

# BE STILL, MY HEART!

MS 400 - 425



CAROL MCPHEE



## ***Be Still, My Heart!***

Andrea drifted off to sleep only to wake when the wind whistled through the trees followed by ice pellets hurling against the window. Somewhere a loose shutter banged noisily against the cabin wall. The racket ruined her attempt to be brave. With the tin roof magnifying the sleet's pandemonium, her courage abandoned her. *Enough of this!* She leaped out of bed and fled to Braeden's bedroom. To her relief, his door wasn't locked. Without pause, she dashed straight to his bed.

In a flash of lightning, she saw his eyes widen. She probably looked like an apparition coming to claim his soul.

"That's some nightgown," he murmured and lifted the edge of his sleeping bag, moving back to give her room. She backed in, angling her back as close to him as she could.

The roar of the storm blocked out her moan of satisfaction when he wrapped his arms around her, cocooning her to his bare chest. His breath warmed the back of her neck; his leg slipped over her thigh. Instead of rebelling from the imprisonment, her fingertips brushed and circled in the soft hair on his leg. Large fingers entwined with hers, clenching tightly.

Braeden sniffed her hair, then buried his mouth in the tresses. She turned her face in his direction and he boosted himself on his elbow to hover above her. He rained tender kisses down a path from her temple to her chin. His mouth shifted in one nuzzling movement to her lips.

Andrea responded by turning onto her back and pulled him over her. Her mouth parted and allowed him to deepen his kiss. Her arms circled his neck. She curled her fingers into his hair as if she were playing a harp... delicately harmonizing her desire with his. The willingness she offered discarded her pride, leaving her defenseless—a victim of her desire.

Could he appreciate what it cost her to yield to him like this? Did he know how vulnerable she'd become? Unlike before, her heart ruled—not her head.

***What They Are Saying About  
Be Still, My Heart!***

“Dietitian Andrea Martin has a special connection with the cardiac patients in the hospital where she works. She believes in living life to the fullest, without regard for time. Dr. Braeden Landry is an overworked but brilliant heart surgeon who has forgotten that life is meant to be lived, and not simply saved. Andrea helps Braeden reconnect with his patients and shows him he needs to live life too, while Braeden gives Andrea her heart's desire. With vivid descriptions, well-drawn characters, and touching plot twists, Carol McPhee brings this romance to a happily-ever-after that is as real as it is satisfying.”

—Paula Altenburg  
President, Romance Writers of Atlantic Canada

Carol McPhee is an author to keep an eye on. I highly recommend *Be Still, My Heart!* A wonderful read from a very talented author who will leave you watching the bookstores for her next book.

—Billie A Williams,  
Candlelight And Shadows  
Skull Music, June 2005

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***Carol McPhee***

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*Wings*

# **Be Still, My Heart!**

by

**Carol McPhee**

**A Wings ePress, Inc.**

**Contemporary Romance Novel**

## **Wings ePress, Inc.**

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## ***Dedication***

This novel is dedicated to:  
Dr. William Travis Weaver, Nancy Cassidy,  
Tim Conroy, Lydia Filzen, Carla Hughes,  
Doug Thompson, and Mary Veelle  
for their guiding lights.



## *Prologue*

Braeden Landry ripped off his green surgical mask and rushed into the doctor's dressing room. He glanced at the wall clock—if he hurried, he could join his foursome at the country club on the first tee and have time for eighteen holes before sundown. Still, one of his referrals was scheduled for an angiogram down the hall about now. The patient's chest pain had been perplexing in the thirty-six year-old man. He was athletic, never smoked, and had none of the other common risk factors for heart problems, yet they hadn't been able to find another cause. Braeden decided he'd pop in and observe.

He sighed. He'd not had much time for the greens lately, and it looked like today would be no different. He re-did his mask, stuck his face through the operating room doorway, and drew the attending doctor's attention. "Jim, okay if I watch?"

"Sure, no problem."

Braeden looked over the shoulder of Dr. Hudson as he injected dye into a catheter threaded up through the femoral artery to the patient's aorta. Both doctors watched the TV monitor and saw the dye flow through the patient's right coronary artery.

The patient muttered, "Hey, Doc, how much longer you gonna be? This X-ray table is hard on my back."

"I'm studying one of your arteries," Dr. Hudson replied. "Now I need to do the other one. I won't be much longer... Braeden, that right coronary artery looks normal to me."

Braeden nodded, "I agree. Go ahead and inject the other side."

They watched the screen again as Dr. Hudson manipulated the catheter's tip to the other side of the patient's aorta and into the opening of the left coronary artery. Dr. Hudson squeezed the hypodermic syringe's plunger and squirted 10cc of dye into the pulsating artery.

"Oh, shit," Dr. Hudson said. "I'm screwed." He motioned Braeden away from the patient's hearing range. "This man has a 100% blockage in his left anterior descending artery, and the block is more than an inch long... I can't get my balloon through the lumen of an obstruction that long, even if I could, I might burst an artery... this guy has to have a bypass." He cursed a string of four letter words.

Braeden's eyes narrowed as he focused on the serious situation that lay before them. "My pump-oxygenator technician quit on me this morning. Her replacement won't be here until tomorrow. That's why we only scheduled uncomplicated cases for this afternoon."

"We'd better put this guy in a helicopter and evacuate him to Montreal."

"Think he'll live that long?" Braeden asked.

Dr. Hudson shook his head. "What other choice do we have? You're the Chief of Cardiac Services—you make the decision, Braeden."

"I can do a bypass on him without a pump-oxygenator!"

"That's never been done—"

"There've been two or three case reports from Barcelona. If they can do 'em in Spain, we can do one in Canada."

"This is surgical history." Dr. Hudson leaned over for the nurse to sponge his forehead.

"Keep out of the way and don't ask any unnecessary questions."

With the patient flat on his back and under general anesthesia, Braeden held out his gloved hand. The scrub nurse slapped a scalpel into it. He then made a four-inch incision near the edge of the patient's breastbone.

"How can you get your hands in an incision that small?" Dr. Hudson asked.

"I don't have to. I can reach everything with instruments."

"When will you take the vein graft from his leg?"

“Dammit, Jim, I don’t need a vein graft. I’m going to use the patient’s internal mammary artery. You can see it here in the incision.”

“The diameter’s not much bigger than a piece of spaghetti. How are you going to stop the heart from beating? Nobody could sew in that little artery with the heart moving around like that.”

Braeden took a long, calming breath, and let it out. “How about holding off on the questions for a while?”

“Sorry. Let me know where I can help.”

Braeden put occlusion tapes on the patient’s coronary artery to prevent any blood leakage that would obscure the operative field. He made a horizontal incision in the coronary artery’s wall to match the diameter of the mammary artery. Adjusting his hand movements with the heart’s pulsation, he sewed the end of the mammary artery into the side of the anterior descending coronary artery, then removed the haemostatic tapes. There was no blood leakage around the suture line. Braeden sewed the chest incision closed.

“My God,” said Dr. Hudson. “Braeden you have the eye of a hawk, the heart of a lion, and the touch of a master.”

## *One*

Dammit!” Dr. Braeden Landry’s eyes spit fire. He leaned heavily against the frame of the patient’s door he’d just opened and abruptly shut. The image burned in his mind. One of the hospital’s staff had been sitting on the bed with an elderly man wrapped tightly in her arms. Her closed eyes indicated passion, not compassion.

“Sam, this is the second time this week I’ve entered a hospital room and found one of my patients clutched in the arms of that technician. I had medical students with me before, so I diverted them to another patient down the hall.” Braeden glanced down the corridor from habit. “Has the hospital decorum around here changed that much while I’ve been away?”

Braeden turned to his silver-haired companion, Sam Jeffrey, Administrator of Bayview Heights General Hospital. “Who is she?”

“Well, in the first place, she isn’t a technician—she’s the new dietitian, and her name is Andrea Martin. She started working here about a month ago, just after you started your leave of absence to update your expertise with hands-on courses. She’s popular with the patients.”

Sam’s eyes twinkled, obviously enjoying the sight of the brilliant cardiac surgeon caught off-guard. The Administrator had been Braeden’s mentor all through the years of Braeden’s medical study and looked on his protégé as the closest thing to a son he’d ever have. Occasionally, he’d take a break from his management duties just to watch Braeden in action on rounds.

“Hell, I can see why she’d be popular, but a hospital’s no place to cozy up that way. It’s downright embarrassing to walk into a room and see a staff member in a passionate clinch. Twice in one week is ridiculous. Makes me feel like an intruder when the patient is here for *my* help,” Braeden hands gripped the patient’s chart with a white-knuckle clasp.

“Well, you’re the attending doctor now, so let’s open the door and go inside. We’re backtracking here. There are still other patients to see. Oops! Watch out for that gurney coming down the corridor full speed.”

Braeden stepped aside and watched the two orderlies manoeuvre the bed past them. He drew in a deep breath and pushed open the door exactly at the moment the dietitian pulled the handle on the other side. His sudden action caused her to stagger backward as the door easily gave way. Braeden leaped forward and caught her flailing body in the nick of time. The surgeon steadied the dietitian, then quickly moved back. To mollify the awkward silence and flushed faces, Sam stepped in to introduce them.

“Miss Martin, I’d like you to meet, Dr. Braeden Landry, Chief of Cardiac Services. Braeden, meet Andrea Martin, our new Therapeutic Dietitian.”

Still ruffled from his earlier annoyance, Braeden scowled and mumbled a weak, “Hello.”

Her face infused with crimson, Andrea’s emerald eyes darted up the six-foot-five frame of the scowling doctor who had almost toppled her. In a slightly trembling voice, she acknowledged the introduction. “H-Hello, Dr. Landry. This isn’t what it l-looks like. Mr. J-Jenkins and I...”

Her stammer reeked of guilt and aroused his suspicion even more. “Spare me the explanations, Miss Martin. It’s all right to hug in the hospital, but I think you were overdoing it.” He deliberately kept his gravelly voice low so the patient couldn’t hear.

Before she could reply, Braeden turned his attention to the bright-eyed gentleman now wiggling under the white thermal sheet. The back of the patient’s Johnny shirt flapped open with the movement.

Braeden glanced at the dietitian but in the process of exiting the room she didn't catch the sight of bare buttocks.

"Hello, Mr. Jenkins. "I'm Dr. Landry, and this is the boss of the hospital, Mr. Jeffrey. Your cardiologist asked me to look in on you. I see by your chart that you've been here two weeks. Are you getting tired of us yet?"

"Damn right, Doc. I'm sick of the flowered drapes and that monstrous picture on the wall. I'd rather be out enjoying the countryside than looking at a cheap replica. Time you boys were gettin' me fixed up and out so someone real sick can have the bed. At seventy, I don't have time to waste in here."

Braeden checked the heart monitor and pulled his stethoscope from its drape around his neck. "Well, it seems the medication has failed to improve your angina; you're still having recurring chest pains. By the way, do you accept hugs from all the females on our staff, Mr. Jenkins? Or only from the pretty ones?"

"At my age, and in my condition, I'll take any hugs given out, Doc. Sure beats the *hell* out of sufferin' with this infernal pain. You oughta try it some time. Hugs lighten the heart and might even put *you* in a better mood."

Sam laughed out loud as Braeden shifted his feet, uncomfortable at the chiding. Putting forth his attentive professional face, the surgeon proceeded with his examination, but camouflaged his concern at the patient's fast and irregular heartbeat.

"Hmm. Guess the dietitian didn't do much damage, Mr. Jenkins—we don't want our staff breaking hearts. We're supposed to be in the business of repairing them."

Dr. Landry's satirical attitude was well known in the hospital. Often highly stressed and tired, his sarcasm lashed out easily at the nursing staff. They knew when to give him a wide berth. "I'll take another look at your test results, then we'll consider the best course of action."

"Just get me out of here soon. This IV hook-up and bleeping monitor is enough to drive anyone mad. At least you haven't got a herd of students with you. I'm sick of feeling like a guinea pig."

"Then perhaps I should call the dietitian back to calm you down."



“Anytime, Doc.”

When they left, Braeden’s gaze skirted the hallway again, but beyond a group of nurses huddled near the lounge, no other staff was in sight.

The two men continued visiting other patients in the Coronary Care Unit. When Braeden’s last referral had been seen, and the patient’s chart returned to the rack in the nursing station, Sam pulled him aside. “How about lunch, Braeden? I’m famished.”

“It’s not a good idea to be starved around here.” Braeden snickered. “Sometimes the cafeteria food is plain unappealing.”

Sam grinned. “Maybe Miss Martin can spice it up for you. The smell of the lasagne is floating off those two meal wagons by the elevators and spearheading straight toward my appetite.”

“Ugh! That doesn’t suit my taste, and she’d better not spice up any more of my patients or she’ll be in trouble.”

“Oh, give her a break.” Sam shook his head and laughed. “I think you might find a few changes have been made since she’s joined us. Come on, the cafeteria is summoning my stomach.”

As they carried their food-laden trays into the dining room, Braeden’s eyes widened in surprise. “I see what you mean. The place has had a facelift. You find a flood of money at the gate, Sam?”

“Nope. It was all donated. One of our heart patients was a florist and so happy at the success of his angioplasty that he told Miss Martin to go to his greenhouses and pick out any hanging plants she wanted. She wanted a lot.”

“And the new wallpaper?”

“Another satisfied patient.”

“Let me guess. Our dietitian likes blue?”

“Her favorite color.” Sam laughed when his companion rolled his eyes.

Choosing a table at the back of the room gave them the opportunity to watch the other staff employees eating their meals in select little groups. Nurses sat with nurses, technicians with each other, and so on, as if there were an unspoken hierarchy at play. Braeden couldn’t help but notice the dietitian broke this tradition when she entered and sat with the head nurse of CCU.

“There’s Miss Martin now. Do you want to put in a request for better food?” Sam asked.

“No. I’ll stay away from her... as far as I can get. It might be safer.”

Braeden couldn’t help spotting a few other things about Andrea Martin as he flicked off the cellophane covering and bit into his ham sandwich. He’d bet she stood six feet without shoes, and even he had to appreciate her well-proportioned figure. Her opened lab coat revealed a bright green silk blouse combined with a navy pleated skirt; her skin radiated health. Now that he looked closer, she could be distinguished from a technician by the green nametag above her breast pocket. He hadn’t noticed that landmark earlier. It must be the amount of green coloring in her attire that accentuated the brilliance of her emerald eyes.

“That’s one tall woman, Sam.”

“I like the way she stands so straight. Most tall women slouch as if they’re afraid of their own shadow. She looks almost defiant.”

Braeden nodded in agreement. “She has great posture, but she wasn’t defiant earlier if you recall. Acted like a skittery cat.” His eyes skimmed her caramel-colored hair. Swept up in a crown-based thick ponytail, one giant ringlet flounced behind her head when she moved. Heat in the kitchen had caused strands to loosen and drip like strings of taffy along her high cheekbones.

“Wonder if she has a significant other. Do you know?” Braeden automatically tried to picture what she would look like with her hair falling around naked shoulders, then shook his mind from his imaginative gutter.

“I don’t know her that well. She certainly has pretty eyes. If I were a bit younger...”

Braeden laughed and concentrated on her face. Her eyes seemed to dance as she talked in an animated way with the nurse, yet only a short time ago they had faltered with insecurity at his displeasure. He pondered the possibility she might be telling Miss Wilson of her experience with the grumpy, Dr. Landry. Her expression changed to a more serious one when she leaned across the table and lowered her voice. He was right. She was blabbing.

"I see you're studying Miss Martin, Braeden. Are you interested in her already? You have a record for not waiting long, but this is rather quick, don't you think?"

Still silently appraising her, Braeden grimaced and balked at Sam's questions. "I'm definitely not interested in her in the way you think. I'm curious of her approach to diet instruction for our patients." He decided to make light of the situation. "What do you know about her, Sam? Where'd she get her training?"

"She interned in Detroit five years ago, then worked three years at the hospital there before coming home to Nova Scotia."

"That would put her age at about twenty-six, wouldn't it?" Braeden figured quickly.

"No, I think her résumé said she was thirty-four. Her years working at the other hospital weren't continuous. It appears she took considerable time off between college years as well. Maybe she had financial troubles and had to work her way through school. But she had good references. Give her a break, Braeden, she's gentle and caring and goes out of her way to encourage the patients to eat."

Sam studied his protégé intently. "You were really bothered by that little incident with her, weren't you? Maybe you should've taken time off for a vacation before returning here. I hear that mini-bypass course you took registers high on the stress meter."

"I'm not bothered at all. Just cautious where intimate activities in the hospital are concerned and you damn well know why."

"Ah... yes, and we won't get into that discussion now. It's over and we have to move on."

"Maybe so, but I intend to remain vigilant from here on. I want no further experience in court. Once was enough."

When Sam returned to his office, Braeden remained behind slowly sipping his coffee and staring out the window at the influx of people entering the outpatients' department. As he finished the drink, he watched a male X-ray technician seat himself at the dietitian's table. By the guy's animated motions, he appeared furious with her. A few minutes later, the technician grabbed his tray and stomped out of the dining room. Miss Martin remained where she was, serenely drinking a cup of tea.

Braeden had been furious with her a short time ago, too, and he knew she was well aware of it when she'd scooted out of Jenkins' room so fast. He'd given her the snarly look he reserved for medical students when they couldn't answer his questions. Maybe she didn't deserve it. He levered himself from his table and returned to the cafeteria line for a refill of coffee.

~ \* ~

Andrea's morning had been a disaster. From the time of her run-in with Dr. Landry in CCU, she'd been angry with herself for being embarrassed when she had nothing to be ashamed of. It was the past catching up, she supposed. Still, working here was an opportunity she couldn't let slip by her. She needed to make her employment secure and that wouldn't be possible if others got her riled so fast. If that doctor only knew how his suggestive comment made her cringe—but he had no idea of what she'd been through in her life. On top of that incident, there had been numerous requests for diet instructions and they almost overwhelmed her ability to squeeze them all in.

Luckily, Nancy Wilson was still eating, so she would at least have company during her lunch break. Nancy was the only real friend she'd made since coming to Bayview. She welcomed the chance to tell the nurse about Dr. Landry and find out why he had something stuck in his craw.

"What can you tell me about your Chief of Cardiac Services, Nance? I had an awful session with him this morning. He walked into the room as I was giving Mr. Jenkins a comforting hug. Judging by his frown and brusque manner, he misinterpreted it."

"Don't let him get to you. And don't get interested in him, either, Andrea—he'll break your heart. Dr. Landry is the 'love 'em and leave 'em' kind. He changes girl friends quicker than you change your panty hose." She laughed at her analogy. "Seriously, he only goes out with a girl until she starts to get serious, then drops her and moves on to someone else. Stay clear. He's major trouble." Nancy's voice softened. "Other than that, he's a great doctor, is fun to be around when he's not overworked, and he can charm a girl right out of her shoes. He's very much a flirt at times, for sure, but mostly he's

sincere and a good friend to have. Don't get on his bad side if you can help it. He'll cut you down in a minute."

Andrea's lower lip stuck out in a rare pout. "Looks like I'm *already* on his bad side. I fell into his arms and felt so ridiculous that I didn't even think to thank him for catching me." She did remember thinking the thick black eyelashes fringing his narrowed eyes provided a startling contrast to his white lab coat. Once his frown had relaxed, she'd noted his eyes were so brown it was almost impossible to tell where the pupils started. "Now that I think of it, his cologne smelled seductive. The grey hair at his temples is attractive, too. Do you know how old he is?"

"Hmm, early forties. He and Mr. Jeffrey are extremely close. Oops! There goes my pager. I've got to get back to CCU. See you later."

Glancing around the room, Andrea spied Dr. Landry staring at her. She was at a loss to know how to respond to the intensity of his gaze. It made her feel like she was sitting on a bed of cacti. Anxious to escape the prickly sensation, she was just considering leaving when George, the head of the X-ray department invited himself to her table.

"When are you going out with me, Andrea?" Same old question he'd been asking for two weeks now. Not attracted to him in any way, he truly repulsed her with his roving eyes and hands. He was too familiar with her when she was within reach; she kept her distance as much as possible.

"Sorry, George, I'm not interested in dating you. I tried hinting about it, but you won't take no for an answer. I'm telling you directly now."

His glare warned that he wasn't used to a brush-off. "There's no reason for you to be stuck-up about it. I give a girl a good time."

"I said, no. Let it go at that."

"You're probably no fun anyway. I can't change your mind?"

"No."

After a disgusted grunt, George steamed from her table. Andrea sighed. He might be more right than he knew. Maybe now she'd get a chance to finish her tea in peace.

Distracted by her thoughts, Andrea jumped when a voice rumbled, “Do you mind if I sit down, Miss Martin?” Anxious to ditch her glum mood, she instinctively replied favorably, before she looked up to see Dr. Landry towering over her.

He picked up her stainless steel teapot. “I got myself a refill of coffee; I’ll freshen your tea. Be back in a minute.” Her mouth dropped, dismayed at his take-charge bearing. He appeared to be in a relaxed frame of mind as he cheerfully greeted and passed other staff members coming in for their lunch.

Her mind leaped to strange thoughts. *Cardiac surgeons are known for being arrogant and intense, but he could have asked if I wanted a refill. This is absurd, even if he is a legend around the hospital.* She’d heard about him constantly since she’d started her job. Staff nurses said his hands were so nimble in surgery that he could be in and out of a patient’s chest before the blood had a chance to ooze. His admirers boasted that he’d saved many a hopeless case with his skills.

“I hope you don’t mind that I’ve butted in, Miss Martin.” His face held the hint of a smile and dissolved his earlier perplexed expression. “I hate eating alone and I saw you weren’t finished with your meal yet. In fact, you’ve hardly touched it. Don’t you like the food in the cafeteria much, either?”

*It didn’t matter if she minded or not,* she thought, as she studied the presence plunking his large frame down at her elbow. *He was here, his tone still as snarky as ever.*

“I want to explain about this morning, Dr. Landry.”

“Ah, this morning... Do you make a habit of snuggling up to all the patients you visit, or just to mine?”

“I beg your pardon? Perhaps you should get the facts first, before making an accusation.” The thought flitted across her mind that she should keep a tight lip; she needed this job desperately. Maybe it was because of the need that she found herself so defensive.

“Just *what* did I interrupt when I entered Jenkins’ room?” His eyes, no longer soft, blasted a warning of danger. His voice had risen high enough that people directed their attention to the pair.

“I was not ‘snuggling up’, as you so indelicately put it. Patients facing heart surgery are often scared out of their wits. Sometimes they

don't relay their fears to the doctors treating them. They suffer in silence unless someone happens to strike a responsive chord that allows them to open up. That person often happens to be the dietitian because she doesn't cause pain. Of course," a smirk wormed its way across her lips, "we get complaints on the food for the same reason." Her voice rose a notch, "There's nothing wrong with a comforting hug, Dr. Landry."

"Calm down." Braeden scanned the other diners. "Maybe I overreacted. You're right. The hospital is stressful for heart patients and they do need comforting." He turned back to her. "Look, could we retrace our steps here and get off this old track? I couldn't help noticing that technician, who just left your table, looked a bit upset."

Ignoring the temptation to wither under the scrutiny of the surgeon's eye, Andrea's anger jacked up its strength. "It wasn't work related. I don't need to explain."

"That's right, you don't have to satisfy my curiosity." His eyes sparkled, like he'd been challenged. "I have an inquiring mind. It comes with my profession."

"All right. Because of my run-in with you, I was in bad mood when he came over. He's been bugging me for a date, so I told him to take a hike." She frowned at his smile. "Look, I don't mean to sound cranky. I do want to thank you for catching me today. I could have hurt myself."

"You're welcome. Always glad to help a lady in distress, but I'm the one that put you in the predicament. May I ask one more question?"

"I guess so." Andrea sucked in a big breath in preparation.

"I hope you don't accuse me of being too personal, but what's on the medic alert bracelet you wear? I noticed it on your wrist this morning when it gouged my neck."

"Oh? I'm sorry. Did it leave a mark?"

"I'll live, don't worry."

"You don't miss much, do you, Dr. Landry?" She looked down at the stainless steel chain with the red symbol mounted on a tiny bar. Preferring not to have anything more dragging about her neck than what was already invisibly there with her problems, she'd worn the

bracelet instead of the alternate alert necklace for some time. It carried memories of an earth-shattering time in her life—a time she'd tried to put behind her, and for the most part had done so successfully. Wearing it constantly, she'd learned to toss lies at a moment's notice when questioned about it. With unflinching eye contact, the words "penicillin allergy" bounced off her tongue. She regretted her need to replay the worn record to this specialist, who was only displaying natural curiosity. But she had no way of avoiding the lie if she were to be accepted as a normal functioning employee of the hospital.

"Excuse me, Dr. Landry. My break is over and I have work to do. Maybe I can find another of your patients to hug."

Dr. Landry didn't smile.

All eyes turned in her direction as Andrea rushed out of the dining room. Braeden was left with a sheepish expression and a mug of lukewarm coffee. His eyebrow arched in a display of indignation when he glanced at the diners gawking his way—and snickering.

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When Andrea caught up to speed with her diet instruction orders, she knocked lightly on the Administrative Dietitian's office door. She could see through the glass partition that Mrs. Marshall was on the phone. Sylvia motioned for her to enter and take a seat.

Andrea tried to appear nonchalant and gazed around the office. *I suppose Dr. Landry is ratting me out already.* Offering a pleasant goodbye, Mrs. Marshall cradled the receiver.

"That was Mr. Jeffrey discussing our request for new equipment."

Andrea breathed a sigh of relief. She had a chance to own up and plead her case. "Sylvia, I had a couple of altercations with Dr. Landry today. I've been trained to respect doctors and be courteous, but the man is overbearing and filled with self-importance. He goes beyond the bounds of good taste with his personal questions. I take full responsibility for the mishaps, though. I shouldn't have let him get to me."

"Tell me exactly what happened. I know Braeden well and I know how tactless he can be."

Andrea related the circumstances, then waited for Sylvia's response.



“Okay, Andrea. To tell you the truth, I know about the matter. I wanted to hear it from your side. Mr. Jeffrey mentioned what happened when he first called. Rumors spread fast around here.” A grimace etched her forty-something face.

Andrea felt the pull of a cold sinking in the pit of her stomach. She liked working here. As a large teaching hospital, Bayview Heights covered a wide scope of medical care and used the latest technologies. It was vital to her career that she not mess up this prospect.

“Mr. Jeffrey and I agree that the conflict between the two of you is unfortunate and we hope it doesn’t repeat itself. Dr. Landry is under enormous strain with the surgery he does, and he’s recently back from a session of intense updating in new methods of surgery.” Her voice gentled. “Andrea, give him some leeway, will you, please? Avoid him as much as you can. We don’t get many requests for diet instruction from his domain, so stay away from it, except when necessary.”

“Of course, but I still want to visit Mr. Jenkins every day, even if he is Dr. Landry’s patient.” Andrea rose to leave. With her hand on the doorknob, she deemed it necessary to make one last point. “I’ll try and see him at times the good doctor is in surgery and avoid another confrontation. Mr. Jenkins has become a dear friend, he doesn’t have any relatives handy to care about him.”

“Just watch out Andrea... be courteous when you can’t dodge Braeden.”

“I will.”

~ \* ~

Sylvia smiled as her usually gentle-mannered assistant left the office. Andrea had shown a unique soft spot for patients with heart problems ever since she’d started working in the dietary department. But with the diet orders sent from other doctors on the cardiac floor, the writing was on the wall. Sylvia picked up the phone and dialed extension forty-two.

“Hello, Sam. I just talked with Andrea.”

“All right, tell me what you think.” Sam’s authoritative voice boomed through the phone.

“You know the hospital is lucky Andrea has come here to work. The dietary employees like her easy-going nature.” Sylvia stretched

her back and blew out a slow puff of air. “The nurses like her calm, prompt response when a diet needs to be changed or a patient, upset with his meal, requires settling.”

“I know she’s well-liked, but I don’t want to see Braeden the butt of rumors again.”

Sylvia toyed with the phone cord. “He’s going to be anyway, you know that. I realize she upset him. She’ll try to avoid that in the future. She has to learn not to upset apple carts around here. I guess you could say Braeden is the biggest apple cart of them all, after you. Do you think I should have filled her in on Braeden’s past relationship with me?”

“Let’s not confuse the issue. I don’t think she needs to know you two were an item, unless you think it might make her understand him better.”

“You know he’s married to medicine, Sam. It would never have worked out with us. I’m happy with Craig now.” She added, “I know he’s not as renowned a cardiologist as he could be, but he does good work and manages to be a wonderful husband as well.

“Anyway, to get back to our problem, I’ll keep you informed.” Sylvia replaced the receiver and walked to the window. She gazed at the distant bay. Lost in deep thoughts, the words burst from her mouth: “Braeden, you’re going to have to tread carefully. I know what a charmer you can be. God help us, if you choose to use that charm on Andrea. With her spunk and vitality, accompanying her over-sensitivity, both of you will be in trouble.”

~ \* ~

Sylvia’s advice echoed in Andrea’s ears, forcing her to continuously revise her calculations on patients’ diabetic diet charts. She breathed a sigh of relief when her shift ended. Once outdoors, the heat of the Indian summer sun lifted the tenseness in her muscles, easing the pulsating throb at her temples. She stopped and inhaled the pungent scent of the yellow and orange marigolds blooming in round plots around the staff parking lot. Her weary body always lightened when she spotted her car parked among the physicians’ late-model vehicles.

The used Plymouth Breeze was all she could afford when she'd bought it a month ago. Because she'd not worked for some time, money had been tight, but with her present job her inexpensive car would be paid off quickly. Then her income could go toward paying down her debts.

The drive along the highway, skirting the coast, unwound her weary mind. It offered a chance to sort out problems and plan her evenings. By the time she arrived home, the salt-tinged air drifting in her car window had peaked her spirits. *It's always so good to get home. I wonder where Ginger is?*

Andrea hadn't told anyone where she lived. The address on her employment papers provided only a rural route number. Her co-workers might have been shocked at her residence—an old ramshackle farm dwelling.

*I'm so glad I found this spot instead of being cooped up in an apartment,* Andrea mused. An overwhelming sense of joy warmed her inside. Every time she came into the yard she counted herself lucky at having come upon this remnant of a bygone age.

She remembered the day she'd visited a real estate company in search for a rental unit. "Perhaps you might be interested in this older home that's for sale," the agent suggested. He drew her attention to a picture on the display board.

"No, I'm sorry. I can't even consider buying a house."

"Well, Miss Martin, we'd be willing to rent it with an option to buy should you change your mind. To tell you the truth, the owner would like an income from the property as soon as possible and there haven't been any interested buyers."

She took the deal.

Andrea turned off the engine and braced her hands on the wheel. Her eyes scanned the uneven moss-covered roof. Fixing it would be a horrendous expense. She shook her head at her mental wandering. Purchasing the property was a lifetime of dreams away.

With its classic white clapboards and dark green shutters, the house spoke of an imposing character, a charmer in the past. Over a hundred years old, the homestead seemed to have taken on the warm hospitality of the many generations who had lived here, greeting all

who entered its back door with an undeniable sense of welcome. The trouble was: few ventured to its door. But that was her fault and the way it had to be. Complications could be avoided—if she remained detached.

She glanced up to the second floor, studying the dormer windows of the two bedrooms and bath. It would soon be time for the storm windows to go on. Hopefully they'd cover up the splotches of peeling paint. On the lower level, the curved living room windows lent an air of solidity and grace to the home. The roof overhanging the kitchen sheltered a porch complete with a swinging bench. She loved to sit there in the early evening and listen to crickets harmonize with frogs along the river. A tidal stream meandered through the meadow below the house, then, going nowhere, lazily returned to the bay. When the current marched in, the fragrance of wildflowers wafted up on the accompanying breeze. When the flow receded, a strong bouquet of seaweed permeated her nostrils, building a dream of permanency.

The tide was out now. She drew a lingering breath deep into her lungs. In reflection of her day, she thought of how the water's endless backward journey reminded her that some accomplishments she had forged had thrust her backward, too. This wouldn't happen at Bayview. She wouldn't allow another crisis. Whatever effort was necessary to avoid it would be put in place.

Andrea gathered her purse and jacket, left her vehicle, and sauntered toward the porch. "Hi, Ginger, you lazy cat. Have a good day?" An orange tabby stretched from its repose on the swing where it waited with patience. "Okay, I'm coming. Did you get your fill of mice?" The cat circled, tail held upright, proud of her success.

"I can tell your day definitely went better than mine." Andrea laughed, then scooped the bundle of burnished fur into her arms and rumbled the cat's thick ruff with her nose. One paw gently touched her cheek and with that one welcoming touch, Andrea knew she was in the best place in the world. "Let's go in and get you some milk."

The back door opened into an old-style kitchen, large enough to harbor the over-stuffed couch she had picked up at a flea market. Along with a small painted table and two matching bright blue chairs, it beckoned her inward. Knotty pine cupboards hinged with black

wrought iron lined one wall. She had papered the rest of the room with a blue and white floral pattern. White and blue striped curtains fluttered at the sides of the partly open window. The cheeriness of her decor created never ceased to fill her with pride.

Tossing her purse on the counter, Andrea opened the fridge and extracted a container of lemonade and a carton of milk. "Here, Ginger, doesn't that look good? When you've finished lapping the milk, come into the living room and tell me your news." Ginger brushed against her leg. "Hmm, perhaps what you need is something to spark up your monotonous life. How about another cat... maybe a male?" Ginger perked up her ears, but nosed into her bowl, more interested on refreshment than romance.

