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Opening Extract from...

Christmas Ever After

Written by Sarah Morgan

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“AREN’T YOU A little old to be poking presents?” Alec watched as his sister crawled under the tree, covering herself with pine needles as she shook and prodded the prettily wrapped parcels under the tree.

His mother had left the curtains open and snow glided past the window like silvery tears, dissolving against the glass. A fire crackled in the hearth and a basket of logs stood ready to keep the flames topped up.

Skylar was still upstairs in the shower. He hoped she wasn’t upset. The thought made him shift uncomfortably in his chair. She was obviously determined not to lean on him and he should have been relieved about that.

He *was* relieved.

“You’re never too old to poke a present.” Liv held one up to her nose and sniffed. “Smells good. What have you bought Skylar?”

“I haven’t bought her anything. Why would I? I’ve told you repeatedly—”

“You’re not together. I know, but I wish you were. She’s a million times nicer than anyone you’ve brought home before. And she is sooooo beautiful, Alec. Her hair could be in a shampoo ad.”

He thought about the silken flow of Skylar’s hair and the way it had felt in his hands. “I hadn’t noticed.”

Liv retied a bow that had come loose on one of the parcels. “For two people who supposedly don’t like each other, the pair of you are like an experiment in a science lab. Not that science is exactly my thing, but I’d say the two of you are one small spark away from a serious chemical explosion.”

“You’re imagining things.”

“Don’t treat me like an idiot, Alec.”

“You’re my little sister, and we’re not having this conversation.”

“I’m a teenager. I think about boys a lot, or didn’t you get that memo? I’m old enough to recognize sexual tension.”

“Evidently not. Skylar and I have mutual friends. She was in trouble, but I would have helped no matter who she was.”

“You brought her home, Alec. You haven’t brought a woman home for three years.”

He wondered if somewhere in the house there was a calendar marked with the highlights of his love life. “I brought Skylar home because she has a concussion and I didn’t want to leave her on her own in London.”

“So you were rescuing a damsel in distress? I don’t believe it. No way. Not after—” She broke off guiltily. “Sorry, Al. I have a big mouth.”

And a big heart.

He chose to ignore the damsel in distress reference.

“There is nothing going on. She isn’t my type. I don’t even find her attractive—” The words jammed in his throat as the woman in question walked into the room.

Her red dress hugged the curve of her narrow waist and ended at midthigh. She’d teamed it with black tights and black boots, displaying legs long enough to make a gazelle die of envy. Her hair gleamed pale gold and two jagged twists of silver, like lightening bolts, hung from her ears.

She looked as far from a damsel in distress as it was possible to be.

The intimacy between them, that moment of vulnerability that he’d witnessed firsthand, might never have happened.

“Not attractive at all,” his sister murmured under her breath. “Close your mouth, Alec. It’s rude to stare.” All guilt apparently forgotten, she scrambled to her feet. “Sky, that dress is incredible.”

It *was* incredible.

So were her powers of recovery. Or her willpower. He couldn’t work out which was responsible for the fact she was on her feet and looking better than most people looked after a week at a Spa.

He looked closer and saw a hint of blush on her cheeks.

Underneath, she was pale.

Which meant it was willpower keeping her on her feet.

Willpower and those gleaming black leather boots.

It didn’t seem to matter what she wore, he kept seeing her undressed. Every time he looked at her.

Naked.

It was as if the internet had crashed in the middle of a movie.

The image was frozen and nothing he did could delete it from his brain.

Naked, naked, naked.

Alec could imagine her, blue eyes laughing, straddling some very lucky man.

Judging from the look she sent him, he wasn't going to be that man and it seemed he'd just sent himself right back into the "asshat" category.

Which was probably the best thing for both of them.

Ignoring him, she flashed a smile at his sister. "Thank you."

Alec ran a hand over the back of his neck and hunted for the right thing to say. He knew he should pay her a compliment, but he didn't want to go there. "Look, I—" Usually words came easily to him, but today they'd all crashed in his brain. "You're— I'm—"

In trouble, he thought. *In a whole lot of trouble.*

"Ignore him," Liv advised. "It's the best way. You look truly *amazing*."

She did look amazing, Alec thought. And she looked even more amazing naked.

Why the hell had he gone to help her in the shower?

