the other girls for her patched trousers and baggy shirts, and forced to eat the noon meal alone. She was twenty-three again, standing on one side of her grandfather's grave while the townspeople fanned out on the other.

"What did they say about me?" Her voice cracked on the last word, and she blinked rapidly to clear her tears. She shouldn't care. She didn't know the villagers. And they never took the time to know her. Not even when she had been alive.

He exhaled slowly.

"That you like *pain au chocolat*."

Raising his hands, he offered her a pink box tied with a string. Fear left his eyes, to be replaced by pity.

That was the worst of all. She stared at her scuffed shoes. Why had Eliot locked her in this world? She liked being able to leave when she wanted.

The interloper shook the pastry box.

"I have it on good authority that chocolate makes almost everything all better."

Chocolate. Saliva pooled in her mouth. It had been forever since she'd sampled the delicacy. Since before the war, since before Eliot...

She shut down the thought, but her stomach growled, refusing to be silenced. As if possessed, her hand reached for the box. Her fingers brushed his and tingled from the contact with such warmth. How could she have forgotten how hot life was?

“Oh, hey. You’re cold.”

He made quick work of his coat buttons then shrugged out of his jacket. Fabric snapped. Warm wool draped her shoulders. Her nose twitched with the scents of pine, cinnamon, and that exotic spice. Embarrassment flamed in her cheeks.

“Thank you.”

“Gloves are in the pocket.” Shifting closer, he fasten the top button so the coat stayed on. “Let’s sit before the fire and eat. That should be warmer.”

He gestured for her to precede him.

“The fire is out.” Her fingers curled around the string, and she hugged the pastry box to her stomach. Her skin prickled as feeling returned. Life always hurt, but this wasn’t so...unpleasant. “I planned to start the boiler but couldn’t find any matches.”

Leaving the small breezeway off the kitchen, she glanced behind her then turned into the salon. The last of the embers danced like red fireflies up the chimney when she entered.

“Right.” He clapped his hands together then rubbed them. His skin was already turning pink from the chill. “First, we need a place to eat and a fire going. If you get my quilt from upstairs, I’ll get the firewood.” He spun in a slow circle before scratching the dark stubble on his chin. “Which would be where, exactly?”

“We used to set it near the terrace.” Her lips twitched. Was there a man alive who could find things without a woman’s help?

“Terrace.” His green eyes narrowed, and he slanted a peek at the breezeway. “You have a terrace?”

“You access it through the basement.” She pointed toward the kitchen. “The first door on the left will take you down.”

“Ahh. Right, you live on the side of a hill.” He spun about then stopped. “Is the boiler in the basement, too?”

“Yes.” What was he up to now?

“Then, with your permission, I’ll get that going while I’m down there.”

Snuggling deeper into his coat, she smiled. She’d like to see him try. The old boiler was a temperamental beast. Even Pépère hadn’t been able to coax her into breathing fire, and he was a master at fixing things.

“But of course.”

She’d give him five minutes then rescue him.

“Righty-o.”

Touching two fingers to his forehead, he marched away. She cleaned a spot on the marble mantel with her sleeve then set the pastry box on it. Her stomach growled again. There was no reason not to eat and work.

Tugging on the string, she undid the knot then lifted the lid. Butter and chocolate—Heaven must smell like that. Selecting the chocolate-filled croissant on the left, she skipped from the room.

Since he was already interested in making her happy, she might not have to work too hard at seducing him.

She bit into the sweet when she reached the bottom of the staircase. Her eyelids fluttered with pleasure, and her knees nearly buckled. *Mon Dieu!* Sugar, chocolate, and vanilla waltzed across her tongue. She’d forgotten the taste.

How could she have forgotten?

Pastry flakes trailed behind her. One bite a step, until her cheeks bulged like a squirrel’s. She would savor the next one. And the one after that. Chewing quickly, she crossed the landing and entered the stranger’s bedroom.

