

STARTING OVER

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Prologue

The room was cozy and pleasant, designed more for comfort than for fashion. Burton Carlisle folded his newspaper, laid it on the couch beside him and studied the woman who sat in a rocking chair near the window. Her hands rested on the knitting in her lap. She stared into space.

Diane Wilmington Carlisle had been Burt's wife for almost twenty years, yet at times she still seemed an enigma. Almost twenty years? Remembrance exploded inside his brain like a penny firecracker. As of three o'clock this afternoon, they *had* been married twenty years. This was their wedding anniversary, which meant it was also Diane's thirty-eighth birthday. How could he have forgotten? Easily, he decided, what with Christine, his secretary, on maternity leave and him in the middle of a much publicized murder trial.

Burton J. Carlisle had not become a distinguished trial lawyer and important community figure by being hesitant and indecisive. Quite the contrary, he'd acquired his high-status position by being intelligent, shrewd and hard working. He could also be devious when it suited his purpose. He considered inventing an elaborate excuse to explain his forgetfulness. Burt also possessed a sixth sense that allowed him to key into the feelings and emotions of others. That sixth sense was telling him that if he hoped to come through this fiasco relatively unscathed, he'd better tell the truth. He spoke softly, "Diane."

Diane blinked as her stare moved from blank to cognizant. "Yes?"

"You've been very quiet this evening. Is something wrong?" Maybe she would broach the subject of their anniversary and he wouldn't have to.

Diane pushed back a strand of blonde hair. "Dan Miller is going away to college in September."

Burt had no idea who Dan Miller was. "Is Dan a friend of B.J.'s?"

Diane smiled at the mention of her only son's name. "No, Dan Miller is the boy who does our yard work. Do you think I should try to find a replacement for him or hire a professional company to take over once he's gone?"

Burt didn't give a damn what she did about the yard. He bit back a sharp reply. "Hire a professional company," he said and waited for Diane to respond. When it became obvious that she had no such intentions, he added, "Happy anniversary and happy birthday, I have plans for us to celebrate tomorrow." There went golf and poker with the boys.

"That's nice but I won't be here tomorrow."

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If this had been anyone but Diane, Burt would have suspected some kind of get-even game. In her case he knew better. In many ways she was as naïve and as innocent as she'd been when he married her twenty years ago. "Where will you be?"

"I'm driving up to Raymonville tomorrow morning. Aunt Ida is having surgery Monday."

There was no love lost between Burt and Diane's Great Aunt Ida. The old woman had never forgiven him for seducing and impregnating Diane when she was only seventeen years old. "I'm sorry to hear that. Do you know what kind of surgery? Did Doctor Jennings call?"

Diane laid her knitting in the basket beside her chair. "Aunt Ida is having something called angioplasty. Sylvia Brannigan called."

Burton corrected, "You mean Sylvia O'Shea." Sylvia, Aunt Ida's next-door neighbor, had been married to Michael O'Shea for eighteen years and they had six children; still Diane insisted on referring to her as Sylvia Brannigan. "I hope Aunt Ida comes through the surgery okay." What else could he say? Aunt Ida was Diane's only living relative. "You can visit with Mother and Emma while you're there."

"If I have time I'll try to get over."

Burt reminded her sharply, "My mother and my sister live across the street from Aunt Ida, not across town."

"I know where Gladys and Emma live." Diane moved restlessly under his steady gaze. "I was on their front porch the first time I saw you."

Burt's recollections didn't match his wife's. "You and I met at a country club dance." She'd been a vision of loveliness as she extended her hand to him and said, "Mr. Carlisle, how are you?"

Diane shook her head. "That's when we were formally introduced. I saw you for the first time the summer I came to live with Aunt Ida. Sylvia, Emma and I were playing jacks on your front porch when you came up the steps and spoke to us. After you went inside Emma told me you were her brother and that you were seventeen-years-old and going away to college soon."

"I hope you were properly impressed," Burt teased, and then asked on a more serious note, "Will you be away long?"

"It may be a while," Diane answered. "I've arranged for a housekeeping service twice a week until further notice. You will have to remember to drop off and pick up your laundry and manage your own dinners unless you prefer eating out."

"I can cope," Burt snapped. He hadn't intended to speak sharply but finding out so suddenly that Diane would be gone for an extended period of time came as quite a shock. "In a much gentler tone he asked, "Why didn't you mention this earlier?"

"I should have," Diane replied. "I didn't want to spoil your dinner."

She was visibly upset. Until now, Burt had thought it was because he'd forgotten their anniversary. The realization that she'd been preoccupied and distant most of the evening because of worry about her aunt put a different light on the situation. Softly he whispered, "I'll miss you."

"And I'll miss you." Diane extended one hand in a pleading gesture. "I have to go."

Of course she did. Not only did Diane love her Aunt Ida, she felt beholden to her. But for Aunt Ida's intervention, Diane would have been shipped off to boarding school when her parents were killed in an automobile accident. Diane was ten-years-old when the accident occurred and her Great Aunt Ida was well into her fifties. Her parents' last will and testament made a friend of Diane's parents her guardian with provisions and instructions for their daughter to be enrolled in a prestigious girl's school in the East.

Aunt Ida would have none of that. She moved in with the force of a tornado and insisted that she be granted custody of her great niece. Ida Belle Stratton had been a moving and volatile force in the corporate world before her early retirement. She was well known for being shrewd, merciless and relentless. No one had ever gone up against her and won. The court system of Texas was no exception. After months of litigation, Ida won custody of Diane.

The ringing of the telephone brought Burt's wandering thoughts back to the present. He reached for the clanging instrument. "Hello."

His son's voice sounded on the other end of the line. "Dad - Happy anniversary, I'm sorry I didn't call sooner but I'm taking two classes this session and you know how accelerated college is in the summer."

Burt did know and he said so before asking, "How is school going?"

B.J. sighed. "Okay, I guess, but remind me never again to take a children's literature class during summer session. I've spent the last five weeks reading everything from nursery rhymes to Grimm's Fairy Tales."

Burt would never understand why a young man as gifted and intelligent as his son wanted to be an elementary school teacher. "You should have taken my advice and majored in engineering."

B.J.'s voice took on a belligerent note. "Dad, don't start." His tone softened. "Let me talk to Mom."

Burt handed the telephone to Diane. "It's your son."

Diane smiled as she pressed the receiver to her ear. "Hello sweetie-pie."

Aggravation itched through Burt. A mother should not address her nineteen-year-old son as sweetie-pie. He listened as Diane carried on an animated conversation with B.J.

"I understand. Thank you for the good wishes." After a brief pause, "I have some bad news," another pause, "No, nothing like that. It's Aunt Ida; she's scheduled to have surgery on Monday. I'm driving up to Raymonville tomorrow morning."

Burt listened with rising agitation. Was there anything more pointless than hearing only half a telephone conversation?

After a lengthy stretch of time, Diane protested, "You will do no such thing." There was another infuriating pause before she said, "You know that's impossible." Another stretch of silence and then, "I will, I promise. I love you too, goodbye." She hung up the phone and turning faced Burt. "I'm proud of our son. He's going to make a wonderful teacher."

Burt wanted to tell her B.J. would be wasting his time and his talents teaching nine-year-olds. This was not the time to resurrect old disagreements. "I'm missing the evening news." He aimed the TV remote toward a large flat-screened television that covered much of one end of the room. The screen sprang to life.

Diane asked, "Would you like a snack or something to drink?"

Burt shook his head in negation.

Diane stood and yawned. "Then I'll call it a night. I have to get up early tomorrow." At the doorway she paused, "Burt..."

Burt hit mute on his remote and turned his head in her direction. "Yes?"

Diane stared at him with an unreadable expression clouding the blue of her eyes. After a long moment she said, "Nothing, good night."

Burt watched her disappear down the hall with a vague uneasiness tightening his chest. He sat through fifteen minutes of the news, looking and not seeing, listening and not hearing, before switching off the TV and following Diane into her bedroom.

She'd once shared the master bedroom with him. Through the years his late hours, unpredictable schedule and frequent bouts with insomnia had caused her to take refuge in what was once the guest bedroom.

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She sat on a stool in front of her dressing table brushing her long blonde hair. After twenty years the sight of her in a thin night gown made his heart pound. "May I come in for a while?" He stood waiting for her response.

Diane laid her brush on the dressing table. "Please do."

Burt sat on the edge of the turned back bed. He was a man with a silver tongue and a superior intellect. Why then was it so difficult for him to speak honestly and openly to his wife? "I'm sorry I forgot our anniversary and your birthday. I know it's not an excuse but this Bennett Barnes murder trial is a tough one. It consumes so much of my time and what with Christine on maternity leave..." His voice trailed away. He was making excuses, and not very good ones at that.

"You don't have to apologize." Diane opened a drawer of her night stand, extracted a small brown box and held it out to him. "Happy anniversary."

Burt took the box and lifted the lid. Nestled in a bed of tissue paper was a finely tooled leather wallet. He swallowed over the lump in his throat. "Thank you."

"I hope it's okay." Diane picked up her brush. "I never know what to get for you. It seems you have everything."

"It's perfect." Burt replaced the lid and slipped the box into his suit coat pocket. "Damn it Diane, I'm sorry."

Diane put her brush on the table and moved quickly to sit beside him on the bed. "Don't be. It's all right." For the first time in a long time she put her arms around his waist. Her touch sent a shiver of warmth through his body. He wanted to take her in his arms and make love to her. He knew she'd submit to his advances. Damn it he wanted more than her passive surrender. He wanted what he'd once had, her passionate, insistent response; he wanted the assurance that she desired him as fervently as he wanted her. Quickly, he brought his emotions under control. "I'll go now. You have to get up early tomorrow." He broke her embrace by standing to his feet.

Diane folded her hands in her lap and stared down at them. "I'll be leaving before you're up in the morning. Maybe we should say goodbye now."

Her coldness froze Burt. What had happened to the fire that burned so brightly between them in the beginning? It was gone now. How slowly and inconspicuously it had died. Over the years, the flame had flickered to an ember. Left unattended that ember had died to ashes. Now there seemed to be nothing left except dust and regret. A dozen conflicting emotions surged through him. He took a step backward. "Goodbye, Diane, have a safe trip." He took another step backward.

"Goodbye, Burt, I'll call you tomorrow as soon as I arrive at Aunt Ida's."

Burt turned on his heel and walked away, feeling more alone than he'd felt in a long time.

Chapter 1

Diane fluffed Aunt Ida's pillows. "What would you like for breakfast?"

Ida Belle Stratton was a short plump woman who wore her seventy-eight years well. "I can come to the kitchen for breakfast."

Diane knew the futility of opposing her aunt; nevertheless, she argued. "Doctor Jennings says you should take it easy."

Aunt Ida sat on the side of the bed. "I've been taking it easy for a month." She pushed her feet into her slippers. "Get into the kitchen and make my pancakes. I'll be there shortly."

Diane persisted, "But Aunt Ida..."

"Will you stop treating me like an invalid and make my pancakes? I'd like some bacon too."

Diane said firmly, "No bacon." She was set to reinforce her declaration with sound nutritional facts when the telephone rang. Grabbing the noisy instrument she pressed it to her ear. Sylvia O'Shea's soprano rang out loud and clear. "How soon can you get over here?"

"Hello to you too, Sylvia." Diane chuckled but her heart was heavy. She'd expected – no, she'd hoped this call was from Burt. "If I run I can make it in about two minutes."

Sylvia snorted, "Don't be funny. I need your help."

Like old times Diane thought as memory pulled her back in time. Sylvia had concocted some wild plan and she needed Diane to help her carry it out. "You're not thinking of calling on Madame Hilda the Psychic or hoping I'll deliver a note to Bobby Jones?"

Sylvia laughed aloud. "I've outgrown wanting to know the future and I no longer have a crush on Bobby Jones." She sobered. "This is something else. When can I expect you?"

"I'll be over shortly after lunch."

"Can't you make it sooner than that?" Sylvia's impatience was showing. "Come over *for* lunch. I'll feed James early and have him down for a nap before you get here."

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James was Sylvia's youngest, a strapping four-year-old bundle of inquisitive energy.

"I'd love to," Diane said, "But I can't. I'm having lunch with Burt's mother and sister today."

Sylvia conceded defeat most ungraciously. "Oh, all right, but get here by three. That will give us thirty minutes before my brood starts coming home from school."

"I'll be there by three," Diane promised before hanging up the phone and turning toward the kitchen.

Aunt Ida called after her, "Was that Sylvia?"

Diane stopped and without turning said, "Yes."

"You thought it would be Burton," Aunt Ida said flatly. Then she asked, "When are you going to give up and call him?"

That was the one thing Diane couldn't do. "I called twice, once to tell him I'd arrived safely and once to say you'd come through your surgery and were out of danger." Burt's silence reinforced a fear that had plagued her for months. Was her husband having an affair? The signs were all there. He spent much of his time away from home, when he was in her presence he seemed detached and removed, their sex life was practically non-existent and he'd forgotten her birthday and their twentieth anniversary. A part of her argued that Burt was not the kind of man who had affairs. She should make allowances. Her husband was defending a man accused of pushing his wife down a flight of stairs. He had other clients also and a host of civic duties and responsibilities. Still, that nagging little doubt wouldn't go away.

Aunt Ida's voice impinged on her wandering thoughts. "Sooner or later you're going to have to face up to it."

Cautiously, Diane asked, "Face up to what?" Did Aunt Ida know? How could she? Diane hadn't breathed a word of her suspicions to a living soul.

"What ever is troubling you. Do you want to talk about it?"

Diane didn't. "I'll make those pancakes now." She hurried away before Aunt Ida could ask more questions.

Diane succeeded in pushing her fears to the back of her mind only to have them return later as she crossed the street and hurried up the steps of the Carlisle residence. Had Burt found someone else or had he simply grown tired of being married to a dull wife? She rang the doorbell and waited. Over the years, her husband had progressed from being a sharp, clever, ambitious young attorney to become a sophisticated, brilliant and well-known public figure. She, on the other hand, had only grown older. Emotionally she

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was still immature and needy. Intellectually she had never progressed past high school. Was it any wonder he'd grown bored with her?

Gladys Carlisle opened the door. Her henna-red hair was cut in the latest style. She wore a frilly blouse and a smart pants suit that complemented her petite figure. "Hello, dear, do come in." She stepped back and waited for Diane to enter.

Diane stepped from the warmth of a sunny autumn day and into the cold atmosphere of the Carlisle living room. Emma Carlisle sat in an arm chair near the door. It was hard to believe that these two women were mother and daughter. Emma was tall and angular. Her dark hair was pulled back from her face and fastened in a bun at the nape of her neck. Her dress was plain and loose fitting. She smiled and stood when Diane came into the room. "I'm glad you could make it. Come into the kitchen. I picked up food from the deli on my way home."

Diane and Gladys followed Emma into the kitchen. The table in the far corner was set with paper plates and strewn with paper bags and cardboard food containers.

Emma pulled out a chair and sat in it. "I remembered you like burgers and fries."

As a teenager, Diane had loved hamburgers and French fries. It had been years since she'd eaten either. She carefully refrained from saying so.

Gladys sat across from her daughter. "I hope you brought me a salad."

Emma scooted a covered plastic bowl toward her mother and pointed to the only empty chair as she asked Diane, "How's your Aunt Ida?"

Diane sat and scooted her chair nearer the table. "You know how antsy Aunt Ida is. I can't keep her in bed." She opened a paper bag and looked inside. It held a fat burger and greasy fries.

Gladys opened her bowl and dumped dressing over its contents. "She will be even antsier when she finds out Sylvia's brother bought the house next door to her. Now she's flanked on either side by Brannigans."

Diane's head came up in surprise. "Sean bought the house next door to Aunt Ida?" Sean was Sylvia's twin brother. He owned a lovely home three streets over on Primrose Avenue.

"Not Sean, I'm talking about her older brother, Dennis. He is the one who bought the house next to your aunt."

"I thought Dennis lived in Chicago." Diane took the wraps from her greasy hamburger and put it on a paper plate.

"He did until last week," Gladys replied.

Emma wagged a finger in her mother's direction. "No shop-talk while Diane's here. I want to hear about Burt and B.J."

Gladys asked indignantly, "Since when is it shop talk to tell Diane that Dennis Brannigan bought the house next door to her aunt?"

Emma retorted, "Since it won't stop there. With you it never does."

Gladys pointed her plastic fork in Emma's direction. "If you don't want to talk about Dennis Brannigan, say so. Lord knows we will understand. Being left at the altar at nineteen is not a pleasant experience."

Emma flinched but she stood her ground. "It's better than having a man who waits until he has two kids and then deserts them along with his wife." She pushed a crust of bread into her mouth and glared at her mother.

David Carlisle, Burt and Emma's father had vanished from the scene when Emma was just a baby leaving Gladys with two children, a mountain of debts and a failing real estate business. Even though she knew very little about real estate and even less about running a business, Gladys was undaunted. She rushed in where older and wiser souls would have feared to tread. Today she was the sole owner of Raymonville Reality, Inc., the most successful real estate company in five counties.

Emma worked part time in her mother's real estate office through her high school years. After her break up with Dennis Brannigan, she became a full-time employee.

Diane wanted no part of this quarrel. She adroitly changed the subject. "B.J. made the dean's list last semester."

"He's like his father," Gladys said, "Clever and personable. He will go far." she pushed her salad bowl from her. "I've been reading about Burt in the newspapers. This Bennett Barnes case has gained nationwide attention and put Burt in the national spotlight."

The conversation moved from talk of Burt's accomplishments to more questions about B.J. before drifting back to speculation about the real estate market in Raymonville. When Diane glanced at her watch it was after one o'clock. She pushed back her chair. "I have to run. Aunt Ida is expecting her bridge club at two and Sylvia is expecting me at three."

"How is Sylvia?" Emma asked as she put cartons and wrappers into a garbage bag. She set the bag on the table and stared into space. "Remember when we were in grade school and called ourselves the three musketeers?"

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Recalling those happy days made Diane smile. "We were going to open an animal shelter and take care of all the stray cats and dogs in Raymonville."

Emma shook her head. "And look at us now. Sylvia has six children, you have a famous husband and I have..." She tied the top of the trash bag with a flourish. "I have to get back to the office."

Diane left her luncheon, if it could be called that, feeling restless and uneasy and not knowing why.

Making ready for Aunt Ida's bridge club soon drove all other thoughts from her mind. This was their first visit since Aunt Ida's surgery and her aunt was as excited as a child. It was half past three before Diane made good her escape and walked across the lawn toward Sylvia's house.

She arrived at the front door as a yellow school bus pulled to the curb and unloaded Sylvia's seventeen-year-old son, Nate and her fourteen-year-old twin daughters Susan and Sarah. The noisy trio was followed by ten-year-old Timothy. Eight-year-old Amber brought up the rear. The group called greetings to Diane as they raced up the walkway.

An emotion dangerously near envy moved through Diane. She had wanted more children after B.J. but Burt hadn't. When she dared argue with him about his unilateral decision, he had, without bothering to consult her, had a vasectomy. Diane waved and returned their greetings.

Later she helped Sylvia dispense snacks and waited as her friend sent Nate and the twins upstairs to do homework and settled Timothy, Amber and James in the den in front of the TV. As the blare of loud music filled the room, Sylvia nodded her head toward the kitchen.

Minutes later Diane sat at a cluttered kitchen table, sipped tea and watched Sylvia dunk a tea bag in a cup of hot water. Time had changed her friend. The trim, bouncy teenager of twenty years ago had been replaced by a chubby, contented woman who still had the ability to brighten a room by her mere presence.

Sylvia said, "You're staring. That's rude."

Diane shook her head. "I'm wondering what you're up to this time."

Sylvia's voice was as prim as a child's. "I want to invite you to my dinner party Saturday night."

Diane said, "You could have done that over the phone."

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Sylvia puffed out her cheeks and blew air from her mouth. "You always were a smart ass. This is something special. It's a welcome home party for Dennis. Sean will be here too."

Diane said, "I haven't seen Sean in years. How is he?"

Sylvia squeezed her tea bag with her spoon before laying it on her saucer. "Not so well these days. He can't seem to get over Norma's death."

Diane sympathized. "Losing a spouse must be terrible."

"It has been for Sean. Maybe Dennis moving back to Raymonville will help." Sylvia grimaced. "God only knows what I'd do if I lost Michael." She brightened suddenly. "Say you'll come. It will be just like old times."

Diane declared, "I'll be here. I wouldn't miss it."

"After dinner I want you to keep Sean occupied." Before Diane could voice a protest Sylvia held up one hand. "I'll take care of Michael. That will leave Dennis and Emma free to get reacquainted all over again."

Diane couldn't believe what she was hearing. "You invited Emma and Dennis to the same dinner party?"

"I haven't invited Emma yet..." Sylvia's voice trailed away.

"In case you've forgotten," Diane intoned sarcastically, "Eighteen years ago Dennis left Emma standing at the altar, literally, and took off for parts unknown."

Sylvia argued, "That wasn't the way it happened, exactly."

"That's the way Emma remembers it exactly." Diane added with conviction, "Emma won't come."

Sylvia raised a disdainful eyebrow. "Let me worry about Emma. Will you come and will you keep Sean occupied?" Before Diane could respond she added, "And will you make one of your famous banana butterscotch cakes for dessert?"

The woman was incorrigible. Diane agreed but reluctantly. "All right, but it's against my better judgment."

Chapter 2

George Walters leaned back in his chair, put his feet on Burt's desk and crossed one ankle over the other. "Well Burt old buddy, you really pulled one off this time. It took the jury less than three hours to find Bennett Barnes not guilty. That's quite a feather in your cap."

Burt smiled at his old friend and business partner. "It also means big bucks for our firm."

"That too," George agreed, "But for now you should enjoy your moment of triumph."

Burt didn't feel triumphant. He felt deflated and depressed. "I need to concentrate on answering some of my back mail and introduce myself to my wife again."

George dropped his feet to the floor and leaned forward in his chair. "You can also think on this. Sylvester Manning called this morning. He wants you to get in touch with him." Burt's blank stare elicited further explanation. "Sylvester Manning has motels in every state in the union. His son Tommy Manning has been charged with vehicular manslaughter. He wants our firm to take the case and he wants you to be in charge."

Burt's mood brightened. "I'll call him this afternoon." A new case, a new challenge - that was what he needed to bolster his sagging spirits.

George urged, "Call him now."

As Burt reached for his telephone, it rang. He drew back his hand. "Christine will get it. Tell me more about the charges against Tommy Manning."

"He's charged with the death of his teenage girlfriend. They were..."

Christine interrupted by knocking and sticking her head through the door. "Your mother is on the phone, Mr. Carlisle. She says it's important."

George stood and waved his hand. "We can talk more over lunch."

"Sure," Burt answered. He put the receiver to his ear. As his office door closed behind George, he said, "Mother, this is a pleasant surprise."

Gladys's irate voice blasted into his ear. "Prepare yourself for an *unpleasant* surprise. Emma eloped last night with Dennis Brannigan."

Burt got a tighter grasp on the receiver. "I didn't know Dennis was back in Raymonville."

"There are obviously quite a few things you don't know," Gladys replied caustically.

"Calm down Mother and get a grip." Burt didn't like the idea of his sister running off and marrying Dennis Brannigan, but there was little he could do about it after the fact. "Things like this have a way of working themselves out."

"Oh, do they?" Gladys snapped before heaving a theatrical sigh. "It never would have happened in the first place if some people I know had minded their own business."

Burt reminded his mother, "Emma is a mature woman and responsible for her own behavior."

"And is Diane a mature adult? Is she responsible for her behavior?"

Burt held onto his irritation. His mother was hurt and angry. She was apt to lash out at those around her. "Don't drag Diane into this."

"Diane is already 'into this' up to her neck. She conspired with Sylvia and Sean to get Dennis and Emma back together."

Burt reproved, "Mother, please." He asked, on a much brighter note, "Have you heard the latest news? The jury found Bennett Barnes not guilty of killing his wife."

"Is some court case all you can think about?" Gladys answered her own question, "Obviously it is. While you are busy saving a complete stranger your sister is eloping with a man who broke her heart once and your wife is cavorting around with an old flame."

"Don't be ridiculous," Burt said, but his heart gave an uncomfortable lurch. He tagged his statement with a querulous question, "Are you referring to Sean Brannigan?" Sean was Diane's steady boyfriend twenty years ago when Burt appeared on the scene and quickly vanquished him.

Gladys sneered, "You catch on fast." Her voice pitched to a wail. "Emma is threatening to quit her job at the real estate office and become a full-time housewife. Where does that leave me?"

Burt was beginning to suspect that his mother's objection to Emma's sudden marriage was for all the wrong reasons. "You can find someone to take Emma's place."

"That's easy for you to say."

"And it will be easy for you to do."

Gladys asked, over a sob, "When you're here next week will you talk to your sister?"

Inane Burt asked, "What do you want me to say to her?"

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"How the hell do I know? You're the orator in the family."

"I hadn't planned to come up next week," He hoped by next week Diane would be home, where she belonged and his life could get back to normal. "But I'll try to arrange to take a week-end off soon."

"You don't plan to be here for Thanksgiving?" Surprise tilted Gladys's voice upward. "B.J. is coming and..." She moaned, "Oh Lord, don't tell me you and Diane are separated."

"Is Thanksgiving next week?" He was out of touch with the world around him.

"The last I heard it hadn't been postponed."

"I'll be there. I'll talk to Emma. In the meantime try not to worry." Burt hung up the phone and rubbed his hand across his brow. Diane cavorting with Sean Brannigan – That was absurd. Diane didn't cavort.