If he hadn't gone to help, he wouldn't be in this position.

The last thing he needed in his life was a woman like Sky, but in a race between intellect and libido, libido was heading to the finish line in first position.

Fortunately all her attention was on his sister. "You look amazing, too! I love what you've done with your hair and that dress is super cute."

Alec watched his sister turn pink with pleasure.

"Do you like it? It's new." It was obvious that Sky's opinion really mattered to her and Sky seemed to know that.

"Great choice. Do you know what would make it perfect? This." She pulled a stylish twisted silver bracelet from her wrist and handed it to Olivia. "Merry Christmas."

"No!" Liv's eyes almost popped out of her head. "You can't lend me that—it's yours."

"I'm not lending, I'm giving. If you'd like it."

Having seen the prices people were willing to pay for Skylar's work, Alec knew it wasn't a small gift. "You can't do that."

"I made it. I can do what I like with it."

"It's stunning." Liv stroked her fingers over it in awe. "I've never owned anything this beautiful before."

"I'm glad you like it! I always want my jewelry to go to a happy home and live a fun life." She paused. "A fun, exciting, fearless, frivolous life, worthy of a princess." She was looking at Liv but he knew her words were directed toward him.

"Thank you! I need to show Mum." Liv shot out of the room, tripped over Nelson, who had taken advantage of the open door to investigate the fuss. She vanished in the direction of the kitchen, leaving Alec alone with Skylar.

He braced himself for a comment on his rudeness. He knew he deserved it. Instead she smiled at him.

"Your sister is adorable. You're so lucky."

"It was generous of you to give her that." He breathed deeply. "Look—"

"It's fine, Alec. You don't have to say a thing."

"I owe you an apology. I was rude and—"

"I'm really grateful for that, because you reminded me why I can't stand you ninety percent of the time."

Something in the way she said it made him smile. "For the record I think your dress is great." More than great. Looking at her he felt as if he'd been dragged naked through the molten core of a volcano.

"I really don't care whether you like my dress or not, Alec. I didn't dress for you, I dressed for myself. I don't need you to tell me I look good."

He stared at her. Selina had needed to hear it. She'd needed to hear it a thousand different ways, a thousand times a day and no matter what he'd said or how he'd said it, it had never been enough. Her insecurity had been the most exhausting thing about their relationship.

Sky's gaze met his and he saw something that looked like sympathy in her eyes, but she didn't say anything. Instead she strolled over to the Christmas tree.

"I always wanted a sister."

He grabbed hold of the change of subject as a drowning man might grab a floating branch. "You have brothers?"

"Yes. All lawyers. It's part of our DNA although somehow it missed me. Mealtimes are like a day in court. Growing up, if I didn't want vegetables I used to say 'objection.' Of course my mother would say 'overruled' and drop them on my plate anyway." She examined the ornaments. "A tree like this would be part of my dream Christmas."

He opened his mouth to ask about her dream Christmas and then closed it again. Information, particularly personal information, was a prelude to intimacy, and that wasn't a word he wanted anywhere near his relationship with Skylar. Circumstances had thrown them together, but that didn't mean he was interested in getting to know her on a deeper level. He already knew more than enough.

"My mother insists on a real tree."

"My mother can't deal with the fact she can't control the activities of each individual pine needle. Where did this one come from?"

"Local farm. Going to choose the tree is part of our family tradition." The more she revealed about her family, the more he wondered how they'd produced someone as creative and free-spirited as Skylar. A different person would have been crushed, or at least taken the path of least resistance.

She examined everything in detail and then reached out and touched an uneven snowman. "Who made this? It's cute."

"Me. My mother refuses to throw it away. That is yet another embarrassing detail you now know about me."

"She doesn't throw it away because it has meaning, I love that." She examined every decoration, asked about each one. "Your whole family history is right here on this tree."

"The handmade decorations you made as a child were probably elegant and perfect."

"My parents have always employed an interior designer to decorate the house for the holidays."

Alec looked at the misshapen snowman that his mother insisted on hanging on the tree every year. "You never made your own decorations?"

"Oh, I made them a few times but they always ended up in the trash."

"Why?"

She ran her finger over a glittering angel. "Whatever I made was the wrong look for the tree."

Her tone was matter-of-fact, but dappled with hints of wistful sadness. It tugged at him, drawing him in a direction he didn't want to go.

