

Barely Leashed

An *Unleashed* prequel

By

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Christmas sucks.

No, that wasn't true. She loved Christmas. Christmas *parties* sucked.

"We're not staying long," Todd grumbled, steering the truck carefully into the circular driveway of the palatial Ross home. Kelsey Jacobs looked at her husband's profile—downturned mouth, brows set low, muscles hard around his eyes—and sighed.

Actually, no, Christmas parties didn't suck, either. She loved the entire season: the lights, the festivities adding warmth despite the chilled air, the music.

Having a husband with some kind of perpetual case of male PMS, now *that* drained the enjoyment right out of everything.

Everything. She couldn't let his bah-humbug attitude rub off on her anymore. It was pulling the life out of her.

She let her gaze roam over the spectacular, brightly lit house and felt a little thrill to hurry and get in there. The place always took her breath away, but even more so when every line of it was precisely defined with a string of tasteful clear Christmas lights. She should've told Todd to stay at home, but that wouldn't have worked. She couldn't walk in there alone, couldn't face the questions. Todd wouldn't have gone for that, anyway.

Always keep up appearances, her mother often said. But her mom had never had to deal with this.

"We don't have to stay long. We never do," she muttered. "But can you please get through the night without snapping my head off?"

Or completely ignoring me in front of everyone? she finished silently when he failed to reply. Though sometimes his silence was preferable over any words he might have for her.

"I'm just tired," he grumbled after several seconds passed.

"Okay. I'm tired too." *So get over it.* "But you know we'd never hear the end of it from Evan if we didn't show up."

"Evan seems to forget that we never drag him to stupid crap against his will."

Once again, she got the eerie sensation that Todd was *trying* to pick a fight. It was the only explanation for some of the off-the-wall things he said lately. Lashing out at Evan, his best friend since childhood, hers since college? What had Evan done to deserve that? The thing was, it wasn't the first time Todd had done it, and it was getting worse.

"Are you mad at Evan for some reason you haven't told me about?"

She practically sensed Todd stiffening in the driver's seat. "No."

Maybe he's mad at him for introducing the two of us in the first place.

The thought occurred so easily to her because lately there were times she felt the same way toward their matchmaker. But that wasn't fair, was it? Evan had only introduced them. He'd never encouraged them to hook up; in fact, she didn't think he'd been too happy about it. Maybe that should've been a red flag to her.

As soon as they entered the foyer and the swirl of color and activity inside the house, the masks of a happy couple went into place. Todd even made a show of helping her slip her coat off her shoulders, so she did her part and linked her arm through his as they accepted greetings from friends and acquaintances.

Smiling, laughing, warmly thanking those who complimented her silky green dress, she let not one iota of melancholy infiltrate the façade. It wasn't too difficult, what with the festive atmosphere. The towering Christmas tree alone could melt the coldest heart, glistening with lights and ornaments she'd be afraid to touch, let alone allow to dangle several feet above the ground. Holiday tunes drifted languidly over the merry chatter.

Through the crowd, she saw Evan standing in a circle of people with his arm loosely around his fiancée's waist. That familiar little thrill zinged through Kelsey's chest. She couldn't fight it, so she didn't even try. She could only let it wreak its havoc on her heart; she could torture herself about it later.

Evan hadn't only been her best friend through her last two years of college, but she'd been so infatuated with him it was a miracle she'd kept her wits about her enough to hang around him without making a fool of herself. To him, she'd been like a kid sister. His *favorite* kid sister, but still. It hadn't been nearly enough for her.

The years since had dampened the agony somewhat, but that little twinge she felt every time she laid eyes on him had never gone away.

Courtney, his fiancée, looked beautiful as usual, her hair twisted up into a soft mass of gold with loose ringlets brushing her naked shoulders. Her burgundy dress allowed for a lot of bare skin and her usual eye-popping cleavage. Evan would probably relish sliding that clinging bodice down later, replacing it with his lips and...

Kelsey felt her own lips twist and would have torn her gaze away before such thoughts could take hold. Inevitably, it always led to her imagining herself in Courtney's place, and shame

was always right on the heels of those fantasies. She wasn't too keen on adultery even if it was only in her mind. How would she feel if she knew Todd was having such thoughts about another woman? Horrible, that's what.