Over lunch, Burt explained to George his need for a short vacation. "I can be in my office until noon Wednesday and back the next Monday morning."

"Go ahead," George answered, "You've earned some time off, but call Sylvester Manning before you go."

"I'll do that," Burt promised, and he did. It was a lengthy conversation that consumed the better part of two hours. He spent the remainder of the afternoon catching up on the backlog of correspondence that had collected over the past weeks. It was well past five o'clock before he closed his computer. As he prepared to call it a day a disturbing thought impinged. Diane had neither called nor written him in over a month. He lifted his telephone receiver and punched in numbers. After several rings Aunt Ida's husky voice barked, "Hello."

Burt demanded, "Let me speak to Diane." As an afterthought, he added a sincere "Please."

"Diane's not home," Aunt Ida replied. Then she asked, "Is this Burton?"

The old woman knew who he was. "Yes it is. When do you expect Diane?"

"She's working late tonight so I'm not sure."

It hadn't taken Diane long to become involved in some volunteer service project. "I hope she's not over doing it with her charity work."

"It's not a volunteer task," Aunt Ida informed him in that supercilious tone of voice that he detested. "Diane is now gainfully employed at Sean's Home and Garden Store."

Burt snapped, "When she gets home ask her to call me."

"Very well, Burton." Before Burt could say more Aunt Ida hung up.

Burt went home, took a shower, ate a sandwich and waited for his wife to call. It was almost nine o'clock before the telephone rang. He snatched the receiver and held it to his ear. "Burton Carlisle speaking."

Diane said, "Aunt Ida left a message that you called."

"I did several hours ago."

"I saw the six o'clock news. You won your case, congratulations."

"Thank you. I spoke to Mother earlier today. She's upset about Emma's sudden marriage." Burton Carlisle was not a patient man. His fought an overpowering urge to demand from Diane an explanation. How dare she take a job in another town without first consulting him? His better judgment said that would not be wise. "Aunt Ida tells me you're a working woman now."

Diane murmured, "Yes."

Burt waited, expecting her to put forward, if not an explanation, at least a justification. After a spate of silence it became apparent that she was not about to offer either. "I'm driving up to Raymonville tomorrow afternoon. I'll be there for Thanksgiving and through Sunday."

Diane seemed surprised. "You haven't taken time off from work in years."

Much more than geographical distance separated Burt and his wife. "Mother says B.J. will be there."

"He's driving up Tuesday after his last class."

Burton, who was usually so adept at moving conversations along, could think of nothing more to say. "I'll see you tomorrow. Goodbye, Diane."

"Drive carefully."

Burt hung up the phone and sat for a long time staring into space. When he did retire it was not to his own room but to Diane's. Lying atop the covers, he pulled a pillow into his arms and closed his eyes as recollections came floating back on the trailing mist of a twenty-one-year-old memory. Once more he was standing on the periphery of the country club dance floor wondering why he'd let his mother talk him into attending a boring Saturday night country club dance. George Walters stood next to him.

Leaning over, he whispered in George's ear, "Let's get out of here."

Looking back now Burt realized that the next moment was the most defining one of his life.

Before George could answer, Diane floated across the dance floor in the arms of an arrogant young pup that he recognized as Sean Brannigan. She wore a gauzy ball gown of shimmering white. A wide blue satin belt hugged her slim waist. She quite literally took his breath away. "Who is that?" he asked on a caught breath.

George chuckled, "That's Ida Stratton's niece. And wipe that lustful look off your face. She's jail bait."

Burt couldn't stop staring. "Do you know her?"

George nodded. "She's an acquaintance, why?"

Burt commanded, "Introduce me to her."

George snorted. "Are you crazy?"

Burt insisted, "I have to meet her."

George grabbed Burt's arm and pulled him to one side. "Listen to me friend, the girl is seventeen-years-old, she's still in high school and she's Ida Stratton's niece. Besides that she has a steady boyfriend." He tightened his hold on Burt's arm. "You had the right idea the first time. Let's get out of here."

Burt didn't budge. "Either you introduce me or I will introduce myself."

George agreed but grudgingly. "On one condition, after the introduction you and I clear out of here fast."

Burt had no idea of leaving. Pulling his arm free he headed in the direction of the dancing couple.

George caught up to him and pulled him to a stop. "Okay, Romeo, I'll introduce you but it's against my better judgment."

Burt not only met Diana, he danced with her, not once but several times. After they had shared an exceptionally slow waltz with the lights turned low, Sean cornered Burt near the back entrance.

"I'm warning you, mister, don't ask my girl to dance again."

Burt ignored the younger man and walked away to ask Diane for another dance.

By the time the evening was over, he knew he'd made a life-long enemy of Sean Brannigan. That didn't matter. What did matter was he'd found the woman he wanted to marry.

He yawned and rolled to his side. He'd never imagined love could strike that suddenly. He'd never dreamed it would be such an intense and all-consuming emotion. The memories blurred and then receded as sleep claimed him.

The next few days passed in swift succession. Besides wading through a mountain of paperwork, Burt met with Sylvester Manning once and with Tommy Manning twice. He gave an interview to a local newspaper, spoke at a Rotary luncheon and made a cameo appearance on a national TV network. By the time Wednesday noon rolled around he was more than ready to close shop and head for Raymonville.

On an impulse he decided to travel a state highway instead of fighting the traffic on the interstate. The route he chose was longer but much more scenic. He arrived in Raymonville as twilight was deepening to darker shades of night. At the intersection of Fifth and Main he turned left and drove until he reached Larkspur Avenue. Swinging right, he slowed as he reached Aunt Ida's house.

Burton prided himself on being a practical and pragmatic man but there was something about coming home that always left him feeling nostalgic and a little melancholy. He had grown up on Larkspur Avenue. The street held so many memories. As he pulled into Aunt Ida's drive he noticed that B.J.'s little Toyota was parked at the curb in front of his mother's house.

A pulse of happiness beat through him as he pulled his key from the ignition, grabbed his overnight bag and got out of the car. He was halfway up the walk when Diane opened the front door. "You're late. I had begun to worry."

Diane was not a beautiful woman by any standard measure of beauty. Her face was ordinary and her figure slight. She did possess an elegance of carriage and an air of serenity that set her apart and made her distinctive without being different. It was that elegance and that serenity, coupled with her child-like innocence, that had first drawn Burt to her. Those qualities shone forth now, warming his heart and quickening his pace. "I took Highway 181 instead of driving the interstate." Stepping onto the porch, he dropped his bag and took his wife into his arms. "I missed you."

Diane gave his arm an affectionate pat on his back before breaking the embrace. "Did you?" Holding the door open, she motioned with her hand. "Come in. Have you had dinner?"

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Burt picked up his bag and went inside. "Yes, I ate at that little German restaurant in Pilot's Point." He set his bag on the floor and looked around the comfortable living room. "Where is Aunt Ida?"

Diane shut and locked the door. "She's in bed. She tires so easily these days." She sank into an easy chair and pointed toward the couch. "Would you like to sit down?"

Burt sat and crossed one leg over the other. "As I drove in I saw B.J.'s car at Mother's. Will he be over later?"

Diane's teeth worried her bottom lip. "He's staying the night with his grandmother." Burt stirred uneasily. Diane had conspired to be alone with him. Was it to break unpleasant news or did she want to spend an uninterrupted evening with him? He would like to think it was the latter. "Then we have some time alone, that's nice."

"We do need to talk."

Talk was not what Burt had on his mind. "We will later." He vaulted to his feet and stooped to grasp his over night bag. "Where should I put my suitcase?"

Diane evaded looking directly at him. "I prepared the guest room for you."

Burt felt the sharp sting of rejection. Dropping his suitcase, he sat once more on the couch. "Maybe we *should* talk first. There are obviously some things you want to tell me and I have some things to say to you too."

Diane closed her eyes and then opened them slowly to meet his riveting gaze. "I'm sure you do." She straightened her shoulders. "I'm listening."

How did he go about telling his wife that he'd missed her and that he ached to hold her in his arms? "You've been away for sometime." He felt as gauche as a schoolboy. "Some of my past behaviors have been...I need to explain."

Diane twisted her wedding band around on her finger. "There is no need to explain. I've suspected for some time."

Burt's brows drew together in a quizzical expression. "Suspected what?"

"I'm not a complete idiot. Who is she?"

Surprise siphoned the blood from Burt's face. "Who is who?"

Diane looked up, her eyes flashing blue fire. "The woman you're having an affair with."

Chapter 3

Diane cringed as her husband leaped to his feet and exploded with the force of an erupting volcano. "I've spent the last twenty years taking care of you and trying to make you happy and now you accuse me of having an affair?" His eyes narrowed speculatively, a dangerous glint in their depths. "Who put that stupid notion in your head?" With his fists clenched at his side, he took several steps in her direction. "Was it Aunt Ida or Sean Brannigan?"

Diane shrank from his bold advance as the ashes of an old memory rekindled to a flickering flame. Only once before had she seen him this angry. That scene from the past played through her mind now with vivid clarity. The day after B.J.'s fifth birthday she came into the living room to find Burt scanning a newspaper. She sat beside him and chose her words carefully.

"Judy Morris is pregnant again."

Burt flipped his paper and said without looking her way, "Too bad."

Diane laid her hand on her husband's arm. "No, it's not. Judy is happy, so is Tom."

Burt's answer was an inaudible grunt.

Diane took a deep breath and forged ahead. "It would be nice if we had another child, a girl maybe, to grow up with B.J."

Burt laid his paper aside and turned to face her. "We have been over this a hundred times. You know how I feel about adoption."

Diane recalled the horrified look on Burt's face when she'd suggested they have another child by artificial insemination. Standing, he lashed out at her with words that vilified and then crucified before striding angrily from the room. She said now with more boldness than she felt, "Sit down."

To her complete surprise, after a few struggling moments Burt took a few steps backward and dropped onto the couch, his anger vanishing as quickly as it had appeared. "I had no idea you harbored such thoughts."

Quite unintentionally she had wounded him deeply. Diane's heart melted. She loved this man and she had completely misjudged him. "I'm sorry."

Burt bowed his head. "You should be." When he lifted his face there were tears in his eyes. "Have I failed you that completely?"

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Burt's lashing out at her, Diane could handle, she'd expected as much. His willingness to accept blame for what was partially her mistake was more than she could bear. It crossed her mind that he could be manipulating her. Shame drove that thought from her head. "It's not your fault, it's mine. I should have said something to you long ago." He looked so defeated. "How can I make amends?"

Burt wiped unashamedly at a tear. "Diane, darling, I'm the one who should make amends." Coming across the room, he hauled her to her feet and took her into his arms. His breath was an erotic puff in her ear. "I can't do that sleeping in the guest room." His kiss was sweet and gentle. It provoked old memories and stirred new desires. Without the slightest hint of reluctance, Diane surrendered.

Burt swept her into his arms and carried her to her bedroom. Just like some romantic scene from an old movie, Diane thought as she laid her head against the strong wall of his chest. Once inside the room, Burt set her on her feet and kissed her once more, this time with fire and passion. His hands shook as he undressed her and laid her on the bed.

Diane watched spellbound as he stood and began the hasty process of shedding his clothes; how handsome he was, and how virile. His nearness stirred an old memory. The first time they made love had been--for her--a revelation. She had not dreamed such fiery sensations could claim her body while disengaging her mind. The cataclysmic experience left her feeling spent and euphoric, and at the same time wanting more.

Burt kicked his underwear toward a corner and came down beside her. Taking her in his arms, he kissed the tremulous length of her parted lips. "It's been so long." He began an erotic exploration of her body.

Diane caught fire. She ran her hands across his shoulders and down his back. His skin was warm and moist. Her heart jolted and her pulses pounded. "It's been too long, much too long."

Burt caressed her with fiery tenderness. A delicious shudder heated her body. Her response was swift and instinctive. She arched her body upward and moaned deep in her throat.

Burt made love to her. His passion was surprisingly restrained. He explored her body with loving tenderness.

Diane responded with a rising sense of urgency. A litany of longing played through her body. She clung to him and cried his name over and over as they came together in a firestorm of desire and need before a shower of brilliant colors burst inside her head and she went spinning into a world of pure sensation.

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Afterward lying in Burt's arms with the warmth of his body enveloping her, Diane felt more complete and at peace than she had in years. Her last thought before the first sweet sleep of night claimed her was, maybe it wasn't too late after all.

~

The rays of a weak November sun shining through her window woke Diane. She turned to stare at the sleeping man beside her. In repose he looked innocent and vulnerable. She reminded herself that he was neither. She would be wise to remember that. Slipping from bed, she pushed all negative thoughts to the back of her mind, dressed and hurried to the kitchen.

B.J. and Aunt Ida sat at the kitchen table sipping coffee and chatting amiably. B.J. stood when she entered. "Good morning sleepyhead." He kissed her cheek in greeting. "Sit down. I'll bring you coffee."

Diane sat in the chair next to Aunt Ida and watched her son move gracefully toward the urn on the end of the cabinet. How handsome he was and how much he resembled his father.

She didn't realize she'd spoken those words aloud until Aunt Ida replied, "In physical appearance yes but thank God he didn't inherit Burt's cold disposition and insatiable drive to dominate." She patted Diane's hand. "The child has your sweet nature and gentle spirit."

B.J. came across the floor carrying a cup of steaming coffee in one hand and a pitcher of cream in the other. "I'm not a baby. Stop talking about me as if I don't understand what you're saying." He set the coffee in front of Diane, put the pitcher in the middle of the table and sat across from his mother.

Diane poured cream into her coffee. Aunt Ida was right; her son was both gentle and unassuming. B.J. was right too. He was a man in every sense of the word. Recollections from last night's encounter with Burt played through her head. Burt was not always cold and domineering.

B.J.'s calling her name cut across her straying thoughts. "Mom, what are we going to do?"

Diane blinked, "About what?"

"About Grandma Gladys, what else? She refuses to come here for Thanksgiving dinner if Aunt Emma and her new husband are here."

Aunt Ida took a sip of coffee. "She will come around as soon as she realizes there is nothing else she can do." She cut her eyes in Diane's direction. "I'm speaking from experience."

Diane put her arm around her aunt's frail shoulders. "I gave you a hard time. I'm sorry." Aunt Ida must have been at her wit's end when she eloped with Burt the moment she turned eighteen years old.

Aunt Ida smiled. "You did have your moments but having you here with me through your growing up years was worth any heartache you caused later."

Diane was reminded anew how much she owed the frail old woman sitting beside her and how much she loved the stubborn old dear.

Burt's voice boomed out into the room. "Good morning all." His tall figure filled the doorway. His commanding presence radiated out into the room and charged the atmosphere.

Aunt Ida snorted, "So you finally decided to get out of bed."

B.J. turned and without bothering to stand said, "Hi, Dad."

Diane jumped to her feet. "Sit down; I'll get your coffee."

Burt held up one hand. "I can serve myself." He filled a cup and sat across from Aunt Ida. A pall of silence fell over the little group.

Burt dumped sugar into his coffee. "Did I interrupt something?"

B.J. explained, "We were talking about Grandma Gladys. She refuses to come for Thanksgiving dinner because Aunt Emma and her new husband will be here."

If anyone could sway Gladys, it would be her son. Diane laid her hand on Burt's arm. "Will you talk to her and see if you can change her mind?"

Burt's brows lifted in surprise. "You invited Dennis Brannigan here for Thanksgiving dinner?"

Diane corrected, "I invited your sister's husband here for Thanksgiving dinner."

"Wasn't that a little thoughtless? You know how Mother feels about the Brannigan family."

Before Diane could answer, Aunt Ida intervened. "How Gladys feels about the Brannigans is not a concern in this house. How Diane feels about her old friends is."

Diane stood and pushed her chair back with one foot. She had to stop this spat before it escalated into a free-for-all brawl between her aunt and her husband. "Come along Aunt Ida, you should rest before lunch."

"I haven't had breakfast yet," Aunt Ida complained.

"I'll bring you something on a tray." Diane helped Aunt Ida to her feet.

B.J. stood and sent his father a condemning look. "I'll help Aunt Ida to her room."

Diane pushed down her aggravation. "Thank you, sweetie-pie." The moment B.J. and Aunt Ida were through the door, she asked Burt, "Will you talk to your mother?"

"Must you call our grown son sweetie-pie?"

"Don't change the subject."

Burt leaned back in his chair. "You want me to talk to Mother. Mother wants me to talk to Emma. I don't want to get involved. What I *do* want is for you and me to go home where we belong."

Diane seldom disagreed with Burt. This time she felt she must. "You are involved; Gladys and Emma are your family." Old doubts that had receded into the background after last night's bout of lovemaking surfaced with sudden impact. Did she 'belong' at home with Burt? She wasn't sure anymore.

Burt shifted in his chair. "Mother said you conspired with Sylvia and Sean to bring Emma and Dennis together again. She's not happy about that."

Diane realized now, after the fact, that she'd angered Gladys. "I had no idea your mother would react so negatively to Emma marrying Dennis." She hadn't realized either that Emma would elope with Dennis one day after Sylvia's dinner party.

Burt was on his feet and heading for the door. "It's immature to act on impulse before you weigh the consequences. I suspect you were swayed by Sean and Sylvia. You should learn to think things through, set a course and steer it regardless of what others say." He paused in the doorway. "I'll go over and talk to Mother. Pack your things we're going home early in the morning." With those words he was out the door and gone.

As Diane prepared a sumptuous Thanksgiving dinner, Burt's words reverberated through her head like a resounding echo. He had offered good advice. It was time she grew up. She would consider her options, reflect on the consequences and not be persuaded by the arguments of others. She had so many things to think about, so many decisions to make and such a short length time to accomplish those demanding tasks.

Despite Burt's pleadings, Gladys steadfastly refused to celebrate Thanksgiving with her family. He returned thirty minutes later wearing a fierce scowl. "My mother is impossible." Lifting his head, he sniffed the air. "Something smells delicious."

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"It's roasting turkey," Diane told him and then asked, "Would you like more coffee or some breakfast?"

Burt shook his head. "No thanks."

"Then sit down and keep me company." They needed to talk. This seemed the perfect time and the perfect place.

"Later," Burt promised. "Now I have work to do. George is expecting me to call. I need to contact a client and do some research. Is it okay if I set up my laptop in the guest room?"

"Of course, but can't it wait until you get back to the city?"

Burt said as he hurried away. "Procrastination is the thief of time."

B.J. came into the kitchen as Burt disappeared down the hall. "Dad should slow down." He sat in a chair and studied his mother. "You're looking well." He jumped to his feet. "Tell me what to do to help."

"You can set the dining room table; use Aunt Ida's good china."

"How many places?"

"Six," Diane replied. B.J.'s troubled glance made her add, "Don't worry, Grandma Gladys will come around eventually. Meanwhile we can enjoy Aunt Emma and Uncle Dennis's company."

B.J. lifted an eyebrow. "Should I call Mr. Brannigan – Dennis, uncle? I hardly know him."

Diane lifted the turkey from the oven. "That's your choice to make. I think Aunt Emma would be pleased if you did."

B.J. moved toward the dining room. "If it pleases Aunt Emma, Uncle Dennis it is."

Dinner began in a strained atmosphere. Diane had strategically placed Burt at the head of the table with Emma to his left and B.J. to his right. Dennis sat to Emma's left and Aunt Ida to B.J.'s right. She sat at the other end, near the kitchen. Despite her repeated efforts to initiate talk, conversation was stiff and sparse.

B.J., bless him, broke the ice when he said, "Hey, Uncle Dennis, pass the mashed potatoes."

Dennis's face wreathed into a bright smile. As he handed B.J. the potatoes, he asked, "What do you think of the Cowboy's chances this year?"

By the time they had completed the meal even Burt was laughing and cracking jokes.

It was well after four o'clock in the afternoon before Dennis and Emma said reluctant good-byes and departed. Shortly after that, Aunt Ida went to her room to rest and B.J. loaded a plate with food and took it across the street to his grandmother.

Diane was putting dishes in the dishwasher when Burt came to stand beside her. "Tell me what to do to help."

This had to be a first, Burt offering to help in the kitchen. "You don't have to do that."

"I want to do it. The sooner this mess is cleared away, the sooner we can start home."

Diane could think of no good way to deliver bad news. Straightening, she stared at her husband. "I'm not going back to the city with you."

Chapter 4

Burt's head snapped back as if his wife had struck him a physical blow. "How much longer do you plan to stay here?"

Diane laid her thumbs on her cheeks and splayed her fingers across her brow. "I don't know." Dropping her hands she pleaded, "Please, sit down. We need to talk."

Burt's anger flared. "You don't know?" The words shot from his mouth with white-hot speed. "Are we talking days, weeks, months?"

Diane sat in a kitchen chair and chewed her thumbnail. "I don't..." Suddenly, defiantly, she raised her head. "Please try to understand. I have nothing there to go back to."

Anxiety was replacing Burt's anger. He argued with more confidence than he felt, "You have me."

Tears glazed Diane's eyes. "Do I?"

Burt sat in the chair beside his wife and took her hand in his. "You know you do." Did she still think he was having an affair? He could soon lay that silly notion to rest. "On our son's life, I swear that I have never been unfaithful to you." When she didn't reply, he demanded, "Do you believe me?"

"You simply do not understand." The look of sadness that clouded the blue of her eyes broke his heart and made him more anxious than he'd been in years.

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Burt pressed her fingertips to his lips. "Come home, we can work this out." Did she want him to beg? He would do that if it would bring her back to him. Sliding from his chair, he knelt before her. "I love you, Diane."

Diane pulled her hand from his grasp. "I know you do, but that's no longer enough."

Pain pushed Burt to his feet. Her words struck him like a blow from an open hand. Never before had he felt so inadequate or so defenseless. He covered his deep hurt with a façade of cold implacability. "Perhaps you're the one who's having the affair. Mother said you were cavorting with Sean Brannigan." He cringed inwardly, waiting for Diane to deny his accusation.

She didn't. Instead, she stood and asked, in a cold remote voice, "Did you believe her?"

Burt thought, *never in a million years. I know you love me just as deeply and as truly as I love you.* He said, "Not then, but now I'm beginning to wonder."

Diane walked back to the dishwasher. "Good-bye, Burt. Have a safe trip home."

Burt's better judgment dictated that he should stay and try to work through this situation. His pride argued differently. If his love was not enough, what else did he have to offer? In less than five minutes, he had detoured to the bedroom, thrown his clothes into his suitcase, collected his laptop from the guest bedroom and slammed out the front door.

Burt pulled onto the interstate with the fire of anger coursing through his veins. After all these years, his wife was rejecting him. A nagging voice in the back of his head taunted, *she's leaving you for another man.* He swore aloud, his imprecations filling the air around him. A chilling recollection taunted him. Once long ago, Sean Brannigan had promised revenge. After all these years, had he gotten around to exacting it?

As he sped along his anger receded to be replaced by some semblance of reason. Diane was being influenced by others. In time she would come to her senses. The taunting little voice sneered, *that's a specious argument.* Burt snarled, "Shut up damn you." Good God, he was talking to himself. Pushing down on the accelerator he sped around an eighteen wheeler.

~

Over the next few days Burt relived the scene in Aunt Ida's kitchen at least a dozen times. Nothing Diane had said or done made any sense unless... Each winding avenue of reason he pursued brought him back to the same crossroads of conclusion. His wife had found someone else. The next logical question was why? For that query he could find no logical answer.

Burt arrived at his office early Monday morning. He had scarcely settled behind his desk when George charged into the room carrying a large manila folder. He closed the door,

sat in the chair near Burt's desk and opened it before saying, "I'm glad you're back. Did you have a nice vacation?"

Burt was reluctant to tell his old friend that his vacation was anything but nice. "It was so-so."

"Too bad," George replied. He scanned the contents of the folder and then announced, "At the time of his accident Tommy Manning's blood alcohol level was .12. He's been charged with DUI manslaughter."

Burt grimaced. "That means to save him we will have to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the accident could have happened even if the kid hadn't been intoxicated."

"And that won't be easy. The police report is in here." George closed the folder and laid it on Burt's desk. "You can look at it and tell me how you want to proceed."

Abruptly Burt announced, "Diane refused to come back to the city with me. I think she's seeing another man."

George's eyes opened wide in surprise. "My God, Burt what happened?"

Burt shrugged. "Damned if I know." He opened a desk drawer and rummaged around inside searching for an antacid. "My breakfast is talking back to me." He popped the disk into his mouth.

George leaned forward and studied Burt with sudden concern. "You look like death warmed over. Are you ill?"

If heart sick was an illness Burt reasoned he might be terminal. "I'm stressed and my insomnia is back."

"How long has it been since you had a physical exam?"

Burt couldn't remember the last time he'd been in doctor's office. "I'm not sick."

George refused to be appeased. "I can't have you getting that way either, not with the Tommy Manning trial scheduled for the first of next year."

Burt was touched by George's concern even though it was obviously motivated by self-interest. "I'll be all right as soon as this mess with Diane is settled and Mother gets over her tantrum." George's raised eyebrow made him add. "She's upset about Emma marrying Dennis Brannigan." He remembered, belatedly, that he'd promised his mother he'd talk to Emma. After his quarrel with Diane, he'd forgotten all about that promise.

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George stood. "There's a doctor on the third floor of the building. I'll have Christine make an appointment for you to see him as soon as possible." He backed toward the door. "Promise me you will go down and let him have a look at you."

Burt promised even though he thought it was a foolish waste of time. Once George was out the door he reached for the telephone and dialed the number of Raymonville Realty.

For once luck was with him. Emma answered the phone. "Raymonville Realty, Emma Brannigan speaking. May I help you?"