"You're not lonely with just me here? Good! I'm not lonely with you, either. Lucky us." Andrea's mind circled a moment. She truly was not lonely. She enjoyed her own company because her obligations were limited. With little to leave behind to cause problems for anyone else, she had recently accepted the way her life would have to be and would work at maintaining her health as long as possible. A husband and family were for women who anticipated a long life span and thrived on responsibility. Her ability to take charge was restricted to what would cause little stress. But now stress translated to Dr. Braeden Landry.

Andrea crinkled her nose with the first sip of the tart drink, then kicked off her white oxfords and ambled into the living room. Divided into two sections separated by an archway, the far section, lined with shelves of nutrition books and romance novels, looked out toward the paved highway. A threadbare armchair, donated by the landlord, and a tri-light floor lamp were the only furniture to grace the space.

Cheap beige carpeting over the wide floorboards united the two sections. Someday, if time and energy allowed, she'd strip those boards to the original rich pine obscured beneath layers of paint. She doubted the landlord would mind.

The section nearest the kitchen contained a TV and VCR in one corner. A motorized treadmill stood in the opposite corner. The mainstay of her life every morning when she walked forty minutes before breakfast, she used the time to watch taped episodes of her

favorite talk shows. Best of all, the exercise started her day off with energy and an illusion of well-being.

A brown chesterfield and matching armchair, left by the previous occupants, faced the floor-to-ceiling granite stone fireplace. She looked forward to using it often through the coming winter. She had stockpiled a good supply of mixed hard and softwoods in a nearby woodbin. The remainder of the half-ton's delivery laid in neat stacks on one end of the veranda.

"Geez, I'm tired. Hurry up and finish your milk, Ginger. I need your company." Andrea plunked herself down on the chair swinging her feet over the armrest. Her body leaned back against the softness of the tufted fabric. She wondered how she could manage to avoid run-ins with the irritating cardiac surgeon, who seemed to have a penchant for getting under her skin?

## *Two*

Instead of returning to CCU from the cafeteria, Braeden sprinted up the flight of stairs to the main floor. He walked down the hall to the administration office, hesitated at the door then entered Mr. Jeffrey's reception area. The secretary's sparkly eyes displayed a keen sense of humor. Laughing at some thought known only to her, she granted him an immediate admittance to the inner sanctum.

"Braeden! Good to see you! I was thinking of having you paged." Sam's blue eyes glistened with exaggerated curiosity. "I heard about your loud discussion in the dining room after I left. Care to draw me a picture?"

"Nice to know the hospital rumor mill is up to speed," Braeden snapped, slumping down in a black leather chair in front of Sam's desk. "In fact, it's speedier than usual. Okay, what did you hear, and how?"

"My secretary was eating in the cafeteria when everyone heard a heated exchange between you and Miss Martin. I heard you got a little pompous, Braeden. Was it a carryover from this morning?"

"It's true, I had another little spat with her. Nothing serious. She has no sense of humor, whatsoever. Is she always so disrespectful of senior staff members?"

Sam chuckled. "No, only with you it appears. What did you say that you thought was funny this time?"

"I asked her if she snuggled up to all the patients or just to mine. I was trying to make light of the situation, that's all. She took it as a

criticism, I guess, and made a caustic remark that led to further trouble. If you recall, Mr. Jenkins was sarcastic this morning, probably influenced by her attitude with me.”

“Yes, well, Jenkins is a patient. He can be influenced by anything, stuck in bed as he is. Try to ease off and give her a break, Braeden. Everyone likes her and we’ve had no problems between her and the nursing staff. You know how hard that is to come by. I think you’re making too much out of her reaction to your gruff manner and making more problems for yourself than necessary.”

“I’ll give her a break, all right. If she continues with that sarcasm, I’ll break her of it the hard way.” Braeden shifted uncomfortably in the chair.

“Braeden, I want to move on to something serious now.”

“What’s on your mind, Sam?”

“Are you planning on using the mini-bypass procedure anytime soon?”

“Well, that’ll depend on several things.” Braeden’s voice shifted to a professional tone. “It’s still in the early stages of being used and I want to be sure the wrinkles have been worked out before I tackle it here. The operation’s not working out as favorably as we’d hoped. The fact the patient only has small incisions and doesn’t have to go on the heart-lung machine cuts the recovery time of a bypass way down. But nonetheless, things can go wrong. I’m keeping in close contact with the major hospitals doing the operation to learn from their mistakes. Why?”

“As you know, I have a heart condition. I’m personally interested in the technique in case I ever need the surgery. At my age, I’d feel encouraged if I knew I didn’t have to have a prolonged operation. My doctor told me I’d need to have a graft done in the not too distant future. The medication I’m on barely works and I’ve had to increase the dosage to the limit.”

Braeden’s heartbeat stepped up its pace, reflecting his concern. “I’ve done the surgery on a few patients, Sam. Unfortunately, two of them died, but it worked well for others. It’s risky business.” He couldn’t mask his sigh. “I couldn’t operate on you, as close as we are, but I’ll recommend the best when the time comes.” His mind dug into



the memory of Sam always being supportive of him through his grinding medical training. Sam was like a father to him and he looked forward to the evenings they spent reminiscing over old times.

Once outside the office door, Braeden's stomach sank to a new low. He knew he had to face the fact that Sam wasn't well. The administrator had been deteriorating over the past year and Braeden was the only one aware of how much of a struggle it was for his friend to maintain a strong outward appearance. A bitter taste swirled round in his mouth. His life seemed to be having more complications than usual lately.

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Andrea's office phone rang before she'd even removed her coat.

"Can you come up to CCU right away, Andrea?"

"Sure, Nance, what's up?"

"We have a new patient, a Mr. O'Brien, room 362. His blood pressure is high enough to cause a stroke. Apparently his breakfast turned him off. He threw the tray on the floor."

"I'll be there right away."

On the receiving end of Nancy's 'Watcha-gonna-do' smile at the nursing station, Andrea checked through the patient's chart before she visited Mr. O'Brien's room. Patrick O'Brien had been admitted the night before due to a high possibility of having a stroke. As she entered the ward, she took no notice of a curtain pulled around the bed of one of the other six patients. Her attention focused on the shaggy giant hunched in a chair with his rigid chin jutted out in defiance. He looked like a bear set to kill.

"Mr. O'Brien?"

"Yeah."

"I'm Andrea Martin, the dietitian. I understand you aren't pleased with your breakfast."

"You'd better believe it, lady." His beady eyes and beet red face detailed his explosive mood. "How do they expect to keep me alive with a skimpy meal like that?" His husky voice boomed through the ward.

Sober-faced, Andrea moved closer to his bedside. "Because of your high blood pressure and excess weight, your doctor has put you

on a low-salt, thousand calorie a day diet.” Andrea glanced at the spilled food on the floor and winked at the dietary employee hurriedly cleaning up the mess. “By the looks of it, you got a bowl of Cream of Wheat and I bet you hate the stuff.”

He caught the twinkle in her eye and leaned back against his pillow puffed behind his head. “I detest cooked cereal and one poached egg on a slice of toast isn’t enough. I’m used to a hearty breakfast that sticks to the ribs.”

“Fried eggs, bacon, home fries, toast slathered with butter and washed down with three or four mugs of the strongest coffee you can get. Sounds good, but not good for you, unless you want a permanent residency in the graveyard next door.” Andrea aimed her thumb over her shoulder toward the cemetery for effect. The dietary maid concentrated on her mop to hide her Cheshire grin.

The patient’s eyes widened, then the hint of a smile appeared.

“Tell you what, Mr. O’Brien. I’ll get the kitchen to send up another breakfast with two eggs and a bowl of Raisin Bran Flakes instead. The resident on duty ordered this diet for you when you came in. Suppose I talk to Dr. Marshall and see if we can’t get you on a diet more ample for your needs, but still have some caloric restriction. We aren’t going to be able to reduce your weight in a short time, not after years of your heavy eating. There’s no need for us to go overboard by starving you and making you miserable. The low-salt diet is essential for your health right now, but we can send up a salt substitute that might help make the food taste better.”

Mr. O’Brien nodded and unexpectedly reached over to squeeze her hand. “Thank you, Miss Martin. I’m sorry for the outburst.”

“I’d probably have done the same thing if I were in your shoes,” Andrea fibbed. If the truth were known, she was mild-mannered and would never put on such a display of temper.

As she walked past the other beds on her way out, the curtain suddenly pulled back and Dr. Landry stepped into her path. A sensual murmur drifted into her ear. “Flirting with patients works well for you, I see.” Ever present were the crinkly grooves at the corners of his dark flashing eyes. Andrea’s blood heated as she exited the room. He followed her out.

Exasperated once again, she turned and speared daggers in his direction. “Dr. Landry, I wasn’t flirting. Mr. O’Brien was upset and scared. I calmed him down. Don’t read something into it that isn’t there.”

She wished she’d held her tongue and not given the final order. It sounded unprofessional, but Andrea couldn’t bring herself to look into the dangerous depths of his eyes and apologize. She wondered how much power he held over her job, if any. Disgusted with the risk she’d taken, she took off at full speed down the hall before the doctor could reply. Rushing into the open elevator, she kept her back to the door.

She didn’t go back to the kitchen. Meeting Dr. Landry again had shaken her more than she wanted to admit to Sylvia. He seemed to have the ability to draw fire from her whenever he chose. Why couldn’t he leave well enough alone? She did her job and she did it well, yet he derided her with each contact. She’d just have try harder to avoid him.

As Andrea passed Mr. Jenkins’ room, she noticed him sitting on the edge of his bed staring out his window as if he were lost in time. She tapped lightly on the doorframe so as not to startle him. He motioned her inside and a quick smile replaced the sadness she’d detected.

“Hi, Mr. Jenkins. How’s your day going so far?” She saw the poached eggs and toast hadn’t been touched. “Is something wrong with your breakfast?” Sitting down on the bed she reached to cover his hand with hers. “What’s the matter? Today has the makings of a beautiful sunny day, not the kind of a day that compels you to drown in your sorrows.”

“Nothing’s wrong with the meal. I just sometimes feel it isn’t worth the battle to keep on living.”

Andrea lowered her voice. “I think we all have feelings like that at times, especially when we aren’t well. In the hospital you haven’t much to do but lie here and think about yourself, and a patient tends to dwell on the bad things. I wonder why that is? There *is* life outside these walls, but it seems so far removed from what life is like inside that it’s easy to lose the sense of reality.”

“You talk as if you’ve been in my situation, Andrea. Have you?” He peered over his spectacles, probing. His mounting sober expression told her that he saw the moistness gathering in her eyes.

“Yes, I have, Mr. Jenkins, and things can seem really grim, can’t they? It sometimes appears that no one cares or knows what’s happening to you, but trust me, there are those who do and understand. You’re in a great hospital and have the best of care. You’ve got the best doctor you could possibly have. All you have to do is put your trust in him. He’ll get you through.”

~ \* ~

Andrea wasn’t aware that Dr. Landry, intending to apologize after their second clash, was leaning against the doorframe. Braeden shook his head at Mr. Jenkins in a silent request that his presence not be given away, then he listened and watched.

A few minutes ago, with mouth wide open, he’d watched her vivacious hips sashay away from him in a provocative way that left him reeling in the lurch. He wondered what it was about him that turned her off the most—it was clear that his charm didn’t impress her, nor did his wit. Yet, she was bragging about him to his patient.

With the sun filtering through the open-weave drapes behind her, she looked like a radiant angel descended upon the patient’s bed. Braeden cringed as he thought of the hospital’s recent experience when a staff member’s intimacy with a patient led to a charge of sexual harassment. But a part of him craved just a little of the dietitian’s open generosity.

Her sudden stiffened back gave ample proof that Andrea sensed he was there. He saw her glance down at her fingers gently massaging the patient’s hand and she groaned with the reality. She knew what conclusion he was bound to draw. He couldn’t help but snicker when Andrea jumped off the bed and clenched her teeth against another backlash from him.

Braeden curbed his tongue. When he said nothing, Andrea visibly bolstered her courage and looked him in the eye. The muscles around her mouth flexed in her staunch effort to stop an outpouring of useless explanations. As their eyes locked, the room seemed on the brink of an explosion.

The patient must have felt the animosity and acted to defuse the situation. “Come on in, Doctor, I was just having a dish of bravery served to me.” He turned to Andrea, “Guess I’ll have that breakfast after all. I wasn’t hungry before our little visit, Andrea, but I am now. Will you come up and visit again when you go off duty?”

“Of course I will. You know I always like to visit a handsome man such as yourself.” She brazenly batted her eyes at the patient, then at Braeden, and rushed under Braeden’s arm into the hall.

“Your arrival made quite a noticeable impression on Andrea, Doc. I’m not sure it was a good one.” Doug Jenkins chuckled and motioned for Braeden to take the chair beside his bed.

“I noticed that, too, and I don’t know why.”

“Must be your sparkling personality.” The older man laughed.

“There’s something wrong with my personality?”

“I’d say your temperament needs a little work. Perhaps your reputation for having an eye toward the ladies precedes you.”

“You’ve heard rumors about me, too?”

“Think I’d let a doctor handle my case without investigating his qualifications and the gossip mill, do you?”

“My relationship with women has nothing to do with my ability to tend you, Doug.”

“Maybe not, but nurses like to chat, and when your name comes up, it’s easy to learn more than I need to know. I observed the other morning that what you think as humorous, Andrea perceives as criticism. Why she tried to justify herself with you when you aren’t even her boss mystifies me. I’m curious about the conflict between two people involved in my life.”

“Hmm. I can understand your curiosity.” Braeden laughed to himself. He was damned curious about her responses to him, too. Curious enough to pay particular attention to her body language. So far he’d learned that she bristled whenever they passed in the corridor, and she darted around corners if she saw him coming. That wasn’t the usual behavior he drew from women. Her skittishness magnetized him, pulling him in like a moth to the flame. The moth would be incinerated. He wondered if contact with her would burn him to a crisp.

Braeden glanced out of the window. How often had Sylvia Marshall remarked on his wit in the same vein? Now it had driven another staff member to shun him and, what was worse, it affected his patient. "The older I get, the less I understand women."

"I never understood them, Doc."

"Do you think it might be a good idea if I change my approach?"

"In what way?" Mr. Jenkins arched his brow.

"Well, I don't have much to do with the dietary department. Perhaps a closer liaison is called for."

"Depending on how you handle it, it might be a wise decision on your part if you don't want the cardiac unit to become a battleground." Mr. Jenkins smiled. "On the other hand, there could be interesting repercussions. I'll enjoy watching this soap opera."

~ \* ~

"Damn that cologne!" The whiff of it each time Dr. Landry neared tended to taunt her after each encounter. Although expecting to be called to task from the incident in the patient's room, there was no indication he had reported it. The aroma's memory would vanish only to return in Andrea's dreams at night, leaving her restlessly thrashing with a hodgepodge of inappropriate thoughts.

Andrea avoided the coronary floor as much as possible. When calls for diet instruction there came into her office from other doctors, she held her breath, and behaved professionally. She made a point of dropping in on Mr. Jenkins late in the day before she left for home. Dr. Landry wasn't around then and she could relax and enjoy the visit. Mr. Jenkins seemed to benefit from the personal relationship and steadily gained strength.

Later that week orders requesting diet instructions in the coronary unit bombarded her phone. Run off her feet, it seemed as if an impish elf toyed with her. A few of the requests were even for Dr. Landry's patients. Why the sudden interest in special diets mystified her. There had been several close calls when she'd nearly bumped into him.

Each time he saw *her*, he would stop what he was doing and stare. She evaded his glances and carried out her duties with her usual warmth, always keeping one eye on the door lest he enter the room. If he did, she speeded up the instruction and left.

“Good morning, Andrea.” Sylvia followed Andrea into her assistant’s office. “It’s a beautiful day.”

Andrea hung up her coat. “I love the view from my back porch in the fall. The country air is so fresh it filled me with energy today so I came in early. I have lots of time to get caught up with the diet orders that came in late yesterday.”

“I’ve noticed you’ve been busy with an influx of low-fat diets. Any more trouble with Dr. Landry?”

“No.” Andrea couldn’t admit to her childish evasive technique, but she knew of no other way to handle her bewildering distraction with the surgeon. His significant influence at Bayview disturbed her because her employment was still at the probationary level. Did he have to inject an invisible stimulant into her lifelines every time she saw him?

“I’ve had no further trouble with the good doctor.” *Not so you can see on the outside, but inside, I turn into a jiggling mass of jelly whenever he’s near. God, I really need to get a life!* Andrea wondered how much longer she could stand her inner turmoil. She had thought she could dissolve the tension if she avoided the source of the stress. It didn’t seem to be working. Dr. Braeden still loitered in her mind. She wondered if she should change her approach.

“Andrea, do you think you could develop a reasonably good working relationship with Braeden now?” Sylvia peered closely at her assistant.

Feeling the heat of the dietitian’s study, Andrea replied. “I’m hoping I don’t have to have any kind of relationship with him. By avoiding each other, we’ll have no more clashes.”

“I don’t think that will be possible. Mr. Jeffrey told me that Braeden wants to set up a classroom structure in CCU. His plan is to provide meal planning and heart disease information to patients admitted to the coronary floor. He wants you to be part of the team. An appointment has been scheduled for us to meet with him in the administration office at ten o’clock this morning. I can’t be there because I have to meet with suppliers, so you’ll be on your own.” Sylvia backed out the door, a half smile curled on her mouth.

Andrea muffled a gasp with her hand. A startling weakness crept up her legs. Groping for her chair she slid into it and balanced her head on her hands at the desk, pondering what she could do to get out of the meeting. She stroked her temples with icy fingers. The tension remained.

"I forgot to tell you that—What's wrong, Andrea?" Sylvia's return brought a look of concern to her face. "You said Braeden wasn't causing trouble. You're worried about him, aren't you?"

Andrea gulped and moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue before she replied. "He makes me uncomfortable. I'll get over it. What did you want to tell me?"

"Oh, just that my own meeting is downtown and I'll be gone the rest of the day. Can you take over for me here?"

"Sure, no problem."

"Okay, I'm on my way. Don't let Braeden bamboozle you. At the same time recognize that the patients will benefit from what the two of you can offer if you work well together."

"I know. Everyone benefits with good teamwork."

When Andrea next checked her watch it was nine-thirty. *This meeting will be as good a time as any to change my tactics with Dr. Landry. I'll go overboard with respect and see if that works. Maybe I can kill my nervous tension by visiting Mr. Jenkins.* For once, she needed his moral support instead of giving hers. Her inner voice warned her there was no way she could work with the doctor. Exposure to cologne that had a tendency to turn her brain to mush didn't promote success.

Andrea cranked up a smile as she entered Mr. Jenkins' room. She found him sitting upright on the edge of the mattress, a letter clasped in his hand. "Are you having any chest pain today?" she asked and sidled onto his bed.

He turned his watery gaze from the view and she noticed a tear make its way down his flushed cheek.

"My daughter sent me a letter. I've never had contact with her before. She's coming to see me in a few days."

"You never told me you had a daughter."



"I know." He hung his head and the sheepish expression flushed across his face advised her not to press the issue.

"It's wonderful that she's coming to see you." Andrea coughed to clear the catch in her throat. She'd always found it sad to see him alone and had assumed he was a bachelor. Their relationship consisted of him talking and her listening to his tales of adventures when he was in the military. Now, for the first time, she understood. Amongst all the excitement, there'd been a void in his life.

Andrea's own problems flew out of her head as she decided to try and cheer him up. She hugged him—Dr. Landry be damned if he walked in. Slowly, Mr. Jenkins began to talk about his life. "In my thirties I fell in love with a beautiful girl, barely out of her teens. She became pregnant with our child. We married and lived together for a time, but she soon became restless and bored.

"One night, I returned home from a month-long training exercise and found her note. She'd taken the baby and gone. I nearly went out of my mind with worry. I should've seen it coming and taken steps to help her."

"How could she do such a thing to her baby's father?"

"She was immature and I'd been selfishly looking after my own needs first. Eventually I located her, but she'd found someone else by then. I left them to live their own lives free from complications with me. When I got out of the service, I turned my anger to developing a building supply company, which accumulated a fortune when I franchised it." Divesting himself from his present problems, he delved into stories about how hard he'd worked to prosper and forget his misfortune.

"Now, after all these years, my daughter has traced me and wrote that she's anxious for us to meet and develop a real family relationship. She wrote that her mother died in a car accident this year. She's, let's see... almost forty years old now."

Andrea held his hand, stroking his wrist. There was little she could add that wouldn't sound trite to her own ears, nor did she want to burden him with her agitation. She'd been through misery, too, in the past. Instead, she switched the conversation to chatting about the hospital menus for the coming week.

“So, this is where you are, instead of meeting with me!” The voice boomed from the doorway. Andrea glanced down at her watch. Ten thirty!

“Hello, Doug.” Braeden’s tone softened when he acknowledged his patient, effectively disguising his anger. “I hope you don’t mind if I take the dietitian away from you for a few moments. We have a matter to discuss.”

Not waiting for a reply, the doctor firmly escorted Andrea by her elbow into the hallway. Expecting him to stop there, she didn’t resist, but he steered her toward a supply room past the nursing station. A gathering of nurses stared as she and Braeden marched by them. Andrea could imagine what they were thinking as he forcibly shoved her into the enclosure. Her elbow joint pulsed under his firm grip. He kicked the door shut and spun her around to face him.

A strong odor of rubbing alcohol overpowered the air. Finding it difficult to breathe, Andrea fought to keep her wits about her.

“What’s the idea of having me waste a half-hour waiting for you to put in an appearance, Miss Martin? Did it ever occur to you that I have a busy schedule, which doesn’t allow for lost moments of waiting for no-shows?” His eyes shot daggers; a little shiver ran down her back. “Have you no sense of responsibility, or professionalism?” The snarlish tone broadcast his anger through the door. She twisted in such a frantic manner that he had no choice but to let her go. He blocked the exit; she backed against the wall.

“What do you have to say for yourself?”

Fighting for control of her words she remained speechless, then stepped toward him, her forehead almost touching his chin, her hands clenched into fists.

Dazed at his outburst, she couldn’t talk.

“Well?” Dr. Landry’s cold stare penetrated deep into her hopes for self-preservation. Her mind functioned only enough to know that at this particular instant, if she lashed back, she’d regret it. She wanted to cringe like a trapped animal, but she managed to hold onto her dignity. Her body’s stance must have signalled strength because she noticed a change in Dr. Landry’s expression. The irritation in his eyes

softened. The aroma of his cologne filled the room, dissipating the alcohol's smell.

Her breath caught in her lungs when she saw his mouth lower slowly toward hers. She should have side-stepped his advance, but rooted to the floor as she was, she couldn't. He placed his hands on her shoulders, yet not with a power grip. She could have brushed them away. Mesmerized by his seduction, her paralyzed limbs couldn't move any more than she could protest.

The clock on the wall ticked noisily, matched by the quickened beat of her mutinous heart. Helpless because of her lack of will to escape, she waited. The crowded surroundings faded into nothingness as she became aware only of his presence, of his dark dissecting eyes. His kiss, when it landed, smouldered on her lips. And she responded in kind. The exquisite pressure of his mouth on hers and the erotic touch of his hands as they gently skimmed down her bare arms, blindsided any reason for defense. Her breathing became shallow as she struggled for sanity amidst the enchantment. A few thundering seconds later, the doctor released his hold, but his eyes never left her face.

Andrea's fingertips flew to a mouth now bereft of his divine touch. A sudden compulsion overtook her brain, pushing out his intimidation. Without thinking or caring, she reached up and dragged his head down to her level again, angled her mouth, and planted her lips on top of his.

Whether the plunder was meant as punishment or expressed desire never entered her mind—the effect was the same. She realized he'd gotten into the spirit and encouraged her action with passion. The lingering kiss ended, the crinkled lines around his eyes deepened like crevices in an earthquake zone. She staggered backward.

"Well, Miss Martin, you surprise me. Now I understand why the patients go wild for you." His forefinger brushed back a stray tendril from in front of her ear. The smirk on his face as he departed accentuated his scornful impression and bored into her psyche with lightning speed. An invisible punch slammed into her chest and raced down her left arm. Plunging her right hand into her lab coat in a search for the small container that defined her life, she sprayed a shot

of nitro-glycerin under her tongue. As she slid into a wheelchair, parked by the wall, the medication performed its wizardry by opening her arteries, setting her free.

As she sat in the silence of the room, she tried to make sense of the situation. She could no longer trust her body where Dr. Landry was concerned; it had double-crossed her. Respect could go to hell. The mighty surgeon had taken a terrible risk in what he'd done.

Nancy Wilson barged into the room and stood stunned at Andrea's appearance. "My God, what did he do to you? What did you do to him?" She kneeled and scrutinized Andrea's eyes. "I've never seen Dr. Landry look so infuriated in all the years I've known him."

"Furious? He was gloating when he left here."

Wayward tears trickled down Andrea's cheeks. Trembling, as she leaned into Nancy's comforting arms, in halting terms she relayed what had happened, excluding any mention of her need for medication. The nurse made no attempt to offer smothering platitudes. Once the waterworks stopped, she wiped Andrea's face with a towel from the shelf.

"You could take him to court for this, Andrea. That's blatant sexual harassment. I've never known Dr. Landry to force himself on a woman. He doesn't have to. They flock to him like sheep."

"He didn't force himself on me. I'm as much to blame as he, Nance. His career could be damaged if word of this gets out. You mustn't tell."

"If that's what you want. But what are you going to do about it?"

Still shaken, Andrea glanced up. "I r-really don't know. I'd intended to g-go to his meeting." A heavy sigh jarred her shoulders. "I'd convinced myself I could change my attitude and be friendlier. But I didn't have making out with him in mind. It struck... out of the blue." She shuddered at her lack of forethought.

The nurse patted her hand. "Look, I've got to get back to work. Call me tonight if you want to, and we'll hash it out over on the phone, okay?"

"I'll see. I have to rationalize what happened."

Nancy stopped at the threshold. "Andrea?"

"Yes?"

"Maybe you're attracted to Dr. Landry like all the other women and that's why you react so strongly when he's around. Is there anything else you want to tell me?"

"No. And Nance, with that sarcastic way of his, I could never be attracted to him. I'm all right now. You scoot back to your work."

"Okay, I'm going, but I want you to consider something. What you may interpret as sarcasm could be construed as dry humor."

"Not as far as I'm concerned."

"Okay, I'm going. Don't stay in here too long or others might get suspicious."

Andrea peered around the doorway after the nurse left. Hoping to avoid anyone who might spread gossip, she walked quickly to a public washroom and splashed cold water on her face. Several minutes passed before the action cooled the heat from Nancy's last remark. Once she regained her composure, she took the elevator to the main floor and hesitantly walked to the Administration office.

"I'd like to speak with Mr. Jeffrey, please."

~ \* ~

Braeden's sense of victory quickly vanished when he left Andrea and marched past several nurses curiously watching the supply room door. He could just imagine what the gossipmongers would say about him now. At the nursing station, he gruffly demanded to see Mr. Jenkins' chart, ignoring the scowling expressions of Nancy and another nurse going about their routine. He merely scanned the update of the chart before slamming it on the desk. The head nurse stayed motionless, observing his blustery exterior.

"If anyone wants me for the next hour, Miss Wilson, I'll be off the hospital grounds."

Braeden climbed into his silver Jaguar and sped out of the city. A drive in the peace of the countryside was what this doctor ordered for himself—a chance to cool down and collect his thoughts. He hardly believed what had occurred; if he hadn't been there, he would never have thought it could happen. A master at controlling himself, no matter what the circumstance, he'd failed to keep his composure just because the dietitian was late for a meeting—his meeting. *What's*

*going on here?* He shook his head in amazement as his sleek vehicle sped through the outskirts.

Braeden drove for thirty minutes, then, his nerves calmer, he decided to head back to the hospital. He turned into the empty driveway of an old farmhouse and paused to look at the view behind it. The sight of a stream weaving through the meadow produced a murmur of admiration. Since there was no car in the yard, he sat a few moments enjoying the panorama.

With autumn's splendor beginning to wane, many leaves of the maple trees fringing the sides of the expanse had fallen, creating a carpet of reds, oranges, and yellows. The dark green boughs of spruces and firs mingled amongst those leaves still hanging, giving the patchwork effect of a giant quilt. *What a great place to live. The house needs a lot of work though. What kind of person would let a treasure like this slide into such disrepair?*

As he backed out of the driveway, he glanced at the black metal mailbox perched on a post by the corner of the lawn. Surrounded by a ring of decoratively painted flowers, he saw the name, *Andrea Martin*, blazoned in red across the side.

Braeden stopped and stared a few minutes longer, then drove back into the yard. He left his car and mounted the porch steps, pausing to rub the neck of a ginger-colored cat on the swing. Peering in the kitchen window, he strained against the pane of glass and scanned the interior. The tidy kitchen exuded hospitality and comfort. He hadn't seen a couch in a kitchen in years and it reminded him of times at his grandparents' house when he was a child. After absorbing all he could, both inside and outside, he returned to the Jag and climbed in. He had a great deal to think about on the drive back to the hospital. It seemed he couldn't stay away from Miss Martin.

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Andrea entered Mr. Jeffrey's office with a heavy heart. He motioned for her to sit down.

"What can I do for you, Miss Martin?"

"I'm sorry to take up your time, Mr. Jeffrey. I know I should discuss this with Mrs. Marshall, but you were the one who hired me. I'm going to submit my resignation later today. First, let me apologize

for missing the meeting this morning, but a patient I had gone to see was upset and I stayed to hear him out. Dr. Landry was furious with me for being irresponsible, and rightly so.”

“And that’s why you think you have to resign? Because Dr. Landry was angry again?” Sam’s sharp eyes watched Andrea’s face. Her lower lip quivered as she grappled to maintain her professional persona.

Andrea fidgeted in her seat, trying to restrain herself from saying more than she thought appropriate. No doubt Dr. Landry would give Mr. Jeffrey some of the details, but even he would have to be careful. She was not taking it upon herself to make a big deal out of his actions and cost him his reputation. However, the situation had become intolerable. Her heart couldn’t cope with this kind of tension. For the sake of her health, there was no other way, except to resign.

“It’s a little more serious this time, Mr. Jeffrey. His anger brought on an angina attack, after he left the room. A shot of nitro cleared my chest, but it’s too dangerous if I’m going to react so strongly each time he’s displeased over something I’ve done. It’s not his fault. He doesn’t know about the condition. You and Mrs. Marshall are the only ones that know, and I want to keep it that way.”

“Andrea... may I call you that? Braeden should be told. He’s usually only that aggressive with medical students. I think I know what’s going on in your case, but it’s a matter of timing and nothing that specifically pertains to you. Braeden can be difficult, but he cares about his patients every bit as much as you do. I’ll talk to him. If you won’t let me tell him, at least give me a chance to get to the bottom of the trouble. If I can’t cure the problem, then I’ll accept your resignation.”

With considerable reluctance, Andrea went against her instincts. “I’ll give it one more try.” Shaking her head as she moved toward the door, she turned and looked back at Mr. Jeffrey. “I don’t want him treating me with kid gloves. Dietitians are part of the medical team. We’re taught to respect doctors and work *with* them, not *against* them. But that should work both ways.”

“I know. I wish you’d reconsider and let him know of your background.”

“No.”

“All right. You’re not making it easy, but I’ll see what I can do.”

Sam picked up the phone.

After leaving Mr. Jeffrey’s office, Andrea returned to the kitchen and checked on the progression of the noon meal. Making note of a few diet changes, she looked at the clock and decided that after her rough morning she needed to refuel her strength, even though she’d long since lost her appetite.

Most of the staff had eaten lunch and gone back to their duties when she carried her meal tray to the dining room. Craving peace and quiet to reflect on her thoughts, she chose an isolated table by the window. She poured her tea into the mug, added milk and stirred the drink half-heartedly. The thick dark stew on her plate held little attraction. Had it been a tender steak, she doubted her stomach would have rebelled. She stared out at the manicured grounds, not noticing Dr. Landry and Sam Jeffrey at the back of the room.



### *Three*

Sam's eyes twinkled as they glanced around the dining room. "Since Miss Martin had this place redecorated, it's a relaxing place to take care of two pressing issues at once—feeding my face and solving a dietary problem that involves you."

"I'm a dietary problem?" Braeden rolled his eyes. "Okay, spit it out."

"This morning, Miss Martin came to my office to submit her resignation."

"She did? You didn't accept it, did you?"

"No. I talked her out of it."

"What did she tell you?"

"A twinge of guilt on your part, Braeden?" Sam's attention focused on his friend. "Why don't you elaborate and tell me what happened? Keep it low, she just came in and is sitting by the window, looking mighty down if you ask me."

Braeden turned and looked, then shifted to the side of the table where he could watch her.

"I take it you don't want her to quit because then you wouldn't have her to torment?" Sam's voice held an edge of seriousness.

"Come off it, Sam, You know that's not true."

"I'm not sure of anything. Since you've come back, something in your attitude has changed. It's not like you to have such extraordinary

dealings with one particular staff member. I thought I knew you so well that I could understand most of your actions. Sylvia thinks you're riled because you've met someone who isn't captivated by your charm."

"That's ridiculous. I'm riled because Miss Martin didn't show up for the meeting we scheduled."

"So you had to search her out and make an issue of it?"