Yeah, and maybe if Todd had laid a hand on you in the past three months...

As Courtney lifted a champagne glass to her full red lips, her engagement ring sparkled. Kelsey stared at it, mesmerized, feeling her mouth run dry with...what? Jealousy? That was ridiculous. Evan was her friend above all else, and he deserved to be happy. Kelsey even liked Courtney somewhat, though she didn't see what differentiated her so much from the usual parade of gorgeous arm candy she'd seen at Evan's side over the years. What was it about *her* that had earned her that sparkler when so many others before her had tried and failed?

She felt Todd's arm pull away, startling her out of those useless thoughts. Without that anchor, she was set adrift in misery again. He was talking to someone now, and after a moment, walked away without a word to her. Not that she *needed* him at her side, but these were mostly his friends, not hers, with only a few exceptions. She could party and have fun with the best of them, but she wasn't good with a roomful of mostly strangers. The four years she'd lived here, far from her native Mississippi, hadn't been spent socializing.

Kelsey glanced at Evan to see him looking back at her, his expression grave. Then his lips curved in a smile and motioned her over with the slightest tilt of his head.

Relieved, she took a step in that direction, only to be intercepted by her coworker, Lisa Scott. The one true friend she'd made since moving here.

"I'm so glad you're here!" Kelsey exclaimed as Lisa gave her a quick hug. "You have *no* idea."

Lisa laughed, and they spent the requisite five minutes cooing over each other's dresses and shoes and hair. Lisa looked positively radiant, but then with her enormous blue eyes, chiseled features and shimmering blond hair, she always did. Lately she'd had an undeniable glow about her.

Lisa lifted a glass of champagne from the tray of a server who was passing by and handed it over to Kelsey. "Here. You probably need this."

"Is it that obvious?"

"No, I mean...just drink. Yeah. Drink on that for a few minutes."

“Okaaay.” Kelsey looked at her as if she’d lost her mind, but obliged. Lisa was probably right, anyway. If she was going to get through tonight, she needed some help. With the warmth of the champagne spreading through her chest, she felt a little better. It was really, *really* good, but then the Rosses spared no expense. “What is that you’re drinking?”

“Me?” Lisa looked down at the glass she held as if she suddenly wanted to hide it behind her back. “Oh...um. Club soda.”

Kelsey laughed. “You might need something stronger than that, yourself.”

Lisa’s smile faded. “Right. I kind of...have something to tell you. So drink some more.”

Pregnant. She’s pregnant again.

Eyes widening, Kelsey grabbed Lisa’s arm. “Oh my G— Lisa, are you...?”

Sighing, Lisa nodded. “Yes. I just found out today. And before you say anything, I know. It wasn’t planned, and I’m more than a little freaked out. But we’re happy about it.”

“Congratulations!” Kelsey leaned over to give her another hug. “You *should* be happy about it. No wonder you’re glowing. I’m so thrilled for you.”

“Really?” Lisa searched her face anxiously as they parted. “I was nervous, because... well, I know how badly you want to start trying to have one of your own. I didn’t want your feelings to get hurt.”

Kelsey fought down the little green-eyed monster that was indeed threatening to gnaw its way into her thoughts. Until earlier this year when their problems had really started, she’d been asking Todd when they could start trying to conceive. During those conversations, he’d always suddenly found something far more interesting on TV or in the newspaper. Finally, she’d quit talking about it, hoping he might bring it up someday. That day had never come.

She waved her hand dismissively at Lisa’s comment. “Don’t worry about that. I’m sure we’ll get there eventually. In the meantime, I’ll just have my fun babysitting yours.”

“And you know I’ll be calling, girl. I need date night to keep my sanity.”

Kelsey laughed and gestured to Lisa’s still-flat belly. “Are you sure date night isn’t the cause of all this?”

“More like moments of utter, careless stupidity.” Lisa fidgeted. “There’s something else.”

Kelsey’s heart dropped. “You’re quitting work.” Hopefully she’d spent all of her powers of deduction on Lisa’s first revelation. She didn’t want to think of going to that office without

her. *No, no, no.* But there was no rush of denial from her friend, so she knew she'd been dead on again.