Burt leaned back in his chair and put his feet on his desk. "Emma, this is Burt."

Without bothering to say hello, Emma snapped, "If you called to ask me questions about Diane, you're wasting your time."

Burt's head pounded and his heart ached. He hadn't had a decent night's sleep in almost a week. "This is not about Diane. I promised Mother..."

"It should be about Diane," Emma replied testily. "If you gave a damn about her..."

Burt sat up and dropped his feet to the floor. "I love Diane."

Emma retorted, "You have a piss poor way of showing it, treating her like she's a child, neglecting her for your precious work." She sucked in her breath. "I'm sorry, big brother. I didn't mean that. What did you promise Mother?"

"I promised Mother I'd talk to you."

"About what?"

"Damned if I know now. Have a good day and tell Dennis hello for me."

Emma's voice softened. "I'll do that and thank you for calling." She hung up the phone.

~

At Christine's behest Burt interrupted his afternoon routine to keep the appointment she had made earlier with the doctor downstairs. "His name is Doctor Manual Garcia," Christine said as she ushered Burt toward the door. "He's expecting you in ten minutes."

Doctor Garcia looked more like a soap opera star than he did a physician. He exuded confidence and professionalism. "Good afternoon," he said as he came into the room and stood by the examining table. He looked at the folder he held in his hand. "Mr. Carlisle, I've been looking over the information sheet you filled out; heartburn, insomnia..." He looked up. "Any chest pains or twinges in your left arm and shoulder?"

Burt was seated on an examining table dressed in nothing but a skimpy gown that gaped in the back to reveal too much of his hirsute anatomy. "None," he declared emphatically. Why the hell had he let George and Christine pressure him into coming here?

Doctor Garcia wore a white coat that contrasted beautifully with the darkness of his hair and skin. A stethoscope hung around his neck. He put the instrument in his ears and then to Burt's chest, "Breathe deeply" and then his back, "Again."

Burt asked, "Bad news, Doc?"

"From my cursory examination, for a man your age you seem in fair condition. I need to run a few tests. The lab is just down the hall. My nurse will be in shortly to escort you there."

Burt swung his legs to the side of the examining table. "That's it, no diagnosis, no dire warnings?"

Doctor Garcia patted his arm. "Not yet. The test results will be back in a few days. I'll call you then and you can come by to discuss the results. *That's* when you get the diagnosis and the warning, if a warning is necessary."

Burt left the doctor's office feeling deflated and disturbed without knowing why. As he drove down familiar streets thoughts about his physical condition receded to the back of his mind as he remembered a much more pressing problem, the rift between him and Diane. Words Emma had spoken to him earlier ran through his brain like some profane vilification. *You have a piss poor way of showing it, treating her like she's a child, neglecting her for your precious work.* Had he been that insensitive and unfeeling? The answer came suddenly and with the force of a revelation. He had! It was an instant that disclosed more than years of reason and logic had taught him.

In one watchful and wary moment the ceiling of reality came crashing down around Burt's well-ordered world. He pulled his silver Lexus into the drive and turned the keys in the ignition as insight burst like a bolt of chained lightning across the horizon of his awareness. It wasn't what he had done that had driven Diane away; it was what he hadn't done.

An old adage his mother had often propagated danced through Burt's brain like a whirling dervish. *There is none so blind as he who will not see.* He had been willfully and woefully blind to Diane's needs and desires. That realization brought a stab of unwanted pain. Was it too late to make amends? One thing was true. It damn sure wasn't too late to try.

How did he go about righting so many wrongs? It wouldn't be easy and it would take time. He would begin by sending his wife flowers the moment he got into his office tomorrow morning; they would have to be red roses of course. He'd send a note with

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them telling her how much he missed her. Over the weekend, he would call and ask her, no beg her, to come home, if only long enough for them to talk.

An insidious thread of possibility began to unravel in his mind. What if she wouldn't... By sheer force of will he stopped that thought. She would, she had to.

~

Three days later Burt received a call from Doctor Garcia asking him to come by later to review the results of his tests. "I'll be in my office until seven. I can see you anytime after five."

Burt had to ask, "Bad news, Doc?" Over the past three days he had faced an indisputable fact. He was no longer ten feet tall and bulletproof.

"We will talk later," Doctor Garcia answered and hung up the phone.

Burt cancelled an appointment to be in Doctor Garcia's office by five o'clock. He arrived as the young receptionist was making preparations to leave. She smiled when he came through the door. "Doctor Garcia is expecting you, Mr. Carlisle. He's in his office. Down the hall," she pointed, "The first door on the right."

"Enter," was the response to Burt's knock. He went inside and closed the door behind him.

Doctor Garcia sat behind an elaborate desk. He looked up when Burt entered the room. "Good evening, Mr. Carlisle." He nodded his head toward a chair. "Sit down. The results of your tests are in; I have some good news and some bad news."

Burt folded his tall frame into an uncomfortable straight back chair. He'd had enough bad news over the past three months to last a lifetime. "Give me the good news first."

"You're suffering from hypertension – high blood pressure. The good news is it's controllable with proper treatment. The bad news is it will require life-long monitoring and may require periodic adjustments." Doctor Garcia paused. "Do you have any questions?"

"Does this mean from now on I'll be taking pills and watching my diet?"

"Yes, but treatment is not about medication and diet change. It's about getting your blood pressure down and keeping it down. To do that you will also have to make some changes in your lifestyle."

Cautiously Burt asked, "What kind of changes?"

"Nothing drastic; you must reduce your salt intake, exercise regularly, cut down on your alcohol intake and avoid stress. It's good that you don't smoke. I'll give you a diet list

before you leave and also a prescription for something to help you get that blood pressure down. I'd like to see you in three months."

Burt shook his head. "Some of those changes seem drastic to me."

Doctor Garcia frowned. "Mr. Carlisle, untreated hypertension can lead to heart attacks, blood vessel damage, kidney damage, stroke and loss of vision."

Burt felt suddenly old and tired. "I'll remember that. Thanks for your time."

Later that evening as he sat alone in his bedroom, Burt mulled over the many events of the past few months. Never before had he felt his own mortality so acutely or seen his own vulnerability so clearly. Why had it taken him so long to close the gap between knowledge and wisdom? If he could start over he would... A flicker of hope pierced his dark despair. Could he start over, begin again, commence anew? He didn't know but one thing he *did* know, if starting over meant literally crawling back to Diane on his hands and knees and begging for another chance, he would do that willingly.

For the first time in weeks Burt Carlisle slept soundly through the long hours of the night.

Chapter 5

Diane put the final touches on the Christmas decorations around the display and stepped back to admire her handiwork. "Not bad, if I do say so myself."

She was thankful to have something to occupy her mind and her time. The three weeks since Burt had returned to the city seemed more like three months. He sent her flowers shortly after he'd returned to the city, along with a note asking her to come home. She called him that night.

He seemed surprised and pleased that she had responded so soon and so positively. Things went well for the first few minutes until Diane realized that Burt was assuming just because she had called, that she was coming home. His smug voice sang over the wire and into her ear. "It will be good to have you back where you belong."

Looking back now, she realized she had overreacted. "Did I say I was coming home?"

Burt sputtered, "No, but I thought..."

One angry retort led to another and before she realized what was happening, they were arguing vehemently. Finally, in a fit of pique, Diane hung up. She hadn't heard from Burt since.

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“What is this, do I see an employee loafing?” Sean Brannigan stood behind Diane with his hands on his hips. “

Diane pulled her mind back to the present. “I’m brightening my area of your store.” She felt a surge of pride. The kitchen and housewares area of the home and garden section of Sean’s store had shown a marked jump in sales since she had taken over its management in November. She sobered. “Thank you for giving me this opportunity.”

“I’m the one who should be thanking you,” Sean replied. “You’ve done a great job. The idea to demonstrate our new line of kitchen ranges by holding cooking classes in the store was brilliant.” He raised a shaggy eyebrow. “Now get back to work. Two days before Christmas is not the time for a department supervisor to be loafing.”

“Yes, Sir, Simon Legree, but don’t forget I’m taking a full hour at noon today.” Sean’s affected scowl made Diane add, “I’m having lunch with your sister and your sister-in-law.”

“It’s like old times having you back with us again at Christmas time.” Sean reminisced, “Remember when we were kids and Dad and Mom had Christmas Eve parties for us?”

Diane remembered. When she had first come to Aunt Ida’s, a scared mousey little girl, the Brannigan family took her into their home and into their hearts. They included her in family parties and outings and took her on hikes and picnics. They supported her and encouraged her. In time she came to think of them as family. “Your dad always hung a piñata on the back porch.” She sighed. “Those were good days.”

Sean leaned against a post. “It’s good to have you home again.”

“It’s nice to be home.” Diane covered her intense emotions with a hollow laugh. “I have to get to work. My boss is a slave driver.”

Sean walked away calling over his shoulder as he went, “Tell Sylvia and Emma I said hello.”

Later as the three women sat around Sylvia’s kitchen table Diane looked up from her salad to say, “Sean says I should say hello to both of you.”

Sylvia set food on the tray of her four-year-old’s high chair. “This will be Sean’s first Christmas without Norma. It’s going to be rough for him.”

Emma pushed her plate away. “Dennis is concerned about Sean too.”

Sylvia handed James a spoon that he promptly tossed on the floor. “If only he and Norma could have had children.”

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Diane said, "Children are a blessing. My blessing will be home tonight and I can't wait to see him."

Sylvia retrieved James's spoon from the floor and replaced it with another. "Children can also be confining. We could be having lunch at Miss Hattie's Tea Room instead of in my kitchen if I dared to take James there."

A tinge of color ran along Emma's angular cheekbones. "I'm about to be blessed *and* confined." She dropped her head. "I'm pregnant."

Sylvia shouted "Whoopee," as she clapped her hands together. "Oh, Emma, that's wonderful. Dennis must be walking on air."

"You must be very happy too," Diane said. How fortunate her friends were. Sylvia had a full and happy life and Emma had so much to look forward to. She, on the other hand, had an empty present and had no future at all. She was indulging in the most craven of emotions, self-pity. Diane lifted her water glass, "A toast to the future."

Sylvia followed her lead, "And to friendship."

Emma raised her glass, "And to happiness." The look of sheer delight on her face made her almost beautiful.

Diane had to ask, "Does Gladys know?"

Emma's expression altered. "No. She's agreed to come to our house for Christmas dinner. I plan to tell her then." She glanced at the wall clock. "I have to get back to the office."

Later as Diane was saying goodbye, Sylvia reminded her, "You and B.J. and Aunt Ida are having Christmas dinner here with me and Michael and the kids. Sean will be here too."

Diane answered, "Only if I can help with the preparations." Sylvia was so like her mother, gathering up all the lonely around her and offering them the warmth of her home and the bounty of her friendship.

"You can make one of those fabulous cakes you make at the store when you do your cooking demonstration," Sylvia replied.

"I'll make a salad too, and a bean casserole."

"Maybe you can come over early Christmas Eve and help me with dinner," Sylvia suggested.

"I have to work until noon on Christmas Eve." Diane slipped her arms into her coat.

“Sean is a hard task master,” Diane said with a smile. “Okay then, I’ll see you Christmas morning.”

As Diane drove the short distance back to the store she wondered what Burt would be doing Christmas Day. She had hoped, when she had hung up on him that he would call back once his anger cooled. He hadn’t. More than once, she had been tempted to call him again. And say what? *I’m sorry I can’t go back to that empty house and that vacant life?* He would never understand. *Please listen to me, show me that my feelings and needs are important to you?* Maybe they weren’t.

The next two days were rushed and chaotic. By the time noon Christmas Eve rolled around Diane was worn to a thread and she still had last minute shopping to do.

She emerged from the store shortly after the clock on the courthouse square struck twelve to see B.J. standing beside his car. He waved as she hurried across the parking lot. “I’ve been waiting for you; how about me taking you to lunch?”

Diane’s spirits lifted as she took B.J.’s arm. “I’d like that. Afterward you can go shopping with me.”

B.J. helped Diane into his car. As he got in on the driver’s side he said, “No thanks Mom. I have an afternoon date to play Scrabble with Aunt Ida.” He put his key in the ignition. “Is Jake’s Diner okay?”

Diane would have preferred Miss Hattie’s Tea Room. “Jake’s Diner is fine.”

They found a small table near the back of the dining room and ordered. As the waiter hurried away, B.J. moved uncomfortably in his chair. “Mom, can I ask you a personal question?”

Diane sensed her son’s uneasiness. She laughed in an effort to lighten the moment. “If it’s not *too* personal, I guess you can.”

“What’s going on between you and Dad?”

Diane had known for some time this conversation was inevitable. She had hoped to postpone it until after Christmas Day. “I’m not sure I know what you mean.”

B.J. shrugged but his eyes were troubled. “You’re still here in Raymonville even though Aunt Ida is fine. You’ve taken a job. Dad is in Dallas. Neither of you ever calls me anymore.” A frown creased his smooth young forehead. “Are you, like...separated?”

Diane could never remember feeling quite so helpless. “It’s nothing for you to worry about.”

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"But I do worry. Is Dad involved with someone else?"

Diane was appalled that her son would entertain such a thought. "Of course not!" Why should his words come as such a surprise? Hadn't she supposed the same thing once? Didn't the shadow of a doubt still linger in her mind?

"How can I not worry? You've left him. I want to know why."

His bold statement left Diane at a loss for words. "...you...B.J., please."

"I deserve an answer."

He did, even though she wasn't prepared to give one just yet. "What happened between your dad and me is not his fault."

"Mom, you're evading my question. What did happen?"

The waiter appeared with B.J.'s steak and Diane's salad. Seeming to sense the tension that stretched between the table's occupants, he served them and quickly hurried away.

As he departed, B.J. leaned across the table and narrowed his eyes. "I'm waiting for an answer."

Diane would be happy to give him an answer if she had one. She wanted to say she hadn't left Burt. That would be a lie, she had. She'd left him long before she came to Raymonville to care for Aunt Ida. "Things change, people change; it's not something I can explain."

"Maybe you're involved with someone else." B.J. held up one hand. "I mean no disrespect. Don't get mad. I need to know."

Diane's chin came up defiantly. "I am not involved with another man." She pointed her fork at B.J.'s plate. "Eat your lunch."

B.J. grinned sheepishly. "I love you, Mom."

At times like this Diane realized that B.J. was indeed his father's son. Her anger evaporated. "I love you too."

"I need to ask you one more question," B.J. said before adding an ingenuous, "Please."

"One more," Diane agreed, "And then the subject is closed."

B.J. straightened his shoulders. "Is it permanent? Are you getting a divorce?"

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Diane's heart gave an uncomfortable lurch. She chose her words carefully. "When your Dad and I get a chance to talk I'm sure we can work things out."

"You haven't talked to a lawyer or anything like that?"

"The only lawyer I have talked to or plan to talk to is your dad." Reaching across the table she patted B.J.'s hand. "Since you're picking up the tab, I'll have dessert."

B.J. laughed. "I should have known this would cost me."

The awkward moment passed and they finished the meal as they chatted about Diane's new job, B.J.'s school and the coming holidays.

Later as B.J. drove her back to the hardware store Diane asked, "Have you visited Grandma Gladys since you've been home this time?"

B.J. wheeled into the parking lot and stopped beside Diane's SUV. "I dropped by the real estate office this morning. Aunt Emma was there. Does that mean she and Grandma Gladys are on friendly terms again?"

"Things seem to be better between them." Diane opened the car door. "Grandma Gladys will come around completely when Aunt Emma has her baby."

B.J.'s eyebrows lifted. "Isn't she a little old for that?"

"Your aunt is in her late thirties. That's not old."

A broad smile wreathed B.J.'s face. "I'm gonna have a cousin. Will it be a boy or a girl?"

Diane got out of the car. "I don't know. We will have to wait until next June and see. Bye, sweetie-pie." She closed the door and walked slowly to her car.

Diane completed her shopping and ran a few errands. It was almost seven o'clock before she pulled into Aunt Ida's driveway. She was far too weary to think about dinner. After an hour of watching TV with B.J. and Aunt Ida, she excused herself and went to her room. She still had packages to wrap.

Christmas Day dawned clear, bright, and cold. Diane was in the kitchen when Aunt Ida called from the living room, "Diane, come here."

Diane rushed to the living room.

Aunt Ida stood looking out the picture window. "This should make Gladys happy." She pointed to the silver Lexus LS parked in the drive of the house across the street.

Diane splayed her hand across her throat. "That's Burt's car." She felt a surge of elation. Burt was home for Christmas. It was followed by a sobering realization. Burt had come home to his mother, not home to his wife. She turned toward the kitchen. "Where is B.J.?"

B.J. appeared in the doorway. "I'm here, Mom."

"Will you carry some things to Sylvia's for me?"

"Sure, Mom." B.J. walked past Diane and came to stand beside Aunt Ida. "That's Dad's car."

Aunt Ida, perceptive as always, patted B.J.'s arm. "So it is. Run along and help your mother."

As B.J. followed Diane into the kitchen, she pointed to a large cardboard box on the kitchen counter. "Can you carry that to Sylvia's?"

B.J. peered inside. "You made a butterscotch cake, good." He hoisted the box into his arms. "After I deliver this I'm going across the street and see Dad."

Diane called after him, "Put a coat on before you go outside and don't forget Sylvia is serving dinner at one o'clock sharp."

"I'll be there."

Diane watched her son's broad back disappear through the kitchen door. Burt was not a stone's throw from her and yet he was farther away than he had ever been before. She could walk across the street and touch him but she couldn't reach him. A fist of pain closed around her heart. Would she ever find her way back to the man she loved?

Chapter 6

Burt yawned, stretched and crawled from his warm bed. It seemed strange waking in the room he'd slept in as a child. *Get used to it friend, you may be here for some time.* He glanced at the clock on the nightstand. It flashed nine-sixteen. It had been a while since he'd been in bed past six in the morning. Padding across the floor to the window, he peered through the slatted blinds. Like an ill omen, ominous clouds hung on the far horizon. A cold complaining wind blew down the street rattling garbage cans and bending tree branches.

Twenty minutes later Burt entered the kitchen to see his mother sitting at the table with her hand wrapped around a coffee cup and staring into space. "Good morning, Mother."

Gladys blinked. "So you're finally out of bed. There's coffee in the pot on the stove."

Burt found a cup and poured coffee into it. "Have you ever considered buying a coffee maker? This old pot has to be at least twenty-five years old." He slid into the chair across from his mother.

Gladys pushed a cream pitcher in his direction. "What are you doing here instead of over at Ida's with Diane?"

No one could accuse Gladys Carlisle of being subtle. Burt pushed the cream pitcher aside. "I'm drinking my coffee black these days."

"Burton Jackson Carlisle, I asked you a question. I expect an answer."

Burt lifted a winged eyebrow, "Burton *Jackson* Carlisle? The full name treatment means I'm in trouble." He smiled into his mother's eyes and said with more confidence than he felt, "Trust me, Mother; everything is going to be all right."

Gladys stirred a spoon around in her coffee. "When you and Emma were teenagers, you behaved like adults. Now you're adults and you're acting like a couple of kids." She lifted one well-manicured hand. "Spare me the rhetoric. Emma called earlier and insisted that you come to Christmas dinner at her house." Laying her spoon aside, Gladys shook her head. "Emma says she has a surprise gift for me. Your sister has been acting very strange lately."

"I'm glad you and Emma have settled your differences," Burt said.

Gladys's smile was wry. "Don't get carried away." A voice calling "Grandma" sent her vaulting to her feet. "B.J., we're in the kitchen."

B.J. shed his coat as he came through the door. "Hi Grandma." He draped it over the back of a vacant chair. "Hey, Dad."

As Burt and his son exchanged pleasantries, Gladys poured coffee for B.J. and set the steaming cup on the table.

B.J. sat beside his father and poured cream into his coffee. "Merry Christmas to both of you. I put the gifts I brought under your tree."

Gladys beamed at B.J. It was obvious that she doted on her grandson. "When you've finished your coffee you can open my gift to you." She sat in the chair she had recently vacated. "I do hope you like it."

B.J. took a sip of the warm liquid. "Grandma, I'd like anything you got for me."

Barri Bryan
Starting Over

With that gift for oratory plus his ability to think on his feet, B.J. would make a fine attorney. *Don't go there.* Burt asked abruptly, "B.J. is your mother at home?"

B.J. brightened considerably. "Yes, she is. Are you going over?"

Burt stood. "I am." He excused himself and hurried from the room. Five minutes later, carrying a large package under one arm and holding a smaller one in his other hand, he stooped to press his forefinger into Aunt Ida's door-bell.

Diane opened the door. She was wearing a coat and carrying a stuffed-full shopping bag. "Burt?"

Icy wind bit at Burt's ears and nose. Cold blew around his feet and up his pant legs. "May I come in?"

Diane set her shopping bag on the floor. "B.J.'s not here." She looked around Burt and toward the house across the street. "He said he was going to his grandmother's."

"He did go to his grandmother's," Burt answered and then asked again, "May I come in?"

"Maybe he went to Emma's instead. He could be at Sylvia's."

Burt's impatience surfaced. "I know where B.J. is. I didn't come to see him, I came to see you. Will you let me in or are you going to make me stand out here until I'm an icicle?"

Diane opened the door and stepped back. "Come in, please."

Burt stepped inside and kicked the door shut. He laid his packages on a nearby table, shed his coat and hat and hung them on a hook in the entranceway.

Aunt Ida called from the living room, "Who's at the door, Diane?"

Picking up his packages, Burt followed Diane into the festively decorated living room. "It's me, Aunt Ida, Merry Christmas."

Aunt Ida wore an out-dated fur coat and was in the process of pushing one hand into a tight fitting kidskin glove. "I hope it will be."

The old woman disliked him. Not without reason, he admitted reluctantly. "Did I come at a bad time?"

Diane sent Aunt Ida a warning glance. "We're going to Sylvia's for Christmas dinner. But there's no hurry." She gestured toward the tinsel Christmas tree in one corner of the room. "Would you like to put your gifts under the tree? I'll make sure B.J. gets them."

Burt took a direct approach because he knew there was no other way to deal with Aunt Ida. "If you will excuse us, Aunt Ida, I'd like to talk to Diane alone."

Surprise tilted Diane's voice. "Can it wait until after Christmas?"

"No, it can't."

Aunt Ida laid a gloved hand on Diane's arm. "I'll go on over to Sylvia's. If you're not there in an hour, I'll be back." Her stiletto stare raked over Burt. "Mind your manners while you're under my roof."

As the front door closed behind Aunt Ida, Diane took off her coat, tossed it on a chair and walked toward the back of the house. "We can talk in the den. It's more comfortable."

Burt followed her into the cozy room, set his packages on a low table and came to stand in front of the dying embers of a fire that burned in the fireplace. "The weather outside is freezing."

Diane sat in a chair near him and crossed one slim ankle over the other. "You didn't come here to talk about the weather."

Burt sank into a chair across from her. "No I didn't."

"Then why are you here?"

A frightening thought surfaced in Burt's mind. Had his wife spent last night in the arms of another man? That notion was too painful to pursue. He got a firmer grip on the emotions that could defeat him. Staring into Diane's lovely serene face, he wondered what thoughts and fears she harbored behind that cool façade. So many questions ran through his brain. He stopped each of them before they could reach his tongue. "Open your Christmas gifts and we can talk." He nodded toward the packages on the table.

Confused surprise chased away Diane's look of reproach. "I thought those gifts were for B.J."

Burt assured her, "They're not."

Her surprise transmuted to embarrassment. "I have nothing to give you."

She did, if forgiveness was a gift. "That's one of the things we can talk about later." He sat in a chair across from Diane, reached behind him, snagged the larger package and laid it in her lap. "I hope you like it."

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Diane removed the bow and the festive paper carefully. She folded the paper and laid the bow atop it before opening the box. Nestled inside tissue paper were a blue cardigan sweater and a matching pullover. Her fingers caressed the soft wool lovingly. "They're beautiful. Tell Christine she did a good job."

She thought his secretary had chosen this very special gift. That knowledge cut deep. "Christine didn't choose the gift, I did."

Diane's head came up in surprise. "You went shopping?"

"I did. I wanted to find a sweater set exactly like the sweater set you wore on our first date. I couldn't, this one is as close as I could get."

Diane asked in amazement, "You remember what I wore on our first date?"

"Like it was yesterday; we went to a football game at the high school stadium." Burt's mind drifted back in time.

He called Diane the Sunday afternoon following the Saturday night country club dance and asked her out to dinner that evening. Diane explained that her aunt didn't allow her to go out on nights when there was school the next day nor would she let her niece date someone she didn't know personally. Undaunted, Burt asked if he could come over and get acquainted with Diane's aunt.

Diane agreed but somewhat reluctantly. "I guess that would be all right."

Burt showed up on Diane's doorstep less than an hour later. Any idea he'd had of winning over Ida Stratton was banished the moment he extended his hand to the old lady in greeting.

"I'm Burton Carlisle..."

Ida ignored his extended hand. "I know who you are." Belatedly, Burt recalled stories he'd heard about Ida Stratton—how in her younger days she'd been ruthless in her climb to high status in the corporate world; of her brilliant mind, her ruthless tactics and her merciless pursuit of power. A lesser man would have been frightened away, but not Burton Carlisle. He intended to court Diane, with or without Ida's blessings.

Turning to Diane he asked, boldly, "Will you go to the football game with me Friday night?"

To his complete delight Diane accepted. "I'd like that."

Burt pulled his mind back to the present. "We rooted for the Raymonville Tigers. They lost the game."

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Starting Over

Diane put the lid on the box and laid it on the floor beside her chair. "Thank you for the gift. It's very nice."