"It was important that she be there." Braeden grabbed a napkin from the dispenser and mopped a splash of soup from his lapel, the results of his rush to change position.

Sam raised his brow. "Sylvia didn't show, but you didn't appear concerned about *her* absence."

"Sylvia won't be doing the teaching I've lined up."

"Well, for your information, Braeden, Miss Martin had a reasonable excuse. She was consoling one of *your* patients."

"Right, she was in Mr. Jenkins' bed."

"In the bed?"

"Oh, all right, she was on it, rubbing her fingers up and down his wrist, her face really close to his. Sam, you know what troubles we've been through. Sex can get out of hand. I don't want a repeat of what happened before."

"Assumptions can get out of hand, too. Now I'm talking as your boss and not your friend, Braeden. I want this aggravation to stop."

Braeden's mood had lightened during the drive back to the hospital but now he felt it darkening again as he scrutinized Miss Martin's dejected form. *If she doesn't stop stirring that damn drink, her food will get cold.* As he observed her actions, the fact that she wasn't eating got on his nerves. He was relieved when her innermost thoughts must have connected with his; she laid down the spoon and picked up her fork.

Unaware of their presence, she took a bite or two, then pulled something from her purse and held it in front of her. Braeden concentrated on the article. He recognized it as a bankbook. He

watched with interest as she flipped through the pages, studied one page for a few minutes and shoved it back in her purse. He couldn't dismiss the rise of her chest with its sharp inhalation of air, nor the way her shoulders drooped in discouragement.

"Braeden, if you could just take your mind off the dietitian and listen to me, we could have some conversation at this table. My lecture is over."

Braeden switched his attention to Sam, and with a sheepish grin started eating his meal. "Ugh! I hate stew," he muttered, "especially hospital stew. Did we cut the food budget again?"

"No. And to be honest, I can see why Andrea doesn't appreciate your dry wit."

"She's won you over, too?" Braeden scoffed.

"Of course. I always play favorites."

"There's no need to be sarcastic, Sam. I know you try to stay impartial."

As they ate their meal and talked about medical concerns, Braeden periodically sneaked glances at Miss Martin's table. She still merely toyed with her food. Once in a while, he noticed her stroking her left arm near her elbow where he'd held her when he marched her down the hall.

He saw her open what looked like an aspirin bottle and pop a tablet into her mouth. She suddenly rose from the table and gathered her dishes onto the tray. As she lifted the tray, it crashed to the floor—dishes smashed and food slopped in a grand parade across the tile.

Miss Martin blushed with embarrassment, looked around and caught the surprised stares of the few diners. For a second or two her eyes focused specifically on him, then shifted to the upset at hand.

Without giving it a thought, Braeden grabbed a fistful of napkins and hurried to her side. He passed half of them to her, and using the rest as padded protection, he picked up the broken ceramic. Andrea quickly cleaned up the spill and murmured her thanks. Braeden took

the garbage-laden tray and placed it on the rack. She rushed from the room.

"This certainly hasn't been a good day for her," Sam exclaimed, when Braeden returned to the table.

"Did she tell you exactly what happened earlier?" Braeden asked.

"No, she didn't, and I didn't ask. I don't want to be part of your silly squabbles, and I want you to treat her with the same respect you think *you* deserve. She's a good person, Braeden. Don't destroy her. You don't understand the circumstances and I'm not free to tell you about them. Leave her alone, if you can't be civil."

"What makes you think it's all my fault?"

"Because she was so careful not to tell me what you did or said. I think she was covering for you, whether you agree or not. What's going on with you? You've been acting like a bear with a sore paw. I've heard about it from other staff as well. You need a vacation."

"I don't need a vacation!" he snapped. "We can't have staff here who show disrespect."

"Braeden, you've shown you disrespect her. What is it about her that bothers you so much?"

"Remember the nurse that acted the same way as Miss Martin does with patients? She nosed herself into the lives of some of the older male patients here, and the relatives of one particular patient didn't like it. They took us to court for sexual harassment when they caught her being overly friendly. Even though the case was dismissed, it involved legal expenses and time in court and with lawyers. I don't want the same thing to happen again."

"Oh, I don't think that's the case here at all. Andrea has excellent references. You're being entirely unfair."

"This all started when she overreacted to a simple statement of mine." Braeden sighed. "Okay, I'll ease off, but I don't like the way she jumps at my every word. I'll be watching, and if she makes another slip..." A voice on the loudspeaker called for Sam to return to his office, leaving Braeden to ponder their discussion.

Braeden left the dining area soon afterward and entered the kitchen, crossing to the dietitians' offices. He could see Sylvia Marshall was the only one present. With a sharp intake of breath, he tapped on her door. They hadn't been on the best of terms since she'd married Dr. Marshall, but she was not the one he'd come to see. Their romance had ended long ago, yet contact still caused irritation to his gut. He'd played with other women, but trusted none because of her.

"Come in, Braeden," Sylvia invited stiffly. "Did you come to apologize to Andrea? In any case, you're too late. She left for the day complaining about a painful arm. Do you know anything about it?"

Braeden shook his head. "Don't rev my engine, Sylvia. She and I had words. I wanted to tell her I'm sorry, but if she isn't here, I can't do it, now can I?"

Not anxious to prolong his stay, he left, and realized that for the first time Sylvia no longer caused ripples of excitement in his body. Andrea's sore arm bothered him, though. It was then he decided that when he finished his office hours he would head out along the highway and maybe end up at a certain old farmhouse.

~ \* ~

The aspirin she'd taken at noon only dulled the pain for a short while. By the time Andrea arrived in her yard, the ache had become almost unbearable again. She took two more pills, filled a hot water bottle and stretched out on the couch in the kitchen. Eventually, she slipped into a deep sleep.

Rap-tap-tap! A knock at the back door awakened her. Amazed to find darkness had settled in, she couldn't identify her caller until she turned on the outside light and peered out the window.

Her grogginess vanished when she recognized the back of her visitor standing on the porch surveying her stacks of stove wood. Dressed in a navy tweed overcoat with the collar turned up as a protection against the cold wind, Dr. Landry looked distinguished and professional.

She didn't try to hide her frown when she turned on the kitchen light and opened the door. Looking up at him, the memory of his tight hold made her instantly decide he didn't deserve any welcoming from her on her own territory. She started to shut the door, but his well-placed foot blocked it from closing. His quick reaction suggested he'd known his reception would be in question and he'd come prepared to deal with whatever she dished out.

"Well?" She wanted to wipe the smug look off his face.

"I've heard, via the grapevine, you're in need of a doctor. I came to check you over, so you might as well let me in since I've come all this way. I'm sorry for hurting you today, Miss Martin. It won't happen again." He stopped for a breath. His face grim, his voice gravelly, he had all the makings of a mercenary determined to carry out whatever his mission. And obviously, his mission was her. "I want to take a look at your arm. Sylvia said it was bothering you."

"I don't need or want you as a doctor so forget it. You've done enough damage." Andrea inadvertently whimpered when the pain in her left arm chose that instant to throb so intensely she instinctively grabbed it with her right hand. Her movement gave Braeden easy access to her home, and taking advantage of it, he pushed past her.

Disgusted, she slammed the door against the cold and sank into a chair at the table, her breathing quick and shallow. She put her head down, so he couldn't see her distress.

Braeden pulled over a chair and parked himself in front of her. "Let me take a look here and see what we're dealing with. Can you roll up your sleeve?"

"No. The cuff is too tight. I don't need you to examine it."

"Could be there's an arrow stuck in it." He grinned. "How often is it nowadays that you can get a doctor to make a house call?"

Her eyebrows lifted high. She didn't smile. "Probably never, but this isn't an emergency."

"Well, there's medical expertise here that will decide if it's an emergency. Are you going to do this willingly or will I have to use

force?” On his word ‘force’ she would have hit him if anything had been handy.

“And getting rough is what you’re especially good at, isn’t it?” She saw by his slack jaw her question hit home. “Just leave.”

“I’ll leave as soon as I check your arm.”

Exasperated by his stubbornness, Andrea didn’t have the energy to argue further, besides the pain was building to proportions she might not be able to handle. “Oh, all right.”

“Good. Now slip your arm out of your blouse. I want to see if there’s any discoloration.”

Keeping her regrets to herself that she’d worn a half-slip, Andrea grimaced as she unbuttoned and cautiously freed her arm. At least her bra was clean, but she hoped he didn’t find the lacy, low dip baring her breasts provocative.

Unfortunately, she couldn’t hide the goosebumps bubbling her skin as Dr. Landry gently squeezed, probed, and bent her arm. When he touched a certain spot, just above her elbow, she jerked upward and inadvertently looked into his eyes at the same time he glanced into hers. His fingers heated her flesh as they expertly continued pressing around the injured area. She tried not to flinch, but her attempt went by the wayside. Heat flamed her complexion.

“No arrows hidden, but there’s heavy bruising, no doubt due to me thoughtlessly squeezing your arm too tight. Where it hurts so much, the muscle may have torn from the bone. I really am sorry, Andrea. It’s never been my style to hurt a woman but at times I don’t know my own strength. I hope you can forgive me. I’ll give you some painkillers.”

“Thank you, Dr. Landry.” Her voice choked deep in her throat upon noticing he’d called her by her first name; she coughed to clear it.

“It’ll be sore for a while, but will heal in time.” He glanced at the couch. “I see you have a hot water bottle. You’d do better using an ice compress for the first twenty-four hours, then try alternating with the

hot water bottle after that. You could rest the arm by putting it in a sling.”

Andrea wiggled her arm carefully into her sleeve and buttoned back up. Rising, in hopes of spurring him on his way, she said, “It wasn’t necessary for you to come all the way out here.” Her tone was stiff and formal. She suspected he was afraid of having his reputation tarnished by news of his action spreading around the hospital. Worse still for him might be the thought she could file a complaint with the hospital administration. Her brows furrowed.

“How did you know where I live? I’ve never told anyone.”

“Purely by accident or maybe it was fate.” He grinned. “I left the hospital earlier to cool down after our ‘incident’, and came for a drive in this direction. I happened to turn in your driveway when I started back. Your name is on the mailbox. Look, Andrea, we have to get past this continual upheaval in our relationship. It’s becoming a problem.”

“And I suppose I’m to blame, is that it?” His face sobered and she felt a measure of satisfaction. “I’m not interested in any kind of a relationship with you, doctor. Just let me do my job. Stop questioning my motives and we’ll get along fine.” Her eyes never left his face as he stood. “Don’t worry. I don’t intend to go public with this. Your good name is still safe.” She moved to open the door, keeping her hand on the knob.

Scowling, he reached into his medical kit and pulled out a small vial of pills. “Two of these now and one before bedtime. Tomorrow take one every four hours.” He closed the bag and sauntered past her. “There’s to be another meeting for the two of us with Sam tomorrow morning at ten. Be there.” After a lingering gaze around the kitchen, he walked out the door she had opened, braced against the wind and returned to his car. The Jaguar scattered gravel as it left the yard. Andrea closed the door and leaned her head against it, her nerves shattered.



The night passed with her waking often, each time, Braeden's face loomed in her mind. The pills he'd given her kept the pain at bay, but they didn't numb the sensual explosions derived from his touch. Nor did they cure the guilt knowing she should have explained her strong response to everything he said. She could have cleared the air and told him he'd brought on an angina attack, then he'd leave her alone. But when she'd come to this new place to work, it was with the determination to live a full, independent life as long as possible. Pity was not something she handled well. She'd learned that the hard way. The fewer people aware of her health problem, the better.

The next morning, at ten o'clock sharp, Andrea arrived at the Administration office. Steeling herself, she greeted the secretary who admitted her to Mr. Jeffrey's inner office. As she entered the room, a quick glance satisfied her that the doctor wasn't present. She breathed a sigh of relief, then saw by his growing smile that Mr. Jeffrey saw her release of tension.

Sam extended his hand in a welcoming gesture. "I'm pleased you could make it on time today, Andrea. Why is your arm in a sling?"

"I injured it yesterday."

"Sorry to hear that; Braeden will be a bit delayed so we'll have time for a chat. I hope the two of you will be able to work well together because I think his idea for a more energetic instruction of heart patients has a great deal of merit. Braeden seems to have had more luck this time getting other cardiologists to give him their full support. In fact, some have offered to take time from their busy schedules to participate in his education program."

"I'm quite eager to learn what he has in mind, Mr. Jeffrey. I think hospital patients need to have more understanding of the mechanics of heart function and what they can do to improve their lifestyle when they get home. Just taking home a diet sheet isn't very helpful. I felt like I was being tossed to the wolves when I was discharged, so I did a tremendous amount of reading on all aspects of heart care. Reliable information lessens the fear."

A tap at the door distracted their attention. Braeden crossed the threshold and strode into the room, his authoritative bearing apparent, his handsome looks annoying. Andrea's enthusiasm and expectations crashed.

~ \* ~

"Sorry, I'm late, but I had emergency surgery this morning." Braeden slumped wearily into the vacant armchair next to Andrea.

"You didn't have to operate on Mr. Jenkins, did you?" Andrea asked, her whispered voice reflecting concern.

Braeden inspected her tired face, then winked at Sam. "No, it wasn't on *your* Mr. Jenkins." He meant the words to be teasing, but her stiffened posture and frown didn't surprise him. *Damn. I shouldn't have said that since she's made the effort to be here on time.*

He felt like a bumbling idiot. Even to himself he'd sounded crass and downright rude. How did he expect to gain her full support for the program he wanted to install, much less turn their hostility around, if he couldn't put a lid on his obviously unappreciated sense of humor? Braeden waited for a sharp comeback, and when none came, he looked at Sam in time to see the administrator shaking his head. He suspected he'd just firmed Sam's alliance with her. To his own bafflement, he found he wanted a sharp retort to lessen the guilt pressing in on his temples. Instead, she caught on that she had Sam's sympathy, settled back in her chair and smiled with her victory.

The thought crossed his mind that if they were going to work together, he'd better get used to her reacting in unexpected ways. He couldn't help wondering what had made her so defensive. The real challenge would be to work with this stubborn fireball. He wanted to ask how her arm was, but didn't dare risk provoking questions from his colleague. He'd never hear the end of it if Sam found out what he'd done.

The meeting took a little less than an hour, during the course of which Braeden explained his ideas for setting up a formal type of class instruction three days each week. One session would cover

necessary diet information. Another session would be given by a physiotherapist on the importance of exercise. The third session would be carried out with lectures by various cardiologists who would answer questions the patients might have.

Braeden observed Andrea closely as he detailed his plans. Her eyes were truly mirrors of her thoughts; she couldn't hide her interest, even though her body language with him gave out a different signal. He smiled as he wondered just what other language her body would speak in the throes of a passionate embrace—his embrace. He was beginning to understand her actions—not why they occurred, but how he seemed to send her into a tailspin. He vowed he would find the real Andrea Martin, with or without her cooperation. It was simply a matter of biding his time.

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Andrea couldn't help but get caught up in Braeden's zealous approach to patient concerns. Now she had something different to sink her teeth into and she looked forward to doing her part. She had enjoyed group participation in clinic education sessions during her internship so she approached the sessions full of energy. She even sat in on those that didn't require her presence. On the surface, she managed to maintain a cool and professional manner, but inside she was bursting with excitement.

Three weeks passed, during which the classes met with overwhelming approval from staff and patients alike. Andrea's arm healed and she'd managed to remain composed, overlooking Braeden's sometimes blundering attempts to be strictly serious and witty at the same time. Her opinions about him began to change when the humor wasn't directed at her. She began to understand that the man simply used dry humor as a technique for dealing with the pressures he faced daily, lightening the seriousness of the profession that was his life.

Andrea promised herself that she'd not allow any emotional entanglements, one way or the other, with this doctor whose charm,

when he turned it on, delivered sex appeal in spades. Her professional manner became a protective device, even though she knew she came off stiff and aloof when he was around her. She regretted her cool exterior, but was well aware that to behave otherwise could be destructive to the program, and to her.

For her, there was little chance of any long-term relationship. She wouldn't want Dr. Landry to waste his time on someone with a limited life span even if he might be interested, which of course, he wasn't. She never failed to be dismayed when her mind strayed in the direction of erotic thoughts concerning him, though. Lately, it wandered there a lot—sometimes at the end of the day on her drive home or during the quiet evening hours when her concentration refused to stay on the romance novels she enjoyed reading. His face usually loomed as the hero's and once she discovered it, she'd toss the book aside in disgust. Even her dreams filled with his face hovering over her bed. There were times when the imagined scent of his cologne was so real she had wakened filmed in sweat.

This particular evening was dark and bitterly cold when Andrea finished her work and left the confines of the hospital walls. She had stayed at the office long after her usual quitting time, planning the lesson for her next class. A strong westerly wind channeled snow across the wide expanse of the parking lot. The icy cold snapped against her face as she hurried toward her car.

Knowing that cold and wind are a death-threatening combination for someone with her condition, Andrea was already tuned into the constriction of her arteries. Keeping her mouth muffled within her coat, she pulled the hood tightly around her face and made her way carefully toward the end of the enclosure. When she heard footsteps thudding on the pavement behind her, she turned briefly and caught a glimpse of a male figure emerging from the shadows. Quickening her step, she proceeded, trying to stay within the floodlights of the hazy light standards beaming an ethereal glow. When a male voice shouted,

“Hey!” she picked up her pace, remembering the rumor of someone prowling the grounds after dark.

She had taken her beta-blocker early in the morning with breakfast, confident that as usual, by slowing her pulse it would allow her to meet her body’s oxygen demands for the day. Increasing her speed now called for more oxygen, but her medication’s effects had long passed their peak and were well on the downward slide. When the tightening belted across her chest and down both arms, she reached into her pocket for her nitro-glycerin bottle, not daring to pause before she shot a spray under her tongue. Fear, a vital part of the ‘fight or flight syndrome’, coursed adrenaline through her blood vessels, compounding the unrelenting spasms. At last she reached her car.

The medication should take effect and expand her arteries within seconds. She fumbled in her purse for her car keys, but the footsteps were coming closer and a burn suddenly accompanied the pressure. She was supposed to wait five minutes before another spray, otherwise her blood pressure would drop too low.

She tried breathing deeply but a wave of dizziness struck her panicked mind. As she leaned her forehead against the cold metal surface of the vehicle door, she doubled and sunk to the ground. Her purse dropped from her hand and along with it, the prescription bottle. In a daze and helpless to prevent the motion, she watched the lifesaver roll under the car. Her name echoed in her ears just as her body lifted into the air transported through time and space. She thought she smelled the cologne of her dreams wafting about her face as a coarse textured fabric brushed her cheek.

Andrea was only vaguely aware of her car door opening, of being shoved inside. When the blurry vision of Dr. Landry’s face came into view beneath the dome light, she couldn’t clear her senses enough to be shocked.

“Andrea! Snap out of it! What’s the matter with you?” His warm fingers grabbed her wrist. She knew her pulse would beat like a run-

away train racing past its destination. After he opened her coat and unfastened two buttons of her shirt, she felt the cold stethoscope pressed against her breast. He could help. Her tension flowed away. The pain ebbed and disappeared. The nitro-glycerin had finally kicked in. When the fog cleared she saw Braeden's concern searching her face.

"There's s-somebody following m-me."

"It was only me, Andrea. I yelled at you. What happened?"

"I'm all right, Dr. Landry. It's n-nothing to worry about. I have low blood pressure and felt a little dizzy, that's all."

"I'm taking you into Emergency."

"No! I'm all right I tell you. This has happened before. I'll be okay in a few minutes. I just need to catch my breath. I'm not going to waste their time." She squirmed to a sitting position.

"Listen, you're white as the snow that's falling and you aren't in any shape to drive. Tell you what. We'll go into Emergency and have you checked over, then I'll take you home. Your car is safe enough left in the parking lot."

Argument would be useless with such a stubborn man hellbent on doing whatever he wanted. Braeden had not given her a choice. If she didn't get her act together, he was going to get suspicious and hound her to death, instead of her waiting for her body to do it. "Oh, all right. Just see that they don't keep me overnight."

"I won't promise you that, but with the budget limitations the hospital has, it's a good bet you'll be allowed to go home. If you're okay."

Braeden picked up her keys and purse. She never mentioned the medicine bottle that lay beneath the car. By the time he whipped her car around and drove her to the hospital's side door, she had calmed, allowing her symptoms to disappear completely.

While Braeden returned her car to the parking lot, the nursing staff placed her on the heart monitor. The blip formed a regular pattern; an electrocardiogram proved normal as well. If they'd had any inkling of

her heart problem, she'd be forced to stay a full eight hours for testing that she hadn't suffered a heart attack. The fact she was stupidly taking a risk by not disclosing such important information played heavily on her mind, especially when Braeden looked directly into her eyes as he passed over her keys.

Neither spoke as he drove the highway to her home. Andrea leaned back against the headrest and listened to the soft jazz he played from the tape deck. "I like your taste in music."

"That's Miles Davis playing his muted trumpet... Miles invented cool jazz. I'm glad you enjoy him, too." When they arrived at her house, Braeden grabbed his medical kit and followed her onto the porch.

"Why are you carrying that? I've already been examined thoroughly by the cardiac resident."

"This time it's me who's going to do it. Humor me. There's no sense in arguing, you know. I'm stronger than you."

A heavy sigh fled her lips. "Bossy, aren't we? I suppose if I refuse, you'll manhandle me again."

He winked, not put off by her sarcasm.

She wished she could learn to bite her lip. He was only trying to help, but she didn't like his arrogance. Short of moving away, there was little she could do to get him out of her life, so she might as well accept his tenacity.

Once she'd given in, Andrea opened the door feeling more spirited. She was within reach of another nitro container, should she need it. Her thoughts wandered to the small bottle lying somewhere in the hospital parking lot. She'd have to look for it in the morning and hoped Braeden didn't park in that area.

He helped her off with her coat, motioned her to sit and removed her boots. She just wanted to relax with a soothing warm drink. And have him gone. By the look on his face as he shrugged off his coat that wouldn't be anytime soon. "Can I get you some hot chocolate, Dr. Landry?"

“I’d really appreciate it, but I’ll make it; you stay put.” For once, she welcomed his interference.

Braeden placed his medical bag on the table. “First, I want to check your blood pressure; how about resting your elbow on the table?” He attached the cuff to her arm over her sleeve. While he concentrated on taking the pressure reading through his stethoscope, she concentrated on the flecks of salt and pepper sprinkled through his thick hair. “Hmm, your blood pressure’s up. Your pulse rate is fast, too.”

“My pulse is fast because you’re here and I know you’re wasting your time.” Andrea clamped her mouth shut. Because he didn’t know she was on medication, which lowered her blood pressure, he wouldn’t have an accurate picture of how much it had risen. She had to quell the guilt swelling in her throat; it would raise her pulse rate higher still. She was fighting a losing battle.

“The old white coat syndrome, huh?”

“Exactly. I get it anytime a doctor pushes his way into my home.” There was no way she could hide the sparks firing her skin from his touch. If his cologne drifting up from his nearness didn’t sent her heartbeat on a rampage, the mere brush of his fingers would. Before he could get his hands on her top buttons, she had opened up the neck—a sign she had learned how determined he could be.

He slipped the instrument into the opening and moved the diaphragm to several places. Each switch made her automatically hold her breath. He smiled and backed away. “You’re heartbeat is strong. Did you say you’ve had these spells before?”

“Yes, a few times, but my blood pressure is usually low and sometimes it drops lower too quickly. I’ve had it checked and as long as I feel okay it’s not dangerous the doctor told me. I feel perfectly fine. How about the hot chocolate now? We could both could use some, I think.”

He nodded, but the questioning look in his eye warned of his skepticism.



At Andrea's direction, he plugged in the kettle, brought down two mugs from a cupboard, and poured in a generous amount of chocolate powder. She told him where he could find a package of marshmallows and he plopped one into each mug, then glanced at her to be certain he was doing what she wanted. She grinned her approval and was surprised to feel a warm glow ease the tenseness in her muscles.

She averted her eyes, afraid of acting like a silly schoolgirl, which was how she felt. This new communication should lend maturity. Their adjustment to a personal relationship in the comfort of her home made her feel more alive. Determined not to be another of his conquests, she could see how others easily would succumb to this doctor's smooth blend of confidence and physical appeal. Having an attractive male nearby brought distracting pleasures, calming her mind with a sense of safety, yet at the same time pricking her nerves with excitement.

"Why don't we take our drinks into the living room?" she suggested, trying to deflect his attention from the way her hand shook when he passed her the mug. Before he could answer, she rose and led the way through the doorway. At the kitchen table in close proximity, she was under close scrutiny and it jarred her senses. Glancing around the tidy living room, she sat on the armchair, leaving him the sofa.

"Do you mind if I light the fire?" he asked. "I see it's all ready to go and there *is* a chill in here."

The chill hadn't reached her fired-up blood vessels. "Sure, go ahead." She watched him light a match from the box on the mantel. As the flame licked up the chimney, the scene seemed natural—him taking control, making her warm, secure and surprisingly comfortable. Her home took on a different ambience with his masculine presence.

Braeden sat back and watched the fire blaze. "How long have you owned this place?" His pensive eyes swung lazily to hers as he sipped at the cocoa.

"I only rent it. I found this property two months ago after I got hired. I'd been looking for an apartment, something cheap, when I stumbled across this house. I'd love to buy it."

"Why don't you?"

She thought about changing the subject, but his inquisitiveness would drive him to pry deep anyway. "I have enormous debts to pay off. By the time I do, the place will have sold. To squelch the disappointment, I've started working on the inside—a bit of paint here, wallpaper there—just to help me feel like it's mine. I'm realistic enough to know my job at the hospital isn't secure."

"Why isn't your job secure, Andrea?"

"You already know the answer, Dr. Landry." She held her mug with both hands and slurped at the melting marshmallow, wiggling her tongue across the sugary softness.

"Call me Braeden, will you please? I honestly don't know why I bark at you; it's an involuntary reflex I think—one of self-preservation." His jaw flexed giving his mouth a boyish grin.

She smiled back. "Just like I don't know why I'm so edgy with you. It's *my* technique for self-defense. Do you suppose we are more alike than different? What a scary thought." Bewildered at the honest admissions she'd made, she wondered where her defensive tactics had gone. They weren't defending her against raw emotions now. She'd like nothing better than to experience the thrill of being in his arms upstairs, swept into what she'd imagined in her dreams would be the height of ecstasy.

Braeden raised an eyebrow, but he made no comment and she struggled to think of a way to get back on safer ground. It wasn't good for her to feel anything toward this man who could display incredible charm when he wanted to do so. "The view out back is gorgeous. In the evening, deer cross the meadow to drink from the stream. I've seen foxes and coyotes down there as well. It's great living close to nature."

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Braeden set his empty mug on the floor, and leaned back. He was so comfortable he didn't want to move, not ever. This was all any man wanted: a roaring fire, good conversation, and a beautiful, sexy woman, who had no idea how she was making his body ache to caress her. Her innocence made her all the more desirable.

"You've done an excellent job making this home cozy, like in bygone days. The kitchen is inviting. I can see I'm soaking up the history of the place. Can't you almost feel the families gathered around this fireplace on stormy nights before cars traveled the road?"

Her mouth dropped. He'd obviously expressed the sensation she'd had many times.

"Do you suppose I could see the rest of the house? I've always had an interest in older homes."

Braeden noticed Andrea's eyes narrowed at his request and he was prepared to accept her refusal. Though she seemed to have a natural inclination to buck most things he suggested, she gave in this time. "Sure, come upstairs."

Andrea led him up a flight of steps unusually wide for their times. They walked down the wide-planked floor to the end of the hall. "This is the bathroom." She opened the door on the left.

A claw-footed, cast iron tub dominated the small room, a sharp contrast to the other fixtures, which had been recently modernized. A shelf, holding bubble bath, candles, and lavender soap, hung on the white and violet flowered wallpaper. Fluffy mauve towels neatly draped from two towel racks near an oval-shaped mirror over the sink. He pictured a scene he would enjoy being part of—both of them languishing in a bubble bath with her back against his chest. He could almost feel—no, he had to erase these senseless thoughts.

When Braeden noted a flush in her complexion, he wondered if she was picturing the same image as well. Probably not. She had a naturally cold, insolent streak running clean through her and probably no imagination at all. He became conscious of his frown when she abruptly pulled out of the room.

At the next door, she hesitated. “This is the spare bedroom. I’m not expecting to have company so I won’t be furnishing it. True enough, when she opened the room, it was stacked with boxes and held little else. Braeden caught a glimpse of sadness. In a natural flow of compassion, he snaked his arm around her waist and noticed an immediate shudder rippled through her body. He left his arm in place. She didn’t try to wiggle away. They remained quietly connected, while he studied the details of the arrangement.

Finally, he released his arm with a slightly reddened face. It was not his intent to be presumptuous with the headway he’d made. He no longer wanted to intimidate her, but he didn’t want to seem on the make, either. She’d made him feel something he’d lost long ago—a sense of camaraderie, a sense of belonging. He’d felt that with Sylvia, but had taken her presence for granted. It was a serious flaw to trust others and to think they thought the same way as he did. It was better to stick to his primary concern in life—his work—and avoid complications. He followed her down the hall. There was one room left.

“This is my bedroom. It’s too prissy for your tastes, I bet.” Andrea’s eyes twinkled and the green cast went well with the crimson spreading up from her neck.

“It is dainty and feminine, I see. Just what I’d expect from a gal who took Home Economics at university.” He laughed as he looked at the double-size canopy bed, centered against one wall. “You have a soul for romance, too, I see.” Her color deepened. Covered with a duvet exhibiting a happy jumble of mixed cornflower blue and white daisies on a pale blue background, a multitude of pillows, in a matching shade of blue, lay propped in a sunburst effect against the white fabric headboard.

She laughed. “I imagine your bedroom is ultra modern with black drapes and perhaps a bearskin rug by the foot of the bed to show your hunting prowess.”

His hand patted her shoulder. “You’re close, but sorry, I don’t have time to hunt. Maybe I’ll show you sometime.” She sidestepped his touch. His eyes skipped across the white, frilly curtains billowing in the two windows. “Your windows are more interesting than mine for sure.” The curtains on the bedposts were tied back with wide, cornflower blue satin ribbons. The canopy top and bed skirt were of a plain, darker blue, calming the liveliness of the puffy duvet.

He glanced at the bedside nightstand holding a milk glass lamp and a romance novel. “I see you read sex stories. I noticed quite a collection downstairs on your bookshelves.”

“More romance than sex. I like subtle more than graphic actions. Maybe I’ll write one someday. I think it might be fun with my vivid imagination.”

“I didn’t know you had a romantic soul.”

“There are a lot of things you don’t know about me, Braeden.”

He pondered her remark as he studied the ornate carvings on the low white dresser, with its accompanying bench. Situated beneath the slope of the slanted ceiling, every inch of the room’s walls were used to capacity. The dresser presented an array of cosmetics and perfumes in front of the large mirror. She was right. There were things he didn’t know about her. He was beginning to suspect that many interesting qualities lay awaiting discovery. He ran his finger around his tight shirt collar and loosened his tie.

“You’re very neat. I’d hesitate to bring anyone into *my* bedroom unless the maid has been there that day.”

“You have a maid? Just to look after you?”

“Well, she comes in once a week. The rest of the time I fend for myself. I’m a terrific cook.”

Uneasy, Braeden started to back out of the room when the thought of inviting her to sample his culinary expertise popped into his mind. He was getting too comfortable with her—not a good sign. The decor in this room told him more about Andrea’s true personality than she would have revealed to him willingly. She was, at heart, a true

romantic with a fanciful imagination after all. This was her Shangri-La, her personal escape from whatever problems she carried and from the intense encounters of those who would try to invade her life, such as himself.

From the threshold, his eyes lingered on the bed, forming a picture of her at night with the full moon streaming in. He liked what he saw in his mind's eye. *Does she ever pull the curtains around the bed? Or is that reserved for a special person who can get past her barriers?*

"There, you've had the grand tour." The finality of her words shocked him out of his reverie.

His face heated, yet the cold bite of reality set in when he recognized he'd better get away from here before an explosion of need—his need—demanded a longer stay. "Thank you, Andrea. I'd better let you get to bed. It's late." He led her down the stairs and put on his coat. "Why don't I pick you up tomorrow and take you to work since your car is still at the hospital?"

"There's no need for that. One of the X-ray technicians lives out this way and I'll catch a drive in with him. Thanks anyway, Dr. Land... er... Braeden."

His boots were hard to get on, or was the difficulty in his rush to leave while his resolve still held? He was about to put up an argument when he realized she might actually prefer to go with the technician. Maybe it was George what's-his-face. He quietly nodded and strolled to his car.

As he drove away, he glanced back and saw her wave under the porch light. He hoped he could convince himself he'd made the right choice in leaving; sometimes it hurt being right.

## ***Four***

Happy to have found her medication intact where it had rolled, Andrea's secret was safe and she had one less worry on her mind. Her cheerfulness trumpeted widely the days following Braeden's visit to her home. Mr. Jenkins teased her often just to see her face redden at the mention of Braeden's name. The camaraderie they shared ignored their age difference.

She'd been to see the patient almost every day since his admittance and could see his improvement. His condition had advanced enough that he was now considered strong enough for a bypass. Dr. Landry would perform the surgery and, though at first the patient had been hesitant to go through it, he'd received such enthusiastic encouragement from Braeden and Andrea that he gave his consent.

Andrea was surprised to see a woman sitting on the side of his bed holding his hand when she entered his room on this bright sunny morning.