"Drew is only six months old, and Kayleigh doesn't start school for another year. I just can't do the whole working mom bit anymore. I don't want to. Plus we'll be spending so much on day care, it's ridiculous. I plan on giving two weeks' notice next Friday. I'll be gone by the first of the year."

"Well, I understand. But you have no idea how much I'll miss you."

"Hey, I'll still be around. We'll do lunch as often as we can."

"Deal."

This night really freaking sucks.

Giggling to cover the deepening of her melancholic mood, Kelsey glanced around the room. The first time she'd stepped foot in the Ross home, years ago, she'd done nothing but stare and gape and marvel. And not just at Evan. At that point, she'd been busily trying to stomp out the last smoldering embers of her raging inferno of a crush on him. She'd been committed to building a relationship with Todd, having accepted that Evan was never going to want her. Not the way she wanted him to.

She tried now to never revisit those memories, but it was hard, especially at times like this. Times when she knew her husband wasn't happy, she wasn't happy, and she didn't know how to fix it.

Suggestions of a long vacation with just the two of them had been promptly slapped aside. Subtle hints that maybe they should seek marital counseling had earned little more than cold stares. A few times, she'd asked outright what she could do to make things better. Silence had usually been the answer. Or a sigh. Or a terse "We're fine, Kelsey."

So, she'd given up. Probably not the smartest thing to do, but she couldn't fix a marriage by herself, and that's how Todd made her feel sometimes. Like she was in this alone.

It wasn't supposed to be this way.

The crowd shifted and she caught another glimpse of Evan standing with Courtney, laughing at something someone was saying. Somehow they looked even more stunning together than they had moments ago, his dark good looks contrasting with her blond beauty in a truly eye-dazzling display. *They'll make beautiful babies*, she thought miserably, and immediately chided herself. Of *course* Evan had the most beautiful girl in the room on his arm. Of course that girl

loved him. It only stood to reason. As the most gorgeous man she'd ever laid eyes on—no use denying it—he deserved no less.

But she also couldn't deny there were times she looked at Courtney and wished to God that whatever he saw in her, he could've somehow seen in Kelsey ten years ago. Then maybe she wouldn't be where she was right now.

How wretchedly selfish.

Lisa was following her gaze, and she should have known better than to get anything by her. "Oh," she said. "Kel, I'm sorry."

Kelsey blinked and looked at her friend, frowning. "For what?"

"Well...never mind. I need to shut up."

"*What*, Lisa? It's okay to say it."

"It's just that I know how you always felt about him, and now he's getting married, and you're having such a tough time... And I had to go and drop my bombshell. It must be hard, that's all."

"Really, Todd and I are..."

Fine. We're fine, dammit. How many times can you tell that lie without breaking down?

If she didn't watch it, she was going to find out. There was an uncomfortable stinging sensation behind her eyes even now.

She cleared her throat. "We're fine. Every marriage has its ups and downs, doesn't it? I guess you could say we're fully entrenched in a 'down' right now, but it'll be okay. It has to be."

Lisa didn't look convinced, her brows drawn together and her blue eyes troubled. Kelsey put her lips to her fluted champagne glass and shot another glance in Evan's direction.

He was standing behind Courtney now with his arms around her waist, talking to his younger brother, Brian—well, arguing with him was more like it. She had to smile. Brian definitely marched to the beat of his own drum. He wore a long black sweater and baggy burgundy leather pants. His black hair sported festive red and green streaks, and underneath the arms of his sweater, she knew he had full tattoo sleeves. He drove Evan nuts sometimes, and no two brothers had ever been more different.

She wanted to go talk to them, hang out, have a good time like a true best friend should be able to. But tonight she didn't know if she could face it. Todd had been right to want to leave early, after all.

Speaking of...

Daniel came to sweep Lisa off to dance, and Kelsey scanned the room for her own husband. They could at least *attempt* to put up a pretense of happiness. How telling was it for them to come to a party and spend the entire night on opposite sides of the room?

As she moved across the floor, she was intercepted a few times, every single person asking if Todd was there, how he was doing...driving home the reality that all of these people were *his* friends first, except for Evan. He was the only person in this house besides Lisa she could honestly say was her friend, too.

