



Tinsel

Julie Harrington

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PROLOGUE

The car sat outside the park at the curb. Headlights off, engine running, the windshield wipers pushed the thin sheet of snow aside, offering a glimpse of the two men in the front seat before snow began to fleck the glass again.

Inside the park, Detective Hunter Grayson stepped away from his precinct's community Christmas tree. Slipping his hands into the pockets of his leather jacket, he fingered his pack of cigarettes. No sooner had he touched them than a snowball nailed him right between the shoulder blades, spraying him with bits of ice and snow.

Obviously pleased with herself, his wife, Kathy, dusted her hands together as he spun around. Her face was rosy from the cold, her red hair windblown and tangled with tinsel and pine needles. She wiggled her fingers. "Okay, Grayson. Hand 'em over."

Grinning, Hunter flicked a long strand of foil from her hair. Like every year,

she'd helped the children in the police-sponsored mentoring program make ornaments. And, like every year, she ended up wearing as much glue and glitter as the tree.

"Hand *what* over?" he asked.

"Nice try. You've got cigarettes and I'm confiscating the evidence."

"Got a warrant?" When she lifted a brow, he abandoned the security of the cigarettes to lace his fingers with hers. Her bare hand was wet and cold and he cupped it between his to warm it. "Have I told you how sexy you look in glitter?"

"And you make a mean paper chain, Detective." Kathy tried to stuff her hands into his coat pockets to snag the cigarettes, but he waltzed backward, keeping her off balance. She anticipated it. "I still want those cigarettes, Hunter. You *promised*."

"I haven't touched them."

"Then you don't need them anymore, do you." She paused when he slid a quick look toward the car again. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Hunter forced himself to shrug and smile. Both were awkward. "I think we should go home before you glue your hands together again."

She bumped his shoulder with hers. "Very funny. You did great tonight. The kids loved you."

"What's not to like about a man who can make an angel tree topper out of a paper plate and some yarn?"

"Boy, if the guys in the squad could see you now. Big, bad Detective Grayson doling out hot chocolate and wiping runny noses."

"All in the line of duty, honey." The thought drew him back to the car and tension crept into his shoulders as "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" began to flow through the park's speaker system.

Arm slung around his wife's waist, he steered his wife toward the park entrance. The dry bones of winter crunched under their boots with each step and, the closer they got to the street, the more that little voice nagged him. His steps slowed, faltered. That pause allowed him to step around Kathy, placing himself between her and the car. It was a subconscious move. One neither of them noticed.

Because he was fixated on the car, he didn't see the dark haired man round the corner until he nearly plowed him over. Michael Kincaid, and the two bodyguards that lingered a few feet behind him, stopped.

"Detective Grayson," the businessman greeted. He tipped his head. "Mrs. Grayson. Merry Christmas."

The muscles in Hunter's jaw pulsed. "Enjoying your freedom while it lasts,

Kincaid?"

Kathy touched his arm. "It's Christmas."

Hunter snorted. Every cop in the precinct knew Kincaid was dirty. He just had enough money to make his illegal activities look okay. At least on paper. Sooner or later someone would get him. It would either be the police taskforce or one of Kincaid's enemies. Hunter didn't particularly care which.

She tugged on his coat sleeve. "Hunter, let's go."

The two men exchanged cursory nods and Hunter followed his wife onto the sidewalk. Each step toward the street drew a band tighter around his chest until he didn't think he could draw in a full breath. His palms were sweaty. His heartbeat fast.

His hand to the small of Kathy's back, he urged her to walk faster. He didn't know what made him look back, but when he did he saw the car window drop.

Light glinted off dull metal, giving him only a second to shove his wife away. He didn't hear the gunfire. Didn't feel the first bullet enter his chest, crack bone before it punctured his lung and ripped out his back... or the other five bullets that followed.

The pain that engulfed him came from the slow motion image of his wife as she reeled back from the force of the bullets, the blood that blossomed on her

chest. The already dead look in her eyes as she folded to the ground like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

Hunter hit the concrete hard, struck his head against the sidewalk. Something cracked in his shoulder and his left arm went numb. He heard her name—half-scream, half-roar—didn't know it came from his throat.

Kathy's head lulled to the side. Red hair and tinsel spilled across the snow.

Fire fisted around Hunter, began to drag him into the void where sight and sound no longer existed. Powerless to stop it, he let the darkness suck him down.

As he went under, it mocked him.

Have yourself a merry little Christmas now.