"Come in, Andrea. I want you to meet my daughter, Melissa."

"Hello, Melissa." Andrea walked to the bed, eager to greet her. "Your father told me he had a daughter. I'm glad to finally meet you. Your dad and I have become good friends these past weeks." The woman gave a noncommittal stare and merely nodded. *This doesn't look encouraging.*

Andrea extended her hand graciously, admiring the long black curls flowing loosely around Melissa's ramrod-straight shoulders. She noted the heavy mascara-covered eyelids overhanging ice blue irises and lips brushed to perfection with an abundance of bright red. The long matching polished fingernails looked like they could serve as ample weaponry if deemed necessary.

Andrea placed the woman at somewhere in her forties because on closer inspection a few streaks of grey peaked through at her temples where the dye hadn't taken. Melissa's detachment clashed with what Andrea would expect from a daughter of such a jovial man and she felt an icy burn slide down her back. The cursory handshake left Andrea to suspect the woman had taken an instant dislike to her. With a defensive pout, Melissa appeared to be on guard. Andrea glanced at the patient to see if he'd noticed the ice crystals forming in the room. Mr. Jenkins' eyes beamed love and gave no indication of anything amiss.

"It seems Melissa has been trying to track me down since her mother was killed and she finally located me here." Pride glistened in Mr. Jenkins' eyes. "We discussed the bypass and came to the conclusion that we need to get to know each other before the surgery takes place. I told Dr. Landry a few minutes ago that I don't want the operation right now. My medication seems to be working better and I want to go home. Melissa will take care of me until we feel I'm ready for it."

"Mr. Jenkins, is that a wise thing to do? You were so weak before and you've come such a long way. It would be much safer to go ahead with the surgery now, as Dr. Landry suggested."

Andrea couldn't believe the influence his daughter had exerted on him in such a short time. "You may not be able to get the operation done when you need it because of the cutbacks and long waiting list. Don't chance coming in as an emergency when the odds are in your favor now. Won't you please reconsider? Don't lay your life on the line." She called a halt to her rambling.



“No. I’ve made up my mind. I’m leaving as soon as I can get my things together and get dressed.”

“Well, I guess this is goodbye, then. Take care of yourself.” Andrea took a deep breath. “I’ll miss visiting with you.” She tried to steady her voice but she couldn’t hide the tear that had formed and slipped insolently over the brim. She wiped it away, cast a look of disapproval at his daughter, and hurried out.

As she strolled down the hall, struggling to control her temper, she saw Braeden reading charts at the nursing station. Her heart fluttered, while she watched him absorbed in his task. Putting aside her nervousness, she approached the desk. “Dr. Landry, could I have a word with you in private?”

“Do we dare go into the supply room together, Miss Martin?” he asked, his amusement obvious by the gleam in his eye. Upon recognizing the rumple of her forehead, he frowned and whispered, “It’s the only privacy available on this floor. I’ll behave. I promise.”

Andrea shrugged and wished she could avoid the brush of his hand against her back as they walked. As the door closed behind them, she tried to ignore the burst of flame welling up from her neck. She remembered the last time she’d been in here with him and the heat generated then had been from anger. Now it seemed to be spreading from a touch that wasn’t intended to be sensuous, yet was.

“How’s your arm?” His eyes glistened with the intensity of his concern.

“It’s feeling better, thank you.”

The thought of the pain their fury had detonated caused her to automatically reach up and rub her arm. She wanted to escape this small space before she suffocated from the tension and the wonderful smell of cologne circulating around her head. The sight of his muscular arms flexing beneath the short sleeves of his scrub shirt sent tremors running up her own arms, pebbling them with prickles. She shook her head to clear her senses, then looked up into the face that

could make her forget her priorities in ten seconds flat. To her great relief, the quick temper he'd shown last time was absent.

"Mr. Jenkins told me he's leaving. Is that wise? You said he needed an operation to regain his health. Does it make sense to leave just because his daughter tells him to, Braeden? Can't you stop him?" She vowed to stay on an even keel. Maturity must rule here.

Braeden reached over and gently placed his hands on her shoulders. His sympathy was all it took. Tears welled in her eyes threatening to overflow and embarrass them both. She cursed his knack for getting her emotions fouled up.

"Whoa! Take it easy, I can't hold Doug here if he wants to leave. My hands are tied." His firm voice didn't offer comfort.

"B-But it's not safe for him to go. You said he n-needed the s-surgery." She grappled with the stammer that bubbled out of her control. "I urged him to have the s-surgery when I wasn't sure it was such a good idea because you convinced me he needed it n-now. You, more than anyone, know how s-sick he is. The problem won't go away." She shook off his hands. "Now you back away from operating just because his daughter wants to get to know him? Where was she all those years when he needed her?"

"Andrea, stop it! You're being irrational. He can make his choices like anyone else. I can't stop him. I told him of the risks, that's all I can do. Now drop it!" Braeden turned and stormed out.

Dazed by his fierce tone and quick surrender to his patient's wishes, Andrea tossed her hands in the air and walked into the hall. Nancy Wilson called her over to her desk. "Are you still giving Dr. Landry a rough time?"

"I really don't mean to." Andrea chewed on her lip. "I feel so helpless where Mr. Jenkins is concerned. He's persuaded Braeden to discharge him and I know that's not a good idea. Braeden says he can't stop him and now I have him riled again." Her deep sigh fluttered past Nancy's ears. "There's nothing I can do, either."

"Why does it matter so much, Andrea?"

She couldn't tell Nancy she knew of the danger from her past experience. She had left the hospital once when she'd been a patient, thinking she'd be better off at home. It had been scary and almost cost her life.

"You have to trust that Braeden wouldn't let him go if it was so serious. He may feel the daughter could be the best kind of medicine and boost him up more. Not to change the subject, Andrea, but I was wondering if you plan on going to the staff Christmas party next week? It's a splashy affair."

"Oh, I doubt it, Nance. I imagine everyone's going with a date." Nancy had successfully broken her train of thought; her mind instantly moved to images of a dimly lit ballroom and soft waltz music beneath a strobe ball.

"A lot have dates of course, but some just drop in for a short time in-between shifts. Some of the interns don't have girlfriends here so they go stag and dance with all of the ladies. It's really a great time. Why don't you come with Josh and me?"

"Josh? Do I know him? A new boyfriend, perhaps?"

"He's a resident internist that I've had my eye on for a while. He asked me out to a movie last week and we had a lot of fun and good conversation. When he asked me to go to the party I couldn't turn him down. Come on, Andrea, there'll be lots of food and dancing to an excellent band. If you don't have anything to wear, I can lend you a dress."

"I haven't bought a dress that wasn't a uniform in years. How formal is the dance?"

"Anything goes. The fancier the better."

"You've talked me into it, Nance. Maybe I can bring my things to work and come over to your place to get ready... Tell me," she leaned closer, "who do you think Dr. Landry will take?"

"I don't know who his flavor of the month is now," Nancy answered in a catty whisper. "It'll be interesting to find out, don't you think?" Andrea couldn't stifle a wide smile.

Looking forward to the Christmas party helped occupy Andrea's mind for the next few days. She didn't have any relatives nearby, so, as usual, the kind of Christmas she had would depend upon her own efforts. Though she occasionally wondered how Mr. Jenkins was doing at home, she felt it would be better for all concerned not to interfere in his new relationship with his daughter. She called several times, but Melissa said her dad was sleeping. Andrea just hoped her words were true and not putting him at risk.

Stimulated and challenged with her class instruction on top of her regular duties, Andrea scarcely had time to think about Braeden. Since the mini-bypass procedure he recently put into practice meant less invasive surgery and a shorter recovery time for the patients, he was kept busy with a larger caseload.

Because Andrea hadn't heard complaints from the busy doctor, she assumed her classes pleased him, yet she would have appreciated feedback. *Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, girl. Take it as it is; the patients appear to enjoy the sessions.*

The day before the dance, as she rushed in the door, she was shocked to see Braeden sitting at the back of the classroom. She'd been running late and appeared just in the nick of time for her lecture. Wiping the sweat from her brow, Andrea tucked loose strands of hair behind her ears, and slid behind the desk. He nodded, but said nothing. He appeared content to sit, arm over the back of his chair, and casually watch the ten or so patients acknowledge each other then sit in chairs scattered about the room.

"Let's see if we can move the chairs closer together, a circle would be fine, and we'll make our session less formal," Andrea suggested. Braeden immediately helped shove chairs into place. *Of course, she thought, these patients shouldn't be moving anything because of their heart problems. How stupid he must think I am, and he's right.*

Braeden returned to the back of the room, keeping to himself. "We're lucky to have Dr. Landry as a visitor today." The patients

turned around, smiled their welcome and turned back to her. "Maybe he will answer any questions that concern you after I'm through." The surgeon nodded and winked.

Damn that wink. It threw her off-center for a minute, but she gathered her nerves and carried on. As usual, her lesson covered the advantages of a low-fat diet, but this time she had brought with her a model of what a pound of fat would look like in the human body. The model was gross but helped emphasize the importance of maintaining a healthy lifestyle to her captive audience. The lesson focused on cholesterol and the ways of cooking meals without using fat of any kind. A lively discussion followed with comments on hospital meals in general. Andrea took them in stride amidst the good-natured bantering. She was so enthusiastic about the response and courage of these sick people that she didn't notice the intense interest of the doctor at the back. It seemed everyone else forgot about him too, because no questions were directed his way.

As they left the room, some patients stopped to chat amiably with her for a few minutes. When they were gone she turned to collect her supplies from the table and was only then aware Braeden had not left his seat.

He smiled when he saw her glance at him, shuffled his feet as he got up, then sauntered toward her. "You're an excellent teacher, Miss Martin."

Andrea's mouth dropped; her heart fluttered as she absorbed the first compliment he'd ever given her.

His eyes pierced into her thoughts. "Do you plan on going to the staff party tomorrow night?"

She cleared her throat before answering as nonchalantly as possible. "I guess so, Dr. Landry... er... Braeden. Nancy has asked me to join her and Josh since I don't know many people around here yet. I'm looking forward to it. How about you?"

He hesitated, as if searching for the right words. “Yes, I plan to go unless an emergency pops up. I don’t have a date, either. I thought I might be at a conference, but it was cancelled.”

An embarrassing pause left Andrea wondering if he might be thinking she was offering herself as his escort. *Not in a million years.* She tossed in a lighthearted, “I’ll see you there,” and headed for the door.

“It was a thought-provoking class, Andrea,” he murmured as he quickly followed. “With that realism of how fat looks in the body, you got the reaction I wanted from the patients. Thank you.”

They parted at the threshold, leaving her with mixed feelings. She didn’t know whether to be joyful or discouraged. While she appreciated the compliment on her teaching, the fact he avoided asking her to be his date disturbed her. Was she not attractive enough to warrant his attention? Maybe she should consider it a challenge and make an attempt to prove otherwise.

A few days before, she had bought a black dress, so stylish in its simplicity that it could be worn at any social affair. But this occasion warranted something even more special, since he’d be there. After work, Andrea cruised some of the better dress shops in the city. Braeden loomed large in her thoughts with each gown she pulled from the rack. Suspecting that to him, the thrill was in the chase, brought a renewed excitement toward her selection. She knew the wisest course was to give him a wide berth, but some inexplicable need to prove herself took over her common sense and she approached her attendance with anticipation. Andrea recognized exactly what she wanted when she discovered it tucked away on an isolated rack—the dress perfect for her needs.

“Has this one been sold?” she asked the clerk.

“Yes, it was, but it was so expensive, the woman’s husband made her bring it back after he noticed the price tag.”

“I see.” Andrea’s mind revolved around car payments and her debt load as she tried it on, until she left the dressing room to examine the

fit in the full-length mirror. She welcomed the oohs and ahs from the female customers gathering around.

The emerald green matched her eyes. The halter top, embedded with tiny glass crystals, molded gently to her breasts beneath the satin sheen. A tight-fitting band beneath her breasts accented her tiny waist. The fabric hugged her hips, then draped in a drift of pure elegance to just above her knees. But it was the back that captured everyone's attention. Cut low to her waist, it highlighted her flawless creamy skin and well-shaped shoulders.

A quick calculation showed she'd need to withdraw money from her rainy day fund. Her bills must be met at all costs, but she couldn't even remember the last time she'd bought something this beautiful and so suitable for the occasion. It was the 'must have' that she'd never had and never would have again. Her guilt flew out the window when she returned to her regular clothes and reached into her purse for her credit card.

Braeden stayed in her thoughts at night long after she went to bed. Andrea set the bedside alarm for earlier than usual, giving her time to collect the things she would need to take to Nancy's. It took her a long time to get to sleep.

Upon waking, Andrea felt groggy and downed a cup of strong coffee while wondering what the evening ahead would bring. Would Braeden really be there, would he like the dress, would she be overdressed? The questions pummeled her mind until in exasperation she went back upstairs and determinedly packed a suitcase including her carefully selected makeup.

Her suede black heels would have to do, and when she flipped through her pathetic jewelry, she decided any of hers would lessen the whammy effect she'd dreamed of creating. Her problem became one of economics. She couldn't afford to buy accessories. Without a dainty handbag to carry, she'd have to rely on keeping her nitroglycerin in her coat pocket. And pray she didn't need it in a hurry.

Opening the closet door wide, she withdrew the hanger covered with a protective shield. As if it were made of thin glass, she removed the dress. Holding it in front of her, she stared at her reflection. Even without the use of cosmetics, her face had a glow. She could hardly wait to put on the dress, but decided not to risk crushing it. Instead, she returned it to its protective nest and carried her things downstairs.

The day dragged as she marked time by checking a clock whenever one was near her. The Christmas spirit bloomed everywhere amongst the staff, and the enthusiasm spread to the patients.

"I'm ready to leave now," Nancy said as she peeked around the corner of Andrea's office door at six o'clock. "Do you want to follow me home in your car?"

"Yes, I'm ready to go. I thought the time would never come. I'm so excited."

"Great, I'll drive slowly. Supper shouldn't take but a few minutes to heat."

Once they entered Nancy's suite, she was true to her word, and in a short time they were sitting opposite each other enjoying a chicken casserole and tossed salad.

"So tell me about Josh, Nance. Do you think there might be a serious relationship starting here?"

"It's a possibility. He called me twice at work today. I think he's interested." She paused to pour the tea and placed the dainty milk pitcher in front of her guest. "I'm wondering about you and Braeden. I've watched the way the sparks fly when you two are near each other."

"You're dreaming, although we've been getting along better lately."

"That's not what I mean. He's constantly taking note of you if you're on the cardiac floor. His eyes just naturally follow as you walk down the hall. And the same goes for you. I'm not blind, Andrea. I know hunger when I see it and it's got a lot more to do with a female-male attraction than being work oriented."



“He’s not hard on the eye, but with his background, I wouldn’t even consider more than just looking.”

“Well, it’s going to be interesting to see if any sparks fly between the two of you tonight. My bet is that you’ll light up the room. Now if you’re finished with dinner, since I don’t have anything for dessert, let’s start getting ready to knock the men for a loop. You can take your bath first. There’s pink bubble bath on the rack above the tub.”

After their leisurely soaks, the two women experimented with hairstyles, relying on each other’s judgement for the final arrangements. With tendrils framing her face, Andrea swept her hair into a French twist. A black velvet clasp held it in place. Nancy, a whiz with the application of eye makeup brought forth gales of laughter as she put dollops here and there, gently blending the hues to accent the brilliance of their eyes. While Nancy decided to wear bright red lipstick, Andrea settled for the more subtle persimmon shade.

Once the cosmetics had dried, they stood apart, beaming compliments. The final touch was to put on their dresses. Nancy’s choice, a full-length dark blue velvet gown with long slender sleeves, dipped low at the bodice accenting her ample breasts.

Andrea slipped her new dress over her head where it sailed into place beneath anxious hands. Nancy whistled when she stood back and admired the transformation. “You are positively gorgeous. Wait till the doctor sees you. He’ll start operating immediately.”

“You don’t think I’m overstated?” Andrea twisted to get a good look at her back. “I feel naked. It might be too much of a good thing.”

“Now don’t you start getting weak-kneed on me, Andrea. Even if he’s not interested there will be plenty of guys who will be. You need some jewelry, though.” Nancy ruffled through her jewelry box. “You can borrow this rhinestone necklace and earring set. They’ll do nicely.”

“Thanks. You’re a good friend. You wouldn’t happen to have a small purse I could carry my lipstick in, would you?”

“I have a silver one that should go with your dress, just a second and I’ll get it.”

“I appreciate you more and more all the time, Nance.” Andrea sighed. The purse would give her a way to keep her nitro handy at all times. With a dab of *Amarige* perfume behind her ears she produced the result she’d pictured in her dreams.

Josh arrived promptly at eight o’clock, thrilled to be escorting the two beauties for the evening. His quick sense of humor and general good nature promised the evening would be entertaining.

To provide adequate space and elegance for the event, the dance was held in the ballroom of a local hotel rather than in the hospital auditorium. It certainly carried more ambience. As Andrea and her friends entered the room, after checking their outerwear with a hat check girl, she felt palpitations flutter briefly in her chest. No doubt due to the excitement she found hard to restrain, they passed when she hesitated at the door and drew in slow, deep breaths.

She had delayed taking her medication by several hours, hoping the strength of the beta-blocker’s power would cover any dancing she might do. If she needed, she could bow out and rest at a table between waltzes. She had no intentions of attempting the fast modern tunes.

The three friends stood at the threshold for several minutes to get their bearings before venturing further into the room. Some of the nursing staff huddled near the door enjoying cocktails and helping themselves to hors d’oeuvres passed around by snappy uniformed waiters. Nancy graciously introduced Andrea and Josh to her co-workers. Soft slow music emanated from the bandstand.

At one end of the room tables were decorated with festive red tablecloths and green napkins. Flickering white and red candle centerpieces lent a mellow glow to the atmosphere. A huge mirrored glass ball hung from the ceiling. As it revolved, colored spotlights flashed onto it, and in turn, their brilliance reflected onto the walls and partygoers.

A waiter passing by with a tray of drinks offered the chance to make their own selection and Andrea, not wishing to combine liquor with her medication, chose a glass of eggnog. As she slowly sipped the beverage, her eyes skirted the room, pausing to watch Mr. Jeffrey talk to Sylvia Marshall. Her gaze continued to the far end of the ballroom. She suddenly became aware of eyes staring back, a hint of a smile on the face of the owner. Braeden Landry leaned on the bar next to Dr. Marshall. The dim room and his black tuxedo accentuated the dark intensity of his eyes. His red bow tie blended with the abundance of red in the clothing of the other guests.

Andrea blushed at his lingering examination. He winked. That's all it took to send butterflies winging haphazardly around in her stomach. Her hands felt moist but she smiled back and continued her watch on the people milling about her. A few moments later, her mutinous eyes darted back to the spot she had last seen him. To her surprise, she noticed he had left that spot and moved considerably closer. In fact, he was decidedly moving in her direction, like a ravenous shark circling a fresh meal. There was no mistaking Braeden's purpose. She was his target.

"I'm going over to speak with Mr. Jeffrey, Nance."

"We'll grab a table and hold a seat for you," the nurse replied.

Like a fish avoiding the opportunity to be the shark's dinner, Andrea circled in the opposite direction to Braeden's step. Her unexpected nervousness produced a weakness inside her entire body that refused to leave. She needed more time to consciously prepare for their meeting and hoped to dodge his presence until her heartbeat regulated.

Realizing the futility of such childishness, she stopped. *This is silly. I'll have to handle this problem like I deal with my other troubles: facing up to them.* She helped herself to hors d'oeuvres, then took a stand near the balcony doors; her eyes fixed on the giant Christmas tree. Ignoring the throb at her temples, she searched amongst the guests to see how far Braeden had advanced and was

dismayed to see from the corner of her eye that he had reached her. His breath steamed the back of her neck and projected in a beeline down her naked spine—warm, caressing, claiming.

“Hello, Miss Martin. I was beginning to think you’d changed your mind about coming tonight.” He spoke with a formal tone, not the seductive one she’d envisaged in her dreams.

She responded in kind. “Good to see you, Dr. Landry. I guess we were a little late, but Josh was telling us tales about his residency, keeping us in stitches. He and Nancy make a fun couple.”

“Yes, I noticed he was proud as he could be when he strutted in with two beautiful women on his arms. No wonder. You are stunning in that dress, Andrea.”

“Thank you, I’m glad you like it.” She blushed as she noted the sincerity in his voice. Standing in front of her, she could feel his energy, smell his cologne and the admiration in his eyes showed he meant what he said. “Ah ... Dr. Landry, er... Braeden, aren’t you standing a wee bit close?” She couldn’t step back because of the wall behind her. “People are staring at us.”

“It’s not me, they’re staring at.” He laughed. “You’re standing under the mistletoe and everyone is wondering if we’re going to make use of it, considering our reputations. Shall we give them something to gossip about?”

Trembling, she glanced up. Sure enough, suspended from a wire, a sprig of mistletoe dangled above their heads. She lowered her eyes and nervously looked away, but she couldn’t deny the sensuous touch of his hands on her waist. He hesitated, giving her time to sidestep should she wish to do so. “We don’t want to disappoint them do we?” He spoke softly, his mouth almost grazing her lips.

Andrea rooted to the spot. She stared into his face, ready to turn aside and sweep off his approach with one hand and move, but her feet were firmly planted and wouldn’t obey her mind. Instead, she chose to hold her ground and watch as he focused on her lips. Her breath suspended, she waited for the impact.

With Braeden, being an overbearing male, she expected a crunch laced with dominance that would clearly demonstrate his authority. When the kiss came it was nothing like she expected. The contact was merely a light brush, a trifle that left her wondering if he had discovered that toying with her would disrupt her sanity. Mystified, she watched as he moved back, studied her eyes for a few seconds, then in a deliberate motion descended toward his target.

The fire of his hand sliding up her exposed back commanded surrender. She hadn't recognized the power of sensual anticipation. A showering of sparks nipped and burned in a heated race to her pulse points. This meeting of flesh went far beyond the peck of a mistletoe kiss. His touch and caress rocketed her sensibilities straight out of the universe. Up past the farthestmost stars. To Heaven. Her eyelids closed, she soared with the ecstasy.

It ended too soon.

When Braeden broke off the clinch, he smiled and looked down at her, his impression not evident. His damp forehead necessitated that he draw a handkerchief from his pocket and swipe it across his brow.

The powerful surge still rampaging through her body left Andrea at a complete loss for words. Behind a mask of cool reserve, she burned from the heat. She staggered sideways, then glanced around and saw smiles and heard clapping in all directions. There would be new rumors feeding the hospital gristmill tomorrow.

"Your glass is empty, would you like a refill to cool you down, Andrea?" he whispered, obviously aware of the effect he'd had. "Or maybe something more refreshing would be better." Brought from her daze, shaken, and definitely in need of a drink, she gulped the remnants of her eggnog and nodded. "Could you get me a Sprite with a little gin?"

She watched as he walked away. Never had she been so affected by a simple kiss; correction, that was no simple kiss; it was a discombobulating extravaganza, and the magnitude of her response overwhelmed her.

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As he ambled to the bar for another round of drinks, Braeden wasn't sure what had just happened. He carefully positioned himself so he could watch the woman he thought outshone all others. "I'd like a Sprite with gin and a Scotch on the rocks. Make that a double, please."

"You're back again already, Braeden?" Craig Marshall greeted him cordially. "Must be the heat in here calling up the thirst."

"And you never left?"

"Well no, Sylvia is involved in kitchen equipment problems with Sam and I'd rather forget hospital politics for the night." The air tensed. The two doctors had only a fair working relationship and avoided conversation on personal matters.

"Sylvia looks lovely as usual," Braeden replied, using the cool formality he maintained whenever Craig was near him. It still bothered Braeden to think Craig had progressed beyond the place he'd held in Sylvia's heart. He'd wondered many times if she'd had him in the wings all along.

"That was quite a peck you gave Andrea."

"I couldn't resist, after all, she was under the mistletoe and I couldn't shirk my duty." Braeden grinned thinking what a stroke of luck that had been; he'd only noticed the sprigs of mistletoe at the last minute.

"Josh looks pleased with himself to be escorting two attractive women. Andrea won't be without a partner long looking like that," Dr. Marshall mumbled.

"Not long at all. I'm intending to be that partner." Braeden turned to the bartender. "Thanks, I'll deliver these now. Excuse me, Craig, duty calls." Braeden made his way along the outskirts of the throng with Craig's words ringing in his ears. He tried not to bump anyone, yet he wanted to reach his destination quickly. With the way she avoided him in his first approach, he wasn't taking chances Andrea might take off now.

Periodically, he looked up on his journey and was pleased to see her still waiting by the Christmas tree. His heart warmed with the memory of his daring kiss. It had been worth every jittery second he'd spent contemplating it. Lately it seemed as if he were hopping around a ring of fire, fearing he'd get burned by her. But beneath the fury that easily flamed lay a heart beating so passionately he could almost feel it sear his chest when he held her close. Using the mistletoe, though not his usual method of approach, could have called for a resounding slap. Yet she'd made no attempt to pull away and the warmth from her lips was enough to melt any ice present between them tonight. With no rejection in sight, she reeled him in and he wondered if it were by accident or design. He figured it was by design—her presence was well ordered. No matter, with the unexpected power of their kiss, he'd been hooked.

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Nancy and Josh joined Andrea when they saw her standing alone. "Boy! That was some kiss. Was it as good as it looked?" Nancy inquired, a wily gleam in her eyes.

Andrea felt the heat flooding into her cheeks and she looked around to see if anyone was listening. "Better, Nance," she muttered from the corner of her mouth, "very good, perfect." She paused and grinned. "Now I know why he's so popular with women."

"They're going to start dancing; the meal will be served at eleven o'clock," Josh interjected. "Why don't you ask Dr. Landry to join us at our table? We've saved two seats."

"I don't know if he'll hang around that long," she replied, "but if he does, I'll invite him. Thanks."

Braeden returned with a fresh drink for her and a refill for himself. They stood to one side making light conversation with those who stopped to chat. The orchestra played familiar tunes, and increasing numbers of couples entered the dancing area. The Strobe light reflected splashes of color, shimmering over the guests and walls to

create an aura of romance as they spun around together. Watching, Andrea knew she had landed in a world of enchantment.

“Would you like to dance?” Braeden asked.

She couldn’t say no. The past few nights she had danced with him many times in her dreams. “I’d like that.”

They placed their empty glasses on a tray; his arm gallantly encircled her waist leading her onto the dance floor. Andrea’s heart pitter-pattered when her palm joined against his. With the first whirl, like Cinderella, her problems vanished. *Anything is possible for a short time. I’ll make the most of tonight and, when it’s over, I’ll have memories that will last a lifetime.*

Carried away with the easy beat of the slow waltz, neither spoke, just listened to the ballad crooned by a male singer as they floated around the room. When the song ended, Andrea basked in delight when Braeden made no attempt to let her go. Another slow tune followed and her feet glided effortlessly in time with his. He pulled her closer for this dance and her spirit soared. Her dreams would have new sustenance tonight. As she leaned her head against his shoulder, she wondered if he could sense her rapture. Did he feel it too? The soloist sat down when the band went to the next number, a foxtrot. In her current state of bliss, the faster beat seemed doable and so she remained wrapped in Braeden’s arms.

“The Christmas tree is beautiful, don’t you think? I usually use different colored decorations, but I like the silver and blue,” she purred as she followed his lead.

“Very nice. Are you going away for Christmas?”

“No. I don’t have any relatives close enough to visit.” She pushed back the sadness that usually cropped up whenever her mind returned to past Christmases. Instead, she concentrated on the dancers about them and hoped he hadn’t detected the catch in her throat. “I’ll still make Christmas special,” she continued. “I believe in the magic of the season. That’s why I came tonight—to get it off to a good start.”



Braeden spun her around in a surprise move; she laughed with the thrill.

“You have a nice laugh, Andrea. I haven’t heard it before.”

“I guess there hasn’t been much of anything funny happening when we’re together.” She smiled shyly. “What about you, Braeden? Where will you be for the holidays?”

“I’ll spend them with my sister and her husband. Marianne and Ted have a new baby. They live about twenty miles from here and recently moved into a new log cabin home on their farm. It will be a special time for them this year and I want to be a part of it.” He pulled her so close that his breath feathered through her hair. A tingling sensation speared clear to her toes. “Other years I’ve been on call so staff doctors could be home with their families.”

“That’s generous of you. If you’re not going to be home I suppose you won’t be putting up a tree.”

They swirled around the floor before he answered. “I don’t usually bother anyway. I’m in a new apartment this year and haven’t had time to get organized. The place needs redecorating to my own tastes. I bet you have one up and trimmed already.”

She laughed. “Afraid not. Oh, I’ve got the tree, but I got carried away and bought one too big for me to get into the house. I’ve been hoping to nab the landlord to help me with it. Maybe Josh will help me tomorrow if I ask him.”

“I can come out and carry it in for you. After my rounds, I haven’t anything planned for the day. Really, I don’t mind.”

She’d walked into that one innocently enough and any thought she had of avoiding him when back in the real world just sprouted wings and took off right out the hotel window.

“Thank you for offering. If you’ll be coming after your rounds, why don’t I feed you lunch for your effort?”

“Great!” He replied with more enthusiasm than she felt. “It’s a deal. I haven’t had a home-cooked meal in a long time.”

His eagerness impressed her, so did the warmth of his fingertips as they slipped lightly down her back and found their way to the opening edge of her dress. The competency of his moves as he guided her around the other dancers made her feel fuzzy and warm and excited. But with the continued fast pace, the revolving colors turned to a dizzying blur. Within minutes she became too aware of a familiar tightness creeping into her chest.

“Are you okay, Andrea? Your body has tensed. Is my good behavior overwhelming you?”

“Not at all. I think I’d better go to the ladies room. Where’s my purse?”

“I put it in my pocket, don’t you remember? Here it is.”

She didn’t have time to deal with the questioning expression on his face. She had to retreat. Fast.

“Excuse me, please.” Leaving Braeden in the middle of the floor with his mouth open, she cut through the barricade of dancers.

As soon as she reached the privacy of a bathroom stall, Andrea sprayed a shot of nitro into her mouth. Within seconds the effect she needed kicked in—the spasms vanished. She slumped against the stall door as a lone tear slipped down her cheek. She breathed in slow, deep breaths trying to calm her fright and get a grip on her disappointment. At least she’d had a few wonderful moments in his arms. Maybe if she rested in here a bit, she could dance again to slow music.

Andrea staggered to the counter and pressed a damp paper towel on her forehead, careful to cool her skin without smearing her makeup. Feeling light-headed, she grabbed the counter for support, hoping the dizziness would pass. The hazy mirror reflected her ashen face, and her dejection. Just like in the fairytale, her pride demanded she leave the festivities before midnight.

Nancy rushed in and saw her looking weak and pale. “Andrea? What’s wrong? You look like hell! Braeden sent me to check on you. I’m going to get him in here right away.”

“No! Don’t get him, Nancy. I’ll be okay in a few minutes.” She wished she could tell her what was wrong and alleviate the worried expression in her friend’s face. She wished she could tell Braeden, but then the truth would come out and everyone would treat her differently. She couldn’t allow that to happen. Not yet. She needed more time to get to know people, more time to live a normal life and soak in her independence. Pity was not an option. A sudden fear struck hold. Was this more than an angina attack? The nitro had worked, but though her chest had cleared, the dizziness had increased and her mind couldn’t process how to leave.

“Nance, I d-don’t understand wha... sh is h-happening. I only had eggnog and a drink with a bit of gin.”

“Your speech is slurred, Andrea. Eggnog?” Nancy asked. “I saw them lacing the eggnog with vodka just as we came in the ballroom—a large amount of it in fact. How much liquor was in your drink?”

“I don’t know, Braeden got it for me.” She waved her hand in midair but there was nothing that stood still long enough for her to grasp.

Nancy put her arm around Andrea’s shoulder. “We’re marching out to see him. You, my good friend, are certifiably smashed.” She opened the door and ushered a teetery Andrea outside. Braeden, who had been nervously pacing the floor, hurried over and grabbed her elbow.

“What’s wrong with her, Miss Wilson?”

“I think she’s had too much liquor. What was in the drink you got for her?”

“I just picked up a Sprite and gin and a double Scotch for me... oh, oh. Maybe the bartender misunderstood and made hers a double, too.”

“With the other drinks she’s had, she must be under the weather to say the least,” Nancy shot back.

“I’m not drunk. I’m jush a...”she paused for a yawn “...little dizzy.” Andrea slipped away from his grasp; one shoulder thumped against the wall as her legs lost their strength.

“Oops.” Braeden caught her. “I’ll take her home.”

Andrea concentrated on not giving anything away. Even in her muddled head she could fathom out what happened. She wasn’t drunk. The combination of nitro-glycerin with alcohol magnified the alcohol’s effect causing the dizziness. But she mustn’t tell. It would surely pass. All she needed was to get back to her house safely and Braeden would see to that. The evening was ruined, but she had her memories—if she could remember anything in the morning.

Braeden couldn’t hold back a grin. “The fresh air will help and a cup of coffee won’t hurt.” He helped her on with her coat and boots. Even braced against the paneling, she swayed, and he jumped to catch her again. With Josh’s help, he got her into the car and fastened her seat belt.