He could never know how grateful she was to have him, one of the few constants in her life when she'd moved to a strange town straight out of college to start a new life. She often thought she'd leaned on him throughout that time as much as she had Todd. If not more. He'd always, always been there for her.

Feeling conspicuous, she stopped and scanned the room from her new vantage point near the shining beacon that was the Christmas tree, still not seeing Todd anywhere through the mingling crowd. Now she couldn't see Evan, either. Sighing, she sipped her champagne and glanced around for a casual acquaintance to chat with, so she wouldn't look like a stranded wallflower.

"Merry Christmas," a deep male voice murmured near her ear. Gasping, she turned to find Evan standing directly behind her, grinning like a fiend and dangling a little sprig of mistletoe above her head.

"Oh, you," she laughed, a hand fluttering to her chest as her heart skipped a beat and began pounding frantically. "Merry Christmas."

He leaned forward and she offered her cheek for the touch of his lips...when what she wanted, shamefully, was to feel the warm, full press of them on her own. It was wrong, but what was she supposed to do? She'd never managed to stomp out those last embers, and despite all her efforts, they would always smolder for him. She'd tried, oh, God, how she'd tried...

He laughed and hugged her after the chaste peck on her cheek, squeezing her tight. He always gave the best hugs, and they always ended too soon. Those arms would probably be just as strong holding her through the night... "You look gorgeous, Kel."

"You're too sweet." Kelsey rarely complimented his looks because if she ever got started, she wouldn't be able to stop. His black silk shirt was the same color as his hair, his holly green

tie brought out the similar hue of his irises. How many times had she stared into those eyes in college, during late night cramming or general bitching/commiserating sessions, and wondered what he would do if she grabbed him and ravished him?

Long gone were those days, and she could kick herself now for not taking a shot at it. Just one shot, and maybe things could have been different. But far more frightening than the thought of his rejection had been the thought of damaging what they already had: the most precious friendship she'd ever known. So she'd kept quiet. And suffered.

She had more important things to worry about at the moment, anyway. His scrutiny was sending a spreading warmth up her cheeks, and she cursed her ability to blush redder than the brightest Christmas ornament in a nanosecond. He'd always held that power over her, and he'd have to be blind not to see it. The humiliation of it burned hotter than anything else. Well, almost anything.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she said brightly. "I haven't seen your parents yet, but just in case I don't, please tell them I said everything looks beautiful."

His narrowed eyes showed her he wasn't fooled for a minute. As long as she'd known him, he'd had a finely tuned BS detector, and put it shamelessly to use wherever she was concerned. Then again, he was a prosecutor. It was part of his job.

"Give me some credit, here," he said, giving her one of those piercing appraisals she felt all the way to her toes. The look that made defense lawyers tremble. She knew because she worked for one.

"Lisa just told me some news that...has me a little upset," she said, grasping for something, anything, to keep from blurting out the truth that underlay everything. *I'm miserable, Evan, utterly freaking miserable. At least some of it is your fault.*

"Is everything all right?"

"For them, yeah, it's great. It's actually wonderful news. I'm just feeling selfish and sorry for myself. Don't mind me."

"Well, it's easy to get bogged down in that stuff this time of year. But I won't allow you to be bummed out at my parents' party, not if I can help it. Come on, dance with me."

"Oh, Evan, no—"

Green eyes twinkling bright as the lights in the Christmas tree, he took the champagne glass from her hand and set it on a nearby table, then cut off her protests by grabbing her hand and dragging her toward the couples swaying to “I’ll Be Home for Christmas”. By the time they reached them, she was laughing too, enjoying the feel of his warm hand wrapped firmly around hers in a grip she knew better than to try to break. He took position and pulled her to him, the firmness of his body against hers and the gentle press of his hand at her waist taking her breath away.

They’d danced together before a handful of times, and the only time she hadn’t gone soft as butter in his arms was at her wedding. He’d been Todd’s best man. She’d been so happy, so eager to start a life with the man who’d managed to win her heart away, even if a tiny shard had always remained in Evan’s possession.

“You can tell that friend of mine he’s a damn fool to let you stand abandoned in the corner like that,” he said. His tone was light, but she sensed an anger behind the words that drew her brows up in surprise.

“I think he’s just—”

“I don’t care what he’s doing. I haven’t seen him by your side since the moment you walked in.”