A red metal toolbox was pushed against the wall. A gray one stood two feet tall beside it. Her fingers itched. What did he have in them? She eyed the door. One little peek wouldn’t hurt, would it? *Pépère*’d always had the nicest tools, and he’d kindly gave her the old when he’d acquired a new one. Of course, she wasn’t allowed to touch the new ones. Would the stranger’s be shiny or covered with rust? You could tell a lot about a man from his tools. She tiptoed closer.

A door slammed downstairs.

Footsteps pounded on the stairs.

“Nysia? Nysia!”

She veered toward the bedstead and yanked the quilt off. Feathers escaped the disintegrated mattress ticking and fluttered around her. Holding the blanket to her chest, she scuttled onto the landing. She hadn’t touched his tools. She hadn’t.

“Y—yes.”

Snowflakes glittered in his black hair as they melted, and cold rouged his cheeks. Holding an armful of wood, he smiled up at her.

“That part of the cellar is darker than burnt cookies. Can you get my flashlight for me? I think it’s in the gray toolbox, top drawer.”

She blinked. Was this a test? Pèpère had never let her assist him beyond watching him work.

“You want me to bring you a flashlight from your toolbox?”

“Yes.” Juggling an armload of wood, he smiled up at her, and the corners of his eyes crinkled. “If you wouldn’t mind?”

He crossed the living room to the fireplace and knelt before it. Muscles played under the fabric of his gray flannel shirt as he rebuilt the fire.

Draping the quilt over the bannister, she traipsed into the bedroom on feet that had wings. Her insides bubbled. She would see his tools. Maybe even touch a few.

This was a test. It had to be.

Dropping to her knees, she stroked the cold metal. Her fingers stopped at a rectangular placard. *Jay Dugan*. She traced the fancy script. Jay. What an unusual name. But was it, in this time?

Her hand shook as she lifted the latch. What treasures lay inside? She would know soon enough. With the heel of her palm, she lifted the lid.

Broken screwdrivers filled little sections of metal—handles on the left, heads on the right, and lengths of steel in the center. Wing nuts and screws filled two compartments. Her heart sank. He didn’t take good care of his tools.

Would he be equally remiss with the clock? She wanted it to stop for a second, not forever.

Sucking on her bottom lip, she shut the lid and eased open the first drawer below. A long black torch lay on a gray spongy surface. Lengths of stretchy bands held several smaller eyeball-shaped lights. Wrapping her hand around the metal cylinder of the torch, she tugged it out and slid the drawer closed. Her fingers dropped to the next drawer. Should she?

The bottom riser on the steps creaked.

So, he was coming to check on her. Jerking her hand away, she slapped the latch in place and sprang to her feet. Six quick strides carried her out of the room.

Jay Dugan smiled at her from the middle of the stairs.

“Did you find it all right?”

She wagged the barrel at him.

“This is it, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” He jogged up the remaining steps. “My brothers think it’s funny to mess with my tools and rearrange things. So, I never know for sure where anything is.”

Her cheeks felt like they would crack from the weight of her smile. Pèpère hadn’t tolerated anyone touching his tools.

“I understand.”

Jay held out his hand. Calluses dotted the fleshy part of his palm.

“I cleaned a spot on the floor for the blanket, if you want to spread it out and warm yourself up while I see to the boiler.”

She laid the torch in his hand, then turned to the blanket and bundled it in her arms.

“I can do that.”

She waited for him to march past her and into the bedroom. Pèpère always made certain she obeyed his rules. Jay winked, about-faced and trotted down the stairs two at a time.

“Save a chocolate croissant for me.”

Propping a hip against the banister, she watched him head for the basement. What game was this? Her boots clacked on the wooden risers. Would he really not check? What if he did? She hadn’t actually touched any of his tools.