CHAPTER ONE



race Locke didn't know what Fate had against her. To conspire with Time was bad enough, but to toss Mother Nature into the fray was just plain cruel.

Her college textbooks clutched to her chest, her chin tucked into the protection of her parka, she plodded across the dark parking lot. Her lone blue Honda, covered in a thick blanket of snow, sat under a darkened light.

Squinting against the ice pellets that sprayed down from the night sky, she hoisted her backpack to a more comfortable position. Funny, when she parked earlier that evening, it hadn't seemed that far away. Now it was like crossing an ocean.

Tough road conditions and a last minute letter at work kept her from going home to change and still make it to her class on time. Now nature was punishing her again by forcing her to clean off her car in her knee length blue skirt, nylons

and heels.

Grace shifted her books searched for her keys at the bottom of her bag. A college degree couldn't be worth all the stress and sleepless nights and she could think of a thousand different ways to blow the money she was pumping into the school. A new car. A bigger apartment. A steak every once in awhile instead of chicken. Live it up. Go out. Maybe even date.

Dating. She didn't want to think about the last time she looked at something other than her computer. Between her job and studies she operated on five hours of sleep. Dating would have to be penciled in after organizing the office's annual Christmas party and hell freezing over.

Besides, it wasn't like she needed the degree. Her job with Royce Incorporated provided her with a decent living. So what if the company offered almost full tuition reimbursement. So what if Edmund Royce thought the business degree would make her more valuable in the eyes of their clients and open more doors for advancement. Did she really need the extra money the degree might earn her? Was it really worth the trouble?

She lifted her chin and quickly tucked it back down when the wind bit it. Hell, yes it was worth it. Including every insomnia producing moment. She may not be

the smart one—that was her sister. She may not be the pretty one, again, that was her sister. She might not be married to a doctor, have three kids, a full-time job, and still manage to make meals from scratch without the aid of a housekeeper... Again, her sister. But at twenty-eight, Grace would do what no one woman in her family had ever done before. She'd graduate from college.

Eyes glowing with renewed determination, she slung her backpack on the hood of her car and plopped her books on it. Nothing was going to stop her now. She'd planned and saved and scrimped. She'd made it this far without any help and she'd make it to the finish line. Alone. Just like always.

Grace jammed the key into the lock, frowned when it wouldn't turn, and tried the latch. The door didn't budge and she shifted in the snow, first lifting one foot, then the other from the drift.

"Oh, no." She gave the handle another jerk. Ice and metal creaked but the car didn't open. "Tell me this is not happening. Not again!"

Cold, wet, and standing in the dark with snow up to her bare calves, Grace cursed her ten-year-old car before she stomped around to the passenger side. Something hidden beneath the snow sent her stumbling and, once she regained her balance, she bent to brush the snow away from a rock the size of her fist.

Even as she questioned where it came from, she looked at the lamppost. A city girl, her parents taught her at a young age to always park under a light. Always. Her gray eyes narrowed as took in the jagged glass of the bulb above her. It didn't burn out in the cold. Someone deliberately broke it.

College prank? Or...

Her hand trembled as she tried the passenger door lock again. This time her tug was a bit more frantic. It still didn't budge and she looked at the school. She didn't relish the idea of the long, frigid trek to the building but she didn't see any other choice. Maybe campus security, if she could wake the sixty-four year old man from his nap, could call her a cab.

Bag and books in her arms again, Grace turned. Wind pushed her hair back, allowing the wind to bit at the tips of her ears, turning them cherry red and making them burn.

"Hey. Lady."

A man oozed out of the darkness. Another one stood a few feet away. Both were young, tall and lanky, and dressed to ward off the freezing temperature. Without the light, it was impossible for her to see anything beyond their dark clothes and ski-caps.

The man closest to her edged nearer and Grace retreated.

"You got a match?" he asked.

"I..." She stole a quick peek at the other man and tensed as he too moved closer.

He didn't look at her, kept glancing around and shifting. Her heart thundered in her chest and her breath quickened to produce tiny puffs of white in the air. Oh God. This was so *not* her day.

Grace ran the tip of her tongue over her lips. They were dry and cracked. "No, I-I don't smoke."

"Oh." He considered that for a moment, shrugged. "That's okay. Hand over your bag and we'll go buy our own."

Reflex made her tighten her grip on her pack. She didn't care about the money; they could have it. What she did care about was her mid-term and the disks that contained her research.