Andrea’s thoughts were of Cinderella leaving the ball and she started to tell Braeden several times, but the words meshed together. She wondered why he smiled at the fairytale name. She liked his smile. She liked his cologne, she liked his...

“Andrea, do you mind if we stop by my apartment first so I can get out of this ridiculous penguin suit?”

Somewhere she thought she heard an alarm bell ping, but it must have been her imagination. She nodded her approval and he soon pulled into an underground parking lot. She leaned her head against the window, intending to wait in the car until he returned.

“Come up with me. It’s too cold for you to stay here and I don’t want you out of my sight.”

She shook her head. “I’ll be all right. I’ll be warm enough sh... nuggling in my coat.” Even with her fuzzy brain and her eyes not focusing properly, her instincts warned she’d be more in control of her emotions and speech where she was.

“I don’t think it’s safe for you to stay here. I promise I won’t behave badly; give me a little credit for decency, won’t you?” He scowled; the tight line of his lips a grim reminder of his temper.

Andrea scanned the bleak isolation of concrete walls and parked cars and decided that in her condition she didn't want to be by herself. She reluctantly accepted his invitation. Together, they entered a small elevator set off from the others. Amidst soft music, the padded silver and black car carried them directly to his penthouse.

When they crossed the threshold and entered his suite, she moved into a sterile expanse of modern artistic design. Huge windows gave free access to a panoramic view of the shining harbor. The ultra-modern decor displayed glass-topped tables, solid oak furniture and black and gold trimmings everywhere she looked. She thought the place could do with a flash of bright color to make it more welcoming. The furniture stood on plush beige carpeting so soft and thick she could have crashed right on the floor for the night. She automatically reached down to her boots and wavered sideways.

"Don't bother taking them off; your feet are dry."

"Okay, but whoever cleans in here might not like it."

"There's no one else here. Remember, I told you that I have a maid come in once a week."

A small bar with accompanying stools curved out from one wall, but the giant surround-sound TV-stereo system and adjacent filled bookshelves dominated the living room. The area exuded masculinity, order, and wealth.

In the haze of her fog-shrouded mind, she immediately thought 'slumming' would be the appropriate term when he had visited at her home. Yet, in spite of the luxury here, she preferred the coziness of her rented rickety house and wished to heaven she was there right now.

Unusually quiet, Braeden helped her to his chesterfield. "Let me take your coat."

"I'd rather leave it on." She pulled it tightly around her.

"You'll get overheated, then nauseous."

"Oh. Sh... poken like the doc you are."

Braeden slipped off her coat and tossed it on a chair before she had time to protest further. He shrugged out of his overcoat, jacket and tie and flung them unceremoniously over an armchair.

Andrea folded into the luxurious black leather softness and leaned into a puffy cushion. She noticed in that one devil-may-care gesture, he destroyed the inhibiting formality of the room.

Appearing reluctant to leave her even for a few minutes to undress, she realized too much decorum had left when he started unfastening the studs of his white shirt. Dark hair peeking through his shirt's opening drew her cross-eyed focus like a magnet. If he was trying to sober her up, this was a good way to do it.

"Is it always this hot in here?" Though her eyes were blurry she wasn't blind. With his shirt removed, she couldn't help but see the thick mat of curls spreading down his torso to disappear below his belt. She had an almost uncontrollable urge to lay her head against his chest and revel in the wiry texture against her cheek.

"It's the liquor, Andrea. It's rather cool here actually."

"Are you sure?" Why didn't he go into the bedroom and save her from this promiscuous meandering? Why couldn't she tear her eyes away?

Andrea shifted her attention to his face, conscious enough to be aware of the excitement wedging into the most sensitive parts of her body. His returning gaze turned up the thermostat in her blood. Every nerve ending sparked with electricity. She shook her head trying to rid herself of unwanted urges and unfilled dreams.

"I'll make some coffee," Braeden declared. His eyes narrowed. "A hot drink might help you feel better."

"Yes, please do." *And get me a bucket of ice to sit in.*

As soon as he left the room, she forced herself off the couch and walked with caution to the window, trying her best not to stagger. She heard him rummage about in the kitchen, then go into what she assumed was a bedroom. When he closed the door, she muttered, "Thank God!" Looking out to the streets below, she rubbed the back

of her neck to ease the pressure threatening to implode her brain. Much longer in these surroundings with sexual surges whirling rampantly in her veins, her whole body would burst and spew liquor all over his fine carpet.

## *Five*

Andrea braced her hand against the large window's frame and stared out at the star-spattered night. She wished she could regain her senses and think clearly. She didn't want to be here in this elegant apartment, not in her present state, not where Braeden probably had entertained scores of sophisticated women. Women who had more sense than she.

Feeling ridiculous and immature, she considered telling him of her condition. It was dangerous for her that he didn't know. She had no idea what the effects of the liquor combined with her heart medication would be. The prescription had clearly warned to curtail alcohol when taking the pills. Her head felt like a time bomb ready to blast. She was so dizzy, she knew she'd do well to get to the couch before she made a total ass of herself and collapsed on the floor.

She reached there just as Braeden returned. She focused on the burgundy sweat suit he wore in an attempt to steady herself. The rich color deepened the brown in his eyes and increased the probing intensity of his stare. Was he as disappointed in her as she was in herself? His expression was unfathomable; she gave up trying to decipher it.

"The coffee is ready. I hope you can take it black, the cream in the refrigerator is sour."

She gritted her teeth. Black coffee was bitter, but she wouldn't complain as long as it made her coherent. "Braeden, I'm sh... orry about this evening. I know I've ruined it for you by my stupidity in



taking medicine before I went to the party. I didn't know there was any liquor in the egg... nog. I should have, with it being Chrishmas, I shup... pose." *Damn*. Her words wouldn't come out right, yet she could think, just not express herself. She reached up and rubbed her forehead to put pressure somewhere else than inside her head.

Braeden's eyebrow rose in a quizzical look. "What medication did you take?"

Oh, oh. She'd made a mistake already. "I-I thought I was coming down with a cold; I took an antihistamine. Thash why I drank eggnog instead of sh... omething stronger. I guess with the vodka in me I forgot and asked for the whatever... I can't remember that either."

She noticed Braeden's expression soften; she felt even guiltier for her lie. He passed her a mug of coffee and she sipped at it, cautiously breathing in the steam in hope all of the problems in dealing with him would evaporate. Her relations with him were shaky at the best of times. This was not the best of times.

The coffee helped stabilize her emotions. She pondered confessing the truth, but she truly wanted more time to get to understand this forceful man who had become such an integral part of her thoughts.

"How do you feel now, Andrea?"

"I'm feeling mu...sh better, thank you."

She wanted some passion in her life. It had been a long time since she'd had any, or was it that she never did have any? Her memory failed her; she couldn't even remember her ex-fiancé's face any more. Nevertheless, she didn't want to be just one link in Braeden's endless chain—her standards were higher than that.

"I think I need to go home now." She couldn't stay in this pressure cooker and pretend all was well. It was too draining.

"You haven't finished your coffee. And I want you to have another mugful before you go."

"I don't think I have the stomach for more."

"Try." He refilled her mug to three-quarters full.

She took a few sips and felt steadier. Okay, it was going to be his fault if she had to continue with the lie. His interest would lag shortly anyway since she had little wisdom to stimulate his intelligent mind. Then he'd take her home and no one would be hurt. She'd received

more than enough excitement to cram into her mind. Hopefully, she'd forget some of it permanently.

The noise of his beeper brought her to reality. As she listened to his call to the hospital, she knew the evening was over. An emergency demanded he go. The magic had been left on the hotel dance floor, anyway.

Andrea gathered up her coat and put it on. Braeden looked around when he hung up and saw her intent. "Whoa! Where are you going?"

"You have to go to the hospital. Would you mind calling a taxi to take me home?"

"No. I can't have you out there alone. You'll stay here for the night. With any luck, I'll be back in an hour or so."

Tears started to fall due to her annoyance, but with her hand on the doorknob, she no longer tried to stem their flow. Looking into his surprised face, her irritation level rose. "You're not asking me to stay. You're telling me to. I'm not here to take orders now." The moisture on her cheeks burned with her fury.

"You've nothing to lose by staying, Andrea. For God's sake, you're still drunk!"

"Maybe I am, maybe I'm not. I think I'm just dizzy." Her temper was rising and all at once she seemed to be able to put her thoughts together in a backlash of giant proportions. "You think I have nothing to lose? I have everything to lose, Braeden—mainly my self-respect." She leaned the side of her head against the door. This was taking more effort than she had in store. She prayed she made sense. "I've heard the hospital rumors about you and for once I believe them. I won't be just another conquest!"

"Did I ask you to be a conquest?" He shoved on his overcoat then pulled on his boots. His eyes narrowed onto the mouth that spewed out insults. He approached her and stood so close his breath intermingled with hers. "Did I?" His warm finger lifted her chin, forcing her to look at the smile on his lips.

His succulent lips.

"Well, no." He must be right. She had to be drunk or she'd never have flown off like this—or come up with such a ridiculous assumption that he'd even want her. "I'm not thinking as clearly as I

would like.” She was stumped. Where did she take it from here? If only her head would stop pounding.

He leaned back, his hand on the side of her bare neck. “Stay until I come back. It’s safe and warm here.”

She wobbled to the couch and plunked down, still wearing her coat. “You’d better hurry to your emergency.”

“They have to run a few tests on the patient. I can spare a moment or two.” He sat down beside her.

“There should be something more gained from relationships,” she sobbed, “but I know you keep your heart tightly wound to avoid commitment.” Her voice quieted with a full body shudder.

“Andrea, if this wasn’t so serious, it would be funny.” Braeden’s face was more somber now.

She liked it better when he smiled. But he wasn’t smiling when he helped her off with her coat.

“Talk about wrapping my heart tight, look at you. Your heart is wrapped in ice as far as I’m concerned.” He sighed. “You aren’t thinking straight and I can’t take any more time to help you cope. Please stay until I get back from the hospital. I’ll take you home then. I promise.” His voiced had smoothed to a whisper. Her shoulders sagged and she nestled into his arms thinking it would be best if she just shut up.

“All right. I’ll wait until you get b-back. I’m so sorry.” She had a feeling she was going to regret some of the things she had said tonight. With luck, maybe she’d only remember the good stuff, like the comfort of his arms and the music that made her heart dance with the wings of an angel.

Braeden said, “Look, I don’t have any furniture in the spare bedroom yet. You can curl up on the sofa.” With a twinkle in his eye, he added, “Or in my bed. There are extra blankets and pillows in the bedroom. I’ll be back as soon as I can.” When he left, the emptiness impacted her nerves. She listened to the whooshing sound emanating from the closing elevator door and wondered where she went wrong—having a simple Christmas drink to be sociable or being dense enough in the first place to hope for a little excitement in her life.

With the caffeine kicking in, Andrea found she was too wired to sleep. She decided to move around Braeden's apartment, pausing at times to steady herself. She needed to keep moving to stay awake so she'd be ready for Braeden to take her home.

She walked again to the plate glass window and looked upward. With millions of star drops clustered above, the night winked a diamond-chip smile. Twenty stories below, in sharp contrast to Braeden's modern apartment building, old-fashioned street lamps radiated the ambience of the older historic community up the street. The contradiction brought sadness as she reminisced about her past and how much effort it was taking her to move into the present. Her past didn't hold the beauty of a bygone era.

Unable to tolerate the mournful direction of her thoughts, Andrea explored Braeden's kitchen and bath. The late hour was finally wearing her down, but curiosity trifled with her mind. She wondered what lay behind the closed door. She propped up her courage and hesitantly pushed at the panel. It opened. When she turned on the light, Andrea was floored by the sight that met her eyes.

The large master bedroom exuded male domination with the dark oak bedroom set. A black and white zebra-striped duvet stretched endlessly across black satin sheets and pillows on the king size water bed. When she glanced up, her mouth fell open, mesmerized by the clear mirrored tiles on the ceiling. She had heard such seduction existed but thought it was only in the Playboy mansion or magazines. She blinked to be sure she wasn't hallucinating.

Disgusted at first glance, she bolted for the bedroom door, yet stopped at the threshold. She turned and stood a minute hugging the doorframe, thinking maybe she'd been too hasty. This was a chance to see how rich Casanova types lived. She tiptoed across the cherry-red carpet to the bed. Unable to resist temptation, she reached down and removed her boots, pulled back the covers and eased her body between the luxurious sheets.

The bed swished and swayed as she positioned herself in the middle. She tugged the duvet up to her waist, then looked again at the reflection above her. The water swirling beneath increased her dizziness. Leaning back full length, she rested her head on the

pillows, never taking her eyes off the image of her fancy-dressed body.

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It was almost four-thirty by the time Braeden returned home, bone-weary, but anxious to see his guest again. If Andrea still wanted to go home, he would take her, just as he'd promised. He had wanted to know who this Andrea Martin was and still hadn't found out. He suspected the truth of her nature lay somewhere between the cool reserve he'd observed in the hospital and the heat generated under the mistletoe. Her hostility at his reputation surprised him though. And pleased him.

He expected to see her curled on the chesterfield and was alarmed that she wasn't. Not in the kitchen either. Had she left to spite him? He rushed to the bedroom where his smile spread wide when he spied her sleeping on her back in his bed. Right where he'd wanted her all evening.

How should he handle this stroke of good luck? Should he wake her? No. He was exhausted. Should he leave her be and stretch out on a couch too short for his large frame? That was the gentlemanly thing to do, but he desperately needed some rest before he made rounds. Otherwise he'd look hung over and hardly reassure his patients.

What he'd like to do was go with his instincts—crawl in beside her and make love the rest of the night. Just to see whether the chemistry was there in sex, like in everyday contact. Damn! He'd promised not to jump her bones; and besides, that kind of action was beneath his sense of decency if the lady was zonked out of her skull.

He'd been thinking senseless things, actually, ever since she'd come into his life. Number one: he didn't chase after women like the rumors implied and considered informing Andrea of the fact. The subterfuge had always spared him the explanation of why he spent many evenings alone. After losing Sylvia, he'd been pathetically depressed. Number two: he'd been picturing how it might be with Andrea in his arms the whole night through ever since that damn kiss. Number three: he needed to get her out of his system; making love to her and satisfying this ill-timed pursuit would surely accomplish that goal.

In the end, he settled for a compromise, well aware it would cause a problem come morning. He removed his sweatshirt and cautiously climbed in beside her. She turned her head away from him, her attractive hairdo limp and partly fanning the pillow, but the rest of her stayed in place. He sniffed at the tantalizing perfume drifting up from her neck and breathed deeply. To make her more comfortable, he removed her hairpins and clasp, encouraging the strands to fall naturally over her shoulder toward her breast. She still hadn't moved when he placed hair accessories on the nightstand and turned out the light.

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Andrea opened one eye to check out the invasion of a solitary sunbeam splintering through a slit in the drapes. She sensed his presence before she saw him. With her head pounding the vibrations of a jackhammer, her scope of vision increased when she stared directly into Braeden's peacefully sleeping face. She froze, once again not believing her eyes. She couldn't be in his arms.

Andrea's heart pumped at a fast pace as her mind struggled to play catch-up. Her breathing became shallow and rapid; her skin stoked up the heat with the awareness of his closeness. His warm breath caressed her neck.

She looked up. Her mirror image revealed their entwined bodies. With the covers pulled down to their waists, he was at least half-naked; she was still in her dress. One of his arms had slipped beneath her head. His other arm encircled her body and rested on her midriff. If she didn't know better, she'd think her nestled state indicated she had welcomed the advance. Hesitantly, she peeked under the covers, relieved to see he still had his sweatpants on.

When she squirmed to get out from under his hold, he groaned and pulled her tighter to his chest; his mouth inched to her temple.

*What to do?*

Ever so slowly she lifted his top wrist and slid his arm down to the side of his body. Edging herself backward she silently admonished each ripple of water that undulated beneath her. Once she stuck one foot from under the covers, her second one joined its mate. Stretching her feet outward allowed the rest of her body to slither to the floor.

She ended up on her knees, bracing her hands against the side of the bed she'd only wanted to test. She had tested it all right. Trouble was, she couldn't remember how it had felt.

Andrea wanted to get as far away as possible. She peeked up over the edge of the mattress realizing she was hesitant to leave this way, yet anxious to escape. How she could suffer two such conflicting emotions at the same time was beyond her comprehension. She had to get out of here and worry later about the events that led to this predicament. She picked up her boots and tiptoed out the door, closing it quietly behind her. Remembering her car was at Nancy's, she looked in the phonebook for a listing of taxis and dialed.

Where was her purse? It contained her keys and a few loose bills. Money she'd need for her fare. The last time she'd seen it, Braeden had been stuffing it into his tuxedo pocket. She looked around—no jacket. He'd taken the jacket off in the living room and tossed it on the chair when they came in last night. Since it wasn't there now, he must have hung it in his bedroom closet when he arrived back from the hospital.

Andrea sidled up to the door and listened. No sound. She cursed the squeaky hinge as she pushed the bedroom door open, peering around to see if there were signs of him waking. Nothing but heavy breathing came from the hump in the bed.

Moving slowly, she tiptoed to the far side of the mattress. When Braeden hadn't moved, she reached over and turned the closet door handle. The darkness inside hid the contents; she eased the door wider. The jacket swung like a ghost from the current of air her movement caused. The bed covers rustled.

Andrea's heart stopped in the midst of a beleaguered breath. The swaying jacket stilled when her hands seized the hanger. With the rustling stopped, she reached into the pocket and retrieved her purse. It was all she could do not to shout her joy. Turning back, she didn't bother to shut the closet door or peek as she navigated her way, but she wouldn't have been surprised to be snagged by the clutch of a hand.

When she reached the living room, Andrea closed his door, hardly believing her good fortune. She grabbed her coat and footwear and

bolted for the elevator. Ignoring her throbbing temples and blurry vision, she gasped with relief when the elevator door opened at the basement level. The night's misadventure would become much clearer in the safe light of home. Until then, she had to manage the best she could. Putting distance between herself and the good doctor meant the first step to salvation.

Andrea didn't relax until she was in the taxi and on her way home. Only then did she dare try to fit the pieces together. She couldn't imagine how she'd ended up sleeping next to Braeden. Had she made a total ass of herself? She couldn't remember anything that happened after she'd made it to the ladies room. She knew Braeden had tossed down a few drinks before her mad dash. With luck he wouldn't remember, either. She would never forget floating in his arms under the revolving Strobe ball or the sensuous kiss under the mistletoe, though. They had kissed gently at first, then an all-consuming desire had devoured her sanity. She'd been a more-than-willing participant as she recalled. How would she ever face him? How would she ever face any of the guests who had watched?

She breathed a sigh of relief when the taxi pulled in her driveway. Yet when she entered the kitchen, the atmosphere seemed cold and uninviting and empty. The welcoming spirits weren't there to greet her. Had they deserted her along with her common sense? She wished she had the courage to return to his apartment, stay until he wakened, then pump him for information.

The bright daylight helped dissipate the weird sensations in her head. She swallowed her morning medication fairly certain any chance for further reaction had passed. After tidying the clutter she'd left behind, she had just decided to work off any lingering traces of regret on the treadmill when the phone interrupted her plan.

"Hello?"

"I assume you made it home all right?" Braeden sounded sleepy.

"I just got here a few minutes ago."

"I could have taken you."

"You were sleeping too soundly for me to dare wake you." She listened to the silence.



"I'm not a bear when I wake up, Andrea. I'm used to having my sleep interrupted."

"That's all well and good I'm sure, but how would I know? I didn't want to have my head chewed off, muddled as it is." She laughed, but not at her explanation. She could imagine him standing by the phone in his briefs with that dumbfounded expression he sometimes wore when around her.

"Got a hangover?" he asked.

"I'm not as bad as last night. The fog is clearing. You'd better go back to bed, Braeden."

"Maybe you're right."

"Sleep tight and don't let—"

"Yeah. I won't. Bye."

With that problem solved, she felt energized. Replacing her crumpled dress with shorts and a tee shirt, she sped up the machine to a moderately fast pace hoping to regain control of all of her faculties. Her mind sharpened with the acceleration of her feet. She remembered accompanying Josh and Nancy to the party, the conversations with staff members, and especially the dances with Braeden. She whizzed along on her treadmill, her energy soaring. The dizzy spell in the ladies room came to mind but there her recollection ended, until she awakened in Braeden's bed. Beneath that gaudy mirrored ceiling! Well, there was no point in bemoaning the loss. She could call Nancy later and quiz her.

After a forty-minute walking stint, she showered. Intending to spend the day in seclusion, she dressed in her favorite blue sweat suit. Old and baggy, its warm fleece always boosted her comfort level. Nauseated at the thought of food, she dragged a box of colored tree lights from the closet. She untangled the various sets, plugged them into the wall and replaced the burnt out bulbs. Now organized, she had to figure out how to get the huge tree inside without causing undue stress.

The sound of a car in the yard sent her rushing to the kitchen window. To see any human would be a nice break and might provide help for her task. When she peeked through the curtains, she stared unbelieving at the silver Jag and only then vaguely remembered

Braeden's offer to help install the tree. Hadn't she mentioned something about lunch? It was only nine o'clock. Her hair still wet and stringy, no makeup, and wearing her scrungiest clothes didn't do much for her confidence. There was no time to change. Braeden was out of the car, long strides carrying him to her porch steps with the speed of a cheetah after its prey. Should she be mad, scared, or embarrassed? Taking a deep breath, she opened the door before he had a chance to knock.

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Braeden stopped short when Andrea appeared in the doorway. "Hello. I..." He'd rehearsed his greeting, but now in her presence the words knotted in his throat. He stood on the porch and shuffled his feet wishing he'd mentally prepared himself better.

"Hello, back." Her eyes had a dewy quality, more noticeable because of her freshly washed skin. His discovery that she was just as attractive dressed in sloppy clothes and without makeup surprised and excited him.

A spirited vibrancy had stirred with the mistletoe kiss. Their tender encounter had been dynamic for both, he was sure. When he'd awakened, he couldn't believe she had gone. Relieved to find her safe at home, once he hung up further sleep didn't interest him; her actions last night did. There were questions that begged to be asked. Why did he always feel she was keeping something from him? Why didn't she trust him enough to stay?

After showering and dressing he'd decided to head out to her home and make excuses for going there. *Ah, the offer to set up her tree will work. Maybe I'll get answers if I'm discreet.* It seemed important to get back in her good graces. He couldn't move on while she occupied his every thought, pestering his brain during the day, plaguing his dreams at night.

"I'm surprised to see you here after what happened last night," she said, breaking the train of his thought.

He added strength to his backbone and straightened. "I think I owe you an explanation, Andrea. Being in my bed must have given you a jolt when you woke up."

"With you in it, too, it did." Her eyes searched his face; the beginnings of a flush crept into her cheeks. He liked to see her blush. The green in her eyes shimmered when she did.

"At least I had my wits about me, Andrea. Good thing, too." He noticed a frown suddenly appear. "Alcohol and antihistamines pack quite a wallop. It wasn't your fault."

"Antihistamines?"

"Remember? You took some before you left home."

"I did? Oh. That's what I told you? I must be really out of sync today; I forgot."

"You have memory problems this morning?" He shifted his feet and turned up his collar for protection against the chill. Then he pressed his advantage. "I suppose you forget how anxious you were to sleep with me. I hope you can remember the things we did. Walking out on all that intimacy... was... was almost unforgivable." His arched eyebrow feigned annoyance.

"W-We were intimate? I-I had my clothes on when I w-woke up!" Her hands balled into fists.

"Well... oh hell, I'm teasing you. I was going to lead you on a bit longer, but I really don't have the taste for telling fibs." He laughed to cover his chagrin. "Lying is no way to build trust in a friendship. I have to be honest with you. Nothing happened."

He caught a glimpse of what looked like sadness, but it disappeared quickly. "You got tired of waiting for me to return from the hospital and crawled into my bed. It was kinder to move in beside you than disturb your deep sleep. The couch is too short for me." Reaching over to touch her shoulder, he reinforced his honesty barely above a whisper. "Really, nothing happened."

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His sense of humor was bugging her again, yet her irritation with his poorly-crafted joke was tempered by her underlying guilt. He was honest with her and she repaid him by hiding the true state of her health. It was all she could do not to blurt out her secret right then. The only thing holding her back was the fear of losing his friendship.

"I'm sorry for my behavior last night at the dance, Braeden." Tears stung the backs of her eyes.

“Don’t apologize. You did that enough already. I came to take you out for breakfast since we missed out on the late night meal. Are you hungry or have you eaten?”

“N-No, I didn’t even want to think about food when I got up.” Snapping to attention, she stood back from the threshold. “Where are my manners? Come inside. I am hungry. It won’t take long for me to change and dry my hair.”

She left him in the living room, a *People* magazine with Julia Roberts on the cover pressed into his hand. In a few minutes, her hair fastened neatly at the back of her head in a French Roll, she reappeared dressed in an open-necked, forest green long-sleeved blouse and beige jeans that hugged her curves.

Braeden was inspecting the open-beam ceiling when she trounced down the stairs. “They don’t build homes like this anymore.” He pointed upward. “Look at the size of the wood joists they used.”

“They used this structure so the heat would go upstairs and make the entire house comfortable. It’s usually toasty warm all over.”

Braeden turned and gazed at her. Andrea giggled like a schoolgirl on her first date. She noticed he’d made himself at home and taken off his overcoat while he waited. She had seen a Brook’s Brothers catalogue in his apartment and everything he wore was pictured in the brochure. The dark green and black pants—she recognized the Night Guard pattern—the white turtleneck and the black crew neck cashmere sweater looked great on him. A startling ache leaped into her body. She had a yen to strip to the waist, climb into that sweater with him and have Braeden all to herself in a warm, furry cocoon.

“Ready?” His word knocked her out of her brief reverie.

More heat suffused her face. “More than ready.” Thank God he didn’t know how available she could be in her mind. “This is very nice of you, Braeden.”

“I’d like to get to know you outside of the confines of the hospital walls, Andrea. It can only improve our teamwork.”

*Or destroy it*, she thought. “Let’s go.”

He took her to a quaint country restaurant a short drive away, ordered the ‘special’ for each of them, then sat back and relaxed. His black sweater accentuated the darkness of his eyes.

As the waitress poured their coffee, Andrea nervously scanned the other patrons, feeling the pressure of his scrutiny. If she looked at him right now, her eyes would surely give away what her body felt, while his eyes hid what he was thinking. With him in her thoughts so frequently, she knew she must be falling for him, repeating Sylvia's mistake in spite of herself. He mustn't find out and she would go to any lengths to bury it. But surely it couldn't hurt to savor his company until he gave up trying to seduce her and pulled away. And that time would come.

She had little to offer him. Having children with her was not an option and there could be no pretense for a long married life. She could give him a brief time of utter devotion, but he was too independent to need it. He liked his freedom, and from all accounts, he would never give it up for any woman. Their parting was destined and loomed like a murky abyss waiting to swallow her.

Braeden broke the silence. "I would have thought you'd have a giant hangover this morning."

"Perhaps I was just dizzy and not drunk like you thought."

"Your words were slurred and I'm not sure you knew what you were saying. At least you're okay today."

"Thank you for showing me a what a great time I would have had if I'd been able to stay at the dance." When she noticed the puzzled expression in his eyes, she explained. "I haven't been to such a fancy affair in a long time and to have had such a good dance partner made it even more special."

"I wish we could do it again sometime soon. Unfortunately, I'm not free for New Year's Eve."

"Neither am I." Andrea wondered what in God's name made her fib about that. She held her breath for fear he would ask about her plans. When he gazed at the scenery instead, she relaxed. She did have plans, but it was to spend it like she usually did—with a good romance novel, a rare glass of Pinot Grigio, and six Ritz crackers graced with smoked oysters.

The breakfasts arrived hot and delicious, the scrambled eggs so light and fluffy they melted as soon as they touched her tongue. An excellent conversationalist, Braeden was funny and kind, warm and

endearing, and most of all, comfortable with himself. She envied that quality. She was ever conscious of how he stirred unfamiliar emotions when he looked straight into her eyes. At times she felt like she could dissolve in the tenderness she saw there.

“You have a good heart, Braeden. I see it in the way you relate to your patients. They admire and have faith in you. Do you realize how important that ability is in a doctor? How come some gorgeous woman hasn’t lured you into a life of wedded bliss by now?” The audacity of her question amazed her, but she wanted to know the answer directly from him—not from Nancy or Sylvia or hospital gossip. She needed to know.

He leaned back in his chair and laughed, waiting for the waitress to pour coffee refills before answering. “I came close one time.” His eyes shifted to stare out the window again as he continued on, “Sylvia Marshall and I were quite serious a few years ago. Looking back, I can see that I got too involved in being the best damn heart surgeon around. She came in a poor second. So, she chose Craig Marshall over me. To be honest, it took a long time to get over losing her.”

He returned his focus to her face. “In fact, it’s just been recently that I’ve learned I *am* over it. Anyway, I made myself a promise to avoid serious relationships and I keep my promises.”

“So I noticed.”

“What do you mean?”

“I vaguely recall you promised not to attack me at your apartment last night and you kept that one, as far as I know.” She laughed trying to mask the heat swirling up her neck.

“Ah... but you’ll never know what might have happened in the morning when I woke up.”

“And I think, sir, we’d better leave it at that.”

“What about you, Andrea? Doug Jenkins couldn’t tell me anything about your personal life. I’m ashamed to say I prodded him for information.” Braeden put down his mug, reached across the table and placed his hand on hers. His attention solidly on her, her guilt accelerated. Caught off balance by his openness, she floundered with indecision. How much could she tell him that wouldn’t send him running?

“Well... er... I understand how you felt about Sylvia. I was dumped, too. It takes a while to get past the pain, but get over it you must. That’s part of the reason I moved here.” A nervous attempt to withdraw her hand from beneath his sent her ice-water glass toppling. Braeden caught the tumbler before a spill made a mess. At least her clumsiness broke his titillating contact.

It seemed like he was always saving her embarrassment lately. She inhaled and took the plunge. “I was engaged at one point, but my fiancé walked out for reasons I don’t want to go into. Besides, I needed a change of pace. I was working as the only dietitian in a mid-sized hospital and found it stressful carrying out administrative duties when I preferred working with patients. I love it here, at least, I did until you and I locked horns.”

“We both made mistakes,” Braeden countered. “But it’s in the past and now we know each other better, don’t you think?”

She looked into his mellowed eyes and her mind went blank. “Who knows?” She shrugged. “I hope so, but I’m not sure what triggered my strong objections to your dry wit before, so I can’t promise it won’t happen again.”

“Next time I’ll duck when I see a volley heading my way.”

The leisurely breakfast helped make up for the loss of her evening. Their coffee finished, Andrea stepped onto the doorstep while Braeden stopped to pay the bill. Her jacket collar pulled up high muffled her mouth from the cold crisp air and hopefully would stave off an angina attack. A soft layer of new snow carpeted the grounds, casting a frozen wonderland charm to the surroundings. Sparkles of diamond-like crystals glittered from every bush and tree. She looked forward to the day.

When Braeden appeared, he reached around her shoulders, and squeezing gently, led her to the car. He unlocked her door and opened it with a grand sweep of his free arm. She smiled and climbed in. As she leaned her head against the headrest she settled into the warmth of contentment.

“Do you want to go back and get started on the Christmas tree now, or would you rather go for a drive?” He patted her hand, then stilled his hand until she made a decision.

"I'd love to go for a drive. It's a perfect day."

"Well, then, a drive it will be."

They drove for a couple of hours, stopping occasionally to watch skaters and ice fishermen on a chain of lakes. It was after one o'clock when they finally returned to her house.

"Show me where you want the tree. I'll bring it in after I trim off the lower branches. I brought a saw in case you don't have one."

"You think of everything, don't you?"

"I try, Andrea. Obviously, I don't always succeed." His little grin challenged her to ask more, but she declined to lay herself open to any intrusion he might make into her own world.

Andrea pointed to the spot in the living room where the tree was to stand and watched while he measured the height of the ceiling. She set about getting a lunch of vegetable soup and ham sandwiches, occasionally glancing out to check his effort with the saw. Having a man do something for her was a new experience, just as new as preparing a meal for two. But what fun! She hadn't entertained anyone in a long time—longer than she cared to remember.

Andrea had just put the finishing touches to the table setting when Braeden thudded against the porch steps. She raced to open the door so as not to spoil his momentum. Exaggerating its weight, he dragged his load into the kitchen, groaning profusely as he passed her at the doorway. Continuing into the living room, he laid the tree in the space she had cleared.

When he removed his jacket, Andrea brushed clinging needles away from the back of his neck. Sensitized by the touch, her mind jumped to what might have taken place after he arrived home from the hospital. Had he touched her, other than to allow her to rest her head on his arm?

"Have you anything that will take the balsam gum off my hands?"

She nodded, relieved to remove her thoughts from their perilous course. "I've got some goo that'll remove it. I could have loaned you a pair of the landlord's work gloves if I'd known you didn't have any. We'll eat as soon as you're cleaned up. We can stand the tree up later."



“Suits me. I’ve worked up an appetite. That’s the most physical action I’ve had in some time.” His smile brought a special joy into her home. He fitted in here. Not as an authority figure, though. She visualized him living here looking after the concerns of his family. Before she’d met Braeden, the stories these old walls held often filled her dreams at night. Tonight she could put a face to the male occupant. Braeden’s face. He’d never know.

She poured his tea into one of her favorite mugs when he came to the table and pulled out her chair. “Tell me how you came to work at Bayview Heights.” She slipped into her seat and waited for him to sit opposite.