Reaching the family room, she shoved her black curls out of her eyes. With a jerk, she snapped the quilt flat. Dust bunnies twirled away to hug the baseboards. Lines of dirt outlined the spot on the floor. The place looked like he’d used his boot to sweep. Now his quilt would get dirty, and she would have to wash it. Still, that was more than Pèpère had ever done.

Smoothing the creases in the quilt, she positioned the pastry box in the center then took a seat next to it. Her ankles stuck out of the hem of her dress. She covered them then yanked the skirt back. This was all about seduction. Embarrassment heated her cheeks. Many women showed their ankles in 1917. A

scandalous few even showed a bit of calf. Not that she was a loose woman. She adjusted the lace hem right above her ankles. Just right.

Flames devoured the wood in the fireplace; the twigs glowed red before they melted around the split wood. She flipped open the box lid then shut it. She could wait. She could...

Oh, bother! If she didn't help him light the beast's pilot light, the fire would be dead before he returned.

Sighing, she pushed off the floor and headed for the basement. She hoped Jay didn't find it distasteful that she knew how to work the old boiler. Men could be funny when their pride was engaged. Most men. Eliot had found her abilities fascinating. She loved him for that.

Cold swirled around her ankles as she turned into the open doorway. Grime coated her fingers as she used the wall to guide her down. A ball of light bounced across the patchwork created by the French doors opening onto the terrace.

"My, you are a thing of beauty." Jay's words whispered over the debris littering the stone floor.

A lover's words.

Her heels dug into the stone. He'd better not have a woman here. Nysia's fists shook at her sides. She stomped toward the boiler room.

"And you purr like a cat with a bowl of cream," he murmured. "Don't worry, baby, I'll take good care of you while I'm here."

She rounded the corner and drew up short. Only he and the boiler stood in the space. A shiny green boiler. One she had never seen before. What had happened to the beast?

A dormant memory stirred in the recesses of her mind. Something about scrap for another war.

Jay stared at her, a flush staining his cheeks. He shook his red hand.

"Sorry. I tend to get enamored of equipment. And your boiler is enchanting." He almost patted the green body but stopped just short. "I tried to get the mayor to install the Weil McInain boiler in city hall, but he didn't. With cast iron sections, rope seals, and short draw rods, she's a thing of beauty."

Nysia's shoulders relaxed. He hadn't been talking to a woman but a piece of machinery. She could understand. She often sang to the beast. She'd miss the old boiler, but this...

Walking closer, she admired the clean lines and the lack of coal dust on the floor.

"It is very nice."

"Top of the line." He blew on his reddened palm.

"You've burned yourself." She reached for his hand.

He shifted it behind his back.

"I didn't realize how fast it would heat up."

Shifting her weight to the right, she blocked his exit. Why did men have to be such infants?

"Let me see your hand."

"It's nothing. Really."

She tapped the toe of her boot. The sound complimented the ticking of the boiler as the metal heated.

"Then it will not hurt to let me see it."

Closing the distance between them, he thrust his hand at her.

"See. Nothing."

She clasped his fingers, angling his hand to the light. Nothing but red. At least there weren't any blisters.

"We'll soak your hand in cold water, then gather snow and use that to absorb the rest of the heat."

His long, tapered fingers felt strong beneath her touch. The callused pads rasped her skin. Like Eliot's hands had been from reinforcing the trenches. They'd felt like fine leather on her bare skin. She shivered and glanced up, expecting to see brown eyes. Instead, she stared into the color of spring, of life returning to the land.

Her heart thumped against her breasts. Her lungs labored to work. A pleasant tingle raced up her spine. She'd always loved spring.

Jay's lips parted. His attention dropped to her mouth.

"We should..."

"We should." Nysia rose on tiptoes. Her head angled to the left. If he just stooped a little they could kiss.

A kiss would be good.

“We should go upstairs.” He shook himself and backpedalled.
“Breakfast then cleaning. We should have breakfast, then clean the house, see what we can salvage before nightfall.”

If you enjoyed the sample, you need not stop there!

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