He could only see her profile, but he was aware of her with every one of his senses. Apart from the livid bruise at her temple, her skin was creamy white, her hair falling in a sheet over one shoulder. He wanted to lift that hair and discover the skin beneath. He wanted to seduce her mouth and coax a smile from her.

She turned her head to look at him and he wondered if the burn of his gaze had triggered some internal alarm system. Maybe she had a built-in heat sensor.

Their eyes met and held.

The only noise in the room was the crackle of the fire.

He could hear the sound of muffled laughter and the clatter of crockery from the kitchen, but here they were completely alone.

She shook her head slowly. "Unbelievable."

"What is unbelievable?"

"Here I am, spilling my guts to you again, and there you are taking it like a man instead of telling me to shut up." She spoke a little faster than usual. "You're treating me as if I'm made of glass Alec, and you don't need to. Say what's on your mind. A bit of the old brutal Hunter sarcasm would probably be good for both of us right now."

He was spared having to answer because at that moment Liv came back into the room and the rest of the family piled in behind her.

His father had several newspapers tucked under his arm and was carrying a tray with glasses. His mother was carrying two bottles of champagne and Alec stood up to help her.

"Two?"

"One to welcome you home and one to congratulate Skylar. You should read what the papers are saying about her. We had no idea this was so big! It's like having royalty in the house."

Liv curled up on the sofa. "It would be horrid having royalty in the house. There would be cameras outside and it would be impossible to get Church to curtsey. He never does as he's told."

Alec noticed that his sister hadn't stopped playing with the bangle on her wrist.

"I bought two copies of everything." His father put the tray down and passed Sky the newspapers. "One for you, one for your parents."

Alec winced inwardly, but Sky's smile didn't slip.

"That was kind. Thank you." She took the newspapers and put them on the table next to her.

"The piece is toward the back in all of them. Aren't you going to take a look?"

"I'll take a look later."

Alec drew attention away from the newspapers. "That bracelet you gave Liv is pretty. How long does it take you to make something like that?"

“That particular piece?” She talked a little about the creative process and Alec realized that, far from being dreamy, she was sharp and focused. He was surprised to discover that all of her work now was bespoke. He wondered why her parents weren’t more supportive. From the little he’d seen, she’d managed to channel her vivid imagination into a lucrative business.

Liv was fascinated. “So someone tells you what they want and you make it? Cool. Do you use diamonds?”

“Yes, but I use other precious stones too—emeralds, rubies and sapphires—they can be as rare and expensive. And I love working with silver.”

Liv touched the bangle on her wrist. “How do you make different shapes?”

“Hammering, soldering—”

“Soldering?” Alec stared at her. “You solder?”

“For making hot connections, although technically it’s called silver brazing. You’re joining metals using an alloy that has been heated to melting point. The molten solder interacts with the metal and when it’s cooled you have an invisible seam. It’s basic physics.”

“Hot connections aren’t confined to jewelry,” Liv murmured, and Alec sent his sister a look that should have welded her to the chair without the use of a blowtorch.

“So people come to you and ask for something specific?” His mother picked up a plate of canapés. “It must be very satisfying making something personal.”

“And a little scary. All I have is the brief from the person buying it. My fear is always that they won’t like the end result.”

“Has that ever happened?”

“No,” she admitted. “But that doesn’t stop me being afraid that it might. I do what I can to avoid that happening. Get as much information as possible about the person. Their likes and dislikes. How they wear their jewelry.”

Alec raised his eyebrows. “There is a way to wear jewelry?” It was news to him.

“Of course.” She took a glass of champagne from his father with a smile of thanks. “Some people keep it in a drawer and bring it out for special occasions. Other people like something they can wear all the time. And jewelry can evoke different feelings depending on the sentiment with which it was given. It can make you feel warm and loved, it can make you smile, it can make you feel glamorous. Either way, I make sure it’s individual. I never make the same piece twice.”

Liv touched her bracelet reverentially. “So there isn’t another one like this anywhere in the world?”

“Actually, that’s an exception. There’s another one exactly like that upstairs in my suitcase. It’s one of a pair. One for each wrist.”

“So now we have one each. I love that. You didn’t make this for anyone special?”

