

Another New Year's Eve

PROLOGUE

“Mozart's in the closet. Let him out, let him out, let him out!”

Eve Gray pulled into the supermarket parking space just as the radio trumpeted the opening bars of Mozart's fortieth symphony. When the music began, the insidious lyric burst from her mouth before she knew it, exploding into the mild Monterey night through the open driver's side window of her little gold Toyota.

She turned off her car and its radio with a quick twist of the ignition key. Eve's green eyes scanned the nearly deserted area. She hoped no one had heard her infectious, non-PC performance.

But, of course, there *would* be a man sitting in the dark blue station wagon to her left. And on a November night that was unusually warm, even for California, his windows were also wide open.

It was then Eve realized that the Mozart symphony played on in the quiet Safeway parking lot.

But even as she peered into the neighboring vehicle, the dark-haired driver inside switched off the classical radio station and directed a smile at her.

It was only a quick, friendly grin, but for a significant interval of time, Eve forgot to breathe. Gorgeous—absolutely gorgeous! Even if she didn't have a photographic memory, his was a face she would never forget.

White, white teeth were set in a wide, sensual mouth. Thick, dark hair fell over a high, square forehead. She couldn't tell the color of his eyes, but they gleamed with mischief, and somehow seemed a perfect complement to his cute snub nose, which hinted at an Irish ancestry.

Shaken by the impact the whole package of features made on her, Eve could only sit and watch while automatic windows closed, and the man exited his car. Very tall and broad-chested, he strode toward the nearby grocery entrance.

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The store's electric doors slid shut, cutting off the man's pleasant baritone voice and the rest of the dreaded verse.

“Oh no,” Eve groaned out loud. “I've doomed another poor soul!” He'd find out that like a virus, the silly ditty had lodged in his brain, where it would taint the wonderful piece of music forevermore.

She had been contaminated by it three years ago. in a college music history class. No doubt the professor only thought he was giving his students a way to remember the piece among the dozens they needed to identify during exams. And it had worked. Oh, how well it had worked!

Locking up her car, Eve straightened her business suit and then rushed into the store. She had an almost irresistible urge to follow the man strolling down the dairy aisle and apologize. *Of course, the impulse has nothing to do with his face and body*, Eve's conscience taunted.

Well, it was not that she needed to resort to grocery store pickups. Lots of eligible men around the government facility where she worked asked her out, and she accepted their invitations as often as she wanted.

Only, I haven't felt much like starting the dating game again, she thought, rubbing the bare ring finger of her left hand where the diamond had been.

Almost against her will, Eve's eyes followed the stranger, who was tossing item after item into his cart. *Funny, he isn't even my type—blond and blue-eyed.*

Yet, there she stood, her body poised over her basket, high-heeled shoes ready to push off after the man.

No. No matter how sexy his smile, or how tempting meeting him might be, she was not about to waylay the guy between the domestic cheese and yogurt displays!

Going to the right instead of the left, she resolutely pushed her cart through the almost deserted store, turning down the baking products aisle that held most of the things she needed.

"Hi, Maria," Eve greeted the checker a few minutes later. "How are your husband and little *niña* doing?"

"Eve, how nice to see you. Don't tell me you're just getting off from work! It's after eleven," the dark-eyed young woman chided, as she surveyed Eve's outfit and then positioned the cart nearer to the conveyor belt.

Yawning, Eve smiled at Maria Hidalgo, touched by her concern. It *was* late. And this was only Tuesday. The pre-test countdown procedures for Project LinkUp were generating a ton of data she would need to analyze in the coming days. The full-scale test wasn't scheduled until New Year's Eve—at the stroke of midnight—in fact. But there would be a lot of late nights before the actual trial run in four weeks' time.

"You're right, I did work late. I had to verify some—details," Eve carefully acknowledged. She always kept the need for security in mind when talking to anybody without the proper clearances.

"I can't believe it's almost two months since my sister's wedding," Maria commented. "Everybody still talks about your piano playing. It made the ceremony so lovely. But to get back to your questions, my husband is fine—Roberto's doing well at his new job, *gracias a Dios*—and the *niña* isn't so little anymore. Bianca weighed more than twenty pounds at her one-year checkup."

"Good thing you're used to dealing with heavyweights." Eve grinned, watching the tiny woman easily heft a large bag of flour out of the shopping cart.

"You're doing your holiday baking early. It's only November 30th," Maria said, piling up sugar, red and green sprinkles and walnuts next to the flour.

"Well, it's hard to resist getting ready for the season when the whole town's had Christmas decorations up since Halloween." Eve pointed to the cheerful holiday trappings all around the store. "But this stuff is for the confirmation class at St. Junipero. They're in charge of the cookie concession at the bazaar this weekend and—"

"And you're donating the ingredients," Maria finished for her.

"Oh, it's only a little dough for a good cause," Eve deadpanned, and then joined Maria in the groan her bad pun required.

"But you're not even Catholic, are you?" Maria observed, waiting while the cash register took a few seconds to calculate the total.

"No, but I've known Father Moreno for years. He used to play chess with my dad at our house every week. And I owe him a lot."

Like gratitude for helping me survive all of last year's disasters, Eve thought. She fought back a sudden wave of sadness with a rush of words. "I mean, he's sent a lot of people my way, like your sister. When you own a house as old as mine— Well, the extra money I make playing at weddings and such really makes a difference in keeping it up."

"It's such a beautiful adobe." Maria nodded. "I love the wonderful garden in back. Every time I visit, I just want to sit there and watch the butterflies all day. I can understand not wanting to let your house deteriorate. But, *chica*, I hope you're taking time out for a little fun, too. Are you dating anybody special?"

Eve schooled her face not to show the stab of pain Maria's gentle probing provoked. She rubbed her bare ring finger again. The engagement diamond that had glittered there had been gone long enough that the band of white skin marring her tan had disappeared.

It had been almost a year. A year since her parents died; a year since walking into the upstairs studio the night after the funeral and . . .

Shaking her head hard enough to loosen a few long, honey-blond strands from their restraining clip, Eve finally answered her friend. "No, Maria, I haven't met anyone special."

Yet, even as she said the words, her eyes found the tall man who rounded a nearby aisle and then charged down it toward the far end.

Maria's gaze followed. "Wow! Now, there's a pair of shoulders you don't often see outside of 'Monday Night Football'! I bet he's new in town, and no stranger to doing his own grocery shopping," she assessed after her quick glance at the loaded cart. Maria looked back at Eve, an expectant grin lighting her delicate features. "Are you going to wait here until he finishes?"

“Uh-uh, definitely not my type.” Trying not to admit how tempted she really was, Eve just smiled innocently at her friend and whipped out her debit card.

Out in the parking lot, she forced herself not to look back while she put her groceries in the car and then set off for her home in nearby Pacific Grove.