Burt captured the smaller box and handed it to Diane. "This is for you too."

"You didn't have to do this," Diane slipped the satin bow from a velvet box.

"I wanted to," Burt assured her.

Diane opened the box and her breath caught in her throat. Resting on a bed of white silk was a pair of exquisite diamond earrings. Their brilliance caught the light and reflected it upward. "They're lovely." Closing the lid, she held the box out to Burt. "But this is unnecessary. You don't have to buy your freedom."

Her words hit Burt with the force of a bullet fired at close range. He wanted to argue that he wasn't trying to buy anything. That would be a lie. He was trying to buy her forgiveness. "Is that what you think I want—my freedom?"

Tears glistened in Diane's eyes. "I don't know what you want. That's a part of the problem."

"It's certainly not my freedom." Did she still harbor thoughts that he'd been unfaithful? "There has never been anyone for me but you and there never will be."

"You do have a way with words." Diane actually smiled. "Do you know what Aunt Ida said about you the first she met you?"

Burt didn't know and he wasn't sure he wanted to find out. At this point he would have done anything, said anything to please Diana. "No, tell me."

"She said you could charm the corset off a Baptist preacher's wife."

Burt wasn't amused; nevertheless, he smiled. "I'm not sure that's a compliment."

Diane looked directly into her husband's eyes. "Dispense with the pretty words; just tell me what you want."

Burt took a deep, cleansing breath and said, "What I want is a chance to start over with you."

Diane's expression moved from annoyed to surprised. "I can't go back and be that naïve little girl I was twenty years ago and I don't know that I'd want to even if I could."

Burt's calm reply covered the fear that chilled down his backbone. "I don't want to go back either. The young Burt Carlisle I remember was a brash son-of-a-gun." Dropping

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his head, he smiled up at her. "I'm not talking about going back; I'm talking about starting over."

Diane stood and walked the length of the room before turning to face him. "I can't go back to that empty house and that empty life." With one hand extended, she took a few steps in his direction. "Please try to understand..."

"I'm not asking you to go back to an empty house or back to another time." Burt pointed to the chair she had recently occupied. "Sit down and I'll try to explain."

Diane perched instead on the edge of the couch. Folding her hands in her lap, she said, "All right. Explain, Burt."

"Day before yesterday I closed a deal with George. He's buying my half of the law firm."

Surprise brought Diane to her feet once more. "That firm is your life." She sat again, this time in the chair near Burt. "What will you do now?"

"Take a few days off, spend some time with Mother. She's having a tough time adjusting to Emma being gone."

Diane leaned forward and narrowed her eyes. "Are you ill?"

She knew him too well. "It's nothing serious but I did see a doctor last month."

Diane turned a ghastly shade of white. "What is this 'nothing serious' that you have?"

"I have been diagnosed with high blood pressure." Her concern both pleased and troubled him. "It's nothing life threatening. The doctor put me on medication and told me to slow down. I'm in the process of doing that now. I will be staying with Mother for the next few months."

"Swear to me that you are not ill with some deadly disease."

Burt heard the anxiety in her voice and read the vulnerability in her eyes. The urge to hold her in his arms and take advantage of her concern was almost unbearable. As he stood and took a hesitant step in her direction an old recollection rose like a specter from the depths of his memory. He was pulled back in time to another place and into another situation where the circumstances were similar to those that confronted him now.

In an instant twenty years fell away and a young and inexperienced Diane sat beside him in his Ford Mustang. They were parked in the darkest area of lovers' lane. The air was replete with the smell of lilac and wild honeysuckle. The words he spoke to her then ran through his head now like the refrain of an old song. "I'm moving to Dallas in

September. George Walters and I plan to start a law practice there.” He had spoken the truth but not all the truth, he wasn’t going anywhere without Diane.

Then as now he has sensed her vulnerability to his aggressive male magnetism. Taking full advantage of that vulnerability, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her tenderly. Diane surrendered, melting into his embrace. He hadn’t planned to seduce her but he had done just that. It was a tender moment that even now brought a rush of joy. As wonderful as it was, it had been ill timed. Starting over meant not being foolish enough to make the same mistake twice.

Burt struggled with polarizing emotions as passion battled with common sense. He could take her here and now, and she wouldn’t lift a finger to stop him. If he did, he might lose her forever. That thought was enough to make him take a step backward. “I have to go now. Emma’s expecting me.”

She had never been more beautiful than she was at this moment and he had never desired her more desperately than he did now. How ironic that the very passion that drew him to her, compelled him to walk away.

Diane pressed her palms together and laid her fingers against her lips as she breathed a sigh of obvious relief. “Thank God you’re all right.”

Burt was far from all right. He headed for the door. He was in the foyer putting on his coat when Diane came to stand in the entranceway. “What about the house in Dallas?”

“I sold it.” Burt took a deep breath and braced himself for what he was sure would be a reprimand. Swift hindsight told him that his wife had every reason to be angry. He had acted without so much as a hint to her of what he was about to do. He put his hat on his head and gave it a little tap. “I hope you aren’t upset.”

“Of course I’m upset.” Diane extended her hands before letting them fall to her sides. “You sold my home without saying a word to me before you did so.”

Burt raised an eyebrow. “If I bought it back would you go back there and live with me?”

“Burt please, try to understand...” Diane began.

Burt hardened his heart to her plea. “Just answer the question, would you or wouldn’t you?”

Diane dropped her head. “I can’t.”

He had to get out of here before he did something foolish like surrender to the overwhelming urge to once more seduce his wife into submission and then surrender. “There are papers for you to sign. I’ll be in touch.” Stepping through the door, he closed it behind him.

Chapter 7

Diane sat at her dressing table skillfully applying make up. Laying her lipstick tube aside she glanced in her mirror at the reflection of Aunt Ida sitting on the side of the bed. "I should be home shortly after midnight." Leaning forward she examined her mascara. "I don't like leaving you alone on New Year's Eve night."

Aunt Ida replied testily. "I'm not alone, B.J.'s here. He and I are going over to Sylvia's later this evening." She sighed. "We're going to miss that boy when he goes back to school."

Over the past few days, Diane had tried not to think about B.J. going back to school again. "So you have a date with B.J.? When did you start going out with younger men?"

Aunt Ida snapped, "My going out with B.J is almost as bizarre as you going out with your husband. What is going on between the two of you anyway?"

The sad truth was there was nothing going on between Diane and Burt. She hadn't seen him since Christmas Day. "Burt called the day after Christmas. He says we need to talk."

"You could do that without going out to Raymonville's most elegant night spot." Aunt Ida's voice dropped. "Men are such fickle creatures and women are such fools."

Diane turned to face her aunt before asking a question she had never had the courage to pose before now. "Were you ever in love, Aunt Ida?"

To her total dismay Aunt Ida replied, "Yes, once a long time ago I was deeply in love."

Diane curiosity was piqued. "Where, when, who was he?"

"You sound like a news reporter." Aunt Ida's gaze softened. "It was here, in Raymonville. It was before I went away to school and moved on to make my mark in the corporate world. The man was my sister's husband. He was also your great grandfather."

So many things fell into place; so many unanswered questions were suddenly crystal clear. Before Diane could speak, Aunt Ida raised a gnarled hand. "Life always offers compensations and exacts compromises. Remember that as you sort through this problem with Burt."

Diane leaned forward yearning to hear more. "Tell me what happened between you and your lover."

"I did tell you what happened. Gus wanted me to marry him. I chose to go away to school instead. He married my sister when I was a junior in college."

Diane breathed, "I'm so sorry."

"Don't be. I don't need your pity. I succeeded admirably in a world where few men can survive and you might be surprised to know I had more than my share of lovers through the years." A dreamy expression clouded her tired old eyes. "But nothing ever quite takes the place of that first sweet love." With some effort Aunt Ida stood. "Get ready; you don't want to keep Burt waiting."

Burt arrived to call for Diane at precisely eight o'clock. He brought flowers, a lovely white orchid wrist corsage. Diane was both pleased and surprised. She was also a little suspicious. Did he have some ulterior motive for bringing her flowers and taking her out to dinner? She reined in such renegade thoughts and decided to concentrate on enjoying the evening.

Later over a candlelit meal, she found herself relating to him the strange conversation she'd had with Aunt Ida earlier. "I often wondered why she was so determined to win custody of me, now I know. I'm the granddaughter of the only man she ever loved." She stopped. Burt had never been overly fond of Aunt Ida and small talk bored him. "But enough about Aunt Ida, tell me about Gladys. Is she happy about Emma being pregnant?"

Burt laid his knife across his plate. "Ambivalent is the word that describes Mother these days. She is rapturously happy that she's going to be a grandmother again but she's deeply concerned about Emma having a baby at thirty-eight."

"She shouldn't be," Diane answered. "Women well into their forties have easy pregnancies and healthy babies these days."

"Try telling Mother that." Burt picked up his fork. "Emma has given Mother notice. She won't be working after next March. That's more cause for Mother to have mixed emotions. She's gaining a grandchild and losing her office manager." He paused a moment and then asked, out of the blue, "How long will you be working at Brannigan's Home and Garden Store?"

Diane's head lifted in surprise. "I...don't know. Why do you ask?"

Burt shrugged. "I'm curious." He popped a bite of steak into his mouth and chewed thoughtfully. "Do you like working there?"

How like Burt to make a statement and in the same breath pose a pertinent question. "I like it very much. It gives me the opportunity to be creative and innovative." She waited

for him to make some derogatory comment about a job in kitchen appliances requiring neither originality nor ingenuity.

Instead he smiled and said, "It sound interesting. Tell me more."

Before discretion could dictate prudence Diane blurted out, "You want to hear about my job at Brannigan's?"

"If you want to tell me about it, yes."

Diane found that she did, very much and she said so. Even as she spoke, caution tempered her elation. What she did paled in comparison to being a defense attorney who spent his days in an explosively tense and crowded courtroom. "I demonstrate and sell ranges, refrigerators, washers, dryers, and all kinds of small kitchen appliances."

"You should be good at that," Burt replied. "Considering the years you've spent in your own kitchen."

"I am good at it and that gives me a sense of pride and accomplishment." The fact that Burt seemed to be hanging onto her every word gave Diane the courage to add, "During the holiday season I held a second round of cooking classes to demonstrate our newest line of kitchen ranges. Every class session was filled to capacity."

Burt pressed his napkin to his lips before saying, "I'm proud of you."

Once again, suspicion reared its ugly head. He had never said he was proud of anything she'd ever done before. Diane pushed her plate to one side. "What the hell are you up to now?"

A flash of anger burned in the green of Burt's eyes. "Why would you think I'm *up to* anything?" Anger was replaced by an icy glaze. "I see I have a long way to go."

Diane was immediately contrite and more than a little ashamed. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" Burt asked. The note of pain in his voice was unmistakable.

She had hurt him and that had not been her intention. "'I'm sorry I offended you."

"You think I'm offended? My God Diane, you don't know me at all."

The truth of that statement hit Diane with the force of a battering ram. She had been acquainted with this man for more than half of her life but she didn't know him, at least not in the way a wife of twenty years should know her husband. "You said there were papers I should sign. When would you like me to do that?"

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Burt seemed happy to change the subject. "You can come to my office sometime next week. Call first to make sure I'm in."

Diane's fork stopped halfway to her mouth. "You have an office?" She was poised to ask more questions when her pride caught up to her curiosity. If Burt wanted her to know more he could tell her but she was damned if she would ask. "What's the address?"

"I rented a space in the office building on Main Plaza. My name is on the directory in the foyer as you enter. I'm on the second floor."

Diane looked around the elegantly appointed restaurant. The décor was plush and overstated. A tall man in a tuxedo played a plaintive melody on the grand piano that stood in a far corner of the room. Could Burt afford to pay for two dinners here? In the past she'd never bothered her head with finances. Burt gave her a monthly allowance to run the house. He had always been more than generous. He had continued to send her checks after she'd come to stay with Aunt Ida. "You don't need to send me any more allowance checks. I have a job now and Aunt Ida charges me nothing to stay at her house."

Burt turned his head to one side and studied her with avid interest. "Do you think I'm destitute of circumstances?"

Diane shrugged. "You've obviously sought immediate employment. I assumed it was because you needed the money."

"And as usual, you assumed incorrectly." Burt made a visible effort to rein his anger. "I could retire today and live comfortably for the rest of my life. But sitting around doing nothing is not my idea of living, so as of next Monday morning I will be a practicing attorney in Raymonville."

Diane almost choked on her food. "Aren't you a little overqualified for that job?"

"Do you think practicing law in Raymonville is beneath my dignity?"

She didn't. "That's not what I meant." Neither did she think he would be happy representing dead-beat dads, parents with truant children, juveniles in trouble, and men charged with domestic violence. That would pretty much be the extent of his case load if he practiced law in Raymonville.

Burt raised one eyebrow. "Would you care to explain what you did mean?" It was back again, that supercilious attitude that drove Diane into a cocoon of silence.

After an extended period of hushed quiet Burt apologized, after a fashion. "I spoke rashly. Forgive me."

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Starting Over

They were slipping back into that same old cycle of harsh words, unforgiving silence and superficial apologies. "I'm sorry too." Diane felt a pressing need to explain. "What I meant was practicing law in Raymonville doesn't sound very challenging and I know how you love a challenge."

"At the moment you are challenge enough for me." Burt said and then asked, "Would you like to dance?"

Diane hadn't danced in years. "I would." She slid back her chair, stood and extended her hand in Burt's direction.

He led her onto the dance floor and took her in his arms. She fit perfectly into his embrace. He held her close and rested his chin atop her head. "I remember like it was yesterday the first time I danced with you." She could feel his strength and his need.

Diane relaxed in his embrace. "I remember too." She remembered also with a touch of irony that the band had been playing *I Know Him So Well*. She had thought then that she did know the enigma that was Burton Jackson Carlisle. She realized now that there were layers and depths to this man that she would never completely know or totally understand. A part of his attraction was that sense of mystery and intrigue that was such an integral part of his being.

The lights dimmed as the man at the piano launched into a baritone rendition of *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*. His voice was rich and mellow. The poignant lyrics drifted through Diane's thoughts leaving her feeling as melancholy as an autumn twilight. That old magic she had felt the first time Burt held her in his arms was still there. She laid her head against his chest and closed her eyes.

Later as they drove home Burt asked, "Did you enjoy the evening?"

"Yes, very much." Diane said over a yawn.

"I'm glad. So did I." Burt pulled into Aunt Ida's drive and stopped his car.

Diane wondered if he'd kiss her goodnight. The tightening in the pit of her stomach told her that she wanted—she needed—much more than a good night kiss.

Burt got out of the car and came around to open her door. "Maybe we can do this again sometime."

Diane got out of the car. "Maybe next New Year's Eve?" She couldn't keep a touch of bitterness from slipping into her voice.

Burt took her arm and led her up the walk. "I do hope so." At the door he dropped a kiss on her cheek, turned on his heel and walked toward his car calling over his shoulder as he went, "Good night and Happy New Year."

Diane went inside, closed the door and tiptoed to her room feeling empty and incomplete and not knowing why.

Later as she lay in bed staring at the ceiling, the events of the evening played through her head like scenes from an old movie. When it began, they were in such a festive mood. What had happened to turn everything around? It was Burt's fault, she decided. He'd told her that he had an office in town and then he'd refused to tell her more.

Diane punched her pillow and turned on her side. That wasn't true. She had spoiled the evening by questioning Burt's intentions. After she had asked him *what the hell are you up to now* everything had gone downhill. She pulled her legs up under her chin as she realized this was not the first time she'd blamed Burt for something that wasn't his fault. A disturbing truth hopped full-blown into her consciousness. She had blamed Burt because her life was empty and unhappy when in truth the fault was hers. Sitting up in bed she stared into the darkness. When B.J. was growing up, she'd wrapped her existence around his. There had been school and Little League and Cub Scouts and a million other things to fill her days and her life. Unfortunately, Burt had not been a part of any of them. Then overnight, B.J. grew up and went away to college leaving Diane with nothing but an empty nest and a vacant life.

She should have seized that moment to broaden her horizons and enrich her life. She could have done so many things, taken adult classes at the community college, done more volunteer work and taken an active part in her garden club. Most of all she could have been more aware of her husband and his needs and wants. Instead she'd shut Burt out and wrapped herself in a tight little world of self pity. That thought closed around her heart like a clenched fist. How easy it was to be wise after the fact.

Diane lay back down her bed and curled into a fetal position. Then she did something she hadn't done since she was ten years old; she cried herself to sleep.

Chapter 8

Burt stood at the window of his second story apartment and watched a feeble February sun sink slowly behind the western horizon. Life did have a way of changing plans and altering intentions. He had anticipated when he returned to Raymonville that he would live with his mother. She needed him now that Emma had moved away. Or so he had thought at the time.

After a few weeks of trying to conform to Gladys's rigid house rules and of listening to her constant complaining, he knew that if he was to preserve his sanity he had to escape. In a matter of days, he found an apartment in one of the newer complexes across town.

He was sure Gladys would object to him moving away and leaving her alone. How carefully he broke the news to her that he had found his own place. He ended by saying, "I hope you aren't too upset."

Gladys, acerbic as always replied, "I'll survive." It was an unsettling experience to discover that his own mother was glad to be rid of him.

Burt sat on the couch in his living room, stretched his long legs in front of him and studied the winged tips of his shoes. His wife had left him; his mother didn't want him. He wondered aloud, "What's wrong with me?" He would worry about that later. He had other more pressing problems to deal with now. Diane would be here soon for dinner. When he'd called to invite her she seemed hesitant. "I don't know about coming to your apartment."

Burt wanted to say so many things. He bridled his tongue and held onto his patience. He didn't intend to take no for an answer this time. Stretching the truth to suit his purpose seemed a little dishonest but not dishonest enough to keep him from saying, "There are some business matters we need to discuss." He neglected to say that the business he referred to was not something that demanded Diane's immediate attention.

Diane asked, "Can't we talk about it Saturday when we have dinner?"

Over the past month and a half, Burt had taken his wife out to dinner each Saturday evening. The occasions were pleasant but not satisfying. Burt had thought that once they had some time to reestablish lines of communication and once Diane realized he was truly repentant for his past mistakes they could start over, this time on a firmer footing. Maybe that would have happened if Diane had cooperated and explored with him the issues that confronted them. It was the one thing she refused to do. Any mention of the past or speculation about the future sent her retreating behind a wall of silence. Once again Burt's temper flared. "I'd like to have this matter settled as soon as possible."

He hadn't told a lie, just left a false impression he told himself as he aimed his remote toward the TV. The announcer's voice boomed out into the room. "Today is Saint Valentine's Day. If you haven't found that perfect gift for your lady love..."

Burt had found the perfect gift and he'd created the perfect setting for an intimate dinner. Now if his obstinate lady love would cooperate... His mind wandered back over the many times he'd let Valentine's Days slide by unnoticed. Could he ever make amends? He was trying. Springing to his feet he paced across the room before turning to stare at the huge bouquet of red roses that adorned his coffee table. Red roses were supposed to convey, 'I love you.' That was exactly the message he wanted to express.

The announcer's voice intruded once more. "Aaron's Floral and Gift Shoppe..." Burt moved to the dining room. The table was festive with a red table cloth and filigreed white place mats. Delicately patterned china and sparkling glassware added the final

touches. A white bowl of red carnations provided an exquisite centerpiece. The caterers had done an excellent job.

Burt returned to the living room. A gory cops-and-robbers drama, complete with the rat-a-tat of guns and ear splitting screams of victims, blared from the TV. Once more he aimed his remote and clicked. The ensuing silence was more nerve jangling than the noise from the TV. He put a CD into the stereo and turned the volume low.

Pragmatic man that he was, Burt had dissected his dilemma and formed a plan of action. If he couldn't break through Diane's reserve any other way he'd use the sexual magnetism that flared between them to woo her into submission. Conversation should flow more freely after a tender bout of love-making. If he performed well enough maybe it wouldn't be necessary to talk at all. A troublesome little voice in the back of his head argued that deliberate seduction hardly equated to love making. He eased his nagging conscience by rationalizing that since Diane was his wife luring her into his sexual trap could not be considered, in the strictest sense of the word, seduction.

Diane arrived a little after six p.m. She caught her breath as she entered the room. "I'm a little late. I'm sorry."

Burt helped her remove her coat. "That's quite all right." He was relieved that she had come at all. He hung her coat over a chair. "Come and sit down. Would you like a drink?"

Diane put her handbag on the chair beside her coat. "No thank you." She sat on the couch and looked around the well-appointed living room. "This is very nice." How aloof she sounded and how distant.

Burt sat on the other end of the couch. "It's comfortable and private and beginning to feel like home now that I have a few of my personal items and mementoes." He gestured toward the lamp beside an easy chair. "As you can see I kept my old lamp so I could create my own little reading space here."

Diane asked, "You didn't keep your leather recliner?"

Burt shook his head. "I sold most of the furniture with the house. I had the movers send me only personal items such as clothing, dishes, pots and pans, lamps, bric-a-brac and pictures. The bulk of what they brought is in a storage facility over on Hickory Street. I'll give you a key if you'd like to go over and look through it."

"Maybe I should." Diane said. "I could use a few more winter clothes."

After a short but uncomfortable silence, Diane remarked, "The roses are lovely."

"And very appropriate for Valentine's Day don't you think?" Burt stood. "Shall we go in to dinner, Madame?" He extended his hand.

"You cooked dinner?" Diane caught his hand and Burt pulled her to her feet.

"I had it catered." Burt tucked her hand through his arm and escorted her into the dining room.

The lights in the room were low. The flickering glow of candle light lent an ambience of romance to the scene. Burt pulled out a chair. "Sit here." Once Diane was comfortably seated, he moved around the table and sat across from her.

They dined on roast beef tenderloin, baked acorn squash with peas, and endive salad. Dessert was a lighter-than-air angel food cake. The food was well prepared and delicious. Diane ate very little.

Later, in the living room over coffee, Burt slipped an envelope from beneath the vase of roses on the coffee table. "The roses are for you along with this." He handed Diane the envelope. "Happy Valentine's Day."

Diane took the proffered envelope and opened it slowly. "What is this?"

Burt mentally crossed his fingers. "It's my Valentine's Day card to you."

Diane pulled the card from the envelope and gasped, "You made this?"

Burt relaxed but only slightly. "With my own two hands, I wrote the thought too." Leaning forward he urged, "Read it aloud."

Diane looked up from under her lashes. "This is very thoughtful." She glanced back at the card. "The measure of my life is my love for you. Will you be my valentine forever?" When she looked up there were tears in her eyes. "It's beautiful."

"I wanted to write a poem," Burt admitted ruefully. "I thought about, 'The measure of my life is my love for my wife.' But I couldn't think of anything to rhyme with forever, so I settled for writing prose."

"I have nothing for you," Diane admitted on a sigh. "To tell the truth the fact that it was Valentine's Day slipped my mind. I've been so busy at the store."

"It doesn't matter," Burt said, but it did. He jumped to his feet. "Come into the bedroom, I have something to show you." He sensed Diane's sudden withdrawal and sat back down. Leaning forward he tried to read meaning into the strange look in her eyes. "This concerns the business I need to discuss with you." He stood once more. "I do need your input on this."

Diane acquiesced reluctantly. She followed him down the hall and into his bedroom. Once inside she spied immediately the well-worn rocking chair that stood in a far corner.

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Pointing she said, "That's my old rocker, the one you bought for me when B.J. was a baby." Hurrying across the room, she sat in the chair and ran her hands over the arms as she rocked slowly. "I had forgotten all about it."

Burt eased across the room and sat on the side of his bed. "The movers found it in the attic. Would you like me to have it delivered to Aunt Ida's for you?"

Diane's shook her head. "No. This rocker is for rocking babies. I don't need it anymore."

Burt put his arms behind him and leaned back on the bed. "I agree. I was thinking maybe you'd like to give it to Emma."

Diane jumped to her feet. "That's a wonderful idea." She came to sit beside him. "But it was a gift to me from you. Would you mind?"

Burt inched a little nearer to his wife. "I would be pleased." He let his fingers trail down Diane's arm. "Emma's baby's a girl. Did she tell you?"

Diane looked at his waltzing fingers but she didn't move away. "Yes, yesterday when I had lunch with her and Sylvia."

Burt pulled Diane a little nearer and felt her shiver. *Take it easy. Don't move too fast.* "The three of you have become good friends again." He held her in a loose embrace. If she could start over with her childhood friends, surely she could start over with her husband. That thought made him bold. He pulled Diane into his arms and kissed her tenderly. He wanted to say so many things beginning with how much he regretted neglecting her through the years, but any mention of the past might break the spell that was spinning between them. Lifting his head, Burt sighed. "Happy Valentine's Day."

Diane made no effort to break the embrace. "It has been thanks to you." She laid her head on his chest. "I can't believe I forgot it was Valentine's Day. I never did that before. It's just that I've been so busy at the store."

Burt held her from him and looked into her eyes. "Take some advice from someone who has been down that path. Never get so wrapped up in your professional life that you lose touch with your personal life."

Diane brushed her hand across his cheek. "It's very easy to do, I'm finding out." She put her arms around Burt and drew him to her. He could feel the rapid beating of her heart. "I should have understood. My only excuse is that I was immature and inexperienced." Releasing him, she looked up with tears clinging to her lashes like little jewels. "Can you ever forgive me?"

"It was my fault too. I took you for granted." That was an admission he'd never made before, not even to himself. "For that I am truly sorry." This was the moment he had hoped for and waited for; his saner self told him that he should take this opportunity to

open up a dialogue between them. Passion dictated another course and sanity is never a match for passion. Burt swept Diane into his arms and kissed her deeply and passionately as a force of driving heat exploded in his stomach and splintered through his body.