“I originally intended it to be part of the collection showing in London, but I liked it so I kept it.”

“At least you have one gift then, Liv,” Alec drawled, “in case Santa hears the rumors that you’ve been naughty and doesn’t show up on Christmas Eve.”

“He wouldn’t do that to me.” Liv grinned at her dad. “Would you, Dad?”

“No jokes about Santa tomorrow when the twins are here.” His mother handed round the plate of canapés. “They still believe he exists.”

“So do I.” Liv sneaked Nelson some ham. “And Boris is hoping for a blind date with one of the reindeer so I’m going to brush him and make him look his best.”

Skylar looked at her. “Who is Boris?”

“Our donkey. He lives in the field behind the house. The family next door own horses and he keeps them company so they don’t get lonely and jump out of the field. I’ll take you to see him tomorrow if you like. We can lend you some boots and a warm coat.”

Alec was trying not to look at Sky’s endless legs. “She’d probably rather stay indoors.”

“Indoors? No way. I’m building a snowman as soon as it’s light. We can see Boris at the same time.”

“Do the twins really believe Santa still exists?” Alec’s father looked vague. “Haven’t they grown out of that?”

“They’re only four years old! And generally it isn’t something you grow out of,” Liv said. “It all depends on who breaks the bad news to you. I heard it on the radio when Mum was picking me up from school. There was a phone-in about what age you should tell your kids. I was in shock for a week.”

Suzanne gave a sympathetic murmur. “You never said anything. All those years we carried on leaving sweets for him and making dusty footprints on the hearth.”

“That’s why I didn’t say anything. The footprints were cute and I ate the sweets.” Liv stroked Nelson. “What age did you stop believing in Santa, Granny?”

“Eight. Your great-grandfather tripped over the end of my bed while creeping around in the dark trying to stuff my stocking. I screamed and he ended up in hospital with a broken ankle.”

Liv laughed. “What about you, Sky?”

“I never believed in him.” Sky took a sip of her champagne. “My parents believed in the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. At least, that’s what they told me.” She gave Liv a conspiratorial wink. “I figured it was because my father would have looked terrible in a Santa suit.”

Liv looked appalled. “So no tooth fairy?”

“No tooth fairy and no Easter Bunny or any of his cute furry relations. I was raised in an atmosphere of uncensored reality. No dreaming allowed.” Sky raised her glass and smiled. “To the power of imagination.”

It was a testament to her resilience that her creativity had survived.

It was like planting a sunflower in the desert and expecting it to thrive.

Alec finished his champagne, reminding himself that her background was none of his business. He’d offered her a roof over her head. He didn’t need to provide psychological support and he certainly wasn’t looking to deepen their relationship.

“The twins are going to love you,” his mother said, topping up her glass. “The rest of us display a distinct lack of imagination when it comes to making pasta necklaces. There’s only so much I can do with a bag of rigatoni.”

Skylar grinned. “Pasta necklaces are my specialty. I’m already looking forward to it. No soldering required.”

“Such a good sport.” Alec’s grandmother reached across and patted her hand. “You’re a lovely girl. I’m so happy Alec found you.”

“Sky isn’t his girlfriend, Mum. I already explained that.” Suzanne sent them both a look of apology and his grandmother adjusted her glasses so that she could take a closer look at him.

“He’s brought her to our family gathering. If Skylar isn’t Alec’s girlfriend, then who is she?”

Alec considered abandoning champagne in favor of neat Scotch. “She’s a friend.”

Twenty-four hours ago he would not have described her even as a friend, but a lot had happened in a short space of time.

“But you brought her home for Christmas. It’s years since you brought anyone home. And she’s sleeping in your room. In my day that meant something.”

“Well, today it just means we’re short on space,” his mother said quickly. “We have both you and Harry staying and I’m assuming you don’t want to share with him. Alec’s room is large. That’s all it is. He isn’t in a relationship right now, Mum.”

“Well, he should be. It’s time he found a woman.”

Alec’s father winked at him and reached across to top up his glass. “Merry Christmas,” he muttered under his breath and Alec gave a half laugh.

“I’m not interested in finding a woman. I don’t want a woman.”

His grandmother turned to his mother with a puzzled look. “What did he say?”

Suzanne Hunter raised her voice and spoke clearly. “He said he doesn’t want a woman.”