“I came here because of Sam. He and my father played hockey for the New York Islanders. Sam quit hockey and became a hospital administrator. My dad stayed with the game, playing goalie until his legs gave out, then he drank himself to death while I was working on my medical degree at Columbia.” Braeden paused and took a deep breath. Just as she was thinking of reaching across to tap his hand in a comforting gesture, he continued on. “Sam came to the funeral. I told him I wanted to be a heart surgeon but didn’t think I could swing it. After my internship, he helped finance me through the eight-year surgical residency. I almost didn’t make it. I was going to quit at one point, but with his encouragement I plowed on.” Braeden quieted and cocked his head.

“And your mother?”

“She’s dead as well.”

Andrea thought he might be waiting for her to contribute sympathy, but she chickened out and fiddled with her napkin then sprinkled pepper into her soup.

“Anyway,” he continued, “every time I got discouraged, Sam was there for me, and he persuaded me to complete my residencies in cardiology then cardiac surgery. He mortgaged his home to help with my expenses.”

“He thought that much of you?”

“Is it so strange? Okay, you’re right. It is strange, and though I’ve repaid him, I can never repay his generosity.” Braeden added milk to

his tea, buttered a roll then firmly fastened his gaze on her. “Now, we’ve talked enough about me; tell me something about you.”

The fork she’d been holding slipped out of her fingers and fell on the floor. She left it and reached for another from the counter drawer. Her movements bought time. Time to end the whirling in her head.

She told him as little as possible. Details about her parents and their death in an accident while she was in college were easy enough. But after she’d covered her internship year, she had to be evasive about her employment history. She didn’t want to lie so she smoothly switched to providing trivial facts about her ex-fiancé.

“How come you didn’t marry him?”

“Like I said before, he dumped me.” Suddenly, it didn’t seem to matter anymore that she’d been dropped like a sack of potatoes when the trouble had started. She smiled. It was like a light bulb had flicked on in her head. She’d been freed. She hadn’t thought of the love of her life since she’d met this imposing cardiac surgeon.

Braeden’s questioning stopped abruptly. He must have sensed the change in her attitude. While they ate, he retreated to more neutral topics concerning the hospital and their progress with the cardiac education program. Andrea knew it was only a temporary withdrawal. He would again approach the private side of her life. By then, maybe she’d be more secure within the hospital structure, tell him everything, and take her chances.

“If you want to fit the tree to the stand, I’ll let you off the hook and clean up the kitchen,” she offered with a tap on his forearm. He reached over and covered her hand with his. The expression in his eyes set her heart palpitating. She quickly withdrew to run the water in the sink for the dishes.

He left the table and pulled her hand off the spigot. “I’ll help you with that, but first come in and lend me your eye to make sure the tree is going to stand straight. Otherwise, your ornaments may slide off.” She followed his lead. The clutching warmth of his hand gave her the jitters. She didn’t want to feel anything. When he let go, she moved away and tuned the TV set to a station playing Christmas music.

Once they had the tree standing firm, she passed him a string of lights to fasten in areas beyond her reach. After he had the top half

strung, he transferred the remaining length to her and attached the glittery gold star. They worked in unison until the last ornament was in place.

When the tinsel was added, they stood back, side by side, admiring their efforts. "How come you bought a spruce tree?" he asked. "We always had fir or pine when I was growing up; the needles stay on longer."

She nodded. "Most people get fir, but I love the thickness of an old cat spruce. See? You can't even see the wall behind. I like the powerful smell, too." As she thought back to her earlier years when her dad had always brought in the same type of tree, her heart filled with a special glow.

Before she knew he was going to do it, Braeden bent down and kissed her forehead.

"Oh." She soon became aware of his mouth slowly descending toward hers. Anticipation wrenched away any thought of rebellion. Heat sizzled from the top of her head and plunged downward. Their lips met in an explosion of emotion so powerful that her common sense sacrificed her to the waves of rapture pulsing through every nerve. His provocative stare shattered her ability to maintain composure. The scent of his usual cologne overpowered her inhibitions. She responded with a power of her own, answering the kiss with strength equal to his. She opened her eyes and watched with satisfaction as surprise registered on his face. He had probably expected a light embrace, not a meeting of like minds bent on a journey of discovery.

Closing her eyes again, her parted lips invited another advance, and he took the gift offered, deepening the contact this time, pulling her body tighter to his. His hands roamed at will over her back and down across her hips. She didn't protest, but instead reached up and intertwined her fingers through his hair.

Andrea felt the back of her sweater rise. His smooth, yet strong hands deliberately edged up to unfasten her bra. Once he achieved his goal, the very same hands moved along her bare back, pressing, massaging. With the barrier cleared from its path, one hand turned, aiming for the swell of her breast. Once more, she pressed her lips to

his mouth as he continued his onslaught. His fingers delivered a magical graze, erotically stimulating wherever they stroked. In the line of fire, her nipples peaked, extracting moans of pleasure from somewhere deep in her throat.

Andrea's conscience leaped to alert. This couldn't be, it wasn't fair to either of them. She knew Braeden was unprepared for her sudden stiffening, but she pushed away from his chest. Her eyes filled with moisture. "This can't happen, Braeden." She had to be clear.

"I remember now I told you in your apartment that I won't be just another conquest. I meant it at the time; I mean it now. That mirrored ceiling was the final straw. I don't want to make you angry again and I'm sorry if I led you on. I didn't intend to, really. I think you should go." Her harsh voice choked and weakened, its power deserting her when she needed it most. She sank to the chesterfield. Her elbows shifted to rest on her knees allowing her hands to cover her eyes. The room became silent.

## Six

Braeden struggled to keep his voice even as his temper tried to get the best of him. “Are you through with your little tirade, Andrea? If so, maybe I could have *my* say.” *What was she hiding?* No matter, later, when he was alone he would piece together the scraps of information she’d given and figure out what led to such depth of emotion that she’d forego the pleasure of intimacy. Like it or not, Andrea had become an important, though baffling, part of his life.

He noticed her shoulders quivering and her muffled sobs disturbed him. At a loss, he sat down with her, gently placing his arm around her waist. When she quieted and turned to face him, her teary eyes glittered in the light of the decorated tree. His heart melted.

“In the first place, I don’t bed every woman I see. I’m sure my reputation carries far more weight than I’m worthy of.”

“In the second place, in case it bothered you, the mirrored ceiling was not a selling point for that apartment. Actually, I had intended to have the tiles replaced by now and it was written into the contract when I bought the condo. However, now I’m not so sure I *will* have them removed. Last night when I watched you sleeping soundly, nestled beside me, I found it stimulating and comforting at the same time. I want to be able to look at you that way other nights. There’s been no other woman in that particular bed before you. Give me a break, Andrea, I’ve only lived there a short while and haven’t had

time to make changes. The proximity to the hospital and great view were the reasons for moving there. I don't have to justify my lifestyle to anyone, but I just did for you. It's up to you whether you believe me."

~ \* ~

Andrea scrutinized his face, bothered more by his wounded look than his irritation with her. How active he was with women was relative to his own point of view. There had to be fact to fuel the gossip; fact she didn't want to think about now.

"Braeden, I owe you an apology. You must think I'm a very stupid, thankless woman. You treated me to a wonderful evening, protected me when I wasn't well, and I've repaid you with accusations that are none of my business." She rose from the couch and walked to the window. As she held the drape aside, looking at the lamplights outside, she began her story. "There are things about me you don't know. I—"

"Hold it right there!"

"What?"

"I think we've heard enough confession for one day. Let's forget about it for now and maybe play a game to relieve our tension. Do you have Scrabble?"

"Sure do." She tried hard to suppress a grin and couldn't. "Think you're a better speller than me? I've won lots of spelling bees, so with the well-known fact doctors are always too hurried to pay attention to such triviality, you don't stand a chance." In his eyes, she saw the challenge take hold.

"Let's play," he said.

Two hours later they scored a tie, surprised at each other's ability. Braeden had the last word play and fit in the tiles for 'qua'.

"That's not an English word."

"Look it up."

She did. It was. "Nuts! Okay, you win."

"What's the prize?"

“How about dinner? You didn’t get much sleep last night with that emergency call. You can snooze on the couch while I prepare something.”

Braeden yawned. “I can’t turn that down, if it’s not too much trouble.”

Andrea squeezed his arm, “No trouble at all. I have to eat anyway.” She wondered if she had been forward with her offer. “What would have been my prize if I had won?”

“I would have taken you out for dinner.”

Her worry faded. Their thoughts seemed to be on the same track. She left him in the living room, stretched out and settled down for a nap. When she tiptoed back in to cover him with an afghan she had knit, he was breathing deeply.

She busied herself preparing more than a simple meal—baked chicken breasts and roasted potatoes. Occasionally she would stand in the doorway watching the rise and fall of his chest. The sight of him lying on *her* couch in *her* home filled her with yearning for a more permanent measure of him in her life. But realistic thoughts pervaded and restored her senses. She could never have him that way. He’d made it perfectly clear—*other nights* didn’t indicate permanency.

She shook her head to clear her self-deprecating scorn and made the salad. Centered on the table, the glass lamp—its base filled with green lamp oil—burned with a mellow flame. A chilled bottle of wine perched in an ice bucket near his place setting. When the meal was ready, she gently touched Braeden’s arm, watching with interest as he quickly came back from some far away place.

He smiled when he got his bearings and grasped the hand she extended, pulling himself up. Braeden didn’t go straight into the kitchen. He stood in the doorway surveying the neatly set table and sniffed the tantalizing aroma in the air. “You’re sending out mixed signals, Andrea,” he announced as he rubbed his chin.

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve created an ambience that sets a romantic mood when you’ve just rebuffed *my* romantic overtures.” The impish gleam in his eye and truth to his words made her blush. She scrambled for words to cover her embarrassment.

“I-I always eat by l-lamplight if it’s dark outside. Even if I’m h-here alone.” She didn’t blame him for questioning her motives, but she spoke the truth. The unaccustomed presence in her home of a handsome male deserved no less than the same special attention she provided for herself at a meal.

Braeden pulled out her chair and when she was seated, he sat opposite, watching as she nervously unfolded her napkin and laid it across her lap.

“Would you like me to pour the wine?” His eyes glistened with enthusiasm.

She nodded. “I hope you like Asti Spumante; it’s my favorite. That’s one luxury I give myself. Researchers have discovered that wine is good for the... ah...” She swallowed hard. “For your health,” she concluded hastily, catching herself before she said *heart*. He smiled that little half-grin she found so appealing and it immediately calmed her.

Finally at ease in each other’s presence, they lingered over the meal, keeping the tone of their conversation light. Andrea served two pieces of hot apple pie with coffee and watched for signs of Braeden’s pleasure. She loved to bake and had made the pie two days ago. With no one except herself to eat her delights, most of the time her baking ended up stored in the freezer. Instead of eating, he leaned back in his chair, pensive.

“What’s wrong?”

“I know you don’t like personal questions, Andrea.” He shifted forward and concentrated on stirring cream into his coffee.

She gripped her fork’s handle then laid it back down. “I like to keep my life private, if that’s what you mean.”



Suddenly he looked up at her. “Feel free to bite off my head if you want, but you told me you were engaged at one time.”

The clinking of his spoon was pricking her nerves. She fought back the urge to still his hand. “Yes, it’s over now. You want the details?”

“No.” He plunked his spoon on the table and shook his head. “It’s not my business. Forget it.”

“Spit it out. What’s your question?” To keep herself occupied, Andrea lifted a bite of pie toward her mouth, but suspended the fork in midair—waiting.

“At my apartment, when you were inebriated... er... under the weather, you said you didn’t know anything about lovemaking. So, since you had been engaged, I’ve been wondering how you explain that?” Braeden squirmed in his seat looking like he expected a bomb to go off.

She wondered if he wanted a verbal video of every secretion exchange in her life. Andrea opened her mouth, but instead of answering, took in a morsel of pie and chewed, trying to look nonchalant while she groped for the right words. The bite stuck in her throat, calling for another swig of coffee to wash it down.

“Danny and I grew up in the same neighborhood. We were both shy and gravitated into a safe, comfortable relationship. In plain fact, Braeden, we only kissed, never seemed to need more. We liked each other and believed there was time for the loving to come later. There was no passion, no lights, whistles or bells like the books and movies rattle on about.” She stared out the window for a few seconds, remembering the outpouring of energy and vitality sparked by Braeden’s presence. “We both had good jobs and were tired of being alone. Taking the next step was logical, so when he asked me to marry him, I accepted.”

“What happened?” The poignant gaze he cast her way resonated deep. Guilt from not telling him the whole truth rose in her chest again.

She flinched and pulled away from revealing more. He had a lot of nerve asking. He hadn't wanted to hear the facts when she'd started to confess before; why should she spoil a perfectly good day owning up now? She answered simply. "Danny later decided he didn't want to go through with the wedding. He broke it off. End of story." She retreated into silence.

The magic of the day had broken away. He had ruined it and she wanted Braeden to leave. No amount of light-hearted humor would bring back the fun they'd shared playing Scrabble. Braeden must have sensed it, too. He ate his dessert quickly and after draining his coffee, got up from the table. "I'll clear the dishes."

"Leave them, I'll tidy up later." She sighed, sorry the pleasant time was over.

"No way, you still have the ones from lunch, I'll help. Wash or dry?"

Andrea's heart fluttered at the twinkle in his eye. "If you insist, okay. I'll dry and put them away." His renewed enthusiasm lifted her downcast spirits. "Don't blame me if you get dishpan hands. I gave you a way out."

"I have dishpan hands anyway from scrubbing at the hospital every day. I won't complain, I promise." He grinned and winked.

As they worked diligently in tandem, once, when he passed behind her, he untied her apron strings. She bent down to wipe the suds from his shoes and realized he was working to restore their previous jovial mood. She felt even worse at sidestepping the truth, and he was making dangerous inroads to her heart that went beyond her dreams. Her impression of Braeden had changed from when they'd first endured flare-ups of quick tempers. She hadn't counted on his sincerity, his inquisitiveness, or his persistence. The traits shattered her illusion of his arrogance.

After the last dish was put away, Braeden dried his hands and turned around to face her. A devilish twinkle in his eye gave warning. He grabbed and flicked the wet dishcloth in Andrea's direction. She

anticipated his intention to sop water on her nose and jumped out of the way. Not to be outdone, Braeden pursued and caught her before she could escape to the living room. Rolling her onto the couch in the kitchen, he tickled her ribs. The tickling stopped when they both became aware of their full body contact.

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Braeden waited a moment or two before he settled in for a kiss. Andrea's lips were moist and pliant beneath his and her surrender made it all the more stimulating. She succumbed to his delicate persuasion as his mouth nudged and skimmed hers. Once the tenseness in her muscles disappeared, he welcomed the invitation to soak up the mystique that was hers alone. Freeing her hands, he softly stroked the side of her face savoring how her velvet skin flushed with his caress.

Andrea's fingers ranged over his hair, then down to his five o'clock shadow and chin as she gazed into his eyes. Gone was her indignation, hopefully replaced by the same heated glow affecting him. He could see she wanted more, as did he. With the strange awakening Braeden withdrew and sat up, his heart pounding with energy; his temples throbbed with yearning. Her passion amazed him, but she trembled. Why? Even though she offered passion, his common sense told him something stood in the way of her complete capitulation. He could see it in her eyes, feel it in the quivering that perpetually cropped up when she was in his arms. She was frightened, and because of her fear there was a well-defined line she wouldn't cross. That was why she'd left his bed. Andrea wasn't promiscuous and he had to be careful or he'd lose the ground he'd gained.

Braeden squeezed her hand and gently pulled her to her feet, keeping his hand clasped with hers. "If the truth were known, I would really like to take you to your bedroom and make love to you all night. But you aren't ready. I don't want to spoil it for you," he whispered. "Let me know when you are. I'll be here." He hugged her and stepped back. Coughing to clear the lump doing loop-de-loops in

his throat, he added, "I think I'd better leave while I'm still behaving like a gentleman."

She nodded; her eyes misted.

Pausing at the door, he kissed her gently on the cheek, though he wanted to crush her to him with a passion that would blow her reserve to the heavens. He would stay the night if she only asked. But by the look in her eyes it was clear she wasn't going to; still, there was a spark he'd not seen before in her gaze. Her reluctance to tread through the gate of intimacy intrigued him. She wasn't like his other experiences. Not at all like Sylvia, who'd been easily available. She'd chased after him with an energy that taxed his best efforts to stay on track. At the time, he'd only wanted to carve his niche in surgery, not surrender to a female's whims. But he'd taken her willingness for granted.

Since Sylvia's marriage, all of his glory hadn't made up for the empty hours away from the hospital. With no time given toward finding a compatible mate, his stress-filled work devoured him. He'd had a great time with Andrea. So much fun in fact, his mind had abandoned his hospital worries. A rare thing. He smiled as he drove from the yard responding to her wave. *You're a challenge, Andrea. I love a good challenge.*

A short time later he arrived at Sam Jeffrey's home and was greeted enthusiastically by the administrator. "I'm glad you stopped by, Braeden. Come in and warm up by the fire."

"I hadn't noticed the cold, but you're right, the temperature is dropping." Braeden removed his boots and hung his overcoat on the rack in the oak-paneled foyer. They moved to the library. Being with Sam always comforted Braeden and sometimes minimized the quandaries that were part of a busy surgeon's life.

"What brings you out tonight?" Sam was not one to pry, but his curiosity was transparent.

"I spent the day with Andrea."

“And you’re still in one piece?” Sam motioned him to one of the two armchairs set in front of a blazing fire.

“Come on, Sam. We get along better these days.”

“How is she after last night? I was going to call but figured you’d have the aftermath well in hand.”

“Sam, you like Andrea, don’t you? You always took her side when she and I weren’t getting along. Do you know something I don’t, or has she got you under the same spell as the patients?”

“I know what was on her resume and what she told me privately. I can’t divulge personal information. She and I have had some heart-to-heart conversations.” Sam smiled, then sobered. “I can tell you that she came to me and offered to resign so she wouldn’t cause trouble for you.”

“You were wise not to take her up on it. Damn. She has me completely baffled.”

“And smitten, too, I think. Right, Braeden?”

“Perhaps. I had fun with her today. Do you know how long it’s been since I’ve had fun?”

“I don’t recall you ever having fun. Isn’t that a good thing?”

“Sam, she’s hiding things from me and creating barriers. Sometimes she lets down her guard, and just when I think I’ve jumped a hurdle, she shuts me out and throws another curve in my path. She’s making me crazy! My mind is on her most of the time. I thought if I could figure her out, I could get past the distraction. The trouble is, I can’t get my fill. The more I’m with her, the more I want to be with her.”

Sam laughed heartily, enjoying Braeden’s confusion. “This is the first time since Sylvia Marshall that I’ve seen you stumped by a female. Could you have met your match? At long last, is there a woman who doesn’t succumb to your charms?”

“You aren’t much help,” Braeden replied looking down at his shoes. “Anyway, I’m sure after the next few days I’ll get to the bottom of it all and find the real Andrea Martin.”

“And then what, Braeden? You’ve always shied away from commitment.”

Braeden propped his feet on a stool and stared into the fire, mesmerized by the crackling sparks shooting from the logs. “Who knows?”

~ \* ~

The thought crossed Andrea’s mind that she was sacrificing too much. She should have given way to Braeden’s desires because she shared them. With encouragement, he’d have taken her to bed, then they’d both have what they wanted. And in the process lost their challenging relationship and her self-respect.

Her home’s small space seemed enormously empty after he left. She perched in a kitchen chair by the window. Feathery snowflakes drifted past the porch light. It was a time to reflect. Memories of the past pulled her back to the newly graduated dietitian who had eagerly looked forward to a bright career. Then life saw fit to launch one disaster after another. The fact she was still here was a salute to her sheer will power.

The phone’s shrill ring in the living room broke her from her mind’s dismal path.

“Hello?”

“Andrea, how are you today?” Nancy’s concern brought a gush of cheer, immediately lifting Andrea’s gloom.

“I’m fine, Nance.” She slid into the armchair, dangling her feet over the armrest. “How much of an idiot did I look last night? I can’t remember much.”

“Not to worry. You weren’t that bad. Braeden got you home okay?”

“He took care of the situation well, all things considered. I don’t suppose I’ll ever live the event down. How rampant do you think the rumors will be?”

“People will forget when someone else does something noteworthy.” Nancy giggled. “You didn’t know the eggnog was spiked. Braeden sure held onto you tight.”

Andrea sighed. “That’s what the gossips will dwell on—me being in Braeden’s arms?”

“Fraid so, sweetie.”

“Well the gossip mongers will be wasting their time. I’ve got too heavy a debt load to even think of romance.”

“Andrea, almost everyone has student loans to work off. You aren’t required to give up your life for them.”

Andrea fingered a few strands of her hair, twisting them into a tight curl by her ear. “I have more than student loans to cope with. I used the services of a lawyer a while back.”

The pause on the other end of the line waited for the gap to be filled. When it wasn’t, Nancy braved a question. “Couldn’t your parents help?”

“They were killed in a car accident four years ago.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Andrea. I didn’t know. Not much wonder you needed a lawyer.” Another pause not answered. Nancy continued, “Well, if you’re all right, I’ll get ready for Josh. He’s coming over for the evening.”

“Nance?”

“Yes?”

“I’m glad you and Josh are getting along well. Treasure the relationship as it is now.”

“Don’t worry, I do. See you at the hospital, tomorrow.”

When she hung up, Andrea knew her mood had become one of envy and would plunge her into a melancholy state. She wanted to avoid that waste, but life has a peculiar way of interfering in the best of plans. Her mind leapfrogged over her wants and carried her back in time.

Her parents’ accident had pulled the rug from beneath her independent self. Established in her first job, she’d tried to continue

her work, but overwhelmed by her emotions, she took a leave of absence. She needed time to straighten out her parents' affairs and regain her balance.

The small amount of money left to her after the estate was settled enabled her to take time to heal. Two months later she returned to her job. She worked six months, then the chest pains started. Their increasing frequency sent her for a medical evaluation and she ended up in the hospital while the doctors tested and explored to try and find out why someone so young would be in such condition. With no medical insurance to help pay her way, the bills compounded with her student loans. Six doctors nixed the idea of a heart problem at her age.

The seventh thought to do an angiogram.

An angioplasty cleared the partially blocked artery found. The procedure failed. Shortly after being withdrawn from the blood-thinning IV, complete blockage occurred, causing a heart attack. Fortunately, the daily swim she'd taken for years had developed a formation of life-giving collateral arteries. Though tiny, the structures allowed enough blood and oxygen to reach the heart to prevent death. If medication would help, it was deemed safer than invasive surgery.

The sound of her doctor's voice echoed in her ears. *"We don't know what your prognosis is, Andrea. You're problem is a genetic one, possibly compounded by stress. A bypass is an option, but because of the time limit on such a graft, and with your young age, we'd only perform it as a last resort. The body will only tolerate two such surgeries so we don't want to limit you this soon. Do the best with what life has to offer."*

She had spent weeks locked in deep depression, afraid to venture outside for fear a heart attack would strike the final blow. Unable to deal with her problems, her fiancé's companionship dwindled until she dismissed him from her troubled life.

Braeden didn't need to know this. Clawing noises at the door distracted her. She opened it and Ginger dashed in. "Where have you been? You should have been here to make an impression on our



guest.” Andrea cuddled the cat in her arms. In spite of the comforting purr, Andrea’s mind jackknifed to her previous thoughts.

Once she’d become aware of the bottomless quagmire, she’d started reading everything about heart disease she could get her hands on. With perseverance, she accepted the challenge to follow all sensible recommendations. As her health improved, so did her attitude. She returned to work. Then as if she hadn’t enough to deal with, fate took another swipe, giving her trouble beyond her wildest imagination. Braeden must never find out about the lawsuit.

When the dust from the courtroom maneuvers settled, she’d packed and moved to her present home, intent on a new life, breaking all ties with the old one. She hoped Sam’s pledge to keep her secrets under wraps held firm. If not, she couldn’t survive another fateful blow.

A sudden chill shook her shoulders from the horror she’d been through at the time. She forced herself away from the wayward thoughts. Concentration on her day spent with Braeden would give her a boost from despondency.

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“Only seven days until Christmas, Andrea. Are you ready?” Sylvia asked, as she returned to the office after a trip downtown.

“No. I have only a few people to buy for and I like to leave it until the last minute.” She hoped Sylvia didn’t pick up on her half-truth. Leaving it to the last minute was her special plan for this year. Since she only needed to buy gifts for Sylvia and Nancy, she’d put it off as long as she could to make her season for giving last longer. It was her way of avoiding the pitfalls of other Christmases that had overwhelmed her with loneliness. “I’m looking forward to shopping after work today.”

“You don’t have any teaching sessions scheduled, do you? Why don’t you take off early? I can cover for you.”

“No sessions this week or next because of the holidays. I’m going to miss the patients’ participation.” She would miss seeing Braeden,

too, but she didn't intend to make herself into a basket case over it. "Braeden was called out of town unexpectedly, I heard. I haven't seen him since last Sunday."

Sylvia raised one eyebrow. "Ah, yes. I remember those absences well. When Braeden gets involved in anything heart-related, he goes to the max, forgetting everything else. Want me to find out where he went?"

"I've no need to keep track of him, so don't bother."

"If you're sure. Okay then, go ahead and do your shopping."

"Thanks, Sylvia."

The stores bustled with busy shoppers and Andrea mingled amongst them happily. In no time she found and bought suitable gifts. In the course of her trek, she picked up a book for Mr. Jenkins. She wondered how he was getting along, but she had put off calling. Her present gave her an excuse to contact him soon. She returned home satisfied with her choices.

The following morning, Andrea was surprised to have a message from Doug Jenkins waiting in her office. He asked that she return his call and she did so, not expecting to hear such a weak voice at the other end of the line.

"Andrea, I wonder if you would mind coming to see me tonight. It's important I talk with you."

"Great minds think alike. I was planning on dropping by anyway. I'll be there about six-thirty. It's okay with Melissa if I stop by?"

"Who cares what she thinks. It's my house."

Andrea couldn't help notice the bitter edge to his voice. She was overjoyed he'd thought to call, yet apprehensive at the thought of seeing that woman again.

She found the old stone mansion sitting off by itself on one of the classier streets. When she rang the doorbell, Melissa confronted her with the usual scowl, obviously not pleased to see her. "Don't get Dad agitated."

“Hello to you too, Melissa. I have no intention of upsetting your father.” Andrea couldn’t ignore the bristling effect her visit caused. However, she remained silent, following Melissa upstairs to a large bedroom where Mr. Jenkins lay propped with several pillows. He appeared pale and lifeless when she first entered the room. When she whispered, “Mr. Jenkins,” his eyes lost their glaze and he smiled, extending his arms for the hug she always gave.

“Oh, Andrea. I’m so glad to see you. I’ve missed your bright face coming to visit, and I sure as hell missed your hugs. Come. Sit down on the side of my bed.”

Melissa lingered in the background, no doubt angered by Andrea’s intrusion into her father’s life.

“Melissa, I want to speak with Andrea... alone.” His curt tone surprised Andrea and, from the look on her face, Melissa, too, but the woman grudgingly removed herself from the room. The slam of the door tilted the pictures hanging on the wall. “Don’t mind her. She’s a spoiled brat waiting for me to die.”

Andrea’s hand flew to her mouth. “I’m sure she isn’t. She’s moody and—”

“Let’s not talk about her. I want to know what’s been going on in your life. Has anything developed between you and Dr. Landry? I know he’s interested in you. Even when irritated he followed your every move if you were in my room—or rather leaving it as you were apt to do if he were there.” He laughed, but then seemed to lose his breath. Andrea sat him up and calmed his gasping by rubbing his back. She promised herself to tell Braeden what she observed.

“We’ve become friends, Mr. Jenkins.”

“Good. I had a purpose in calling for you, my dear. My lawyer came here yesterday so I could draw up a new will. I don’t want to leave everything to my daughter. I’ve made donations to various charities, but also I left a bit to you. I hope to help you get all you desire.”

Andrea gasped. “Oh, you can’t, Mr. Jenkins. Part of my normal duties is to visit patients and you became a friend. I got more out of our visits than I could ever give you. Don’t leave me anything. I’m managing okay on my salary.”

“Hush. Not another word. The deed is done, but I didn’t want you to be shocked. What’s so nicely wrapped in your hands? Is it a present for me?”

Andrea looked down at the gift still clutched in her fingers. “Something I thought you might like and a good excuse to come and see you. Are things not going well? Melissa isn’t mean to you, is she? I could get Braeden to—”

“No, everything is fine. Can’t be easy for her to stay with an old codger like me.”

Andrea sensed he wasn’t being face-up with her, but with her own privacy issues, she was the last one to want to pry. She intended to bring up the inheritance matter again and make a more positive refusal. She couldn’t, under any circumstances, allow him to place her in jeopardy, innocent though it might be.

“I’m a bit tired now, Andrea. I hope you can come back again soon. I miss your smiles.”

Unfortunately, the chance to pursue her concern evaporated; she didn’t want to tax his strength. “Of course I’ll visit you again and maybe I’ll bring Braeden, too.” With a measure of sadness she walked out of the room, expecting he’d soon fall asleep.

She descended the stairs deep in thought, wondering if she should search out and challenge Melissa. She had nothing concrete to go on and her worries could be groundless. Perhaps they stemmed from jealousy at no longer being the center of Mr. Jenkins’ attention. Thinking it was prudent to be cautious in other people’s lives, she marched straight to the front door. She saw Melissa, her face distorted with anger, behind a large potted plant. She ignored her, opened the door and strolled out into the night.

When Andrea returned home, she responded to her answering machine's flashing red light. Braeden's sexy voice asking her to meet with him the next morning at nine shot a thrill through her. She could hardly wait to find out what he wanted.

There were five days left until Christmas. Andrea didn't understand why the thought of its nearness filled her with more joy this year than usual. She'd be alone as always, but she knew exactly how she'd spend the day. She intended getting up while it was still dark. Then she'd sit beside the lighted tree with a fire blazing in the fireplace and enjoy a breakfast of Belgian waffles smothered in maple syrup. She'd let her thoughts wander over past happy Christmases by going through old photo albums, then open the two presents sitting under the tree. Later she would go to an early morning church service at the vine-covered chapel down the road. After a roast chicken dinner, complete with dressing and cranberry sauce, she'd drive the countryside checking out the decorations.

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At nine o'clock sharp Andrea left the elevator on the coronary floor and proceeded to the nursing station. Nancy stood at the desk filling out patient medication schedules.

"How are you, Andrea? You're looking chipper today."

"I'm supposed to meet Braeden. Do you know where?"

"He's with a patient, but he should be out any minute. Oh, here he comes."

As she watched Braeden coming toward her, Andrea's heart skipped several beats. For once she enjoyed the palpitations and smiled in response to his approach. She felt no urge to run in the opposite direction this time.

"Hello, Andrea." Braeden looked up from the clipboard he was carrying and glanced at the clock on the wall. "Sorry, I'm running a little late today. Can I see you in private for a moment?"

"Long as it's not in the supply room," she quipped.

“Well then,” he chuckled, “let’s go to the lounge.” He stood back and motioned for her to lead the way.

He quickly pulled her behind the door of the empty lounge and gave her a quick peck on the cheek. Catching her off balance, she swayed against him, and he didn’t try to hide his pleasure at the close contact.

“I’ve been out at my sister’s house. They had some trouble with the baby’s breathing and Marianne wanted me with them when they took her to the pediatrician. I didn’t have any surgery scheduled, so Craig took my regular cases and I stayed for a couple of days to be sure everything was okay.”

“Nothing serious, is it?”

“No. She and Ted are hyper about anything going wrong. Marianne had two miscarriages before this last pregnancy. She asked if I wanted to bring anyone with me to their home for Christmas Eve through to Boxing Day and was pleased I said yes. So, what about it, Andrea? Would you like to spend three days with us at the farm?”

“Ohh.” As if a switch had been thrown, palpitations pulsated across her chest. Turning toward the window she struggled to control her breathing, deep and slow, deep and slow. Her fingers bit into her palms. Finally, the rush of beats eased.

“Before I answer, I have one question.” Andrea turned back and stared up at him, her body tense. “What would the sleeping arrangements be?” She was fully prepared to decline the invitation if his intent ran contrary to hers.

He raised his eyebrow and grinned mischievously. “Whatever you want, Andrea. They are open-minded people, but the five-bedroom house allows plenty of room if you want your privacy.”

“Then I’d love to go. Thank you for thinking of me.”

The invitation surprised her, but her acceptance surprised her more. She’d known Braeden for a short time, but she still couldn’t get enough of him. She expected him to be angry at her stubbornness, angry enough to withdraw the invitation, but instead, he accepted her

choice calmly without batting an eye. Surely there'd be no harm in being around others for Christmas just once.

*I'm being ridiculous. He's probably not interested in me that way anymore... And cows have feathers.* She laughed to herself. *Now my dilemma will be what presents will please his family. I can't go empty-handed.* She left the lounge humming, *I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus*, happy to spend the rest of the day mulling over what gifts to buy.

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After work, Andrea ate her supper in the cafeteria, then set out for more shopping. The stores were busier than ever, filled with shoppers like her searching for gifts at the last minute. Normally, she disliked long lines at the cash registers, but tonight she welcomed the close contact and found herself caught adrift in the spirit of the season. This year she had people to spend the holidays with, and best of all, she would be with Braeden. The anticipation of his arms around her, seeing him for three whole days, and for that time being a more dominant part of his life filled her with happiness. She promised herself to treasure the memory.