She responded with like fervor, putting her arms around his waist and pressing her body into his.

Burt thought just before he surrendered to a consuming passion, that whatever else was wrong in their marriage, the sexual attraction they shared was right and strong and as potent today as it had been twenty years ago. He whispered, "Lift your arms." When Diane obeyed he pulled her sweater over her head and dropped it to the floor.

A shiver of desire ran through his body as Diane slipped the buttons on his shirt from their moorings. She had never been so bold before. That knowledge made his heart race and his breath come in little gasps.

Tenderly, slowly and with mind-bending restraint, Burt undressed his wife. She was as beautiful and as desirable now as she had been on their wedding night. Despite the flames that licked through his stomach and scorched through his veins, he took his time.

When she was completely bare, Diane reciprocated by helping Burt rid himself of every stitch he wore. When he was completely nude, he lay down on the bed and pulled Diane down beside him. For the next hour he made tender, slow, passionate love to his wife, bringing her to the peak of ecstasy and then following her into that primal world of the senses.

As his mind reconnected to his body, Burt turned on his back, sighed and pulled Diane into the cradle of his arms. Kissing her moist cheek he whispered, "Welcome home my love." All seemed right with the world.

Chapter 9

Diane hurried down an aisle toward the front of the store with a folder in her hand and her handbag slung over her shoulder. She didn't usually stay so late but she'd been working on an ad campaign for her new line of spring merchandise and time had gotten away from her. The place was deserted except for Pete the custodian. She nodded to the crusty old man as she walked past him. "I'm leaving now. The place is all yours."

Pete paused from his sweeping and leaned on his broom. "Takin' work home with you again?"

"Yes, I am."

Barri Bryan
Starting Over

"Have a good evenin' Miz Carlisle." Pete pushed his broom under a counter. "And don't you fret about me being alone in this place. Mr. Brannigan is still here."

Diane stopped. "He is?" She turned in the direction of Sean's office. "I'll say good-bye to him before I go." This would be an ideal time to discuss with Sean her plans for their Spring Sweep Sale. At his office door, she knocked and waited.

Sean's voice sounded from the other side. "Come back later, Pete. I'm busy now."

Diane turned the knob. The door was unlocked. Without waiting for an invitation, she opened it and stepped inside. "It's not Pete, it's Diane." She stopped. Sean sat at his desk staring down at an open ledger. He held a half filled glass of whiskey in one hand. When he looked up there were tears in his eyes.

Diane turned to go. Obviously, she had interrupted a very personal moment. "I'll come back tomorrow."

Sean called after her, "No, don't go. I could use a little company about now."

Diane made her way across the room feeling clumsy and a little foolish. "I didn't mean to intrude." She sat in a chair near his desk.

Sean closed the ledger and took a sip of his drink. "You're not intruding. I'm glad you dropped by. At moments like this I need the support of a friend." He nodded toward the ledger. "I was reading Norma's journal—again. I didn't even know she'd kept one until after she was gone. I found it when I was going through one of the drawers in her desk."

Diane searched for words that would comfort this grieving man and found none. She finally responded with the tritest little phrase she knew. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Sean replied. "As painful as it is, reading Norma's journal brings me a measure of comfort. I've learned things about her that I never knew when she was alive." He set his glass on the desk. "Would you like a drink of Irish whiskey? I'd offer you something a little less potent but that's all I have."

"No thank you." Diane laid her folder on the desk and tapped it with her forefinger. "This is my first draft of the ad campaign for the appliance department's Spring Sweep Sale. You can look it over when you have time and get back to me."

"Leave it; I'll look at it later." Sean touched the ledger in front of him. "I thought I knew Norma so well. When I read her journal I realize there was a part of her I never knew at all."

Diane sensed his need to speak his thoughts and sort through his emotions. "There are places inside each of us that no one else can touch. Burt and I have been married for over twenty years and there are times that he seems a stranger to me."

Sean asked, "How are things going between you and Burt? Sylvia says you're no longer going out with him."

Sylvia had some nerve telling Sean something Diane had related to her in confidence. "Sylvia discussed what I told her about my fight with Burt with you?" What had happened between her and Burt hardly qualified as a fight, but that was beside the point.

Sean held up one hand. "Don't be offended. Sylvia didn't betray a confidence at least not intentionally." He stared down into his glass as he swirled its contents. "Sylvia is my twin. We share a special bond. I can read her like a book. She told me you hadn't gone out to dinner with Burt for several weeks. I surmised the rest."

Diane's anger cooled. "Aren't you the clever one? But you're a little off base. Burt and I had a disagreement Valentine's Day and I walked out. I haven't spoken to him since."

Sean smiled wryly. "That must have been some disagreement."

Diane shrugged. "Not really, Burt assumed too much, I lashed out at him, He put me in my place with a few well chosen and very caustic words and I left in a huff."

Sean leaned back in his chair. "Are you going to patch things up?"

Diane told the painful truth. "I don't know if we can." She added a qualifier. "It depends on Burt. The next move is up to him."

"So the fight, excuse me, disagreement was his fault?" Sean asked.

Diane wanted to say yes, she couldn't, not and be honest. "He started it." She sounded like a petulant child. "I did what I always do and walked out before things got out-of-hand."

Sean took another sip of whiskey before asking, "Do you want to know what I think?"

Diane's first impulse was to say no. She reconsidered. Maybe what she needed was a man's perspective. "Don't tell me you're taking Burt's side in this."

"I'm not taking any side." Sean replied. "I'm offering what I consider to be an objective opinion."

"Then tell me, what do you think?"

"I think." Sean tented his fingers and stared over them. "That you're afraid to force a show-down with Burt."

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Starting Over

Diane protested, "I am not..." She was set to say afraid. After some contemplation, she realized there was some truth in Sean's unflattering assessment. "Good with words, Burt is."

Sean said, "I think that's your excuse for avoiding a face-off with Burt. I don't think that's the real reason you turn tail and run every time Burt tries to force a show-down."

He was being damn personal and a little insulting but he was a friend and Diane knew his intentions were the best. "Why would I avoid the one thing that could possibly save my marriage?"

"That's a question only you can answer." Sean lifted an eyebrow. "But I can hazard a guess; maybe because it's also the one thing that could destroy it."

Long after Diane left Sean's office, his words echoed in her head leaving her disturbed and on edge.

Over dinner, Aunt Ida intruded into her thoughts to ask, "Is the pressure of being a working woman catching up to you?"

Diane apologized, "Sorry, I'm not very good company tonight."

"I'm not complaining about your company," Aunt Ida shot back. Her tone gentled. "You do seem a little preoccupied."

"It's not my job." Diane assured her aunt.

"Then it's Burt. What has he done now?"

"What makes you think Burt has done something?" Diane refused to look her aunt in the eye.

"My dear child, I was not born yesterday. You haven't been out with him in weeks, he never calls anymore. I consider that something and even if I didn't, you do."

Yes, she did. Not seeing Burt was even more painful and frustrating than seeing him every weekend. Her aunt was too clever and too perceptive for Diane to attempt a lie. "It's difficult to explain. Burt and I had a disagreement."

Aunt Ida laid her napkin on the table. "Is this where I'm supposed to ask for all the gory details or is this something you don't wish to discuss with your old aunt?"

Sometimes Aunt Ida could be down right aggravating. "Are you asking for a blow-by-blow description?"

Aunt Ida shrugged. "Not unless you want to give it to me."

Diane thought of telling her aunt, politely of course, to butt out. She would have if she hadn't been desperate for a shoulder to cry on. "The last time I was with Burt he lured me into bed, we..." Diane cleared her throat. "Had sex and afterward Burt assumed we were together again for good. Can you imagine that? I told him we still had problems to work out and Burt, arrogant as always, insisted that we could do that after we were living together again as man and wife."

Aunt Ida looked at Diane over her spectacles. "Picking a fight with a man just after he's made love to you is a little unflattering to him, don't you think?"

Diane's head snapped back. "Unflattering?" She echoed incredulously. Aunt Ida did have a way of putting things into perspective. Her head dropped. "I guess I could have been a little less blunt."

"Why weren't you?" Aunt Ida asked. Before Diane could answer, she added, with a wave of her hand, "Never mind. Go on with your story."

"There's not a lot more to tell. Burt let go with a few well chosen caustic and cutting remarks and I walked out." Diane drew a long ragged breath. "I thought he'd call later and apologize; he didn't."

Reaching across the table, Aunt Ida caught Diane's hand in hers. "So what are you going to do now?"

Diane squeezed her aunt's cold fingers. "I have no idea."

"What do you want to do?" Aunt Ida's eyes clouded with sympathy.

Diane pulled her hand free. "I want to have a life with Burt, but not the kind of life we've had over the past few years."

Aunt Ida was playing devil's advocate and doing a damn good job of it. "Have you ever talked about this with Burt?"

"Every time I try we either end up in bed or we get into a fight or both," Diane admitted a little ruefully before adding, "I don't like confrontations."

Aunt Ida pushed back her chair and reached for her walking stick. "Few people do, but sometimes they're necessary." She stood. "I'm going to bed, good night."

Diane cleared the table and put dishes in the dishwasher before she retired to her room. She had thought that talking with Sean and Aunt Ida would help her clear her mind. It had only succeeded in making her even more unsure and unsettled. As she stretched out on her bed one thought emerged to stand clear and true. She didn't want to lose Burt. By the same token she didn't want the next twenty years with him to be a carbon

copy of the past twenty. Turning over, she closed her eyes. "I'll think about all this tomorrow."

She was so weary, still rest eluded her as events of the day followed Diane into her dreams making sleep more a task than a restful pursuit. She woke the next morning feeling tired and on-edge.

Aunt Ida was sitting at the table reading the morning paper when Diane came into the kitchen. Without looking up she said, "You're up early."

Diane poured coffee from the urn on the cabinet and sat across from her aunt. "I couldn't sleep."

Aunt Ida slid the paper across the table. "Your husband made the front page."

Diane moved her cup aside and turned the paper in her direction. A bold headline in the bottom left corner read, *Local Lawyer is Republican Nominee for District Attorney*. Looking up she shook her head. "Burt's not a prosecuting attorney, and I'm not sure he's a Republican."

"Obviously he's declared himself to be both, not that it matters a great deal." Aunt Ida laughed. "Diane, my dear child, most of the voters in Raymon County don't know the difference between prosecution and defense and they don't give a damn about party affiliation. They will be concerned however that a Johnny-come-lately has decided to run for public office."

Diane's eyebrows lifted. "This is Burt's home. He grew up in Raymonville."

"That he did but he went away and became a big-shot attorney and a prominent public figure. Some people around here will resent that."

Diane said, "They should be proud of a hometown boy who went away and made good."

"Some of them will be," Aunt Ida replied, "And some of them won't."

Diane leaned across the table. "Do you think he has a chance of being elected?"

"With his charm and magnetism, maybe, but it will be a battle."

Diane stood. "I can't worry about that now. I'm going in early. I have a ton of things to do today."

"Drive carefully," Aunt Ida admonished as Diane hurried out the door.

When she got to her office Diane found the folder she'd left with Sean the previous evening on her desk with the words *I approve; get on with it*, written in bold masculine

cursive across the top. That was good news; it was also the signal to put her plan in motion. She was so engrossed in her work that she failed to hear Sean enter the room. When he spoke her name, she looked up and placed her hand over her heart. "You scared me."

"Sorry about that." Sean eased into a chair near her desk. "Have you seen the morning paper?"

Diane pushed her work aside. "I saw. It looks like Burt will be Raymonville's next District Attorney."

Sean shook his head. "I doubt that. His opponent is Jules Jacobson. Jules is not only the present District Attorney he's also one of Raymonville's most revered citizens."

Diane did some swift mental calculating before saying, "Jules must be sixty-five years old."

"He's sixty-seven to be exact," Sean replied.

"Isn't that a little...?" The ringing of the telephone interrupted Diane's reply.

As she picked up the receiver Sean mouthed, "See you later." With a wave of his hand he was out the door and gone.

Diane said in her most business-like voice, "Brannigan's Home and Garden Store, Diane Carlisle speaking."

Burt's rough baritone sounded in her ear. "This is Burt. We have to talk. When can I see you?"

Chapter 10

Burt knew he was risking further alienating Diane by calling and demanding to see her. It was a risk he felt he must take. His life had taken a strange turn recently and he needed some immediate answers to questions only she could answer. Thank goodness she'd agreed to see him. He put his cell phone in his pocket. There was simply no accounting for female logic. The last time he'd invited her to his apartment, she'd been reluctant. This time she'd suggested that they rendezvous there. "It's the only place I know where we can have complete privacy." Then she had said something that piqued his curiosity. "I have some things to say to you too."

Through the remainder of his busy day, Burt had little time to think about Diane's puzzling statement. As he drove home that evening, the words hopped right back into

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his head. *I have some things to say to you too.* Like what, he wondered. He'd find out soon enough he decided as he pulled into the drive-through window of Frank's Deli.

He had put dinner on the table and was lowering his body into his easy chair when the door-bell rang. "Coming," he called as he strode across the room and opened the door.

Diane stood on the other side, clutching her handbag under her arm and grasping a bottle of wine in one hand. "I'm not late this time."

Burt swung the door open and with a sweep of his hand gestured for her to come inside. He watched as she walked across the room and sat on one end of the couch. She'd lost weight since she'd come to Raymonville and she'd changed her hair style. The hairstyle he liked but he worried that she may be a little too thin. Stating the obvious, he asked, "You brought wine?"

Diane stared at the bottle in her hand. "I thought it would go nicely with the deli dinner you promised me."

She was being damned amiable. Suspicion threaded through Burt's relief. "That was thoughtful of you." He pointed toward the dining room. "I hope you're in the mood for baked chicken, potatoes and peas, that's what we're having."

Diane stood. "That sounds delicious." She handed Burt the wine and took his arm. "And I am hungry."

Yes sir too damned amiable. Burt escorted his wife into the dining room. He helped her to her chair and sat across from her. "I know you don't like paper plates but I'm not into dishwashing." Diane hated paper plates. He waited for her caustic reply. It never came.

Instead, she smiled and said, "They go well with the cartons." Lifting the container of potatoes, she heaped a generous serving onto her plate before passing it to Burt.

Burt decided to take advantage of her pleasant frame of mind. He poured wine into two paper cups and passed one to Diane. "Thank you for coming here on such short notice."

Diane shrugged. "You said it was important."

"It is," Burt said and then added a qualifier, "It's important to me at least."

"Is this about your being the Republican nominee for district attorney?" Diane watched as Burt cut slices of chicken. When he stopped and stared at her she added, "I read about it in this morning's paper."

"You don't seem surprised that I decided to run." Burt put a slice of chicken breast on Diane's plate.

"I stopped being surprised by anything you do a long time ago." She put peas on her plate before pushing the pea carton in Burt's direction. "What about your resolve to slow down?"

"I have slowed my pace." Burt was surprised, and pleasantly so, by the way their meeting had gone thus far. "The position of District Attorney in Raymonville is not nearly as stressful as the position I had in Dallas. It's also something I can do well and I believe I can make a difference." Belatedly her remark about not being surprised registered. "How long ago?"

Diane's fork stopped in mid air. "How long ago what?"

"How long ago did you stop being surprised by anything I did?"

Diane laid her fork in her plate as her glance locked into his. "The day you..." She looked away. "Forget it, it's not important."

It was important to Burt and he said so and then added, "Please tell me the last time you were surprised by something I did."

He read in her glance the intent to refuse. "I..." Her expression changed. "The day you told me you'd had a vasectomy. That was one colossal surprise. I have never understood why you did it."

"It should be perfectly obvious. I did it because I didn't want to see you suffer through childbirth again." Burt reined in his annoyance. "You were so young and innocent. I had taken advantage of your inexperience. The result was a difficult pregnancy and an even more difficult delivery. Since I seemed unable to control the passion that could make you a mother again, I decided to have a vasectomy."

Color drained from Diane's face. She sucked in her breath and expelled it slowly before asking in a voice that trembled with an emotion he couldn't identify, "Did you ever stop to consider that might not be what I wanted?"

He hadn't, not until now. Insight like chained lightning flashed across the periphery of Burt's understanding. Diane had been carrying resentment and animosity around inside her for all these years. "Why didn't you say something then?"

"You told me after the fact." Diane took a quick sip of wine. "What good would complaining have done?"

In his zeal to protect the woman he loved, he had acted impetuously and foolishly. Only now was he realizing the far-reaching consequences of his folly. "I never knew." Burt extended one hand. "It's a little late to apologize but I am sorry."

Tears stood in Diane's eyes. "I'm sorry too. I realize now I should have told you then how I felt regardless of the circumstances." She shook her head. "Hindsight is always twenty-twenty."

"All I ever wanted to do was protect you. I'm sorry if you were hurt." She had given him the perfect opportunity to launch into what he had called her here to say. "That's why I asked you here tonight. I want to protect you if I can."

"No thank you." Diane said emphatically. "I don't want any more of the kind of protection you offer."

This was a Diane Burt didn't know, assertive and combative. "Don't be difficult. You need to hear what I have to say."

Diane stood and tossed her napkin on the table. "You don't know what I need; you never have."

Burt covered his hurt by asking gruffly, "Do you want to tell me what you need?" He'd done it now for sure. He waited, expecting her to slam out of the room or lapse into sullen silence.

Instead, she sat back down. "Would you listen if I did?"

He didn't *want* to listen. His better judgment told him he'd better both listen and heed if he ever hoped to make things right between them again. "Yes, I will." He poured more wine into her paper cup. "Tell me what you need."

"I need you to stop taking me for granted."

Burt was guilty as charged. That guilt put him on the defensive. "I have always done what I thought was best for you."

"Without ever bothering to ask me what I thought or felt."

A flash of hindsight revealed what he'd never seen before. Even though his intentions had been the best, he'd been insensitive and high-handed. But he wasn't the only one at fault. Through the years Diane had retreated further and further behind a wall of silence making communication between the two of them more and more difficult. "You should have told me how you felt long ago." After a moment of introspection, he asked, "Why didn't you?"

"I tried once and you became so angry that I never dared mention it again." She smiled a sweet sad smile that broke Burt's heart. "I'm an emotional coward."

Burt knew the woman who sat across from him. A confession such as she had just made cost her a measure of dignity and self respect, both of which she valued highly.

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"You are the bravest woman I know. I don't recall..." An insidious memory unraveled inside his brain. He did recall, he recalled vividly. "I overreacted. The thought of another man's sperm inside you made me a little crazy." He wanted to speak again of starting over. How could he when the damage he'd done was irreparable? "Once more, all I can say is I'm sorry."

"So am I," Diane said softly. She brightened suddenly. "Do you realize that for the past thirty minutes we have been communicating with each other rather than throwing angry words back and forth or hiding behind silence?"

They had indeed. "Is that a good sign?"

Diane nodded. "I think so; I hope so." She took a quick sip of wine and grimaced. "Why did you ask me here?"

Burt pushed back his plate. He'd eaten little but his appetite was gone. "It's about this upcoming election." He paused as he felt around in his mind for the right words to speak. "I'm going to be thrust into the limelight. Every aspect of my life will be scrutinized; my opponent will see to that."

Diane dusted bread crumbs from her lap. "Sean says your opponent is one of Raymonville's most revered citizens."

Burt hooted, "Jules Jacobson is a lazy old man who hasn't tried a case since he was elected four years ago. Getting him out of office is my main reason for agreeing to be a candidate."

Diane looked doubtful. "Doesn't he have to prosecute criminal cases from this district?"

"No." Burt shook his head. "He has an assistant, a woman named Mary Thomas. She's the one who has done the District Attorney's job for the past four years. She should be the Democratic candidate, but thanks to Jules, she's not."

Diane asked, "Do you have proof of those accusations?"

Burt had to admit, "Not all of them." He chuckled. "This is a political race not a court case. I don't need proof to back up my accusations and neither does Jules. That's what I want to talk to you about." He stood. "Let's go into the living room. We'll be more comfortable there."

Diane objected, "Shouldn't we put away the food and wash the dishes?"

She was stalling again. He couldn't let her get away with it. "The food is all right and there are no dishes. Let's go."

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Without further argument, Diane walked slowly to the living room where she perched on the end of the couch and folded her hands in her lap.

Burt wanted to sit beside her and take her hand in his. His intuition told him he'd better keep his distance. He sat on the other end of the couch and turning put his arm across its back. "The media will contact you soon asking for statements and wanting interviews. You should think about what you will say to them."

Diane straightened and turned to stare at him. "Why would they do that?"

Once again, Burt's impatience surfaced. "Because, damn it, your husband is running for the office of District Attorney."

"That has nothing to do with me," Diane argued. "You and I are..." She struggled, obviously trying to find the correct term to describe their present marital status.

Burt finished the sentence for her. "Separated? That's all the more reason for them to poke and pry and ask embarrassing and impertinent questions."

Diane straightened her shoulders. "I will tell the truth."

Burt asked gently, "And what is that truth?"

Diane dropped her head. "That you and I are living apart."

"They know that." Burt answered. "They will want to know why."

"I will tell them it's a personal matter and not something I wish to discuss."

"That would certainly open Pandora's box." Burt bit his tongue and shook his head. "I don't mean that as a criticism."

Diane's head came up. "Then how do you mean it?"

"What I'm trying to say is that people in the media are clever and persistent and not above asking you leading questions and then later quoting you out of context."

"And that could do harm to your campaign."

"Not only that, it could also embarrass and humiliate you." Burt drew a quick impatient breath. "I don't want that to happen."

Diane's voice softened. "I will cope."

He didn't want her to have to cope. He wanted to protect her. "There is a way to avoid all this."

Diane cut her eyes in his direction. "I don't see how."

Burt mentally crossed his fingers and plunged ahead. "You can move in here with me until the election is over." He raised a hand to still her objection. "There's plenty of room. The spare bedroom is large and comfortable. I won't intrude into your affairs and I won't trouble you with my problems."

"I don't..."

Burt interrupted. He didn't like forcing the issue but she'd left him little choice. "It would also give us a chance to work out some of our differences."

"I don't think..."

Even as he spoke Burt realized his actions were those of a desperate man. "As an alternative you could file for divorce, that would stir more controversy but at least things would be settled between us." Was he crazy? The last thing he wanted was a divorce. "So, which will it be a permanent separation or an attempt to work through our differences?"

Chapter 11

Diane's breath caught in her throat as her heart picked up an arithmetic beat. Her husband had just delivered what could only be classified as an ultimatum. She didn't want to divorce Burt. Neither did she want to be bullied into moving in with him just to make his campaign run more smoothly. Her first impulse was to run. No, damn it, not this time. She would stand her ground and stay the course. "I want more than just your assurance that you wouldn't intrude into my affairs or trouble me with your my problems before I would agree to such an arrangement." Had she taken leave of her senses? Probably so, she'd never been completely sane where Burt was concerned.

If Burt was surprised he didn't show it. In a voice that was low and calm, he said, "Name your terms." Had he shown the slightest sign of triumph or signaled a hint of exaltation, Diane would have been gone in a heartbeat. He didn't. If anything, he seemed humble.

Diane steadied her voice. "For starters, we share the housework." She was not about to become Burt's live-in housekeeper.

Burt lifted an eyebrow. "Are you agreeable to a twice-a-week cleaning woman?"

"Yes, if in the meantime you pick up after yourself." She waited, expecting him to argue or object. He did neither. Instead he nodded his agreement. "I can do that. Is there anything else?"

"There's the problem of food and laundry." Diane was surprised by her own boldness.

"Those things should be no problem," Burt replied matter-of-factly. "There's a small laundry room off the kitchen. We can agree on who has what wash day. I seldom eat at home. When I do, I can fend for myself." Leaning back, he laced his fingers behind his head. "If those terms are agreeable to you we can consider this a done deal."

"There's one other thing." She had come this far. She couldn't back down now. "I expect to pay my half of the expenses." Paying even half the rent on a place this pricey would probably strain her budget but she didn't intend to be dependent on Burt, or anyone else but herself ever again.

Burt dropped his arms as his head swiveled to stare at her. "That's not necessary." Was he angry, offended, hurt? She couldn't tell.

"It is for me." Diane decided to push her advantage. "Those are my terms. You can take them or leave them."

Burt's smile was self-derisive. "I'll take them. When can you move in?"

Diane's mind was spinning in circles. She'd have to break the news to Aunt Ida. She should call B.J. too. Packing and moving would take from the time she'd planned to spend working on her new sales campaign. "I'm not sure..." She stood. "I have to go now."

"I'll expect you Saturday or Sunday at the latest." Standing Burt extended his hand. "Shall we shake on the deal?"

Diane grasped his hand and knew instantly that touching him had been a mistake. Shivers danced up her arm and down her backbone. Twenty years had not diminished her desire for this man. She pulled her hand away. "I'll be here. I'll call before I leave Aunt Ida's to make sure you're here."

"You'll need a key." Burt took a key ring from his pants pocket, removed two keys and held them out to her. "The larger key is to the front door of the building. The smaller one opens the front door to the apartment."

Diane clutched the cool keys in her sweaty hand. "Thank you." She hurried toward the door calling out as she went, "I'll see you this weekend."

As she drove home she rehearsed in her head what she would say to Aunt Ida. The old lady wouldn't be happy about this latest turn of events. Diane's common sense argued that she owed Aunt Ida no explanation. Still, the nagging feeling that she was somehow betraying the one person who had always been there for her wouldn't go away.