“Well, where’s Courtney right now?” she asked with a wink.

“Courtney’s off doing Courtney’s thing. She’s my social butterfly. I don’t have to worry about her.”

“So...I’m *not* one, and you have to worry about me?”

“You’re my shy violet and I always worry about you, whether you need me to or not. Do you want me to talk to him?”

“No,” she snapped, much too quickly. “Please don’t get involved; you know how he is. That’ll just make things worse.” Immediately, she winced at her slip.

And he, naturally, didn’t miss it. A frown creased his brow. “Are you two all right?”

Oh, God, don’t even ask me that, you of all people will see the truth no matter what I say.

“Can I plead the Fifth?” she asked with a dull laugh. She feared her palm was about to grow damp in the heat of his, and she forced the fingers of her other hand not to tense on his shoulder. She shouldn’t be having this conversation, not with him.

“Shit. Kelsey, I’m sorry.”

At the despair in his voice, she shook her head vehemently, unable to bear another person she cared about apologizing for how much her life sucked. It could be far, far worse, couldn't it? It wasn't like Todd was abusive, or cheating on her...

But he *was* abusing her. In his coldness, in his neglect. As for the other...well, there were no mysterious business trips, no unexplained late nights, no walking in on secretive phone calls. She had no reason to believe anything like that was going on.

"We'll be fine. Really, don't worry about us," she said.

"It's not him I'm worried about. You know, sometimes I wish I'd—"

He cut off, and her heart went wild as she searched his face for the end to that sentence. "What?"

"Nothing. Never mind."

"Evan..."

He took that moment to separate them, giving her a little twirl as she nearly screamed in frustration. "I was about to say something utterly useless and unhelpful to the situation," he said, bringing her back close and settling his hand on the small of her back again. "Don't worry about it."

Sometimes I wish I'd never let you slip through my fingers?

Sometimes I wish I'd grabbed you and run?

Yeah, right. Wishful thinking.

"Enough of my gloom and doom," she said, desperate to take the heat off herself. "Have the wedding plans begun in earnest?"

He chuckled, but the darkness hadn't bled out of his eyes any more than it had bled out of her mood. "Yeah. You can imagine."

"Is it still on for August, or can you two wait that long?"

"We *need* that long, if she wants to pull off something of this magnitude. Damn thing just keeps getting bigger and bigger. I've threatened elopement, if I have to drag her kicking and screaming."

"Just about every woman has dreamed of her wedding since she was a little girl. Courtney just wants it to be special."

"It'll be special all right. The kind of special that leaves us all bankrupt."

Laughing as he twirled her again, she found herself truly wishing Evan got everything he wanted out of life. No one deserved it more, at least in her eyes. She would suffer any hardship to know he was happy. There was comfort in the thought. “I hope she realizes what a lucky girl she is.” *She’ll get to wake up beside of you every morning for the rest of her life.*

“I hope she does, too,” he said with a mock seriousness that made her laugh harder. Their dance turned into more of an affectionate hug, and she squeezed him tight, closing her eyes and breathing deep the mysterious spice of his cologne and the scent that was distinctly his. “And you keep your chin up,” he said, his voice so near her ear that it sent a shiver down her spine. “You’re right, everything will be okay.”

Her best friend. She might never have him the way she’d wanted all those years ago, but she was blessed to have him at all.

Opening her eyes just before he released her, she saw something curious over his shoulder. Just a brief glimpse of what appeared to be a couple arguing in the corner, which ordinarily wouldn’t have been strange at a party. What caught her attention and held it so steadfastly for a brief moment was that the two people were Todd and Courtney.

She was about to comment, wondering what those two could possibly have to fight about. They hardly spoke to each other aside from friendly chit-chat whenever the four of them were together. But it was then that Evan’s dad came through the room in a Santa Claus suit, doing his yearly shtick with a merry “*Ho ho ho!*” Cheerful chaos ensued. She got caught up in the laughter, the moment forgotten.

Two weeks later, she would remember that moment again in excruciating detail, and wonder how she could have been so blind.

*Find out what happens when Evan and Kelsey finally come [Unleashed](#), available now from **Samhain Publishing**. And look for Brian’s story, **Rock Me**, coming May 4, 2010!*