Her mind on the days ahead, she walked past her destination in the mall, then realizing it, took time to stop and catch her breath with a cup of coffee at a department store cafe. With her thoughts in command of her mission once more, she set about selecting her gifts. She bought a set of uncirculated coins for the year of the baby's birth. A wooden calendar, with numbered sliding tiles for the days of the month, satisfied her need for her hosts.

The challenge lay in Braeden's gift. She'd pondered the entire day. Not knowing his likes and dislikes or having the foggiest notion of what he might need made the task more difficult. "He probably doesn't need anything," she muttered to herself, so that left out cologne and clothes. She didn't know his taste in reading or if he took the time for it, so books weren't an option either. The possibility of jewelry sprung to mind. She entered several stores before she latched

onto a set of cuff links with matching tie clip that captured her eye and her heart.

The design boasted two small gold hearts set side by side and seemed appropriate for the occasion. If they had been linked, it might send too personal a message. She wanted to avoid suggesting hope for more. Set apart as they were, to her they depicted two loves that couldn't join. If Braeden put his mind to it at all, he was apt to think the hearts embodied their common cardiac interest. He wouldn't have to know they reminded her of how much their relationship meant. The whimsical thoughts that the gift conjured up sent her spirits soaring. Satisfied with her selections, she drove home with visions in her head of the presents wrapped and lying beneath a giant decorated tree.

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The day before Christmas arrived at long last. Andrea awoke with a combination of excitement and anxiety at the prospect of meeting Braeden's family. She had been scheduled to work until noon, then he would pick her up at her home by three o'clock. At two o'clock, gigantic butterflies waged war in her stomach as she paced the floor keeping a sharp lookout on the driveway.

She had packed and repacked, changed her clothes three times, and almost wore a track through the cheap carpeting leading to the bathroom. By the time his Jag entered her yard, her nerves had shipwrecked and she feared another angina attack. Rather than take a nitro spray and have him smell the medicinal odor, she forced herself to calm down. When he knocked at the back door, she took a moment to compose herself, check for last minute straggling strands of hair from her French twist hairstyle, and recoated her lips with an apricot shade to brighten her pale skin.

By the time she got to the kitchen his well-toned physique filled much of the open doorway as he leaned against the jamb. A bitterly cold gust of wind blew inside causing her to gasp with a sharp intake of air. At her struggle for breath he quickly closed the door. She reached for her chest to stifle the burn rising under her sternum. The



pain changed to a dull throb and spread down her left arm. She groped for the nearest chair.

Braeden saw her distress and knelt beside her. He grabbed her wrist so fast she didn't have time to pull it away. "What's wrong, Andrea? Is this the same trouble as before?"

She nodded and squeaked, "Yes. I'll be okay in a minute."

His eyes reflected his alarm. "Your pulse is racing. I've got my medical bag in the car. Be right back."

While he was gone, the pain tapered off. She forced herself to relax. The attack was over. Now it was time for damage control.

Braeden returned, placed his kit on the chair and, every inch the medical professional, pulled out his stethoscope.

"Sorry about that, Braeden. I didn't mean to scare you. The cold air took my breath away and being edgy about meeting your family didn't help." She tossed a short, forced laugh at him, then rose and reached for the suitcase standing by the cupboard.

"Hold it, Andrea! I don't buy that for a minute. Sit back down until I check you over. He crouched at her knees and slipped the stethoscope into the opening of her blouse. "Hmm. Your heartbeat isn't as fast as I suspected it might be."

"It's only fast now because I'm embarrassed at what happened. Also, I've been tearing around getting ready to go. Don't read more into it."

"You're sure you feel all right now?"

"Yes."

His eyebrows deeply furrowed, his eyes pensive, Braeden rose to his feet and, shaking his head, carried her suitcase to his car.

## *Seven*

The enthusiasm Andrea had felt while waiting for Braeden's arrival disappeared, replaced by guilt over hiding the truth from him once more. He glanced at her from time to time as they drove the highway, but said nothing. It seemed as if he were waiting for her to open up, but her mind drew a blank. She couldn't bear to lie to him again; at this point it would only accelerate her discomfort. He had every right to be angry and suspicious. This tense beginning to the holidays warned they both might be better off if she stayed home.

Andrea kept her eyes on the passing countryside and her thoughts on what lay ahead. She didn't want to suggest that they turn around and head back without giving the new experience a chance. What must he be thinking at this very moment? She had battled with him when they first met, lied to him in the parking lot, was dishonest with him now, and still planned to spend three days with him in unfamiliar territory. Never mind what he's thinking; what on earth had she been thinking to get herself in such a predicament?

Braeden suddenly swerved the car into a service station. Instead of continuing their journey when the attendant filled the gas tank, Braeden pulled up in front of a restaurant attached to the store. "Let's get a cup of coffee."

Andrea nodded her compliance and, avoiding his eyes, stepped into the crisp air, taking great care not to inhale deeply.

They sat silently in a corner by the window until the waitress came to take their order. Bubbling with Christmas spirit, the jovial older

lady bantered easily with Braeden as he put in their request. “Do you want anything to go with your coffee, Andrea?”

“N-no, thank you.” She glanced at his face for the first time since they had left the house and saw, not anger, but definite concern. She needed to get out from under this stress, before the pressure overwhelmed her.

“This is a cute little restaurant; I bet they have a good business here,” she commented, hoping to lighten their moods. She fidgeted with a napkin. “I hope your family likes me. I haven’t been on a farm in years. We used to visit my aunt on a dairy farm; my cousins and I loved to jump in the haymow. We played in the barn for hours and I remember how great it was on rainy days when the rain pittered-pattered so noisily on the barn’s tin roof. Life is so much simpler when you’re a kid, so full of happiness and promise.” She didn’t mask her sigh.

“Would you really like to go back to when you were a child, when others made all your decisions and you did what *they* wanted you to do?”

Andrea squirmed under Braeden’s probing gaze. She stared out the window taking her time before she answered. “I haven’t made such great decisions since I’ve grown up and with my family all gone now, I’d say yes in a flash. Being an adult isn’t what it’s cracked up to be.” A noticeable shudder tore through her and she shifted her attention back to Braeden to await his comment. The grimace on his face was ample proof that he had seen her flinch; the tight stretch of his mouth also showed he was irritated by her answer. The ensuing silence played on her nerves. She concentrated on the steam bursting forth from the mugs the waitress served.

“There’s nothing more you want to say about the incident back at your house, I take it?”

“No.”

“That’s your prerogative. Okay, we’ll forget it... for now. Don’t be anxious about my family.” His voice softened. “They’ll like you and *you* will like them.

"I'm sure I will. She tried to make small talk, though not in the mood. It fell flat. In the end it was simply easier to focus on the scenery and finish the drink.

"If you're through your coffee, let's be on our way. It's not far from here," Braeden said, bringing a finale to the bit of peace she had found in the landscape.

They continued on and soon turned into a long lane that led to a large cedar log home perched on a hill beside a huge, red-roofed barn. Two dogs, barking feverishly, ran out to greet them as the car approached. When she climbed out, Andrea showed no hesitancy in bending down and extending her hand to let the dogs sniff it.

Speaking over the top of the Jag, Braeden introduced Heidi, a sheltie-terrier mix, and Bear, a husky-collie combination with overtones of a beagle in his background. They recognized Braeden and bounded up to him as he came round to Andrea's side. "You're brave to step out with these two carrying on. Did you have dogs at home?"

"We had a black and white Border Collie. His name was Kipper and he was gentle most of the time, but he loved a good scrap with any dog that came onto our property." Hearing voices from the direction of the house, Andrea looked up and saw their hosts coming to greet them.

"Hi, folks," Braeden said. "I want you to meet Andrea. Andrea, this is my baby sister, Marianne, and her husband, Ted."

"I was trying to picture what you would look like, Marianne, but with your blond hair and blue eyes, I was way off."

"Braeden and I aren't alike in temperament, either," Marianne interjected. "So you can relax around me." She jabbed Braeden with her elbow and Andrea passed off the good-natured poke as a normal occurrence between the brother and sister.

The welcoming spontaneity put Andrea at ease and the four were soon engaged in animated conversation about the dogs. "Heidi is a lady and very protective of Bear," Marianne told her.

"Yeah! But she's a real bitch, if you let her get behind you. She likes to nip butts. Can't seem to break her of the habit," her husband

retorted. "Seems as though she likes you, Andrea. Watch her carefully though if she gets in back of you."

"Why is the other one named Bear? He doesn't look like one."

"No, but he shakes his stuffed animal toys like a bear would maul a rag doll," Ted replied with a glow of pride in his eye. "He's gentle with people though, and completely enthralled with Heidi."

Andrea immediately liked the humor that was evident in their lives. Ted was similar in coloring and about Braeden's age, but his shorter height and muscular build set him apart from his brother-in-law.

Marianne touched her arm and gently pulled her in the direction of the house. The young woman's sparkly eyes, ruddy cheeks, and wide smile foretold the presence of an easy-going, happy nature. Braeden's sister was right. She wasn't at all like her prominent brother. The women paused to look behind and watch Ted and Braeden get the luggage out of the car. As Braeden carried her suitcase, knowing he was being watched, he pretended to stagger under the weight, causing the others to make faces in feigned sympathy. Andrea felt much better with his improved disposition.

Marianne's warm, easy manner made her an instant friend. Andrea relaxed in her company. Even the house seemed to welcome her with the same show of happiness. A roaring fire in the kitchen's wood stove created a cozy atmosphere and she gladly removed her boots and outer clothing. With her jitters gone, she looked forward to spending time with her new friends.

A muffled sound, followed by a wail, came from another room. Andrea could hardly wait to see the baby. She followed Marianne into the nursery on the ground floor. "Oh, Marianne. This is lovely. I like what you've done with the pink and yellow decor."

"Well, I know there are too many stuffed animals in here already. Braeden overdoes it. He also bought the pine bureau to match the spindle crib that was Ted's as a child." The crib stood beneath a fluttering mobile of sailboats circling in the thermal heat waves from the baseboard heating panel.

"This is Sara, Andrea, she's three months old today." Marianne's blue eyes danced as she picked up the baby.

Andrea liked the way Marianne smiled more readily than Braeden. She obviously was younger, maybe thirty, and didn't have the same kind of stress that he had. *I bet she doesn't fly off the handle as quickly as he does. She's more outgoing than Braeden and she's content; she's got all she wants or needs right here.* She wondered if Braeden would ever be this settled. No, she doubted he'd find peace in the simplicities of life.

Andrea watched intently as Marianne removed the baby from her crib and changed her on a padded table. "Andrea, do you want to carry her to the living room while I check on my casserole in the oven?"

"I'd love to, Marianne. I hope she doesn't mind. I don't know anything about babies." Andrea wrapped the blanket snugly around the infant and held her upright against her shoulder. The infant nuzzled under Andrea's chin; the softness of Sara's hair delighted her. She gently rubbed the baby's back and sniffed at the Johnson's Baby Powder that Sara wore. As she looked out the nursery window to the fields beyond, she cooed in the baby's ear, unaware of Braeden observing her from the bedroom door.

When she turned to leave the room, she was startled to see him blocking her way. He stepped aside after a quick look at the baby, but tendered Andrea a moist peck on her cheek as she walked past.

"By the captivated look on your face, I'd say you'd make a great mother, just like Marianne."

Andrea paused dead in her tracks, heaved in a deep breath, then hurried past.

His unexpected kiss scored a fiery trail through her flesh. Her skin warmed when she turned and focused on his face because she recognized a silent promise for more in the brown depth of his eyes. He was no longer annoyed with her, and for that she felt a sense of relief. No other person in her entire existence had caused such tingling to erupt without warning, and she didn't understand why someone so far out of reach did.

Braeden tipped his head. "Let's join the others, shall we?"

She nodded. With the lump in her throat she couldn't speak.

They joined Ted in the living room. Marianne, finished with her kitchen chores, came to feed the baby. “Andrea, will it bother you if I nurse Sara in here? If it does, I can go to our bedroom.”

“Stay. I don’t mind.”

Marianne’s openness was a sharp contrast to Braeden’s tendency to keep his thoughts private. When they’d seated themselves, Marianne opened her blouse and nursing bra and let the little girl snuggle in close to her breast. The two men engaged in conversation while Andrea focused on Sara. She noticed Ted had to repeat Braeden’s name several times and when she looked over, Andrea saw it was because he had focused on her. She squirmed like a butterfly under a magnifying glass.

When the baby finished nursing, Andrea leisurely studied the huge grey and black granite stone fireplace that dominated the room. It overlooked a hardwood floor partially covered by an oval multi-colored, braided rug. The royal blue Chesterfield and two matching armchairs provided comfortable seating. Marianne and the baby occupied an old-fashioned rocking chair placed near the fireplace. A huge Christmas tree in the corner stretched toward the dark cedar rafters of the open ceiling. Red bows and white crocheted snowflakes accented red and white miniature round bulbs scattered through the branches. She could hardly wait to see the effect when the lights were turned on.

“Do you plan on having kids, Andrea?” Marianne asked, catching her off guard. A quick swallow brought forth an instant change in Andrea’s demeanor, not lost on the others in the room. Her fingers pressed into her thighs as she searched for an easy answer where none was to be had. She glanced in Braeden’s direction, hoping he hadn’t heard the question. By his silence and crinkled forehead she knew he had, and like the others, he was waiting for her answer.

“I never gave it m-much thought. I guess I—”

“Come on, Andrea,” Braeden interrupted, “you were engaged; you must have discussed it.”

“I said I never thought about it, Braeden.” The sharpness in her tone surprised even her. She tried to think of something to fill the sudden hush. Marianne caught the glare in her brother’s eyes.

Marianne and Ted glanced at each other, fully aware of the budding tension.

Ted jumped to his feet. "Let me show you the rest of the house, Andrea, while Marianne finishes with the baby."

Andrea grabbed the branch he offered. "That would be great, thanks."

~ \* ~

Marianne waited until they went up the staircase, then turned to her brother, "I'm sorry, Braeden, I guess I touched a sore spot. You really were a little personal with her, you know."

He sighed and shrugged his shoulders. "I suppose you're right. I shouldn't have been so nosy, but I want to find out as much as I can about her. It doesn't make sense that she and her fiancé wouldn't have discussed having kids. She shuts me out and I don't like it!"

"Maybe she can't have children," Marianne whispered. "Did you consider that?"

"Dammit, she could tell me, I'm a doctor, not a priest." His hand slapped the arm of the La-Z-boy.

"Then you would have asked her why she couldn't, and your personal prodding would have continued. Let her tell you these things in her own good time. Be patient. I've never seen anyone, except me, snap at you, and Lord knows, sometimes you deserve it."

"I guess you're right. I've found I can't tease her without getting myself in trouble, and I don't want her mad at me while we're here. I'm not serious about her or anything, but she's not only attractive, she's intelligent, too. I'm interested in what makes her tick, Marianne."

"I'm glad to hear that." Keen satisfaction spread across her face. "She's the first woman you've brought here since Sylvia Marshall, several years ago, and I already like her more than I ever did Sylvia. That woman sure threw you for a loop."

"Ted and I could never understand what attracted you to her; she was cold and aloof. You need someone warm and cuddly. You always like to have your own way and can be a bit dictatorial, you know. I think Andrea fills the bill and she doesn't mind being sharp with you."



It's time for you to smarten up, Braeden. You need someone permanent in your life."

"Goddammit! I don't need someone hiding things from me, Marianne. I don't know what they are, but they must be serious. If she doesn't open up soon, I'll have to do some investigating to satisfy my curiosity. I don't want to do that. It's sneaky."

"Calm down. I'll see what I can find out. Here they come. Remember, don't push her."

~ \* ~

"It's a beautiful home, Marianne, full of love." Andrea exhaled an admiring sigh as she walked into the room.

Braeden stood up and put his arm around her waist. "C'mon and I'll show you the main barn."

Andrea liked his close touch, but was afraid that if she went with him he would berate her for what she had said. "I should stay in here and help Marianne with supper." She glanced at his sister hoping for a reprieve—she got none.

"You two go ahead," Marianne ordered, tugging on Ted's arm, as he was about to offer to be their guide. "We'll call when supper is ready. You've got about twenty minutes."

Andrea and Braeden put on their jackets and boots and headed for the barn. "This is a working farm, Andrea. They have a large dairy herd, some beef cattle, and a large pig operation in the barns at the far end of the farm. Ted grew up here and took it over when his parents died in a house fire about five years ago. He cleared the rubble and with the insurance money and his inheritance built the new house in its place. He's done wonders with the farm. I roomed with him at college and it was through me he met Marianne. They're very happy."

"I can tell," Andrea answered softly. "She adores him, and he must think the world of her. It has such great warmth." Andrea gazed at the serenity of the landscape. She reached up and put her hand on Braeden's arm. "I'm sorry I was short-tempered with you back there. I didn't mean anything by it and I'm really ashamed."

He pulled her closer and placed his arm securely around her shoulders. "I was out of line. Marianne blasted me for being so nosy and I guess I was. Forget it."

“I can’t have children and I get a little sensitive about that at times, but I shouldn’t have barked at you.”

He squeezed her again. Braeden seemed to brush the incident off, but several times she prickled under his scrutiny. She wished she couldn’t see the hurt in his eyes. The distraction of sights, sounds and heady smells of hay, animal bodies, and manure, soon brought back memories of happy times to her.

In the hayloft a mouse scampered across the floor with a cat hot on its trail. Startled, Andrea shrieked and jumped. Braeden grabbed her, but didn’t let go when he saw what had surprised her; instead, he twisted her directly in front of him and held her tight. A few seconds later his mouth descended, smothering all possibilities of resistance—if any had been offered. He possessed her, and the intensity of his desire swept aside all thoughts of defense. She melded into his passion, accepting him within her own searing need. Nothing else existed or mattered.

Her hands fingered through his hair and she pulled his head closer. Their kiss deepened. Braeden buckled his knees and lowered her to the soft mound of hay. They kissed again and again, each kiss carrying her on the puffed sails of a cloud. Sparks surged and exploded as one of his hands opened her jacket and slowly, but deliberately, crept to her ribcage. Her breath caught and held as he lifted her sweater and slipped the hand beneath it. She leaned into the pleasure giving permission for him to do as he pleased, begging for his touch. She yielded completely when he quickly claimed ownership of her swollen breasts.

Andrea peered into the smoldering eyes fixed on her face. He flooded her hot cheeks with more tender kisses. His lips moved to the small, sensitive hollow of her throat, and her slight moan drifted into the air. When he roamed back to her mouth, his tongue parted her lips and penetrated into the soft tissues lying in wait. She met the thrust with a force of her own; their tongues danced and explored. Her hands moved beneath his jacket and sweatshirt.

Braeden withdrew and leaned back, his eyes feasting on her lacey bra. He wrapped her jacket close to assure her warmth, but left an opening in front. His mouth caressed the tops of her breasts as his

hands kneaded and massaged in preparation for his advance. When he unfastened the front clasp and cast the separated parts to the sides, Andrea's body arched as her hardened peaks craved gratification. She coasted on a carpet of down toward eternity.

He closed his mouth on her breast, but as he did so, his head jerked up at the sound of his name in the distance. Repeated again, they both reeled to their senses. Ted was calling them to supper.

"Saved by the bell." Braeden scowled, then brightened. "But the match isn't over." He jumped up pulling Andrea with him. "We'd better get out of here before my brother-in-law decides to embarrass us."

Andrea's rush to normalcy demolished the pinpricks needling her hormones. Shaken by what had happened, she observed Braeden's resignation, then glanced down at the disarray of her clothes. She focused on the chaff that covered her slacks, until she looked closer. The sight of her sweater still pushed up around her neck flamed her cheeks with embarrassment. She hurriedly refastened her bra and tucked her sweater into the waistband of her jeans. They brushed each other clean without a word.

"Do you think they'll be able to tell we were making out?" She'd die of embarrassment if Ted used their romp as fodder for his humor.

"I'm sure they won't have to stretch their imaginations." Braeden laughed. "Ted will behave himself since he doesn't know you well. It's okay. You look fine."

"And I feel fine."

"What do you mean?"

"Ah... I mean..." Her pulse quickened.

"Oh, you mean you liked that little tussle? We'll have to try it again where it's warmer and more private." Braeden kissed the tip of her nose.

Heat flashed through her whole body from the sensuous nibble. Although she had loved touching him, feeling the strength of his muscles, inhaling the masculine scent that was strictly his, she whispered a silent prayer, thankful for the break in their exploration. She wasn't ready for this excursion into lust. If Braeden researched her background, he would be appalled and disgusted that he'd even

entertained the idea of a sexual encounter. She wouldn't last long enough for him to tire of her and there wasn't a faint hope of believing otherwise. She'd have to have more control of herself to reap the benefits of a pleasant Christmas. And she mustn't let him suspect her distress or dishonesty. After she returned home, she'd ease out of their relationship on some dreamed up pretext.

Once presentable, they went into the yard holding hands and leisurely strolled toward the house. Darkness had set in and the outside Christmas lights created a magical fairyland. Braeden swung his arm around her waist and steered her up the pathway. Andrea placed her hand on top of his and left it there until they entered the house. She wondered if her swollen lips would give her away. Trying to appear blasé, she removed her jacket and boots. Unconsciously loving any contact with him, she rubbed Braeden's back as he bent to take off his footwear.

"I'm not going to say a thing about how happy you two look," Marianne said. "Ted will start teasing if I do."

"I'll help you with supper, Marianne." Andrea playfully tapped Braeden's hip as she followed her hostess.

The women wasted no time setting out the hot food. The aroma of the seafood casserole and hot biscuits lured the men from the living room. The four of them chatted at the dining room table as if Andrea had always been part of the group. When she glanced at their faces, a sense of belonging filtered into her mind and she blinked to clear the moisture it caused. She blushed when she noticed the obvious male heat spilling from Braeden's eyes. Each time it happened she glanced down at her napkin, at a loss how to handle it.

Though Marianne and Ted had to be aware of the intimate eye contact between Andrea and Braeden, they didn't comment. Andrea speculated that Ted was getting a few kicks under the table. Braeden was clearly in a happy mood and suddenly a glimmer entered his eyes. "Did you know Andrea's afraid of some of the animals in the barn, Ted?"

"Which ones? Geez, none of them are dangerous as long as you don't get too close."

"One is. He's tearing around in the loft."

“Braeden, stop,” Andrea muttered from the corner of her mouth.

“Why, Ted, even your cat wasn’t scared of the mouse.”

Andrea was mortified.

“Braeden, that’s enough!” Marianne crumpled her napkin and threw it at her brother. He responded by tossing it back. When the main course was over, the women cleared the table and retreated to the kitchen to slice the lemon pie and make coffee.

“I’m having a wonderful time already, Marianne. It was kind of you to invite me.”

“We’re glad you came. Ted and I were pleased when Braeden said he wanted to bring you. You know he doesn’t talk much about his personal life and the only other woman he ever brought here was Sylvia.” A heavy sigh escaped from Andrea’s mouth. “It’s true, Andrea; I see that disturbs you. I can tell you, she definitely wasn’t right for him and we’re glad they broke up. Still, we were sad that he didn’t seem to allow anyone else in his life. I want my brother to be content. He’s dedicated to his work, but there’s much more to life than work. I think the two of you are a good match. What do you think of him?” Her gaze steadied on Andrea’s face.

“I like your brother. He’s dynamic, charming when he wants to be, and he has an infectious personality, though his sense of humor could use toning down.” Andrea laughed. “I have a tendency to take what he says the wrong way. We enjoy each other’s company, Marianne, but that’s all it is. I know about his habit of dropping a woman when she gets too serious.” She looked out the window, scanning the farmland. She’d said too much.

“My brother has been a steady force in my life. I know his bad habits, but I think with the right person he would mellow. I hope you *are* that person. I have a strong hunch you are. Be open with him—he deserves it. I think you might be surprised at how things will turn out.”

*Be honest with him? Oh, how I want to be, but that would end it right now. A little more time is all I want, is that so wrong? Am I being selfish? Yes. Am I delaying the inevitable? Definitely. If I can hold out for another month, I’ll tell him everything. At the end of January I’ll tell him about my heart disease... and the lawsuit.*

~ \* ~

Ted turned to Braeden as they stared into the fire: “Andrea is a great girl, Braeden. Are the two of you serious or are you gonna be stupid and let this one get away?”

“We’ve not known each other long, but she’s fun to be with and a challenge.” Braeden crossed his feet and smiled at Ted’s bluntness. He always knew where he stood with him. “You know that I’ve not wanted a permanent attachment since my relationship with Sylvia bit the dust. I’m only curious about Andrea. I like what you and Marianne have, but it’s not for me. I’m not good at personal commitments. I’ve learned someone always gets hurt when partners can’t live up to expectations.”

“Geez, I don’t agree with you at all, Braeden. Yes, there are disappointments, but when you share love, you overlook the irritating parts and resolve to make the marriage stronger. Don’t shove her away. She’s a sharp contrast to your pig-headed ways. I don’t think you’ll be able to bulldoze her easily.” Ted laughed at his bravery in speaking up. “I bet she can handle you and still not be afraid to be her own person.”

Braeden slumped back in the chair and thought for a moment before he looked at the brother-in-law who’d never given him advice previously. He wondered at Andrea’s knack for mesmerizing males without seeming to deliberately do it. “You’re falling into a pattern that I can’t figure out. She charms the patients, too.”

“I think the reason is that her sincerity shines through. Face it, Braeden, you hit a grand slam here. She’s warm and caring, and when you look into her eyes, she naturally draws out a protective instinct.”

“That’s my fascination with our relationship. Even though she’s been on her own for a while, I have this compulsion to look after her. I have the same reaction with my patients. That’s one reason why I went into medicine in the first damn place, but I’ve never experienced it with someone I’ve dated. It’s weird and new and Goddamn scary.”

Ted grinned and stoked the logs. “Yep, you’re hooked.”

Braeden shook his head and groaned.

While they enjoyed dessert and coffee in the living room, Braeden noted how easily Andrea chatted with his family. Her mouth was

seductive, her eyes soft, liquid and luminescent in the firelight. She was so enticing he could hardly wait to get her alone upstairs and continue what had started in the barn.

~ \* ~

The evening passed pleasantly as they played cards—gals against the guys. The women rubbed it in each time they won. Andrea felt comfortable in this homey atmosphere. Happiness exploded everywhere, from the craftsmanship of the house to the light in Marianne's eyes whenever she looked at Ted. She couldn't understand why Braeden made do with short-term relationships when a long-term one held so much promise.

Today in the barn had been a mistake on her part. She had let herself venture into another dimension just to see what it was like. What would have happened if they'd not been interrupted? She knew the answer. She would have succumbed to the exquisite ecstasy, but then it would end. He'd be gone and she'd be left with an emptiness in her soul. His intimacy would only be a memory to haunt her the rest of her life. Seeing him at the hospital each day would become a daily torture and she'd be forced to go elsewhere. Yes, she had too much to lose.

"Andrea. Andrea?" A voice penetrated her thoughts.

"Hmm? Oh, I'm sorry. I was lost in thought," she explained as she realized Braeden wanted her attention.

"Want a penny?" he asked.

"They aren't worth that much." She waved him off with a hand motion. "It's getting late and I'm really tired. Does anyone mind if I say goodnight and head for bed?"

"I'll join you," Braeden replied with a sly, sheepish grin and a gleam in his eye.

"Oh, no you won't," she retorted. She tossed her hands in the air to make her point. Marianne and Ted chuckled as she mounted the stairs.

Ted turned out the tree lights. "Night, everyone."

Andrea sobered at Braeden's puzzled expression. Murmuring a soft, "Goodnight," she went upstairs and closed her bedroom door.

Muted voices drifted up from the foot of the staircase, but she didn't hear footsteps. Quickly removing her clothes, she put on a filmy, pink nightgown and crawled into bed. She fluffed her pillow before switching off the lamp and cuddling into the comfort of the down duvet.

The stars shone through the bedroom window, and as she admired their brightness, she changed her mind and slipped out of bed to look at the view. The snow sparkled with dazzling brilliance across the pastureland. She raised the window to cautiously sniff the country air, overpowered by the peace and beauty of the world outside. At the click of her door latch she closed the window and turned around toward the sound. A dark masculine form silhouetted on the threshold against the light in the hall. Braeden didn't say a thing, just stood there, watching, waiting.

Andrea's body refused to move. She readjusted her eyes to the ray of light infiltrating the room. She needed to push him out, slam the door and get some sleep for tomorrow's excitement. What she needed to do and what she wanted to do were two opposing forces and right now her want was more powerful than her need.



## *Eight*

Amazed by his boldness, Andrea stayed by the window and watched as Braeden slipped into the room, turned and peeked up and down the hall, then closed the door softly. His calculated approach quickly narrowed the distance between them. Reaching out, he took her in his arms, paused briefly and gazed into her eyes. He lowered his mouth to hers. A pulsating beat throbbed through her chest as she yielded to his kiss. His tongue parted her mouth, deepening the contact with a hungry insistence that demanded control of her senses, her thoughts, and her will. She glanced up at him and reeled at the depth of her longing, astounded by its strength. His grip relaxed when he noticed her lack of resistance, that indeed, she was responding with equal zest.

Her closed eyes intensified the caress of his warm breath on her cheeks. In response to the titillation, she trailed her fingertips along his temples, stroking, massaging them. She stretched further, interweaving them through hair damp with perspiration. She lowered his head so he could continue his devastating assault on her throat. He broke away. Startled, her eyes opened wide.

“Andrea, I want you now.” His husky voice was compelling.

She didn’t reply; words weren’t necessary. She saw the emotion in his eyes and could feel the shudder rippling across his shoulders as he tried to retain control. She heard his deep sigh, and matched it with one of her own as she stepped tight against the windowsill. *Why couldn’t Braeden leave it at just kissing?* She yearned for more of his

kisses so the taste of him on her lips and the smell of his scent would be forever inscribed in her memory. Who was she kidding? She wanted him in every way as much as he wanted her. Reality reared its ugly head. *If Sylvia couldn't keep him with her, what chance would I have, even if he overlooked what I've done?* "I can't Braeden, please?"

Braeden stood in stunned silence.

As the full moon crested over the barn's roof, its light shone through the window illuminating Braeden's face. His expression changed from anticipation to frustration. How could she explain without telling too much? "I know you can't understand, but I don't want to ruin what we have by rushing things. I also know I must be sending you mixed signals."

His eyes searched hers, suspicious, unbelieving, openly trying to decipher her meaning. She trembled at the hurt she saw. Hesitantly, she reached up and touched his shoulders.

His hands dropped at his sides, rigidly resisting her pathetic endeavor to pacify him. "I thought we could finish what we started in the barn." His voice cracked, no longer sporting his usual self-control.

"I'd like that, too," she whispered. "But I plan on going to bed alone and dreaming about you instead."

"Why dream, when you can have the real thing? You're right, dammit. I don't understand, Andrea." He backed away. "We're two adults who want the same thing!" His straight spine, piercing glare, and arms limply removed from her body shouted his exasperation.

Andrea turned and stared out the window. The magic of the encounter in the barn had been replaced by a sadness that coiled tightly around her heart. "That's where you're wrong, Braeden. We *don't* want the same thing. I don't want a casual affair. I need something more stable, with permanency, and most of all, with real loving." She fought back the urge to expound on her need. A true loving relationship with him would be impossible.

To her surprise, he moved closer, lifted her chin for a quick peck on her nose, and stepped back, raising his hands in surrender. "Okay. I'll settle for a goodnight kiss, done my way."

"Done your—"

Braeden settled in for the kill, grabbed her buttocks and pulled her to him with a commanding force. His lips descended on hers with a fierce pressure demanding all she had to give. Swept into the wildness of his embrace, she met his desire with passion as she strove to give him satisfaction for at least this brave effort. He took her offering, gentled the kiss and released her. He left without a word. She stayed helplessly in place as the door closed. *I deserve him walking out like that. I hurt him.* Her finger wiped away an errant tear. No sooner had the door shut behind him than it opened again. "You're sure?"

"I'm sure." His hopeful question brought a smile to her heart.

"Just checking." The door closed quietly.

She crawled into bed and once more snuggled under the covers. Sleep didn't come easily as she lay thinking about her choice. If he only knew how much of herself she sacrificed not to spend the night wrapped in his arms. Denying his wish came at a high risk—she could lose him sooner.

Andrea tossed and turned most of the night, sliding into a deep sleep just before dawn. The smell of bacon wafting from the kitchen encouraged her to open her eyes seconds before a light tap sounded at the door. "Come on in, Marianne. I'm decent."

"I know you are, for sure," came the reply as Braeden opened the door and bounced onto her bed.

Through squinting eyes she made a futile attempt to smooth out her disheveled hair. He stretched next to her giving her the once over, his arm supporting his head. Andrea's cheeks quickly fired with embarrassment and she pulled the covers up to her chin.

"Someone might come in."

"Relax, Andrea. I'm not going to ravage you. I only want to wish you, *Merry Christmas.*"

"Oh, Christmas? Merry Christmas to you, too."

Flinging caution to the wind she swung her arms around his neck and kissed him with reckless abandon. Clearly surprised by the energy behind her embrace, Braeden took the advantage and met that connection head on, cupping his hand over the satiny smoothness of her breast. She was overwhelmed by the sensitivity of his touch, basked in it, then pulled away.