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The house was dark when she pulled into the driveway. Diane breathed a sigh of relief. Reprieve—she had until tomorrow morning to prepare for what she suspected would be an unpleasant encounter. She hurried up the walk and quietly slipped her key into the lock.

The click of the lock and the flick of the light switch sounded simultaneously. As Diane stepped inside light flooded the living room and spilled into the foyer. She called out, “Hello, I’m home,” as she hurried toward the living room.

Aunt Ida stood beside the entranceway. “Is that you, Diane? What time is it?”

“It’s me,” Diane replied. “It’s almost nine-thirty. What are you doing up so late?”

Aunt Ida shuffled across the floor, took an open book from the seat of her easy chair, put it on the table beside the chair and sat down. “I was reading. I must have fallen asleep.” She yawned. “And right in the middle of sizzling seduction scene.”

Diane sat in a straight-backed chair across from her aunt. “When did you start reading romance novels?”

Aunt Ida removed her glasses and wiped the lenses on the tail of her dress. “I started a few years ago. One day over a bridge game Mildred Tucker kept raving about a book she was reading. I decided any book that excited Mildred to that degree was worth perusing. I asked her the title and she told me.” Aunt Ida smiled derisively. “It was a damned good book.” She put her glasses on and smiled at Diane. “Your aunt is hooked on romances.”

Diane returned her smile. “You’re getting mellow in your old age.”

“Or senile,” Aunt Ida snorted. Her gaze locked into Diane’s. “Sean called earlier. He seemed surprised when I told him I didn’t expect you home until later this evening.”

“Does he want me to return his call?”

Aunt Ida shook her head. “He said he’d catch you tomorrow. A reporter from the Raymonville Gazette called too and some persistent person from the local TV station called twice.”

“They shouldn’t have called here and disturbed you,” Diane declared before saying, “Burt warned me something like this would happen.”

Discretion was not one of Aunt Ida’s strong points. She asked point blank, “So you were with Burt tonight?”

“He called this morning and asked me to meet with him,” Diane said, wondering as she spoke, why she felt constrained to explain.

“He’s called a dozen times over the last two weeks,” Aunt Ida reminded her. “And you refused to even talk to him.”

There would never be a better time to say what must be said. “I’m going back to Burt. I’ll be moving into his apartment over the weekend.”

If Aunt Ida was surprised, she didn’t show it. “Are you positive this is what you want?”

With much more assurance than she felt, Diane said, “I’m positive.”

“Your husband has stirred up quite a controversy by deciding to run for District Attorney. That’s sure to complicate your personal relationship.”

Diane didn’t dare tell her aunt that there would be no personal relationship between her and Burt. “We can work it out.”

Aunt Ida got slowly to her feet. “I’ll miss you.” She took a few steps in the direction of her bedroom before stopping to add. “I hope you know that you always have a home here.”

Diane did know and she appreciated it more than she could find words to express. “Thank you, Aunt Ida.”

“You’re welcome, now go to bed. Tomorrow will be here before you know it.”

Diane went to bed but it was a long time before she fell asleep.

She called B.J. early the next morning. He was the one person who would welcome the news that she and Burt were together again. She wasn’t *really* with Burt, but B.J. didn’t have to know that. As she’d expected, B.J. was overjoyed. “That’s super, Mom. Does that mean that everything’s okay between the two of you now?”

Diane didn’t want to lie to her son but she couldn’t tell him the truth. “I had dinner with Dad last night. We had a long talk. Things are much better between us now.”

“I knew you two couldn’t stay apart for long. I’ll call you later. I have to run now. I have an early class.” Before Diane could respond, B.J. hung up the phone.

Diane soothed her conscience by telling herself that she hadn’t lied to B.J. She just hadn’t told him all the truth. By the time she reached her office, she’d convinced herself she’d done the only thing she could do under the circumstances.

Diane arrived bag and baggage at Burt’s apartment building at precisely seven-thirty a.m. the following Saturday. As she pulled into a parking space near the front entrance,

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she remembered that she'd forgotten to call ahead and tell Burt she was coming. So what if she woke him? She could have spared herself the worry. Burt wasn't home.

It took Diane over an hour to lug three loads of suitcases and boxes from her car, into the building, onto the elevator and inside the apartment. She spent another hour unpacking and straightening her room. Worn, weary and more than a little aggravated that Burt hadn't showed up to help her, Diane collapsed on the bed and curled into a fetal position.

She must have fallen asleep.

She was awakened by voices sounding from the living room. Burt's booming baritone she would know anywhere. "Sit down. Would you like something to drink?"

The answering voice was high-pitched and definitely female. "What do you have?"

That was a loaded question if she'd ever heard one. Diane sat on the side of the bed. Just what the hell was Burt doing with a woman in his apartment? She glanced at the clock on her nightstand. It flashed eleven-thirty-five. She'd been asleep for over an hour.

Burt's voice impinged again on her senses. "The choice is limited. Will you have cola or iced tea?"

"I could use something stronger if you have it," was the melodiously jocular reply.

Diane was on her feet and half way across the room when common sense moved into to challenge her anger. This was no time to lose her temper or her cool.

"I can offer you a shot of Irish whiskey," Burt replied over a chuckle.

The feminine voice replied, "After all that's happened to me over the past twenty-four hours, a shot of whiskey would be most welcome."

Diane's anger transmuted to an emotion she owned most reluctantly. She was livid with jealousy. Words Burt had said to her earlier flashed through her head like a neon sign. *I won't intrude into your affairs and I won't trouble you with my problems.* Was this one of Burt's 'problems'?

If she had stopped to reason, Diane would have realized that Burt would not have asked her here to live if he was involved with another woman. She didn't think. Instead she barged into the living room. What a sight she was, clad in old faded jeans and a too tight tee shirt with her hair hanging loose and her eyes blazing. She came through the door just as Burt was offering the other woman a tall glass. "I hope I'm not interrupting something important."

Burt's mouth fell open, literally. "Diane? You said you'd call. I didn't expect you to be here so early. We..." His voice trailed away.

"Apparently, you were mistaken," Diane replied as she eyed the other woman. She was tall and slim with big brown eyes and mane of bleached-blond hair. Coming across the room, Diane extended her hand. "I don't believe we've met. I'm Diane, Burt's wife."

Burt seemed to have found some of his poise and a measure of his equilibrium. He set the glass he held on the table and gestured toward the other woman. "This is Mary Thomas. You remember, I told you about her."

Burt's discomfort was a balm to Diane's wounded spirit. She lied with bold ease. "I don't recall, I'm sorry to say." She dropped her arm to her side since obviously Mary Thomas was too shocked to shake her hand.

Burt cleared his throat. "Mary, this is my wife, Diane."

If she hadn't been so consumed with jealousy, Diane would have felt sympathy for Mary Thomas. The woman was obviously in a state of mild shock. She looked from Burt to Diane and then back to Burt again. "I didn't realize. I thought..."

Burt turned to Diane with one hand extended. "Mary has defected. She resigned her position as Assistant District Attorney yesterday."

Mary added, "I have offered to be Burt's campaign manager and he's accepted."

Burt's discomfort made his voice raspy. "Mary came here to pick up some papers."

Diane held up one hand. "There's no need to explain." These two had guilt written all over them. That and their evident discomfort at her presence gave her a strange sense of being in control of the situation. "Don't mind me; go ahead with your....whatever it is you're doing." She pointed her feet in the direction of the kitchen.

Burt called after her, "Diane?"

Turning she smiled sweetly, "Yes, dear?"

He waved his hand in dismissal. "Never mind, we can talk later."

"Yes, dear, of course we will." As Diane hurried from the room, she could feel his frustration beating at her in white hot waves.

Chapter 12

Burt sat in a chair and sipped the drink he'd made for Mary. He'd given her the papers she'd come for and hustled her out the door in record time. What a moment for Diane to decide to move in bag and baggage. He hadn't expected her until Sunday morning at the earliest. There was some doubt in his mind that she'd show up at all without further urging from him. *Damn, she said she'd call first.*

He'd unintentionally created a situation that could drive Diane away and just when he hoped to start bridging the gap between them. He sipped his drink and smiled. Diane was jealous. She'd been downright catty to Mary and treated him like a kid who'd been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. Aggravation wiped his smile from his face. What did he have to do to prove to Diane that he loved her?

"I see your friend has gone. I hope I didn't drive her away."

Burt looked up to see Diane standing in the doorway with a sandwich in one hand and a Styrofoam cup in the other. "I made myself some lunch. I hope you don't mind."

Burt felt clumsy and awkward as a school boy. "Not at all, why should I?"

"I haven't had time to stock my side of the pantry. I'll buy you more bread and peanut butter when I go to the store."

If he hadn't known her so well, Burt would have sworn she was sparring for a fight. "There is no need for that." He pointed to a chair. "Sit down, Diane and let me explain."

Diane sat, put her cup on the table beside her chair, took a bite of her sandwich and chewed thoughtfully before saying, "There is no need to explain. I know the ground rules. I wouldn't think of intruding into your *affair*." She made the word affair sound like a profanity.

That wasn't what Burt meant and Diane damn well knew it. His eyes narrowed dangerously. "It wouldn't be wise to push me too far."

Diane sipped from her cup and swallowed. "When was I ever wise?"

She *was* sparring for a fight. Burt was damned if he'd give her the satisfaction of seeing him lose his temper. "Prudence is not one of your strong points." He was being insulting but not without reason. Diane had been insulting first. "Neither is discretion." He bit his tongue and waited for Diane to retreat behind her inevitable wall of silence.

Instead of retreating Diane let go with both barrels of an offensive that was as bold as it was surprising. "And discretion is the better part of valor; not that you would understand either of those terms."

So she wanted to bandy words about? Burt could do that. Words were his stock-in-trade. "You've lost me, dear wife. Define for me if you can the words discretion and valor."

Diane rose to the occasion admirably. "Maybe I should since it's clear that you don't have any concept of the meaning of either." She took a dainty, infuriating bite from her sandwich, chewed and swallowed before adding. "You must realize I'm speaking from the standpoint of wisdom and not from the standpoint of knowledge."

Burt's caustic reply was out before he could brake his tongue. "I agree that you may be lacking in knowledge." It was a nasty thing to say but she had pushing him into a corner. He raised one winged eyebrow. "I'm waiting for your wise but limited explanation."

Leaning back in her chair, Diane crossed one ankle over the other. "Discretion is nothing more than good judgment. It's having the wisdom to use diplomacy and tact so as not to needlessly hurt others, especially those significant others who trust and love you."

Burt felt as if she'd slugged him in the gut. He had been both indiscrete and stupid when he'd brought Mary to his apartment. But then he could fill a book with just such indiscreet and stupid acts. "You do have a point," he conceded with a little less than his usual grace.

"And valor," Diane's chin lifted. "Valor is a special kind of courage that allows you to be bold enough to face adversity even when you'd like to run and hide."

Burt swallowed over the lump in his throat. "Well said." Her insights surprised him. So did the fact that they'd made sarcastic accusations and hurled scathing indictments at each other without Diane lapsing into sullen silence. That was cause for hope. "Again, I owe you an apology. I said some things I didn't mean. Can you forgive me?"

"I forgive you. Can you forgive me?" Diane smiled. "Would you like a peanut butter sandwich?"

"I can make it myself." Burt was on his feet and almost to the kitchen when the buzzer signaling someone was at the apartment building entrance sounded. As he hastened to answer, he wondered aloud, "Who can that be?" He flipped the switch. "Yes?"

B.J.'s voice rang into the room loud and clear. "Hey, Dad, is Mom there?"

What was B.J. doing here? "Yes she is," Burt replied.

"Open the door and let me in."

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Burt pushed the button beside the speaker. "The door is open. Come on up." He turned to Diane. "How did B.J. know you'd be here?"

Diane was on her feet and moving toward the kitchen. "I called and told him I was moving in with you." She stopped as her back stiffened. "He thinks we're together as in *together* together. Please don't tell him we're not."

Burt answered, "I should be able to pull that off for a weekend."

Diane turned as she pressed her fingertips to her temples. "I forgot. Oh, my God," Her hands dropped to her sides. "Burt, B.J. is home for spring break. He'll be here for a week."

"A week," Burt echoed. He looked around the room. "Where are we going to put him? You have the spare bedroom. The only other place to sleep is on the couch."

Diane chewed her bottom lip. "I can sleep there. B.J. can have my bed."

Burt scoffed, "How are you going to explain to B.J. why you're sleeping on the couch if you and I are together *together* again?" *Damn, the kid couldn't have picked a worse time to show up on their doorstep.*

Diane grimaced. "Oh, Burt, what..."

B.J. banged on the door. "Hey, you guys. I'm here. Let me in."

"We'll think of something," Burt said. He wasn't sure what that something would be. Opening the door he stepped back. "Come in, son."

"Hi Dad." B.J. came inside, dropped his bags on the floor and looked around the room. "This place is a little cramped but it's nice." He hugged Diane. "Hi Mom."

It hadn't been until B.J. had showed up. Burt remarked dryly, "I'm glad you approve."

"I need a shower and some food." B.J. picked up his bags. "Where do I crash for the next week?"

Diane sent Burt a furtive look. "This way, I'll show you."

When she returned a few moments later, Burt was standing in the middle of the floor trying to collect his scattered thoughts. Diane dropped into a chair. "B.J.'s taking a shower."

Burt sat in his easy chair and sighed. "There's nothing in the house to eat. Shall I order something from the deli across the street?"

"That's a good idea. I'll go to the grocery store later." Shaking her head Diane smiled, "No one but B.J., right?"

Burt nodded, "No one but B.J."

After lunch, B.J. decided to visit his grandmother and Aunt Ida. "Do you guys want to come along?" he asked as he pushed his arms into his jacket.

Burt declined. "I have a meeting this afternoon."

So did Diane. "I have shopping to do, sorry."

Burt left a few minutes later. "I'll be back before dinner," He told Diane as he hurried toward the door. "If you need me call me on my cell phone."

"So you're running out, leaving me to deal with this problem alone?" Diane asked caustically.

Burt stopped. "Damn it, Diane I have to go. I'm meeting with my campaign committee for a strategy session."

"Then run along, you wouldn't want to keep them waiting."

Burt slammed out the door and rushed down the hall wondering as he went what had happened to the sweet docile little woman he'd married and how he was ever going to get back into her good graces and into her bed. She seemed impervious to any approach he tried. He would find a way, he had to. Maybe time was the answer. With time she would come around, or would she? He was still arguing with himself when he pulled into a slot in front of his campaign headquarters and stopped his car.

The meeting went well. As it drew to a close his phone rang. Burt excused himself and answered, "Burt Carlisle here."

Diane's voice cooed into his ear. "Darling, please come home as soon as possible."

Burt turned his back on the assembled members of his committee. Diane was calling him darling? Less than two hours ago, she'd been barely civil to him. "Is something wrong?"

"B.J. is giving us a dinner party tonight. You need to be here to help me prepare."

"What are you talking about?" Had B.J. invited guests to their apartment on such short notice? "When, where?"

"He's celebrating our reconciliation." Diane replied, "At seven o'clock this evening at the Paper Lantern."

The Paper Lantern was a small bar and eatery located on the outskirts of the city. Burt wasn't going there and he said so before adding, "Tell B.J. to forget it."

"It's not that simple," Diane replied. "B.J. has invited several other people to meet us there. He wants the entire family to share our happiness. He says..."

Surprise tilted Burt's voice as he interrupted to ask, "Is B. J. there with you now?"

"Yes, darling," Diane cooed in a sugary sweet voice.

"I'll be there shortly."

Burt hung up the phone, adjourned the meeting and drove home in record time. He parked his car and raced to his apartment intent on telling B.J. to call off this 'celebration'. He found his son sitting on the floor in the center of the living room printing names on index cards. B.J. looked up as he came inside. "Hi Dad."

Burt slammed the door and leaned against it. It irritated him to see his son engaged in what he considered to be an effeminate pursuit. "What the hell are you doing?"

"I'm making place cards for tonight's celebration." B.J. held up a glitter encrusted card for his father to see. "I thought they'd make nice mementoes of the occasion."

Burt barked, "Where is your mother?"

"Sean Brannigan called." B.J. answered as he turned his attention back to his task.

Burt struggled to hold onto his patience. "That's not an explanation."

B.J. held up a second decorated index card. "This one's for Mom. Do you like it?"

Burt dropped into his easy chair. "It's beautiful. Where is your mother?"

"She went to her office."

"Did she say when she'd be home?" Getting information from this kid was like pulling teeth.

B.J. completed a card and laid it aside. "She's meeting us at the Paper Lantern."

Burt loosened his tie. "B.J. about this dinner..."

"Isn't it an awesome idea? I planned it because I wanted to make Mom happy." B.J. tackled another card.

"And is she?" Burt asked.

"She says it's a sweet gesture on my part. I explained to her how it started out to be just you and me and her, and then I decided to invite Grandma Gladys. Grandma suggested that I ask Aunt Emma and Uncle Dennis too, so I did. Then I decided I'd better include Aunt Ida."

Burt wasn't happy about spending an evening in a sleazy bar with his mother and his sister, her difficult husband and Diane's acerbic Aunt Ida but if it pleased B.J. and made Diane happy, he could suffer through it. "That's very nice but why the Paper Lantern?"

B.J. dusted glitter across his latest creation. "It's the only place I could get reservations for sixteen people on such short notice."

Burt fairly shouted, "You invited sixteen people to dinner?"

Without looking up, B.J. replied, "Don't worry Dad. This is my treat."

"And how did you manage to pay for that treat?"

B.J. put the lid on a vial of glitter. "I charged it on my credit card."

Burt was the person who paid that credit card bill each month. He considered pursuing the subject further and decided it was not worth the effort. "Just whom did you invite besides Emma, Mother, Dennis and Aunt Ida?"

B.J. gathered his cards and hopped to his feet. "Aunt Emma had invited Sean and Sylvia and Michael and their kids to her house for dinner. When she said she couldn't come because she was expecting guests, I told her to bring them along to the celebration." He headed in the direction of the bedroom that he now claimed as his own.

Burt called after him, "Just a damn minute."

B.J. turned. "Yes Dad?"

"Come back and clean up your mess."

As B.J. swept paper scraps and glitter into a dust pan, Burt asked, "Does your mother know how long your guest list is?"

"Oh, yeah."

"And..." Burt questioned.

"And what?" B.J. asked in all innocence.

Burt stood and snagged his tie from the table beside his chair. "And nothing; get dressed, we don't want to be late."

Chapter 13

Diane sat beside Sean as he moved his Hummer adroitly through evening traffic. "We're set now for the Spring Clearance Sale."

Sean glanced briefly in her direction. "Thanks for coming in on your day off." He shifted his gaze back to the road. "I didn't know when I called that you were planning a celebration party tonight. Why didn't you say something?"

Diane stared at Sean's profile and felt a surge of pity. She knew how difficult the weekends were for him. "This is B.J.'s party. He's doing all the planning."

Sean gripped the steering wheel with both hands. "All the same, I appreciate you coming in *and* inviting me to your celebration. Weekends are rough for me. It helps to have work to do and social events to attend." His grip loosened. "Enough about me, tell me about this party you're throwing."

Diane hadn't invited Sean. She was a little surprised that B.J. had asked him to attend. "You can thank B.J. for the invitation. He planned this event, he issued the invitations and he's the official host."

Sean shook his head. "I should have guessed as much when Emma told me it was at the Paper Lantern. But what does it matter *where* we have dinner? You and Burt are together again and that's reason for celebration."

Surprise caused Diane to speak before she thought. "That's kind of you to say. I never thought you cared for Burt all that much."

"I didn't, I still don't but I do care about you and you care for Burt. I'm happy things worked out between the two of you."

"Thank you." Diane felt like a fraud. She stared out the window and changed the subject. "I'm thinking of offering more cooking school sessions in the summer. What do you think?"

"Sounds like a good idea." Sean pulled into the parking lot of the Paper Lantern and glanced at his watch. "We're a little late. Let's get inside. We don't want to miss any of the festivities."

They were met at the door by Tiny Young, the owner-manager of the Paper Lantern. He was a huge man, weighing well over three hundred pounds. His fat face wreathed in a

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smile and his several chins shook as he shouted a greeting over the blast of loud music that filled the room. "Howdy, y'all. Come right in."

Diane stepped through the opening and into the crowded dining room. "We're with the Carlisle party."

"I figured as much since I don't recall seeing either of you around here before." Tiny pointed to the back of the room toward a long table. "It's that-a-way."

Diane threaded through people and around tables with Sean close on her heels. She thought, as she made her precarious way along, that this was the kind of place Burt hated. She gritted her teeth and hoped for the best.

B.J. had outdone himself with festive decorations. The tablecloth was a colorful plastic creation. The plastic cups and plates were vivid shades of red and blue and balloons hung from the ceiling. Diane eased into a chair beside Emma and scanned the faces that looked back at her. They seemed happy enough except for Burt. The scowl he wore spoke volumes. She apologized. "I'm sorry we're late."

"Sit here," Emma told Sean. She motioned for Dennis, who was seated next to her, to move into the next chair, precipitating a series of shiftings until the chair on the opposite side of the table next to Burt was occupied.

Sean settled in the chair beside Diane. "We got busy and time got away from us." He looked around. "B.J., your decorations are spectacular."

"Thanks, Mr. Brannigan." B.J. beamed as he pushed back his chair and stood. "This is an occasion to honor my parents." He lifted his glass of soda. "A toast to the happy couple; may they enjoy another twenty years of wedded bliss."

Amid here-heres and shouts of approval the group drank.

B.J. seemed more than pleased with himself as he sat down and announced, "Now that Tiny has found a booster seat for James and the second guest of honor has arrived we can order. What will it be barbequed beef, barbequed pork, barbequed sausage or barbequed chicken?"

Even though the menu was limited, the food was well prepared and the fare was attractively served. The conversation was convivial and jovial. Gladys and Michael talked of the building boom that was taking place in Raymonville. "You keep building those homes," Gladys pointed her fork in Michael's direction, "and I'll keep selling them."

Michael grinned, "You keep selling them, Mrs. C. and I'll keep building them."

Emma and Dennis shared how they were searching for an appropriate name for their daughter. "She's due in June. That doesn't leave much time but we'll come up with

something,” Emma patted her husband’s hand. “Dennis and I together make a good team.”

Burt opened his mouth, “I...”

Diane caught his eye and sent him a warning look.

He drew a quick breath, “Think that’s nice.”

Sylvia and Michael’s son Nate asked B.J. about college life and then said he hoped to attend Texas University next year. Their fourteen-year-old twin daughters Susan and Sarah hung onto B.J.’s every word and giggled when he spoke to them directly. Ten-year-old Timothy and eight-year-old Amber elbowed each other and smiled knowingly each time the twins giggled.

Even Aunt Ida entered the conversation now and then with a clever observation or a pertinent comment.

Everyone seemed to be having a great time; everyone that is except the guests of honor. Try as she might, Diane couldn’t relax. Partly because Burt was obviously seething with suppressed anger and partly because Aunt Ida’s gaze was sending her a look that said the old woman wasn’t fooled, not for one minute.

Sylvia, Michael and their brood left early. As Sylvia kissed Diane goodbye she whispered, “Call me tomorrow. I want to hear all the racy details about you and Burt getting back together.”

Diane objected, “There’s not much to tell.” She didn’t like lying and pretending.

Sylvia patted her arm. “I want to hear anyway.”

Gradually the other guest drifted away until only Sean, Burt, B.J. and Diane were seated at the table. After a moment of awkward silence, Sean stood. “I really must be going too. Thank you B.J. for including me in you celebration.”

B.J. seemed blissfully oblivious to the tension that rose and sparked around the table. “Thank you for coming, Mr. Brannigan.”

Sean held up one hand. “Call me Sean please.” He turned his attention to Diane. “Since your car is parked at the store would you like me to take you back there?”

Before Diane could respond, Burt said, “B.J. rode out with me. He can go with you back to your store and bring his mother’s car home.” There was just enough bite in his voice to set Diane’s teeth on edge. She cringed as he added caustically. “That will give you and B.J. an opportunity to get better acquainted.”

B.J. hopped to his feet. "I can do that."

At that moment, Diane could have throttled Burt. If he said more and hurt B.J. or offended Sean, she just might.

Sean asked as he stared down at Diane, "Is that what you want, Diane?"

Before Diane could reply, Burt said, "What Diane wants is not your concern."

His caustic words clearly took Sean by surprise. "I beg your pardon?"

Standing, Diane laid her hand on Sean's arm. "Yes, it is. Please go and take B.J. with you." She fumbled in her handbag, found her car keys and handed them to her son. "Drive carefully. I'm attached to my SUV."

B.J. looked from Diane to Burt and back to Diane again. "Mom, is everything okay?"

Diane thought her face might break from her effort to smile. "Everything is perfect. Run along and thank you for a lovely party."

The moment the two were out the door, she stood and grabbed her handbag. "Let's go."

They were in Burt's car and far down the road before either of them spoke again. As he stopped for a red light, Burt glanced in Diane's direction. "You were late to your own party. Don't think that was a little rude?" He looked back toward the road and stepped on the gas hard causing the car to lunge forward.

Diane steadied her hand against the dashboard before turning to stare at his angry profile. She had expected him to let go with a caustic quip or a nasty innuendo. Such a direct attack took her by surprise. "You want to talk about rude? You were barely civil tonight."

The tense line of Burt's jaw was the only sign of his intense emotion. "I conducted myself with dignity and decorum. That's more than I can say for you. B.J. had place cards for all his guests. He worked most of the afternoon making them. He had a special one for you which you would have seen had you chosen to take your place beside me instead of opting to sit beside Sean Brannigan."