"Look," her voice wavered and she swallowed. "You can have the bag. Take it. But I need something out of it. Really." She shifted her books so she could clutch the backpack to her chest. Her shaking hands and numb fingertips made it impossible to open the zipper. A bubble of frustration built in her throat and her

next breath sounded like a gasp. "I-It's only papers."

"Christ, let's get this over with," the second man hissed.

The first man, the one with the dark green stocking cap, shook his head as he drew his hands from his jacket pockets. A deft flick of his wrist flipped open a lethal looking blade.

"Give me the damn bag you stupid bitch," he spat, "or I'll cut you."

Bag and books forgotten, Grace dropped them as she turned to flee. She made it two steps before her feet shot out from under her on the icy pavement. With a startled scream, she pitched forward. The ground rushed up to meet her.

Her knees sank through the snow seconds before her hands. The pavement, hard and unforgiving, grated against her shins, tearing through her nylons with ease to eat into her kneecaps. Her palms ground into the asphalt and her skin stretched, tore, as fire lanced across them.

Unable to control her fall, Grace collapsed onto her stomach with an unladylike grunt. Snow stung her face as her cheek scraped the ground. The cold froze its way into her skull and eye sockets like a razor, stinging and numbing at the same time.

Swearing, Grace pushed herself up as moisture sank through her jacket and suit

as pain radiated deeper into her face.

The second man had her bag. Paper and files from the office spilled across the ground as he pawed through it. The first man, the one with the knife, looked down at her as she peered up at him. Their eyes locked.

Close enough to see him clearly this time, Grace couldn't keep herself from staring. Smooth features. Almost too pretty to be called handsome. A narrow nose. Thin lips. Eyes as cold as marble. His black hair, matted flat against his forehead by the cap, was a stark contrast against his light skin.

She'd remember that face for the rest of her life.

He must have known because he shook his head and shifted the switchblade to his other hand as he closed the distance between them.

Feet on either side of her legs, he bent and closed a gloved hand around the front of her jacket. He jerked her upward, lifting her torso from the ground and toward him as he raised the knife. Murder flashed through his eyes.

"You shoulda listened," he told her, "when you had the chance."

CHAPTER TWO

The world slowed, began to crawl forward frame by painful frame. Blood roared in Grace's ears as she watched the switchblade arced high above her mugger's head, whistle as it slashed down toward her throat.

Her mouth opened as the cords and tendons in her neck strained to produce a scream. The sound couldn't get past the fear that clogged her throat shut. Suddenly she realized the thunder she heard radiated from around her, up through the ground.

The man holding the knife stiffened and glanced over his shoulder as his partner looked up from her backpack. Her wallet fell from the inside pocket and disappeared into the snow with a plop.

One minute there was nothing but the deadly purr of an engine, and the next... The next, *he* came out of the swirling sleet.

A lone headlight blazed in the night, began to grow brighter and brighter and Grace realized it was a motorcycle. Despite the snow and ice, the Harley continued to bear down on her attackers.

The world snapped into fast forward. Jerked out of her fear and shock, Grace took the opening and flung herself backward. Using the momentum of her fall, she swung her leg into her attacker's groin. Somehow he managed to sidestep the blow and her knee grazed the inside of his crotch.

Swearing at her, the mugger stumbled back as Grace rolled away. Adrenaline and fear gave her new strength and speed. Somehow she ended up on her feet, didn't even feel pain when her ankle twisted out from beneath her, wrenching her knee to the left.

The motorcycle shrieked as it bore down on her attackers and the two muggers barely had enough time to dive apart before the machine whizzed by, kicking up a cloud of snow from the ground.

The driver of the motorcycle hit the brakes, causing the back of the bike fishtailed wildly and Grace held her breath, afraid the bike would spin out of control. The man straddling it anticipated the slide and controlled the massive bike between his thighs like a master.

Before she realized he had it stopped and under control, he was off the bike, rushing her assailants in a flurry of strength and danger restrained by black leather. He dealt with the man closest to him, the one that had searched her bag, first.

Fist met bone with a crack and the thug staggered under the blow. Somehow he managed to find his footing and come back with a strong right hook that snapped Grace's rescuer's head back. The punch barely phased him. He ducked, spun as he moved, and a long, lean leg swept up to deliver a savage kick to the robber's chest before another sweep knocked his feet out from under him. The thief went down with a *whomp* in the snow.