“That’s what I thought he said, but it doesn’t make sense. Why wouldn’t he want a woman? Is he saying he’s gay? Has he come out?”

“He’s not gay, Mum.”

“Are you sure? Because Skylar is a beautiful girl. The only reason a healthy, vigorous, single man wouldn’t be interested in her would be if he were gay. And that would be fine. I want him to know we’ll love him whoever he is.”

Alec clenched his jaw. “I am not gay.” He was aware of Skylar, sitting across from him. Her head was bent over Nelson so he couldn’t see her expression but he was fairly sure she was laughing.

Liv was definitely laughing. “Don’t post anything about being gay on Twitter, you’ll break a hundred thousand female hearts.”

“If he isn’t gay, why isn’t he seeing someone?”

“He’s not in a hurry to get involved again,” his mother said briskly. “And we’ve talked enough about Alec’s private life. You know he doesn’t like discussing it with people.”

“We’re not people, we’re family. Family care about these things. If this is about the divorce, well, it’s been several years since Selina, and picking badly once doesn’t mean he’s going to do it a second time. Just because you bite into one rotten apple, doesn’t mean you have to chop down the whole tree. He needs to get back on the horse.”

Liv sent Alec a look of sibling solidarity. “You’re mixing your metaphors, Granny.

“He should be dating again. Skylar is single and the dogs love her. They’re a very good judge of character.”

Alec wondered what it was going to take to get them to leave his love life alone. “I’m grateful for your concern, but I can manage my love life by myself. If and when I choose to start seeing someone, I can do it without the help of my family. And that includes the dogs.”

“Nelson and Church could set up a dating agency,’ Liv suggested helpfully. “I’ve got the perfect slogan. ‘Don’t let your relationship go to the dogs.’”

His mother finished her drink and stood up. “Mum, come and help me in the kitchen,” she said firmly. “I need to deal with the food. Dinner is game casserole.”

“Made with a bottle of my best burgundy,” his father murmured as he stood up, giving Alec a sympathetic look over the top of his glasses. “Let’s hope not all the alcohol has evaporated. I have a feeling we’re going to need it. By the way, did I tell you all that Lydia Taylor is pregnant?”

Attention shifted away from Alec and his parents and grandmother walked into the kitchen together, catching up on village news. Church took advantage of the open door and bounded into the room, his wagging tail sending decorations flying.

Liv grabbed him. “You have to start behaving now you’re running a dating agency. You’re CEO. Canine Executive Officer.” She hauled him out of the room, leaving Alec with Skylar.

He was the one who broke the silence. “I apologize for my grandmother. I hope she didn’t embarrass you.”

“Not at all. But I’m guessing she embarrassed the hell out of you.” Her eyes were alive with laughter. “Oh Alec—” She gave up containing it, laughing so hard the tears poured down her cheeks. “I love your grandmother. She is a wonderful, priceless, *darling* person. I want to pick her up and take her home with me.”

Right then he wouldn’t have stopped her.

Much as he loved his grandmother, he would have packed her bags and stuck her on the plane himself. “She doesn’t know the meaning of the word *tact*.”

“But that’s what’s so perfect. She’s honest. She’s speaking from the heart. She cares about you.” Wiping her eyes, she sat up. “Sorry. I don’t mean to laugh, but your family is so—so—”

“Exasperating? Interfering? Certifiable?”

“Special. If I were a writer, not an artist, I would have got a movie script out of tonight.” Her smile sent desire marauding through his body. She held nothing back. When she was angry she showed it. When she was amused, she laughed. She wore her emotions on the surface without apology or restraint. With Skylar there was no guessing. What she felt was right there for everyone to see. She lived life with the brakes off.

He wondered if she was as open and unrestrained in the bedroom.

His palms ached with the desire to reach out and haul her against him. He wanted to rip her clothes off and screw her right there on the couch, an urge he intended to resist at all costs no matter how much it would delight his grandmother.

“What would you have called your movie? The Twelve Humiliations of Christmas?”

Her smile dimmed. “You’re really upset. I’m sorry.”

“Why are you sorry? You weren’t the one trying to manipulate my love life.”