A twinge of remorse made Diane twist in her seat. "How was I supposed to know that? No one told me." She was damned if she was going to let Burt's remarks put her on the defensive. "You were sullen and sarcastic and downright insulting to Sean."

"Was I?" Burt lifted an eyebrow and looked her way. "It wasn't intentional."

It was intentional and Diane knew as much. She snapped, "Watch the road." Burt was hurt and angry, and not, she realized belatedly, without some reason.

Burt turned his glance back to the road. "You would have known if you hadn't gone tearing off to some meeting. Do you run every time Sean Brannigan snaps his fingers?"

"I went to attend to important business." Diane sought to justify her actions by condemning Burt's. "You had already gone off to attend some important business of your own."

"And you had no qualms about calling me and demanding that I drop everything and come home." Burt pulled off the freeway and turned down the street that led to the apartment. "I halted my meeting and came running. When I got there you were gone."

Diane had to admit, from Burt's perspective he had reason to be annoyed. "Maybe I was a little thoughtless."

"You were more than thoughtless; you were insensitive and inconsiderate."

That seemed a rather scathing indictment for what Diane considered to be a small offense. "I'm sorry you're upset."

"I not upset," Burt pulled into his parking space, unfastened his seat belt and turned to face her. "I'm pissed off to the core. You were mad as hell when I brought a woman to my apartment and irritated when I went to a meeting I'd had scheduled for some time. Later you called, demanding that I come home. Before I could get there you took off without notice to spend the afternoon with Sean Brannigan. As if that wasn't insult enough, you came to our reconciliation celebration late and with him in tow. Then you reorganized B.J.'s carefully thought-out seating arrangement so you could sit by his side through *our* celebration dinner."

For the first time Diane glimpsed her actions from Burt's perspective and it had an unsettling effect. "I was out of line. I'm sorry."

Burt echoed, "You're sorry? That's it, you're sorry? I turn my life upside down trying to please you. I bend over backward trying to make you see how much I love you and want you back in my life. You repay me by bringing another man to *our* celebration and all you can say is 'I'm sorry?'" He got out of the car and slammed the door hard. As he walked toward the apartment entrance, he said over his shoulder, "That's not enough."

He was being obstinate and unfair. Diane got out of the car and hurried to catch up to him as she called out, "Wait, Burt, we need to talk about this."

At the entrance, Burt paused and waited for her to catch up to him. "What is there to talk about?" He inserted his key in the lock and held the door open for Diane to go inside.

Before she could maneuver around Burt and through the entrance, B.J. called from the parking lot, "Wait up, you guys." He raced across the lot and held the door. "After you, Dad."

As the elevator climbed upward, B.J. asked, "Did you guys enjoy the party?" He was like a small child seeking and needing his parents' approval.

Diane's heart overflowed with love. "It was a lovely party and a very thoughtful gesture." She elbowed Burt in his ribs. "Wasn't it Dad?"

"Oh, yeah, it was great," Burt agreed as the elevator came to an abrupt stop. As the doors opened, he moved around B.J. and hastened down the hall toward the apartment door.

B.J. waited for Diane to step into the hallway before leaving the elevator and falling in step beside her. "Mom, in the morning I'm going to church with Grandma Gladys. I'll be leaving early and I know how you like to sleep in on Sunday morning, so if I'm not home when you get up, you'll know where I am."

Diane followed Burt and preceded B.J. into the apartment. "Thank you for remembering to tell me in advance." Tomorrow morning seemed light years away.

Chapter 14

Burt sat on the side of the bed and used the toes of one foot to slide the shoe from his other. His heartburn was acting up again. He wanted to blame the spicy barbeque he'd had for dinner. He couldn't, not with a clear conscience. Over the last few weeks he'd been careless about his diet; he hadn't exercised regularly and stress had been his constant companion.

Diane called from the bathroom, "I'll be out soon."

"Take your time," Burt called back. How the hell was he supposed to share a bed with Diane, have her lie beside him in a state of near-undress and hold in check his passionate need for her? He recalled vividly the last time he'd wooed her into surrender. He had been so sure that making love was the one way to heal the breach between them. He couldn't have been more wrong. *You'd better find a way to deal with this old buddy if you want to salvage what's left of your marriage.*

Diane came from the bathroom and sat on the other side of the bed. "Do you think we can talk about this?"

"Not tonight." Burt stood, determined to put both physical and emotional distance between them. "I'm not up to talking or doing anything else but sleeping." He hurried

toward the bathroom. Once inside he closed the door and leaned against it. Maybe a cold shower would help.

He remembered as he stood under a spray of chilly water that he'd forgotten to take his daily dose of medication. He got out of the shower, wrapped a towel around his middle and was rummaging around in the medicine cabinet looking for an antacid and his high blood pressure capsules when he spied the tall vial of sleeping tablets the doctor had prescribed for his insomnia. He'd never taken even one of the things. Medication seemed such a cowardly way to induce sleep. He took the bottle from the cabinet and read the instructions. *Take one as needed for sleep; do not take more than two pills in twenty-four hours. Caution this medication can be addictive.*

Burt shook three pills from the vial and held them in the palm of his hand before downing them with a gulp of water. If he was in a drug-induced sleep, he wouldn't be tempted to do something foolish like make love to his wife.

And sleep he did. It was almost noon the next day before Burt awakened with a headache and a bad taste in his mouth. He sat on the side of the bed and looked around. Not a sign of Diane, maybe that was for the best. He dressed and stumbled to the kitchen.

Someone, probably Diane, had made coffee. Burt poured a cup and sat at the table with his head in his hands. It seemed his relationship with Diane had come to an impasse. Where did he go from here?

Over the next week, he asked himself that question repeatedly. He never came up with a definitive answer. Somehow, he managed, with the help of his sleeping pills to stay to his side of the bed for the next week. By the time B.J. left for college Saturday morning, he felt as if he'd been run through a sausage grinder.

Although his personal life was on a downhill slide, Burt's professional life improved with each passing day. His campaign moved along nicely and he had more clients than he could handle. In April he hired Mary Thomas as his assistant thus providing him with some free time to concentrate on his race for District Attorney.

The primary in May secured Burt's place on the November ballot as the Republican nominee for District Attorney of Raymon County. That was good news but he knew that his biggest battle was ahead of him: the momentous task of defeating Jules Jacobson in the November general election.

Diane was cooperative in helping with Burt's campaign. She attended rallies, sat through speeches before numerous civic groups and endured lengthy luncheons held in his honor. In public she appeared to be a faithful and devoted wife. In private she was cool and aloof and distant. She'd moved back to her bedroom the instant B.J. left for college and there she had stayed for three long months.

Then one Sunday morning in early June, she knocked on Burt's bedroom door.

He sat up and called out, "Yes? Who is it?" As if he didn't know it was his very estranged wife.

"It's me, Diane. I've made breakfast. Would you like to come and join me?"

What had prompted this sudden about-face? Burt decided not to question what he perceived to be a fortunate turn of events. "I'll be right out." He dressed slowly. It wouldn't be wise to let Diane know how anxious he was.

When he came into the kitchen, Diane was standing by the stove stirring the contents of a skillet. "I'm glad you could join me." Turning she pointed with her spatula. "Sit down. The eggs will be ready in a few minutes."

Burt pulled a chair to the table and sat in it. A dozen thoughts ran through his head. He was reluctant to give voice to any of them. Finally, he asked, "What's the occasion?"

Diane put the eggs on the table and poured coffee into Burt's cup. "You and I have a problem."

That had to be the understatement of all times. Burt took a sip of coffee. "You are the clever one."

"Don't be sarcastic." Diane sat in the chair across from him. "B.J. is going to summer school again this year."

Burt raised an eyebrow. "That's a problem?"

"He'll be home next week to spend a few days between semesters." Diane drew a deep breath. "I will be living here until after the November election; therefore, I see no reason at this time to tell B.J. the true status of our marriage."

Burt swallowed before taking a quick swig of coffee. Was Diane leaving him after the election? In so many ways she'd already left him. "We will talk about what happens after the election after the election."

Diane nodded her agreement. "Meanwhile B.J. is coming home and that complicates our arrangement here."

Burt heaped eggs into his plate. "That does present a problem."

Diane's eyes were bright with unshed tears. "I think I've come up with a solution."

Burt tasted the eggs. They were delicious. "I'm listening."

Diane turned her head to one side. "I want you to do more than listen. I want you to *hear* what I have to say. B.J. thinks..."

"I know what B.J. thinks." Burt's patience was wearing thin. "Just tell me whatever the hell it is you want me to know."

"Emma's baby is due in a few days."

Burt couldn't keep the disdain from his voice. "That I already knew." Before the words were out of his mouth he repented of having uttered them. In a much softer voice he said, "I can't see what that has to do with B.J. being underfoot for the next several days."

"Is that how you think of B.J., as being underfoot?" Diane bit her bottom lip. "We can talk about that some other time too. What I need you to do now is persuade Gladys to give B.J. a job in her real estate office for the few days he's in Raymonville."

Burt raised one eyebrow. "What if Mother doesn't want B.J. underfoot at her office?"

"You can talk her into it." Diane argued and then reinforced her argument by pointing out, "She hasn't found a replacement for Emma yet. She can use B.J.'s help and his company."

"That's all well and good but it doesn't solve the problem of where B.J. will sleep."

Diane moved restlessly in her chair. "He can stay with Gladys at night too."

Burt had never thought of Diane as someone who manipulated people or situations. Now she was doing both. He considered forcing the issue. If he did she might leave and take with her that spark of hope that kept him hanging on. He could refuse her request. Second thoughts moved in to make him reassess his rather precarious position. He had depleted his supply of sleeping pills. Without them he couldn't hope to share a bed with Diane and not succumb to the demands of his own passionate needs.

As he reflected over his rather limited range of choices, Diane's voice impinged on his dismal thoughts. "I'm waiting for an answer."

"I'll talk to Mother." Burt stood. "I'm going to my office. I'll be there until noon if you need me." The irony of that statement made him smile. If she needed him—that would be the day.

Diane called after him, "Don't forget to talk to Gladys."

Shortly after eleven, Burt called Gladys. Anything but a direct approach would get him nowhere with his mother. The moment she answered the phone, he said, "This is Burt. I need to talk to you. Can I come by your house later?"

Gladys replied, "Emma is in the hospital. Dennis took her in about seven this morning. He finally got around to calling me, her mother, to tell me that my only daughter is in labor. I'm on my way there now. If you want to talk to me, you can meet me there."

"I want to and I will." After all these years, he was going to be an uncle. Burt was a little surprised to find that prospect pleased him immensely. He hung up the phone and hurried out the door.

Thirty minutes later, he raced into the waiting room of the maternity ward at Raymon County General to find Gladys sitting in an arm chair and flipping through a magazine. Her head swung in his direction as he came across the room. "You came. Thank God. Sit down and keep me company."

Burt could never remember seeing his mother so distraught. Glancing around the room he asked, "Where is Dennis?"

"He's with Emma. She wanted me to stay too but I said no." Gladys rubbed her hands together before putting them palm to palm and pressing her forefingers to her lips. Shaking her head she dropped her hands to her lap. "It's all so crazy. The birthing room is no place for a man but Dennis insists on staying 'to help Emma' as he so quaintly puts it. He's done all he can do. He should get out now and let the doctors and nurses take care of his wife."

Burt chuckled. "So you couldn't take seeing your daughter suffer?"

Gladys sat up and glared at him. "You think you've found a chink in my armor?" She slumped in her chair. "You have. What is all this talk about natural childbirth? My daughter should be unconscious from the moment she feels her first hard contraction until someone, preferably the doctor, cuts the umbilical cord on her infant. But not Emma, oh, no, she's lying in there," she inclined her head toward the door, "suffering unbearable pain and it's all so unnecessary."

The woman he'd always thought of as invincible had a soft side. Burt felt a tender surge of emotion. "How long has it been since I told you I love you?"

Gladys brushed at a wayward tear. "I can't remember. Probably the last time you wanted me to do something for you." She favored him with one of her rare smiles. "What do you want now?"

Standing Burt extended his hand. "I want to buy your lunch; which way to the cafeteria?"

Gladys seemed unsure. "I don't know if I should leave Emma." She scowled. "Hospital food is always terrible."

She'd already left Emma. Burt was too kind to point that out to her. Taking her hand, he pulled her to her feet. "Humor me and come along. You don't have to eat the food, just keep me company while I do." It had to be fate that brought him here. His mother needed him. He could never remember her needing anyone before. He was glad he was here for her. Taking her arm, he guided her into the hall.

Burt inquired at the desk and was told the cafeteria was, "Down the hall and to the right."

As the two of them settled at a table in the almost deserted dining room, Burt said, "Sit here, I'll get you a plate. What would you like?"

Gladys relaxed in her chair. "I would like a sirloin steak and a shot of bourbon. I'll settle for a cheese sandwich and a cup of coffee."

Burt returned to the table several minutes later carrying a tray loaded with two sandwiches, two cups of coffee and two pieces of apple pie. "I got you dessert too." He put the tray on the table, sat across from his mother and slid her sandwich and coffee across to her.

Gladys lifted the top of her sandwich. "This looks almost edible."

Burt set his food in front of him before reaching to put the tray on the table next to them. It was time he got down to the business at hand. "I've been thinking Mother, that perhaps..."

Chapter 15

Diane had read the same page three times and she still didn't know what it said. Closing her book, she laid it aside. Her brain teemed with uncertainty and indecision. Her intellect told her that if she had an ounce of pride she'd leave Burt now, today. Why did she keep hanging on when the last tenuous thread that had held their relationship together—Burt's sexual attraction to her—was gone?

Her heart argued differently. *You love your husband. Hang on a little longer and fight for the man you love.* How did she fight indifference and lack of interest? Her mind drifted back to their passionate encounter on Valentine's Day. She had been so sure after that fierce coming-together that their sexual relationship was perfect. All they needed now was some time to work out their other problems. Looking back today, she realized how wrong she had been. She should have nurtured and tended that bright flame. But she hadn't and it had flickered and died from neglect and indifference.

Painfully, reluctantly, her memory hopped from February to March as she recalled how through a long week Burt had lain beside her each night and without offering her so

much as a good night kiss, fallen immediately into a sound sleep. As she lay beside him listening to his even breathing, she wondered what had happened to cool his ardor. When B.J. returned to school, Diane crept back to her bedroom and there she stayed, hiding her sorrow and her heartbreak behind a façade of cool indifference.

Had Burt grown weary of trying to patch up their threadbare relationship? Had he found someone else? Maybe that someone else was Mary Thomas. Burt had hired her as a junior partner in his law firm. When the coming November election was over, would he ask Diane to leave?

Jumping to her feet Diane paced across the room. *What you have, girl, is the Sunday afternoon blues along with an old-fashioned case of claustrophobia. The four walls are closing in on you.* Grabbing her car keys and her handbag, she raced out the door.

She drove for almost an hour before stopping her SUV in Aunt Ida's drive. As she got out of the car and slammed the door, Sylvia called from across the hedge. "Diane, hi, congratulations"

Diane stopped. "Thanks." She wondered what she was thanking Sylvia for.

"You don't know?" Sylvia asked and then said, "You're an aunt. Dennis just called from the hospital. Emma had her baby."

News that should have brought elation drove Diane further into a mood of black despair. "That's wonderful."

"I'm driving over now to see them. Do you want to come along?"

Diane was in no frame of mind to share someone else's happiness. "No thanks."

Sylvia said as she opened her car door, "Maybe after you visit awhile with Aunt Ida you can come on over to the hospital."

She would have to put in an appearance sooner or later. Diane forced herself to express an excitement she didn't feel. "I'll be over in an hour or so."

As Sylvia backed from her driveway, Aunt Ida opened her front door. "Diane, thank goodness. I thought the Collins boys were playing football in my front yard again."

"I was talking to Sylvia," Diane explained as she hurried up the walk. "Emma just had her baby."

Stepping back, Aunt Ida motioned for Diane to come inside. "I know. I just got off the phone with Burt. He's at the hospital. He wanted to speak to you. I told him you weren't here."

Diane came through the door and closed it behind her. "I went for a little drive. Does Burt want me to return his call?"

Aunt Ida walked unhurriedly from the foyer into the living room. "He wanted you to know that Emma had her baby." She sank slowly into her favorite easy chair. "As predicted, it was a little girl. She weighted six pounds and two ounces. Her name is Sylvia Diane. Isn't that a lovely name?"

Diane agreed. "Yes, it is." She sat on the couch across from her aunt. "And I'm flattered."

"You should be." Aunt Ida said. "You have a namesake. That's an honor not everyone in this old world can claim." She turned her head to one side. "Why aren't you at the hospital with Burt?"

Diane lied with appalling ease. "I had some things to do and some errands to run."

Aunt Ida hooted, "Baloney."

Diane dissolved into tears. "Oh, Aunt Ida, what am I going to do?" She was immediately sorry for her outburst. Aunt Ida was the last person to confide in about Burt. She didn't like the man; she never had. Her opinions and her advice were bound to be biased.

Aunt Ida struggled to her feet and came to sit beside Diane. "Don't cry, dear." She held one of Diane's hands in both of hers. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Diane wiped at her tears with her free hand. She did, but she didn't. "It's all very complicated."

"I'm still in command of my mental facilities," Aunt Ida replied. "Perhaps if you proceed slowly, I can grasp the basics of this complicated problem."

Diane smiled through her tears. Her aunt did have a way of putting her in her place. "I don't know when it began. I don't know *how* it began. Somewhere along the way Burt and I have drifted so far apart that I can't find my way back to him."

Aunt Ida dropped Diane's hand as her wrinkled brow creased into a frown. "You're a reasonably intelligent woman; make a guess as to how and when."

Diane had expected her aunt to condemn Burt and offer her sympathy; instead she was casting aspersions on Diane's mental capabilities and forcing her to call into question past events that were painful to remember. "How can you take Burt's side in this? You don't even like him." She bit her tongue. She was being childish and petty.

Aunt Ida's backbone straightened. "Maybe it's time we got a few things straight. I am not taking Burt's side in this. How can I? I don't even know what *this* is. And contrary to

what you have always believed, I do like Burt and I admire him too. He's strong and decent. Those are qualities you don't find in a man every day in the week."

"Then why have you always treated him with such contempt?" Diane asked before prudence could dictate discretion.

"I have never treated Burt with contempt. I have stood my ground with him and refused to let him bully me. You, on the other hand, have let him dominate your life completely. That's what makes me angry and I inevitably take my anger out on Burt when he's no more at fault than you are."

Diane wanted to debate Aunt Ida's astute observation. She couldn't, it was too near the truth. For no reason she could explain, she defended Burt. "He's not domineering so much as he's assertive."

"And you've always lacked the backbone to deal with that assertiveness." Aunt Ida observed as she studied Diane's troubled face.

That was another truth Diane was reluctant to admit. "I was once maybe, but not anymore." That was a lie, a blatant, ball-faced lie. She was afraid, even now, to push Burt too far.

Aunt Ida took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "The two of you have never reconciled." She tagged her statement with a questioning, "Have you?"

Diane hung her head. "No, not really."

"Then why did you move in with him?"

That Diane couldn't explain. "I don't know. It seemed the answer to a multitude of problems."

Leaning back, Aunt Ida narrowed her eyes. "He conned you into coming back to him and you were more than willing to let him." When Diane didn't reply, she asked, "Am I right?"

She was, on both counts. Diane felt a pressing need to explain to her aunt. "Burt was running for a political office. The media had begun to ask embarrassing questions about our separation. He thought if we were living under the same roof it would help his campaign and protect me at the same time."

Aunt Ida moved to the end of the couch. "Thank you Diane. When we began this conversation I was a little confused."

Diane breathed a little easier. "Then you do understand?"

"No, I don't." Aunt Ida snapped. "Now I'm even more confused than I was at the onset of this little discussion." She studied her hands that lay folded in her lap. "What are you going to do now?"

Diane shrugged. "I don't know." She asked, a little hesitantly. "What would you do if you were in my place?"

"I would never be in your place. I have always been careful not to be legally tied to any man. Marriage is too complicated for a loner like me." Aunt Ida gripped the arm of the couch and stood to her feet, signaling that the conversation was over. "Come into the kitchen. You can make a pot of tea."

Diane followed her aunt into the kitchen where she made tea and spent another thirty minutes discussing safe and trivial matters. Finally, she used the excuse of going to see Emma's baby to escape.

She arrived at Emma's room to find Sylvia seated in the only chair in the crowded space. As Diane entered, she hopped to her feet and perched on the side of Emma's bed. "You just missed Burt. He and Gladys left about ten minutes ago."

Diane sat in the chair. "I'm not looking for Burt."

"He's looking for you," Emma said. "He tried to call you several times and you didn't answer."

"I turned off my phone," Diane explained feeling a little foolish as she did so. Looking around the room she asked, "Where is Dennis?"

Emma laughed. "He's down the hall standing in front of the nursery window admiring his daughter."

Sylvia beamed. "Hey, that daughter has a name."

Diane relaxed feeling that she was safely past having to discuss Burt or face probing questions. "I'm so flattered that you'd name your daughter after me."

Sylvia rammed her finger into her chest, "And me."

Emma laughed. "We spent nine months trying to find a suitable name for our child and couldn't come up with one. The moment she was born, Dennis took one look at her and said, 'Hello, Miss Sylvia Diane Brannigan.' I knew the moment he said it...that was the perfect name for our daughter."

The three women talked as only old friends could, of babies and birthing, names and namesakes, events and occasions. By the time Sylvia excused herself and left, Diane had relaxed and was feeling almost cheerful.

Dennis returned a few minutes later, beaming and bragging. "Bubbles is the most beautiful child in the nursery."

"Bubbles," Diane gasped.

Her surprised expression caused both Dennis and Emma to burst into spontaneous laughter. When Dennis could catch his breath he explained, "Sylvia's twins were here earlier. They were intrigued by our daughter's ability to blow bubbles. They called her Bubbles. The name seems to fit. She's so happy and beautiful and she's brought so much joy to so many people."

Diane laughed too. "Bubbles is a very fortunate young lady to have you two for parents." Much more of this and she'd be crying and not all of those tears would be from happiness. "I have to go. Burt will be wondering what happened to me."

As Diane drove from the hospital to her apartment, all the problems that had pursued her over the past three months overtook her once more, hopping back into her head to challenge her new-found serenity. *You're a coward, Diane Carlisle, a gutless wonder who lacks the strength to let go and can't find the courage to hang on.* She pulled her SUV into the parking space beside Burt's silver Lexus, got out, and pointed her reluctant feet toward the entrance of the apartment building.

Burt greeted her at the door of their apartment. "I had begun to worry about you. Where have you been?"

I've been lost for such a long time, trying to find my way back to you. "I visited with Aunt Ida and then went to see Emma's baby."

Burt's expression of concern altered to register doubt and some other emotion Diane couldn't read. "I called Aunt Ida twice. She said you weren't there." He turned away. "Never mind, it's not important. You're here now. I talked with Mother. She will house B.J. during his break between classes."

How distant he sounded and how cold, Diane managed a short, "Thank you for seeing to the matter."

"You can relax now, you're safe," Burt intoned sarcastically. In a much more agreeable tone he asked, "Have you had dinner?"

"I'm not hungry." She had to get out of his sight and away from his forceful presence before she did something foolish like beg him to love her again. What would happen then? She didn't want—couldn't bear—to think about that. "I have a headache. I'm going to my room. Good night."

Chapter 16

Burt pulled his Lexis into a parking slot near his campaign office and glanced at his watch. It flashed seven-thirty-five a.m. He got out of his car and raced toward the office door. A fierce November wind pursued him, biting at his ears and nipping his nose. Not good, he thought. Election days should be sunny and fair. Only the die-hard and totally committed would brave this icy storm to cast a ballot. Lack of turn-out could spell his defeat.

Since last May when he won the Republican primary, this was the day Burt had both dreaded and anticipated. He anticipated the triumph that winning the office of District Attorney could bring. He dreaded the thought of losing the race and he knew that was a very real possibility. He dreaded even more the possibility of losing Diane. Would she leave him the moment the election returns were in?

Burt unlocked his office door and went inside. The warmth reached out and embraced him. He shed his coat and hung it on one of the pegs that stretched along the north wall. He found some comfort in knowing that win or lose he'd waged an aggressive campaign for the office of District Attorney. It had been a long and arduous conflict that had him battling a determined opponent and fighting against overwhelming odds. Burt had been both determined and tenacious. His campaigning schedule consumed all of his spare time during the summer and become more intense as summer turned to fall.

His battle to reclaim Diane's love remained a nebulous conquest against phantom forces that he could neither define nor delineate. He had hoped through the long summer that she would relent and respond to his attempts at reconciliation. His overtures seemed to drive her further away. Her complete withdrawal over the past few weeks had him convinced now that she would leave him after Election Day.

He pulled his thoughts back to the present. His faithful staff of workers and volunteers would be arriving soon. He made coffee in the huge urn Mary Thomas had rented the day before, sat in his chair and waited, but not for long.

A few minutes later Pete Turner came through the door and shivered. "It's colder than a witch's tit out there." He hung his coat on a peg and headed for the coffee urn. "Did you vote?"

Burt nodded. "Yes, I was the first person to cast a ballot in precinct two."

Pete filled a Styrofoam cup with coffee. "I'm in precinct three. I was the first person to vote over there." He sat in a chair and crossed his legs. "This don't look good, Chief. A lot of people will stay away from the polls today."

Burt shared Pete's thoughts and his concern. "All we can do is our best." It was a hollow cliché but at this point, it was the best he could manage.