A flash of steel snapped Grace out of her stupor as the second attacker, the one intent on slitting her throat, rushed forward. "Look out!" she shouted, her warning ringing like a bell in the night.

The demon in black leather turned. His arm came up to block the downward thrust of the blade. Grace saw the power of the robber's stab, saw the roll of muscles beneath leather as the other man held him off. He drew back a fist and rammed it into the assailant's gut, causing the robber to fold forward on a grunt of pain.

Latching his gloved hand around the assailant's wrist, the man twisted. The

snap of bone was audible and the switchblade tumbled from the thug's hand. With a scream of agony, the mugger collapsed to his knees and cradled his broken against his chest.

Apparently not satisfied that the man was no longer a threat, her rescuer grabbed the man by the front of his jacket and slammed him to the ground. Face down in the snow, the mugger was in no position to argue as his arms were pulled behind his back and secured with a flexible.

Once he'd bound the robber's feet with a similar strap, her rescuer pivoted toward the first man to find him gone. Shoulders tight, her rescuer stood. His voice was gravel when he swore and rubbed his hand against his bruised jaw. He touched the corner of his mouth with gloved fingertips, studied them briefly before wiping the hand on his jacket.

Grace took a shaky step forward. "I—"

His head whipped up and, before she could finish, he strode toward her. Snow and ice crunched under the thick soles of his black motorcycle boots with each strong step. Because he stood more than six feet, his long stride brought him to her in seconds.

A combination of fear and cold made Grace shiver. The hand she leaned

against the car was the only thing that kept her on her feet. The man blended into the night, seemed to belong among the shadows and the darkness. Dimly, she realized that was by design, not by accident.

"Are you all right?" he demanded, his voice a growl the same pitch as the motorcycle engine. Low. Unemotional.

Shivering, Grace tugged her wet coat around her. It bothered her on an instinctive level that she couldn't see his face. "I-I think so."

"Do you have a cell phone to call the police?"

"N-no." She swallowed. Hard. Shape began to bleed out of the darkness. Not definable details, only an impression of him. He towered over her, solid muscle and steel will. She smelled leather. Danger. "I... Thank you. If you hadn't come along, I don't know—"

"Are you hurt?" he cut in as he claimed another step.

Yes. Most definitely leather. Lots of it. He wore black leather pants, gloves, and a trench coat that flapped around his legs with each gust of wind. His hair was dark. Brown. Perhaps black. She could see that much even though his face seemed to be cast in a permanent shadow.

She pulled her wet hair away from her face. Her fingers brushed her cut cheek,

sending a sliver of pain through her, and she winced. Even in the gloom she felt his gaze like a caress when his dark eyes swept over her. He edged closer, raised a gloved hand to take a gentle hold of her chin. The coldness of his leather glove made her inhale sharply.

His eyes, the color of Belgian chocolate, dropped to her mouth before they lifted to meet hers. She searched them before his thumb brushed across her cheekbone. The move made her flinch.

"You're bleeding," he announced.

Grace gave herself a firm mental shake. "You saved my life."

"It wouldn't need saving if you had any common sense."

The bite of his words made her blink. "What?"

"You should have asked security to walk you out this late at night. This town is dangerous. If you want to survive, you need to be smarter."

Grace jerked her chin out of his hand and took a step closer. She saw his shoulders tense, his eyes widen before they narrowed behind his mask, and knew her action surprised him as much as it had her.

"Are you saying this is my fault?" she demanded. She poked him in the chest and felt nothing but rock hard muscle beneath her finger. "You've got a lot of

nerve. You think I asked for somebody to come along and—"

Mask? Behind his *mask*?

The rest of her tirade died away. Sweet mother of God, it *was* a mask. A little black mask. The kind one wore to a masquerade party.

A sudden wave of dizziness made her knees tremble. Her hand fell to her side. "Oh my God. It's you." Awe colored her cheeks pink and made her gray eyes widen. "Fury. You're real."

Turning his face away, the man the newspapers dubbed "Fury", clenched his jaw. His profile was as strong and rugged as the press-circulated composite drawings showed.

He slid his hand into his pocket to produce a small canister as he approached her car. It took him a few seconds to spray the lubricant into her lock and around the driver's door. Once he was finished, he gripped the door handle and gave a strong jerk. Ice cracked and the dome light inside flickered to life as the door swung open.

He was already moving away from it before Grace could make out his features.

He tossed the can at her and she caught it on reflex. "Go back inside and have the security guard call the police," he told her. "Make sure you tell them about the

knife. They'll need it for evidence. And don't touch it. You'll ruin the prints. If there are any."