“But I know how that feels. And I’m sorry because although I know you hate talking about your marriage under any circumstances, the real reason you’re upset is because your grandmother talked about it in front of me. Not only am I pretty much a stranger, but you don’t even like me. Revealing deep feelings to someone you don’t know is an uncomfortable experience. It makes you feel vulnerable. I know, because that’s how I felt yesterday.”

The only sound in the room was the crackle of the log fire.

“You didn’t seem vulnerable.”

“Are you kidding? First I bled on you, then I threw up in front of you. That, believe me, is a low point for anyone, so don’t talk to me about being emotionally vulnerable because where you are concerned I have been naked in every possible sense of the word. I have a clear recollection of thinking ‘kill me now’ at several points last night.” She gave a crooked smile that told him that no matter how bouncy she seemed, the past twenty-four hours had wounded more than her head.

“Out of all that, the worst part was throwing up?”

“No. The very worst part,” she said slowly, “was needing your help in the first place. If I’d made a list of all the guys in the world I would not have wanted to see me at my lowest point, you would have been right there at the top. In the summer you made it clear you thought I was hopeless, and I actually enjoyed our moments of unarmed combat where I proved you wrong and then suddenly, wham, I’m in a situation where I prove you right.” Her surprisingly honest admission unlocked something inside him.

“That’s not how I see you.”

“I know exactly how you see me, Alec. To you I’m this ditzy, useless, princess blonde who can’t get through a meal without having her hand held and the annoying thing is that I can’t even prove you wrong right now.” There was an edge to her tone and she rubbed her fingers over her forehead and gave a helpless shrug. “Ignore me. It’s not a contest.”

“That’s not how I see you,” he repeated. “I know I’m the last person you would have chosen to have by your side through this, and yet despite everything, despite the fact that your life has been shredded in front of someone you hate, you have been gutsy, good-humored and dignified.”

Her throat moved and she stared hard into the fire. “I don’t hate you. And that’s probably the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“Probably the only nice thing I’ve ever said to you.” And he felt a flash of guilt because he knew that the reason for that had nothing to do with her. “I think you’re the strongest woman I’ve ever met, but you’re right that I’m not good at disclosing personal details in front of people. Anyone. It makes me feel—”

“Naked? Alec, I *was* naked in front of you. Literally. So I think I’m winning in the battle of personal humiliation.”

He wished she hadn’t brought that up.

“I hate it when my family talk about me. It’s like walking into the supermarket and discovering I’ve forgotten to put on my trousers.”

“That happens often?”

“Never. But it was a recurring nightmare of mine when I was eight. It stayed with me.”

Her smile was back, warm and generous. “Mine was discovering I was wearing odd shoes.”

“It worked out well for Cinderella.”

“That was one shoe, not odd shoes. I don’t think Prince Charming would have looked twice at her if she’d been wearing one red Prada and one silver Jimmy Choo.” She started clearing up the glasses. “Why do you hate talking about your marriage?”

“I’m not good at admitting failure.”

“Is it failure or is it life?”

“It definitely feels like failure. I tried to make it work, but I couldn’t give Selina what she wanted.” Why the hell was he telling her this? “I hurt her. Badly.”

Sky gave him a long look. “And she hurt you.”

“Most of it wasn’t her fault.”

“You really believe that? Is that why you don’t date? Because you think you’re this bad guy who is going to hurt women? That’s bullshit, Alec.”

“You don’t know me.”

“I’ve learned a thing or two since yesterday. I never would have guessed this in the summer, but it turns out that buried underneath that badass, moody exterior is a real chivalrous streak. I know that because nothing less than a chivalrous streak would have driven you to take me back to your hotel room and then bring me here. And I suspect that is what prevents you from placing the blame for your divorce where it should surely lie. On the shoulders of your ex-wife.” She walked to the door and paused while he opened it. “I think your grandmother is right. You should start dating again, Alec.”

He clenched his jaw, thinking that he felt more naked now than he had when he’d stepped out of the shower. If the weekend carried on like this, they’d have no secrets left by the end of it. “That isn’t going to happen.”

“It should. It’s true that you border on the arrogant and your communication tends to veer toward sarcasm, but you have great biceps, and there are plenty of women who find brooding and cynical to be attractive traits. If you kept your mouth shut, I’m sure you could attract one of them.” Flashing a smile, she walked past him, leaving him drugged by a light cloud of perfume and a lethal dose of lust.