By ten o'clock the campaign office teemed with workers, volunteers and well-wishers. In the crowd, Burt felt alone. He needed Diane here by his side. *Dream on Buddy*. Since last June Diane had showed no interest in his campaign. He wondered if she'd even bother to vote today.

The next two hours dragged by as a TV newscaster projected a low voter turn out and went on to calculate that Jules Jacobson would "win by a nose." The newscaster was followed by a petite little weather woman who predicted sleet and rain later in the afternoon.

Burt walked to the other end of the room, sat at a tiny table in a far corner and stared out the plate glass window. Ominous clouds were gathering across the western horizon. Now and then a flash of lightening was followed by a rumble of thunder.

Mary Thomas followed him and sat across from him. "The weatherman's predictions could be wrong."

They could be but Burt suspected they were right on target. "We will just have to wait and see."

Mary pushed a soggy burrito across to Burt. "Eat; you're going to need your strength for the ordeal ahead."

Burt was realizing more and more that his strength was Diane and her belief in him. If he had lost her and her support, nothing else mattered to any great degree. He took a bite of burrito. It was soggy and cold. "One thing's for sure; this race is going right down to the wire."

"Buck up," Mary said in a too cheerful voice. "You have a fifty-fifty chance of winning."

The weather forecaster's prediction held true. By three-thirty in the afternoon cold rain was falling from a leaden sky. Burt hunted through his pockets for an antacid and wondered why Diane didn't call. She owed him that much.

The afternoon dragged on; the rain turned to sleet as the dinner hour came and went. Some thoughtful supporter appeared around seven in the evening with trays of sandwiches. Burt was too on-edge to eat. The polls closed at seven. First news of the election results should be available shortly.

A few precinct reports trickled in around eight. The news wasn't good. Jules Jacobson had a slight lead.

Around nine many of Burt's supporters gave up and went home. He couldn't blame them. Home was where he would like to be, home with his wife, if he still had a wife. *Diane, where the hell are you?*

The nine-thirty report put Burt ahead by five votes. That bit of good news was enough to energize his remaining supporters. They made fresh coffee and congratulated Burt and each other. Burt made a short speech. It was stirring and optimistic but his heart wasn't in it.

By eleven it was clear that Burt had won the election, not by any landslide but by a comfortable margin. TV news crews appeared, shivering and shaking moisture from coats and equipment.

Burt graciously posed for pictures and answered countless questions. Predictably one reporter, a tall blonde with a hooked nose, asked the inevitable, "Where is Mrs. Carlisle?"

Burt smiled and answered that he hoped she was home safe and out of the bad weather. He hadn't been a trial lawyer all those years for nothing. Before the woman could ask another question he announced, "I'll answer one more question before I go home to join her."

He answered four or five more questions before the reporters took their reluctant leave and the crews and camera men packed their equipment and disappeared out the door and into the stormy night. Not until the last straggling member of the news crew had gone through the front door did Burt realize how bone weary he was.

A few of his more faithful supporters stood around the coffee urn and yawned as they congratulated each other on a job well done. Burt called to them. "I want to thank each and every one of you for all you've done through this rough campaign. Let's close up shop and go home. It's been a long day."

Pete Turner and Mary Thomas lingered behind the others. Pete asked, "Would you like me to stay and help you lock up?"

Burt shook his head. "No, you've done enough for one day."

As the door slammed behind Pete and Mary, Burt sat in a chair and closed his eyes. He was too tired to budge. After several minutes, he got slowly to his feet and moved in the direction of the coffee urn, hoping he could salvage one last cup of coffee before he unplugged it. No such luck, it was completely empty.

Burt was putting used Styrofoam cups into a garbage bag when someone pounding on the front door made him set the bag aside and hurry to unlock it.

Mary Thomas stood on the other side, shivering and looking rain soaked and bedraggled. Pushing past Burt, she came inside. "I forgot the coffee urn. I have to return it by eight in the morning."

Barri Bryan
Starting Over

She was soaked to the skin. "Get out of that wet coat." Burt said as he took his coat from its peg and draped it around her shoulders. "You could have picked the urn up tomorrow."

Mary hung her wet coat over the back of a chair. "The rental company is just down the block from me and I live all the way across town. I'd rather take it tonight."

As tired as he was, Burt offered to carry the urn to Mary's car.

Mary sat in a chair and hugged Burt's coat to her body. "Thank you. I'm parked under the street light at the south end of the parking lot." She handed him her car keys. "The urn fits snugly in the back seat."

Burt hoisted the urn and made his way around tables and chairs toward the front entrance.

Mary hopped to her feet and raced to hold the door open for him. As he stood poised to make a dash for her car she cautioned, "Be careful. It's dark out there."

Burt hurried across the parking lot calling as he went, "Don't lock the door." He didn't want to be stranded as Mary had been earlier, banging on a locked door begging entrance.

The wind blew fiercely and sharp spikes of sleet struck his face and arms. Burt was soaked to the skin and his teeth were chattering before he reached Mary's car. By the time he got the urn into the back seat, made it back across the parking lot and to the door of his campaign headquarters, his shoes were filled with water, his clothes were dripping wet, and he shook with cold.

As he came inside, Mary took off his coat and extended it in his direction. "Here, put this on."

Burt thought the offer came a little late. All the same, he took it and pushed his arms into the sleeves.

Mary placed a folding chair in front of a heating vent and motioned for Burt to sit in it. "Come over here near the heat."

Burt sat down, took his shoes from his feet and set them near the vent. Water dripped from his clothing and made little puddles on the floor. He took off his socks and wrung water from them before hanging them on the rung of a nearby chair. His chest was tight and his shoulders ached from the wet and cold. He took off his coat and hung it across the back of that same nearby chair.

Mary took her scarf from her head and offered it to Burt. "Dry your hair on this."

Barri Bryan
Starting Over

The scarf was made from some soft wooly substance. Burt dried his hair and rubbed his ears before handing it back to her. "Thank you."

Mary draped the scarf over the seat of the chair. "Maybe if you took off your wet shirt and put on your dry coat you'd get warm faster."

That seemed a sensible suggestion. Burt shed his dripping shirt.

Mary took it from him and hung it over the back of another chair. "Would you like me to call Mrs. Carlisle to come and drive you home?"

Burt shook his head. "No, thank you." He could imagine trying to explain this situation to Diane. "I'll dry out and go home shortly."

Mary pulled a chair near him and sat down. "I'll wait with you."

"There is no need for that."

"Yes, there is," Mary argued tenaciously. "It's my fault that you got wet in the first place and I should have thought to give you your coat before you went outside."

Burt rotated his shoulders trying to loosen some of the tenseness that pulled at his neck and back.

Mary came to stand behind his chair. She rubbed her warm hands along the thick muscles at the back of his neck. "Let me massage some of that tenseness away." She rotated his hands in tiny opposing vertical circles. "Neck tension is often the cause of immense physical and psychological fatigue."

Burt relaxed as the tenseness in his neck and shoulders floated away. "You sound like an authority on massage."

Mary massaged below Burt's ears, then let her fingers trace along his jaw bone. "I am. I supported myself as a masseur while I was attending law school."

Burt rubbed perspiration from his brow. "Did you turn the heat up in here?"

Mary laughed. "I did but we can kick it up even higher if you'd like."

Too late Burt realized her words carried a double meaning. He jumped to his feet and turning faced her. "Mary- Miss Thomas..." Silver-tongued Burt Carlisle was struck dumb.

Mary moved closer, put her arms around his waist as she purred, "What's the matter Mr. D. A., has the cat got your tongue?" She laid her head against his chest and sighed.

"I...It's..." Burt stammered.

The front door burst open emitting a gust of icy rain and a furiously angry Diane. "You slut, get your hands off my man."

Burt broke Mary's embrace and stepped back as Diane kicked the door shut with her foot and advanced across the floor with both hands on her hips and her eyes blazing. "What the hell is going on here?"

Mary had the good grace to look chagrined. "Mrs. Carlisle, we weren't expecting you."

Diane stopped in the middle of the room. "I can see that." She came to stand between Mary and Burt. Shaking her index finger in Mary's face, she shouted, "Answer my question, what were you doing with your hands all over my husband?"

Mary took a step backward. "Mrs. Carlisle, please try to control yourself."

Burt had never seen Diane so angry. That rage gave him some hope. Maybe she did care for him after all. "I can explain..." His words and his hope died away on the end of a long breath. How could he prove his innocence when circumstances made him look as guilty as sin?

Diane whirled and pointed that same condemning finger in his direction "You, shut up." Once more she faced Mary. "Get out of here now!"

Mary grabbed her scarf and her handbag and ran for the door.

Burt sank into a chair and let his head drop into his hands. Could he make Diane believe he was innocent of any wrong doing? He doubted that he could but he had to try.

Chapter 17

Diane watched as Mary Thomas ran out the door and into the stormy night. She struggled to control her anger as she turned once more to face her husband. She had come here tonight to apologize and beg Burt's forgiveness, to get down on her knees if she had to and plead with him to give her a second chance. The sight of him in another woman's arms had driven every sane thought from her mind. All she felt now was blinding anger and a hurt too deep to measure. "You have gone too far this time."

Burt lifted his head and stared directly into her eyes. "Do I get a chance to explain?" The contrition in his expression and the pain in his voice were undeniable. Diane pulled a chair directly in front of him and sat in it. "This had better be good." She took off her coat. "It's a little warm in here."

“Someone turned up the thermostat,” Burt said. I’ll readjust it.”

Diane noticed as he walked across the room that he was barefoot and bare-chested. The sight of him in that semi-undressed state made her breath catch in her throat. Her anger dissolved to be replaced with an ache of longing. God how she loved this man and she didn’t intend to lose him, not because of some bleached blonde floozy and not because of her own foolish pride.

Burt found the thermostat. “This thing is set on eighty-five.” He twisted a knob before turning to say, “It should cool down in here soon.”

It was now or never. Diane cast aside the last vestige of her pride. “I came here to apologize.”

Burt came across the floor and sat in the chair he’d recently vacated. “*You* came here to apologize to *me*, for what?”

A tear coursed down Diane’s cheek. “For so many things,” Her voice trembled. “Can you forgive me? Do you think you can learn to love me again?”

Burt knelt before her and took her hand in his. “Please, don’t cry.”

His words brought a fresh burst of tears. “I took your love for granted for so many years. When that love died, something inside me died too.”

Burt vaulted to his feet and paced across the floor. “You have me at a definite disadvantage.” Stopping, he turned to face her. “Because I don’t have any idea what the hell you are talking about.”

Diane wiped her sleeve across her face. Was he angry, upset, displeased? She couldn’t tell. “I’m talking about what happened the week of B.J.’s spring break.”

Burt scowled. “If I remember correctly, nothing happened.”

Diane refused to dodge the issue or hide behind a façade of indifference. “That’s because every night I was in your room you fell asleep by the time your head hit the pillow.” Remembering brought even more tears. “That’s when I knew your love for me had died.”

Burt’s scowl converted to a smile. “Diane, my sweet precious little idiot, I slept because I was drugged out of my skull.” He came back across the room and once more knelt before her. “I kept remembering what happened Valentine’s Night after we made love...you walked out on me afterward. I was afraid if I made love to you again, you’d leave again and this time it would be for good. I knew the moment I got near you I’d be lost to all reason, so I took three of the sleeping pills Doctor Garcia prescribed for my

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insomnia. It worked; I slept like I'd died." His smile widened. "I took three of those potent pills every night that you spent in my room."

A great weight lifted from Diane's heart as she touched his dear face with her fingertips. "I wanted you to make love to me. I wanted your passion and your desire and so much more..." Her voice faded on the end of a sigh. She had wanted too much. She'd expected too much. "About me walking out after we made love on Valentine's Day— I thought then that physical attraction wasn't enough."

Burt raised a questioning eyebrow, "And now?"

Diane smiled through her tears. "Now it seems a good place to start." She had come this far, she may as well go the distance. "I have made so many foolish mistakes through the years. I should have been a partner and wife to you. I should have supported you in your undertakings; I should have become a mature adult. Instead for twenty years, I built my world around B.J. and remained an emotional adolescent."

Burt kissed her fingertips. "Diane, darling, please..."

Diane pulled her hand from his grasp. "No, please, let me finish. Even after I could look back and see all the mistakes I'd made, I kept right on making bigger ones. I blamed you because our marriage failed, I lied to myself and to you, I manipulated you..."

Burt disagreed, "You are not a liar or a manipulator."

"Oh, but I am. I lied to myself and to you when I ran away from you after we made love on Valentine's night. I was looking for some kind of foolish perfection. I know now that no marriage is perfect. We get out of a relationship what we put into it." She wiped the back of her hand across her nose. "I manipulated you into asking Gladys to taking B.J. in when he came home last June because I couldn't bear to spend another week lying beside you and having you reject me."

Burt stood and stared down at her. "I admit to being unfeeling, insensitive and at times acerbic, but believe me when I tell you, I have never rejected you." When Diane opened her mouth to speak, he held up his hand, signaling her to silence. "I've made mistakes too, so many big bad mistakes. I never gave you much of a chance to mature emotionally. For all the right reasons I did all the wrong things. I wanted to protect you, to make your life perfect and your world secure. I only succeeded in making you unhappy and ultimately alienating you."

Diane's long fettered hope took flight. "Then you aren't going to leave me now that the election is over?"

For the third time Burt was on his knees. "Is that what you thought, that I would leave you after the election?"

"I have been frightened out of my mind that you would."

"I thought *you* would leave *me* the moment the last ballot was counted." Burt's laughter rang through the empty room. "Oh, Diane how can two people who are so in love be so completely out of sync with each other's needs and emotions?"

Diane giggled. "It's called a failure to communicate." Leaning forward, she kissed Burt on his lips before straightening in her chair. "There is one message you'd better listen to and heed. If I ever catch you in another woman's arms again, there will be hell to pay."

Burt pulled a chair beside Diane and sat in it. "I had no idea Mary would come on to me like that until it was too late."

Diane nodded. "I can understand that but next time you will recognize the danger signs and you'd better put some distance between you and some aggressive female before things get out of hand."

Burt said, "I swear to you that I didn't..."

Diane silenced him with another light kiss on his lips. "I know you didn't."

"You do, how?"

"She had her arms around you but you didn't have your arms around her." She kissed him again, this time letting her tongue slide inside his mouth to tease and taunt.

Burt grabbed her in a tight embrace and returned her kiss with a long, lingering kiss of his own. As he raised his head, he growled, "Let's go home. I want to make love to you properly."

Diane ran her hands along the muscles of his arms and shoulders. "I prefer that you make love to me here, now, and improperly."

Burt pulled back. "Are you suggesting that we..." His voice snagged in his throat. "I don't think..."

She had shocked him. Good, that was what she'd intended to do. Diane unfastened his belt buckle and unzipped his fly. "Thinking is not necessary. All you have to do is act."

Burt's body stiffened. "Diane, we're in a public place. Passers-by can see in here and..."

Diane reached behind her and hit the light switch, plunging the room into the darkness and shielding its occupants from probing eyes. She slid her hand inside his shorts and wrapped her fingers around his erection. "It's two o'clock in the morning and freezing rain is coming down in buckets."

Burt questioned—his voice heavy with passion, “Do you think this is wise? I do have a public image to maintain.” Even as he protested he was helping Diane shed her clothes and protesting, “This isn’t like you.”

Diane suddenly realized it was exactly like her. For the first time in what seemed like forever she knew exactly what she wanted, and it wasn’t to be wise. She wanted to be daring, she wanted to tease danger and tempt fate. She wanted to make love to her husband with wild abandon and unbridled passion. She rid herself of her undergarments and stood before him, naked and aching with need. The light from a neon sign across the way flashed intermittently across the room. In its pulsating glow her body radiated like an iridescent jewel.

Burt pulled her into his arms, crushed her against his nude body and took her breath away with a deep, probing, passionate kiss.

Diane responded with a fervor that sent her spinning into a vortex of desire. Dropping every pretense and shedding all inhibitions, she made aggressive, torrid love to her husband. Passion and a sense of daring the forbidden liberated her to do things she’d only fantasized doing before. She became the aggressor. Taking in the same measure that she demanded pleasure, she gave herself, body and soul to the gratification of the instant. Nothing mattered now except this man and this magical moment of ecstasy.

Burt’s breath was labored. His chest heaved and his skin felt damp to her touch as he carried her to a dark corner, pushed her against the wall and impaled her on his stiff erection. As he moved in and out with ever escalating strokes, he murmured words of love that penetrated her senses and filled her heart even as ejaculation filled her body.

Her orgasm was sudden and so intense that it sent her spinning into a world of delirious delight. For long moments she was lost in a glittering universe of sensuous splendor. Slowly she descended from those glorious heights. Never before had she felt so complete or so loved. She rested her head against Burt’s bare chest and spoke the first word that came into her mind. “I love you Burt Carlisle.”

Burt held her in a tender embrace. “And I love you, Diane Carlisle, more than you will ever know.” He released her. “Are you all right?”

Diane leaned against the wall. “I am better than all right. I am wonderful.”

“You can say that again.” Burt sat in a chair. “We should get our clothes on and get out of here.” He smiled as he ran his long fingers through his tousled hair. “I don’t know if I have the strength to move.”

Diane sorted through the pile of clothes that lay on the floor. “Get used to it; I am going to expect this kind of lovemaking at least once each night for the rest of our lives.” Never before had she been so bold and never before had she felt such a sense of power.

Burt laughed as he stood and slipped his legs into his pants. "Diane, you amaze me. After all this time I discover that a vixen has been hiding inside my docile little wife." He fastened his belt and slipped his arms into his damp shirt. "I like that vixen." Dropping back down into a chair, he stretched his bare feet in front of him. "Even though she has a vicious temper, I thought for a few minutes when you saw Mary's arms around me that you might attack her."

Diane sat in a nearby chair and pushed her feet into her socks. "She can count herself lucky that I didn't." Remorse moved in to dampen her elation. "I have been so unfair to you for such a long time. I never realized until I became a working woman the pressures and responsibilities, and yes, the temptations that come with working in a public place eight hours a day, five days a week."

"Have men been trying to put their arms around you?" Burt's eyes narrowed.

"Nothing like that, but I have had a few males express interest."

"I hope you told them to get lost." Burt scooted his chair nearer hers. "I never realized until you left me how much I needed and relied on you. I never meant to be unfeeling and overbearing. Looking back now, I know that I was. Can you ever forgive me?"

"We can forgive each other," Diane answered as she pushed her feet into her boots. "We can put the past behind us and concentrate on the present."

Burt put his socks in his pocket and slipped his bare feet into his shoes. "No plans for the future?"

"The future will take care of itself if we nurture the happiness that is ours today." Leaning back in his chair Burt laced his hands behind his head. "Do you know how few people get the chance to start over?"

"We're luckier than most." Diane stood and draped her coat around her shoulders. After all these years, after all the mistakes and misunderstanding, they could start over again. This time she would be wiser. Experience had taught her that problems must be faced and dealt with on a daily basis and perfection was not an option in this imperfect world. "Let's go home."

Burt shoved his shirt in his pants and slipped into his coat before taking Diane's arm. "I'm ready if you are."

They stepped from the warm building and into the cold of an early autumn morn. Arm in arm they walked toward Burt's Lexus. The wind had died down. The sleet had ceased to fall and the clouds had rolled away. A million stars glowed in the early morning heavens. This was the end of a long stormy day. It was the beginning of a new tomorrow. The

couple got into the car and drove away toward that new tomorrow and a future bright with promise.

Epilogue

Burt pulled his Lexis into the garage and shut the door. This was Valentine's Day and he had plans for this evening. He got out of his car and headed toward the kitchen of the house that he and Diane now called home.

When he'd first known that the house across from Sylvia and Michael and next-door to his mother was for sale, he considered buying it immediately. He was not thrilled about living so near, not only to his family but also Diane's Aunt Ida *and* Sylvia and Michael O'Shea, but he knew Diane would be. He was set to call the realtor when he reconsidered.

The events of the last year and a half had taught Burt some hard lessons. One of those lessons was that his happiness was dependent on Diane's happiness. He realized that he had no right to buy a house anywhere without first talking it over with his wife. He called Diane instead.

Memories of that conversation wafted across his memory like a caressing spring breeze.

"Hi, sweetheart, how is your day going?"

"Much better now that I'm hearing your voice."

"Did you know the Collins house on Larkspur Avenue is for sale?"

He heard the smile in her voice when she said, "I know, I was going to talk to you this evening about looking at it later this week." Her tone moved from glad to grave. "I know it's awfully close to both of our families, maybe..."

Burt interrupted, "Does that present a problem?"

"Not to me. I'd be happy living there."

"So would I. I'll call the realtor and make an appointment for us to see the place over the weekend."

Even before they toured the house, Burt was sure this was the place they would eventually call home. Now, two months and several repair and remodeling projects later he could find no reason to regret their decision to move here.

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Burt opened the kitchen door to see Susan and Sarah O'Shea bustling about the room and chattering like magpies. "Hello," he sang out.

The chatter stopped and the two turned to stare at him. Finally, one twin found her voice. "What are you doing here?"

"I live here, Susan." Damn, they were as alike as two peas in a pod. "You are Susan?"

"No, I'm Sarah." Both girls giggled as Sarah pointed to the other twin. "She's Susan."

Burt laughed too. These two possessed an innocent charm that he found refreshing. "What, may I ask, are you doing here?"

Sarah said, "We're helping Aunt Diane."

Susan added, "With her surprise."

Burt sat on a kitchen stool. "What surprise?"

Susan reasoned, "If we told you it wouldn't be a surprise."

Sarah added, "Besides, we promised we wouldn't."

"Wouldn't what?" Burt asked.

Sarah took a table cloth from a drawer and headed in the direction of the dining room. "Wouldn't tell."

Susan grabbed the napkins and followed her.

Burt followed Susan. "Wouldn't tell what?" This conversation was going nowhere.

Sarah spread the cloth across the dining room table. "We promised Aunt Diane we wouldn't tell you that she's planned a special Valentine's dinner for you." She glanced at the clock on the dining room wall. "The people from Miss Hattie's Tea Room should be here soon."

Susan stopped her task of putting napkins in place. "Sarah, you just told what you promised not to tell."

Sarah shook her head. "I did not."

"You may as well have," Susan argued as she put a plate at each end of the table. "You told Mr. Carlisle that Miss Hattie had prepared a special dinner."

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Sara was repentant enough to ask, "You won't tell Aunt Diane we told...will you Mr. Carlisle?"

Burt shook his head. "I won't tell and I thought we agreed that you'd call me Burt."

Susan took lacy doilies and red hearts cut from construction paper from the sideboard drawer and held them up for Burt to see. "How do you like our decorations, Burt?"

Sarah added, "We're going to put them around the table and then sprinkle them with glitter."

Burt thought of the way B.J. had festooned his place cards with glitter and more glitter. "Does the younger generation have a glitter fetish?"

Susan asked, "What's a fetish?"

Sarah grimaced. "Who is the younger generation?"

Burt tacitly conceded defeat. "We will discuss that another time." He took one of the plates from the end of the table and placed it beside the other plate. "When laying a table for a romantic dinner, you begin by putting the couple near each other."

Sarah snapped her fingers. "That's a good idea."

Susan took glitter from the sideboard drawer. "I agree." She scattered the glitter over the hearts that Sarah had placed randomly around the table. "Now everything is set."

"Not quite," Burt said. "We have another problem. I have also ordered a romantic dinner for two for this evening. My dinner is coming from Chuck's Steak House."

Susan screwed the lid on her bottle of glitter. "Maybe you can call and cancel."

Burt shook his head. "It's too late for that." A slow smile spread across his face. "I have a better idea. Set two more places. You two are having dinner with Diane and me tonight."

Sarah protested, "That doesn't sound very romantic."

Burt grinned. "Trust me; this will be a very romantic evening."

And it was. The moment the twins were out the front door and headed across the street Burt took Diane into his arms and kissed her tenderly before lifting his head to ask, "Did you enjoy our rather eclectic dinner?"

Diane snuggled in his arms. "I did. I enjoyed our guests too. Aren't they delightful children?"

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They were and Burt said so as a sudden sorrow took him. He had taken from the woman he loved the chance to have a daughter of her own. Regret deep and debilitating washed over him. Resting his chin atop Diane's head, he whispered, "I'm so sorry. I should never have..."

Diane pushed back and laid one finger over his lips. "We both promised remember? No recriminations, no apologies, and no looking back and regretting what might have been." Putting her hands on the sides of his face, she pulled him down and kissed his lips before heaving a sigh. "We have too many things to be thankful for to mourn what we can't have."

Burt swept her into his arms. "Shall we celebrate what we do have?"

"That's an excellent idea." Diane laid her head on his shoulder. "It's been a Happy Valentine's Day my darling."

Burt strode toward the bedroom. "You ain't seen nothing yet." Despite his promise to let go and move on, he would always harbor a few lingering regrets about past mistakes. That thought brought pain and a touch of gratitude. How else would he have learned that his happiness was inextricably tied to making the woman he loved happy? *Hey buddy, you've become quite a philosopher.* He went inside and kicked the door shut with his foot.

The End

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Using the pseudonym Barri Bryan, Billie and Herb Houston have been writing as a team since 1990. Billie is a former teacher and educator. She holds an undergraduate degree in history and a graduate degree in educational psychology from The University of Texas at San Antonio. Herb is a former teacher, computer programmer and technical writer for the Air Force. He holds a degree in theology from the Trinity Valley Seminary in Kennedale, Texas.

Billie and Herb write the kind of books they enjoy reading—stories about relationships; stories that explore feelings and probe emotions. The plots revolve around ordinary people caught in extraordinary circumstances and faced with difficult decisions.

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