"They wore gloves."

He let out a long, low sigh. "They always do."

Knowing he was about to disappear, Grace grabbed his arm but released him when he whirled around to face her. Frigid indifference rolled off of him and she retreated, stumbled a little when her ankle protested.

He steadied her and one of her small hands settled on his muscular forearm, the other against his chest. After more than two years roaming the streets in search of crime and injustice, the coat had a lot of mileage on it. The leather, stiff from the cold, was smooth under her fingers.

Grace felt the steady echo of his heartbeat against her palm and hers answered it by falling into the same slow rhythm. There was another scent that clung to him. One she hadn't detected earlier. Now, standing this close, it was impossible to miss. Rich Colombian coffee. The sudden desire to step into him, feel his arms close around her as she pressed her face into his coat, flooded through her.

"You are hurt," he snarled. The words were accusatory as he swept his gaze over her. "How bad?"

"I'll survive." The sharp edge to her voice was rote and Grace swore she saw a smile flicker across his lips.

"I'm sure you will. But can you walk?"

The question was a blatant challenge and she pushed his hand away. "You should get out of here before someone sees you."

"Why?"

"Everybody knows how the police feel about you. You're a rogue. A vigilante. They want you in jail."

"You don't."

"Of course not. You did save my life."

The image of the razor, the sound it made as it whistled through the air toward her throat, replayed in vivid detail. Despite the chill of the night, her palms felt moist. She felt violated, as if something important had been stripped from her. Grace shoved it down. She'd deal with it later. When she was alone.

Her hand wasn't quite steady when she raised it to push her hair away from her face. The strands caught in the scrape on her cheek, dragging across the cut like barbed wire, and she winced as she said, "I don't think letting the cops arrest you after you rescue me is appropriate repayment. Do you?"

Even in the dark she could feel his scowl. "The police should be that worried about the real criminals in this town instead of chasing after me," he said. "We're both working for the same thing."

"What's that?"

"Justice."

"Maybe they're just jealous. They have to wear bulletproof vests and stiff blue uniforms while you run around in leather and ride a Harley. Call it envy."

He laughed as if she'd made some twisted joke. The sound carried bitterness. And pain. "I want a town where a woman can walk to her car at night without getting mugged. The cops are too busy playing politics to do their damn jobs. Until that changes, they're stuck with me."

Shivering, Grace hobbled to her backpack on the ground. The textbooks were wet but they'd dry. She crouched to gather her folders and grimaced when the files she'd brought home from work folded limp in her hands. She bit her lip as she stacked them on her thighs. Maybe if she was careful and spread them out on the table at home to dry they'd be all right. The folder holding her research and her mid-term was damp but holding together.

As she tucked her things back in her bag, she noticed the scratches on her

hands, the beads of blood that welled up from them. Frowning, she rubbed a stinging palm against her knee. Her fingers snagged one of the many holes in her nylons, wrenching it wider.

"I really do appreciate everything you did," she said without looking up. "If you hadn't come along, who knows what would have happened. A bag can be replaced but they could have slit my throat or..." She cut the darker thoughts off with a shake of her head and a squaring of her shoulders. Her wallet sat next to her foot and she shoved it into a pocket. "That didn't happen because of you and I don't see a single squad car charging to my rescue, do you?"

"So?" The question was low and terse.

She zipped her bag. "So, I figure you serve this town as much as any public servant. The mayor should be thanking you instead of—"

The roar of the motorcycle engine drowned out the rest of her words. Astride the bike, Fury gripped the handlebars, eased up on the brake to let the machine crawl forward.

The smell of the exhaust, the heat of the engine washed over her as the bike rolled closer to her. When he reached her side, he stopped and braced a foot against the ground. The muscles in this thigh tightened under his black leather

pants.

"You want to repay me?" His dark eyes gleamed like onyx. "Press charges. Give a detailed account of what they did. Tell them this scum tried to kill you. Ask for the D.A. and not that chump A.D.A. He'll cut a deal with this toad. The D.A. won't. Testify. Make sure the charges stick so this doesn't happen to someone else. That's what it takes. That's all I ask."

Still crouched in the snow, Grace peered up at him as he stared at her. Snow tangled in her hair and settle on her eyelashes. "I will," she said. The two words were a pledge.

Fury hesitated and studied her face once again. His jaw tightened. The engine revved. And then he faded back into the night that spawned him.