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Andrea's repeated rejections of any attempt to shift their relationship into high gear had worn on Braeden's nerves all night. He'd stayed awake wondering if he had a future with her. Try as he might, he couldn't envision moving on to someone else just yet. Something in their interaction was different from any other he'd experienced. It aroused his sensitive nature, seducing him into pursuing this woman regardless of her stubborn will. He'd win her over in time; it was going to take longer than he planned, that's all.

Andrea wasn't like Sylvia, who'd wanted him to commit straightaway and wasn't willing to wait until he had established his career. It was only later, after they'd split, that he realized being 'busy with his profession' was his way of putting off a relationship that he didn't want permanent. When she'd married that jerk Craig Marshall, who'd been hot on her trail for months, he'd been furious and felt like an idiot for letting it bother him. Dr. Marshall's mediocre performance as a doctor still astonished him. And that was what hurt. Being passed over for him. As hot as Sylvia had been in the beginning, she'd turned aloof and cold—she'd had Craig as a backup in the wings.

On the other hand, Andrea's personality radiated warmth for all to see, and he'd suspected passion lay fully developed beneath the surface. When he held her in his arms he could feel the heat of her sexual need, though she struggled to keep it hidden. Near dawn, he had finally put his finger on the problem: it wasn't that she didn't trust him, hell, she didn't trust herself. Now that he had figured out the riddle Andrea posed, he was going after her with an unusual approach. Attack and withdraw. *Let's see how she reacts to confusion. I'll have her eating out of my hand in no time and have fun with the challenge.*

Braeden gave Andrea one final squeeze then abruptly got up. "I'll see you downstairs." He walked out of the room, and closed the door behind—noisily.

His rapid departure disappointed her since she'd been enjoying his company. But it was a new day, and she couldn't let this outcome spoil the excitement of a real Christmas morning. Andrea hurriedly

dressed in pale blue, lacy underwear topped with black stirrup pants and a soft burgundy-knitted sweater. She brushed her hair and pulled it to the back, securing it with a leather thong. She had to admit she found Braeden intoxicating, not only from his visceral masculinity and commanding presence, but also from the interest he'd shown in her. He could change from a domineering stance to one of tenderness and good humor in a pig's eye blink and kept her on her toes. He made her laugh. He made her heart soar, and he made her want more from life—more than she'd ever dared dream.

Enthusiastically greeted at the breakfast table with happy banter, even from Braeden, she knew it would be a merry Christmas and she could hardly wait for the day to unfold.

After breakfast, Marianne and Andrea started clearing the table. "Never mind that," Ted interrupted, "Braeden and I will do it later."

Braeden pretended to look dismayed. "Let's go to the living room and get to the presents." They laughed when Ted proceeded to crawl under the tree, first pulling out the gifts from the back. He handed one to Andrea and she saw it was from Braeden.

"Hold it," Braeden ordered from his perch on the hearth. "Open mine last."

"Okay then, you have to open mine last, too." She laughed at his scowl.

The four of them opened their gifts and emptied large red stockings that had magically appeared overnight hanging from the mantle. The one for her had been filled with candies, soap and scented lotions. When her presents from Sylvia, Nancy, Ted and Marianne had been opened she fixed her attention on the large rectangular gift from Braeden.

"Guess what's in it." Ted said.

"I'll try." She sniffed it, rattled it, and felt it from end to end. She noticed Braeden had stopped opening his gifts to watch. What was he thinking as he sat across from her? She cleared the discarded wrapping paper next to her and patted the seat. "How about sitting next to me, in case I need help?"

"Thought you'd never ask. You just think I'm going to give you hints."

“Braeden, stop torturing her, both of you open your gifts,” Ted prodded. “We want to see what you gave each other.”

“Let’s see if I can guess quickly,” Andrea blurted out. “A book? A scarf?”

Braeden shook his head.

“Bath salts, powder, writing paper?”

“Nope.”

Andrea paused in her search of discovery. “You disguised a small gift by putting it a larger box, didn’t you, Braeden? That’s it. You cheated. It’s jewelry.”

A Cheshire smile creased his face.

“Not fair. You can’t expect me to guess what’s in the box if you’ve disguised it.”

“Okay, open it.”

“After you open yours.” She laughed at the surprise on his face. He obviously didn’t think she had enough will power to hold back.

Braeden grinned and continued opening his other presents, taking his time. Andrea held back her impatience. Although she’d put a lot of feeling into its purchase, she was trying not to give him the satisfaction of knowing it. Finally he’d come to the end. The suspense was apparent. Braeden opened her gift of the cuff link set. His mouth dropped and he paled—not the expression she’d anticipated. Alarm signals shot out. “Don’t you like them?” An uneasy feeling surged from the pit of her stomach. The room quieted.

Ted looked to his wife for some indication of the problem. Marianne raised her eyebrow in silent communication that she was bewildered, too.

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Braeden no longer wondered why he had thought her so plain when she’d tripped into Mr. Jenkins’ hospital room. He hadn’t seen the sparkle in her eyes, appreciated her delicate femininity, or the vitality of her personality—they were evident now. His patients had seen those characteristics even though they were sick. What had been wrong with him?

“Open *your* gift, Andrea.” Braeden spoke in a hushed tone, his voice catching at the back of his throat.

Hesitant, with a confused look on her face, Andrea pulled off the bright red ribbon and removed the embossed gold wrapping paper that she had admired under the tree. She glanced at him before she shook off several boxes of descending size. When she pulled up the lid of the bottom grey velvet case she stared in astonishment. Nestled in soft white cotton fluff was a gold bracelet—adorned with two gold hearts, side by side. They matched the cuff links and tie clip perfectly.

Heat flushed her cheeks; the moisture in her eyes embarrassed her even more. To calm the tense atmosphere Ted came to her aid. “Braeden, for once you showed good taste.”

Concerned that his gift had been a shock to her as much hers had been to him, Braeden tilted her chin with his finger. “Guess we shop at the same store, Andrea. Thank you.” He was moved by the coincidence, yet alarmed by her reaction to it. “Let me put it on you.”

Without a word she raised her wrist, but her hand trembled. After he fastened the bracelet, she expressed her thanks but barely above a whisper. She couldn’t stem the flow of tears.

“I didn’t know you were such a romantic,” he whispered.

“What do you mean?” She finally looked up.

“Two hearts linked together.”

“But they’re *not* linked, Braeden, I made sure of it. They’re side by side.”

“Sure they are. ‘Linked’... cuff links, get it?” He narrowed his eyes when her face burned crimson again.

“Oh, Braeden!” Marianne exclaimed. “Why am I cursed with such a tease for a brother? You’re an embarrassment. Andrea, ignore him.”

Andrea smiled, but it was a polite response not a happy grin. “I guess I’ll have to.”

Braeden gallantly disposed of the wrappings and straightened the living room, even though used to people cleaning up after him. If he kept changing like this to earn points with Andrea he’d soon be housebroken to the point he wouldn’t recognize himself.

Ted tended the baby, leaving Marianne and Andrea free to start preparations for the turkey dinner. Andrea had brought her grandmother’s recipe for dressing which Marianne urged her to make while she prepared the mincemeat and apple pies.

Throughout the morning, neighborhood families dropped by and Ted and Braeden hauled out the old sleigh and horses to give rides. Midmorning, Braeden took time to go into the kitchen. "Want to take a break and go on a sleigh ride, Andrea?"

"No, thanks." She rinsed and wiped her hands, then picked up an onion and a paring knife.

Disappointed by her refusal to join in, his enthusiasm dissolved. Something had changed after she'd opened his gift. He'd get to the root of it later.

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Andrea turned down his offer to participate knowing full well that sitting in the cold could put her condition in jeopardy. She was thankful Braeden didn't press the issue of joining in the fun. From his brief hesitation, she knew she had given him reason to question her negative response, but she didn't have time to dwell on his suspicion. At four o'clock, amidst delicious smells permeating the house, they sat down for dinner.

"Someday, Braeden, I hope to be sitting down to a table where you divvy up the bird," Ted grumbled as he carved the first slice of white meat.

"And someday you might if you can keep your manners about you that long," Braeden tossed back.

Marianne giggled. "It's not likely he can, Andrea."

Andrea studied the joyous, smiling faces, yet a sudden feeling of uneasiness swept over her. She remained quiet throughout the meal, aware Braeden noticed. As much as she tried to join the merriment, she didn't seem able to break herself out of the blue mood enveloping her. The linking hearts had caused it, she knew. So silly.

When dinner was over, Ted stood up. "The baby is asleep and after that great meal, my vote says the women can leave while we men do the dirty work." Braeden made a face and shrugged.

"You're on," Marianne replied. "C'mon, Andrea, let's go for a drive down to the pond and check the thickness of the ice."

"You have a place to go skating?"

"Sure do, and I bet I have skates that'll fit you."



“Er... I don’t skate, but I can sit in the car and watch all of you do it and baby-sit at the same time.”

“Okay, if you’re sure you don’t mind.”

“I’d be thrilled.”

A hush had settled over the landscape with the day’s fresh fallen snow as Marianne and Andrea strolled from Marianne’s Subaru to the edge of the pond. Andrea wrapped her scarf over her mouth to protect her from any frigid blasts. Fortunately, the woods surrounding them offered shelter.

With her hostess chattering happily about Braeden’s childhood antics, Andrea quickly emerged from the gloomy mindset of having to protect her condition. This private chat with Braeden’s sister was important. She wanted to learn as much about him as she could to file away tidbits of information that she could draw on in her hours alone.

“I think Braeden has fallen for you, Andrea. We’ve never seen him this interested in a woman before. His eyes light up when he looks at you. Even Ted has noticed and he doesn’t usually pick up on such things. How do you feel about Braeden now that you’ve seen him in a family setting?”

“I care a great deal about him, as much as I’ve tried not to. In the beginning I thought he was the most egotistical, temperamental man I’d ever met, but I misunderstood his confidence and dedication to his patients. Looking back now, I can see I misjudged him. I wish I hadn’t said some of the things I did.”

“Can you overlook his reputation with women? I don’t think it’s all true. He’s only ever brought Sylvia out here... and now, you.”

“It doesn’t matter. He’s a confirmed bachelor, Marianne. I can’t change that and won’t try. He’ll tire of me soon, like the others, and I’m trying hard not to put myself in a vulnerable position. Being here I already miss what I’ll never have. Can you understand that? I don’t understand it myself, but along with the fun there’s a sadness.”

“That’s why you were so quiet at dinner, right?”

“I guess so, but I’m glad I came.”

The two women approached the pond and hesitated at the edge. “Let me just check to see if the pond is thick enough for us to skate on tomorrow.” Marianne stepped carefully onto the ice. “The ice is great

when it's this smooth. It'll be our first time out this winter. I'm going out farther, it seems hard enough so far."

"Okay, but be careful." Andrea remained at the fringe, not certain the smooth tread on her boots would track well on the slippery surface.

"I love to—"

CRACK! Andrea watched in horror as the incident unfolded in slow motion. A fissure slashed across the pond's surface, reverberating like a whip slicing the air. The ice beneath Marianne's feet gave way. With one loud shout she plunged into the water out of view. Andrea's scream snagged in her throat. She froze to the spot. Marianne rose up, sputtering and clawing at the sharp edge of the opening. The ice around the hole broke each time she tried to hoist herself up; she couldn't haul herself out.

With Marianne's thrashing, Andrea snapped from her shock and searched for a long stick. She found an old fallen tree branch and holding it tightly, sidled onto the ice. With crackling noises splintering the ice on every side, she flattened and extended the limb. Marianne grabbed and held on.

"Don't let go," Andrea yelled. No sooner had the words left her mouth, then the branch broke, leaving Marianne panic-stricken in the water. She sunk under the surface, then bobbed back. Andrea reached in her pocket, withdrew her nitro-glycerin bottle and sprayed under her tongue. She had to remain calm. If she panicked, too, Marianne would drown.

"Marianne, I'm going to throw my jacket along the ice. Grab the end, but don't pull. I'll hold onto the other end and twist it as much as I can for extra strength, then I'll tow you out."

Marianne nodded, her eyes wide with fear, her lips blue. There wasn't much time.

Andrea thought she heard an engine in the distance, but she concentrated solely on the task at hand—quickly twisting and holding onto the clothing for dear life and pulling with as much strength as she could muster. Her shoulder muscles contracted with the torture.

Braeden and Ted rushed to help, but with every resource within her dedicated to hanging onto Marianne's lifeline, Andrea couldn't

respond. Braeden pried her hands from the end of the spiraled fabric so he and Ted could reel in his sister. Once Marianne was safe on thick ice, Ted picked up his soaked wife and carried her to his truck. The ice was cold against Andrea's cheek as she lay spent, but thankful that a tragedy had been averted. She was barely aware of Braeden's approach.

Braeden sat her up and pushed her arms into the sleeves of her jacket, slightly damp from the water Marianne had splattered. He half-carried her to shore where she was able to stand on firmer ground. He swooped her up in his arms and carried her to Marianne's Subaru. Braeden didn't speak until he landed her on the front seat, but when he did, his raspy voice showed his concern. "Are you all right, Andrea?"

"J-just c-cold." She leaned back against the headrest trying to stay calm.

Once at the house, Braeden pulled the vehicle up behind Ted's truck and walked Andrea inside. Ted had carried Marianne to the living room and placed her in the rocking chair by the fire. Ted helped her shed her clothes and slip into the folds of a thick wool blanket. "I'll fill the tub with warm water. Check her out will you, Braeden?"

"My medical bag is in the car. Be right back."

While he examined his sister, Andrea sat on the hearth and concentrated on absorbing the warmth from the fireplace. The heat in the Subaru hadn't stopped her shaking. Her nitro spray had stood her in good stead this time, but the heaviness in her chest when she'd first seen Marianne's plight proved it had been a close call. That must be why she still trembled. She made her way to the kitchen and poured two mugs of coffee. Upon returning to the living room, she passed one to Marianne.

When Braeden finished with his sister, he glanced up at her. Andrea noted a perplexed expression on his face. However, he didn't say what bothered him now and she knew better than to ask. Her hands soaked up the heat from the ceramic and at last her jitters faded. Under Braeden's watchful eye, the women drained their mugs.

Ted helped Marianne upstairs for a soak in the tub. A few minutes later he came to the top of the stairs and yelled down, "Marianne's

responding well to the warm bath, Braeden.” His words shouted his relief.

Braeden spun around toward Andrea. “I’d better check you over, too.”

“I’m fine now, Braeden. There’s no need. I didn’t get wet.” She brushed his stethoscope away.

“I said I’m taking a listen.” He sat down next to her.

With no way out, she was forced to submit to his invasion and try to think of other things as he lifted her sweater. The coldness of the stethoscope’s diaphragm helped, but it did nothing to alleviate the questioning burn from his eyes.

“I’m taking your blood pressure, too.”

“This is silly, Braeden, you can see I’m all right.”

~ \* ~

While Andrea was in the kitchen, pride burst forth in Braeden’s chest. Marianne praised the way Andrea handled the emergency. He shuddered, thinking of what the consequences might have been. But he bristled when she mentioned that Andrea had pulled a small bottle from her pocket and sprayed a substance into her mouth. *What was the substance?*

“How are you feeling now, Andrea?” He narrowed his eyes at her return; his heartbeat picked up the pace.

“I’m fine, really.” Andrea’s cheeks bloomed with color. “No harm done, but it was a little scary. If you two hadn’t come along, I think the outcome might have been different.”

After listening to her heart, Braeden turned her around and checked out her lungs, thumping his fingers at various points along her back. Then he took her blood pressure.

For the experience she’d just had, she seemed in good condition. Her heartbeat was running a bit fast while her blood pressure was decidedly low. She had explained that as normal for her as he recalled. He turned her to face him and stared deep into guilt—like she’d been caught with her hand in the cookie jar. Something lay hidden behind the emerald gleam.

“Do you have asthma, Andrea?” He hoped she’d nod yes—he would prefer she’d puffed on a bronchodilator for lung problems rather than a nitro-glycerin inhaler for heart trouble.

“No, I don’t have asthma. Aren’t my lungs sound?”

“They’re fine.”

He waited for an explanation about her use of a medicinal spray. It didn’t come. She didn’t know Marianne had observed her using it, and so he said nothing.

Andrea quickly changed the subject. “How come you and Ted arrived when you did?”

“We had finished our kitchen chores and were having coffee when we got the notion you two had been gone for a long time and it was starting to get dark. The baby was awake, so Ted put her into the bunting bag and car seat and off we went. I think both of us had a premonition something wasn’t right.”

“I’m glad for whatever brought you to us,” she remarked. “I’m going to get more coffee.”

He could tell that his scrutiny was making her uncomfortable... and prodding guilt? “Stay put, I’ll get it.”

Carrying her mug, he picked up her jacket where she had laid it in the hall and took it to the kitchen. He hung it to dry behind the wood stove, hesitated, then, as an afterthought, reached into one of her pockets. He retrieved a small bottle. He knew by the feel it was a nitro-glycerin container before he looked. Braeden rolled it over in his hand; the prescription label read: *Andrea Martin. Use as needed. Dr. Frederick Smythe.* He slid it back in her pocket and refilled her mug.

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When Braeden returned with more coffee, the puzzlement still in his eyes made Andrea nervous. Maybe he was as shaken as she at the near loss of his sister. She found his gaze so intense that she couldn’t look him straight in the face. Ted’s appearance brought a welcome breather from her tension.

“Marianne is sleeping now, but I’m so glad you were there, Andrea.” Ted shrugged his shoulders. “I hate to think what might have happened if we hadn’t gone to look for you. It must have been an awful experience.”

"I never want to go through anything like that again, Ted." To alleviate her embarrassment at his appreciation, she added, "Guess that means skating is out."

Braeden didn't crack a smile. His gravity made her edgy; something was wrong. Luckily, Ted kept up a steady stream of conversation, which helped take her mind off Braeden's preoccupation. She knew she had lost something vital—it had to be related to her failure to be truthful and open with him.

Ted appeared to pick up on Braeden's gloomy mood. "I need help in the barn, Braeden. How's about putting those lily white hands to real work?"

"I can help, no problem."

Andrea was rocking Sara when the two of them reappeared. She listened with interest to their voices in the kitchen. They seemed to get along well even though they were different in many ways. Ted had been lighthearted and jolly during her visit. Braeden had become intense and brooding. There wasn't much doubt in her mind that she brought out his stormy side. She wondered what had given her dishonesty away.

There was only one solution and that was to own up and let the chips fall where they must. At least she'd had a great Christmas day until the pond episode. Later tonight she would confess everything. She couldn't live under this kind of pressure and still enjoy the happiness she'd found in this home. If she came clean, regardless of Braeden's reaction, she could repay the honesty so generously offered her by her hosts.

When the men entered the living room, she hoped Braeden would sit next to her. He didn't. He sat in an armchair and ignored her. Ted stoked the fire. Marianne joined them a few minutes later looking rested and content. She lifted the baby from Andrea's arms and took Andrea's place in the rocker.

Andrea felt a flicker of envy and no small amount of remorse. *God, how I want what Marianne and Ted have—a baby, a nice home, and an honest relationship filled with trust and companionship.*

A tear meandered down her cheek and she quickly brushed it aside. Not before the others noticed it though. She rose and walked to

the large front window. A three-quarter moon cast its beam across the carpet of snow. Multitudes of tiny crystalline ice structures, firmly fastened to the shrubs outside, radiated their brilliance.

“Do you want to go for a walk?” She jumped. Braeden, standing behind her, dropped his hands on her shoulders. His breath on her neck coaxed her to an affirmative nod.

A private stroll would be as good a time as any to bare her heart and her mind. The fun was over. Cinderella would not retreat from the ball this time. She grinned at his sudden upbeat expression despite the shiver winding its way down her spine. Enough time had elapsed since she ate that if they just ambled along and she didn’t get chilled, she should be all right. She borrowed a warm jacket from Marianne, located her scarf and followed Braeden, passing by him as he opened the door.

The snow crunched beneath their feet as hands in pockets they walked down the lane in silence. Halfway, Andrea stopped and stepped across the ditch to a fence that ran the length of the pasture. Braeden joined her and stood quietly as she looked up at the night sky.

“Braeden, there are things I must tell you. Things I should have told you when we first had difficulty getting along. You would have understood why I spend so much time with the coronary patients.” Andrea sniffed at the night’s freshness trying to bolster herself with enough strength to get through this drudgery.

“I have a heart condition—I know how desperate those patients feel. Doctors can’t begin to appreciate their mental anguish. Patients don’t know what questions to ask, so they lean back in their hospital beds and imagine the worst.”

Braeden withdrew his hands and clenched them on the fence railing.

“Four years ago, I graduated as a dietitian, was hired immediately for my first job, and became engaged to a man I’d known most of my life. Everything was going so well...” she trailed off, and took a deep breath. “I developed pains in my legs that felt like elastic bands squeezing the muscles. Because I swam every day, ate right, and didn’t smoke, nor did I have any of the common risk factors for heart

disease, the doctor thought arthritis had set in. His medication helped for a while. As the weeks went by, I noticed chest pains if I walked any distance and one day I had pain severe enough to almost take my breath away while in the pool. I had to go to Emergency. They put me on the cardiac floor as a precautionary measure. The doctors ran tests and found blockages. An angioplasty cleared the plaque, but the artery collapsed, causing a heart attack.

When Braeden removed one hand from the fence and placed it on her shoulder, she knew she had his sympathy, but she also knew it wouldn't last long. Only until she confessed the rest. This was going to be difficult.

"Go on," he murmured.

"When I was discharged, the specialist told me he didn't know what my prognosis was. They didn't want to do a bypass at my age unless as a last resort because of the higher risk for women. 'Do the best with what life has to offer,' I was told. I can still hear the echo of those words.

"You must have had enough collateral arteries around the occlusion to support your needs."

"Yes. Being sent away from the safety net of the hospital was like being thrown to the wolves. I was terrified. For several months, I did nothing but take it easy, afraid to move for fear it would bring on another heart attack. I left my job. My fiancé tried his best to be supportive, but after a while he couldn't stand to see me self-destruct. One day I woke up and there was a 'farewell-I-love-you-but' note in my mailbox."

Braeden reached out and pulled her against him. "You're here now, that's what's important."

She placed her hand on his arm. "There's more. Braeden, I came to the realization that I had to help myself. I couldn't live in a state of limbo. I read every scrap of information I could get my hands on and concentrated on diet and exercise.

"Eventually, I built up enough stamina to work full-time again, but I ran into unforeseen difficulties. The administrator where I had worked was a good friend of Dr. Jeffrey's and that's how I ended up here. Dr. Jeffrey knew about my condition but decided to take a



chance on me because he has angina, too. I didn't want people feeling sorry for me. He said it was our secret."

"You could have told *me*." He kissed her on the tip of her nose.

She shook her head. "I've seen how gentle you are with your patients. You would've treated me with kid gloves. That doesn't help. I have to feel normal."

Only she didn't feel normal. She felt a growing strain in her chest instead. It was starting to hurt. Now was not the time to fill in the rest. Let him absorb the ramifications of what she'd already said. She could tell him about the lawsuit later.

Andrea waited, expecting to be treated as if she were a leper or a piece of fragile china. Either reaction would tear her apart.

Braeden wrapped his arms around her and crushed her to his chest. She raised her tear-streaked face to his. He bent down and kissed her lips, softly at first, but with ever-increasing pressure. Her chill disappeared. The ensuing heat stormed her body, as his embrace became more demanding, more intense, more sexual. "I understand you," he murmured. "Trust me."

## *Nine*

“Come on.”

“Where are we going?” Andrea scrunched her shoulders and pulled back. She looked directly into Braeden’s face. “Look, Braeden, I think you need time to absorb what I’ve said. I don’t want to hop into bed with you simply because you pity me; that’s what you’re feeling right now—pity.” She twisted on her heel to continue the walk, but turned back to face him. “I’ve told you before, I don’t want a casual affair. We still don’t know each other well, and definitely not enough for me to risk intimacy. I have my pride.” Braeden’s forehead furrowed when he noticed the lecturing tone of her classes had crept into her soft-spoken words.

“Sometimes, I wish we’d never met.” Her body shook as she took a deep breath. “The complications have become almost more than I can stand. I imagine you don’t even know what I’m talking about. I wish I didn’t care about you, then probably I *would* sleep with you, no holds barred, and no worse because of it.”

Holding her elbow, Braeden steered her toward the house and remained silent as they walked back up the lane. The ‘no holds barred’ interested him. He didn’t have a clue what she was talking about, though. He could accept the heart disease—that was his life. He could help her as long as they were together, even though it wouldn’t be forever. She was accurate there, too. He didn’t want or need commitment; he’d made that clear. Obviously she wanted what he wasn’t prepared to give. She was driving him crazy and he had to

end this physical closeness. It was time to break out of the impasse and chalk it up to a life experience. *Damn her anyway.*

Braeden kept his thoughts to himself as they entered the house and shed their outdoor clothing in the kitchen. When they joined Ted and Marianne in the living room, he slumped into the chair nearest the fireplace, intent on spending the rest of the evening glaring at the crackling fire. The flames would lead him into his own private hell.

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Andrea knew Braeden was in a foul mood and she was the cause; how could she not be? She didn't attempt to bring him out of his snit or explain to his sister who eyed him with some concern but kept quiet. Andrea meant to give him a day or two to consider what she had told him. If he was still interested and pursued her, could she possibly put her fears aside and willingly slip beneath the covers with him? Oh how she wanted to do so. She was tired of this cat and mouse game, too. He had chipped away at her resolve constantly. It surprised her that she could still be outwardly forceful and such a shaky blob of jelly inside. She hadn't given him any inkling of her weakening power, though. Hopefully, it was too late—she could feel him backing away from her.

At bedtime, Braeden approached her at the foot of the stairs. "We'll be leaving in the morning, Andrea, I want to make rounds on my patients. We'll leave shortly after breakfast."

It was the deathblow to their relationship. Curt and final. Her heart ached as if he'd hammered it. She looked at Marianne and Ted and sensed they knew it, too. When she reached her room, she flung herself on the bed and sobbed far into the night. In the morning, tired and red-eyed, she hastily packed her things, then mustered up her courage and went down to breakfast.

Marianne and Ted were seated at the table talking in a hushed manner until she appeared. They offered their usual warm salutation. "Come on in, Andrea," Marianne called. "Braeden stomped out of here muttering he needed fresh air. He didn't seem to be hungry."

"Looks like we'll have a sunny drive back," Andrea replied, her voice laced with sarcasm. She didn't comment further and helped herself to a couple of pancakes from the stack. Ted passed the syrup

without being asked. She could tell by their woebegone expressions that Braeden must have told them they were breaking up. Ted made a quick departure to the barn. No doubt he figured this was a time for ‘woman talk’.

“We’ve enjoyed your visit, Andrea, and we hope we won’t lose contact with you.” The sincerity in Marianne’s voice touched Andrea’s sensitive nature. She wanted to run back to the bedroom and never come out. “Come see us anytime.”

“I’d really like to, Marianne. I guess Braeden told you things aren’t going well between us. I wish it could be different. I wish we could see everything in the same light.”

“Don’t you think that maybe you’re writing him off a little too quickly? I know my brother, and though he comes across as an ornery old bear at times, he’s actually very thoughtful and caring about his friends. I think he’s scared—scared of someone meaning too much to him again, demanding too much of him and abandoning him when he doesn’t measure up to expectation. Sylvia did that to him. She broke his spirit, but I think you can mend it.

“You’re wrong, you know. Braeden doesn’t need anyone. I can overlook his cantankerous ways, but I can’t overlook how he shies away from commitment.”

“The two of you need each other, not just in the sexual way, excuse me for getting personal, but for moral support. Braeden deals with life and death circumstances every day. He needs someone who has the strength of character to deal with him, yet can be warm and loving. You were meant for each other.” Marianne reached out and patted Andrea’s arm. “Give the relationship a chance. I told Braeden the same thing before he went out. I don’t think I got through to him, so maybe you’ll have to make him see the light. Please don’t give up on him, he’s just as lost and confused as you are.”

“It shows that much, huh? Right now, we need to be apart to regain our stability.” Her eyes misting, Andrea placed her hand on top of Marianne’s warm pressure. “Even if I did smooth things over, there are things he doesn’t know about me. They would break us up anyway, so I don’t think the relationship is worth working on. It’s

probably just as well we end with him being furious with me. At least we had a great Christmas. Thank you for that.”

When Braeden came in, he merely glanced at Andrea and his sister on his way to pick up the suitcases at the foot of the stairs. After he returned to the kitchen, he stopped only long enough to thank Marianne before loading the luggage in the trunk of his car. Andrea watched out the window as he waved to Ted, who was down in the lower pasture spreading hay for the animals. Braeden climbed into the car and started the engine.

“I guess that means I’m to leave now,” Andrea said. “Thanks again for your hospitality.” She quickly put on her jacket and slipped into her boots. She gave her hostess a parting hug, then walked with casual grace to the waiting vehicle. She dreaded the drive home.

As she opened the car door, she hesitated long enough to wave goodbye to Ted, then slid into the passenger seat beside one scowling doctor. The atmosphere was tense as they pulled out of the yard. She tried to still her breathing so she wasn’t the one disturbing the quiet as the car lurched from the driveway and proceeded down the snow-packed road. She felt the anger of the driver as the Jag picked up speed, a speed too fast for the slippery conditions ahead. The car skidded and fishtailed across the highway before it came to a sudden halt on the edge of the ditch. She didn’t say a word, just breathed in long deep breaths, trying to calm her anxiety and her temper.

While waiting for the palpitations to fade, Andrea glanced at Braeden. He had leaned his elbow on the car door’s armrest, his head supported by his hand against his cheek. White-faced, his dark angry eyes glared at her. Her teeth clenched.

She looked out the back window expecting to see traffic snarled behind, but there were no other vehicles on the road this early on a Sunday. She had to pull him out of his snit. If he was mad at her, okay, but it was ridiculous to risk their lives over it. “That was a close call, Braeden. The road is treacherous.”

“I’m sorry if I scared you. My mind was on other things, but I’ll slow down and concentrate on driving.” She breathed a sigh of relief. At least he was talking to her again, but the car didn’t move. “Did you love him?”

The question took her by surprise coming out of the blue as it did. She knew who he was referring to, but wanted to buy extra time. “Love who?”

“Your fiancé. You said you expected the loving would come later. You didn’t say if it did or not.”

“You have a good memory. No, I never loved him in an intimate way. I already told you we never slept together. That’s your real question, isn’t it?”

“It’s been playing on my mind. Trying to figure out whether to believe you. I only wondered if he’d been successful where I’ve failed. I’m arrogant and I know it—arrogant enough to want to be the one at the top of the heap. I’d be pissed if I’d been the only one to lose out.” He shifted his position and reached for her hand, then pulled it back. “I have to admit I’ve learned a lot about you these last few days, Andrea. I’m glad you came with me; it’s been an eye-opener.”

“I refuse to apologize for not being what you’re used to. For the sake of a calm working arrangement, we can settle for a mutual pact of cooperation. I enjoyed myself here very much, even though it ended on a sour note. You don’t know everything about me and it’s better left that way. There are things you would interpret wrong, so I think it’s wise we go our separate ways.” She finally said what was on her mind, but not in her heart. She stared out the window hoping he wouldn’t see her tears or how miserable she’d become.

“You know what? I think you’re right. What a load off my mind! This has become too difficult and neither of us needs it. Do you have plans for New Year’s? I’m taking Melissa Jenkins to a New Year’s Eve ball in the city.”

She glanced at him, not believing he was capable of such cruelty, but she’d wounded his pride.

“I made the date just before you and I kept company and I was wondering how to get out of it. Now I don’t have to worry and you know what? I’m looking forward to going.”

Andrea’s world crashed. What a jerk he was, and how naïve she’d been. He’d cut her to the quick in an instant. “I have plans, too,” she countered easily, as she slipped into thought. Braeden started the car and this time paid more attention to his speed. She didn’t invite him

inside when he deposited her suitcase on the back porch. And he didn't linger.

Andrea returned to work the next day. As she took her coat and boots off in her office, Sylvia Marshall leaned against the doorjamb. "How did your holidays go with Braeden?"

"I spent a couple of days with him at his sister's home. We had a lovely time." She spoke with a benevolence she didn't feel.

Sylvia hesitated; when she spoke there was a touch of melancholy. "I used to go there when Braeden and I were dating." She sighed and started back to her own office.

"Sylvia, why did the two of you break up? Did you know Braeden never got over it? That's why he's on this binge of going out with women and dropping them when they get too close. I think he's secretly punishing them, including me, for the hurt he feels."

Sylvia stopped and turned around, a wistful expression on her face. "Braeden didn't make the time for us and his lack of commitment turned me cold. He thought I was frigid. But it was because I couldn't relate in a loving way to his neglect. My personality doesn't allow me to be as relaxed with people as you are. I grew up in a home where there was little love or emotion and I craved more. Along came Craig, who grew up in the same type of environment and I could see in him a desperate need for love. I was immediately attracted to him. Ours is a passionate marriage, one we both feel comfortable in. Don't let Braeden push you away. He needs you, whether he knows it or not."

"I guess back then he must have felt defeated when he couldn't make you warm to him at his whim. He's so sure of himself, he probably hadn't even tried to analyze the problem from your point of view." She tossed her head. "I ended our relationship, Sylvia. He's going to start dating Melissa Jenkins. There's no turning back now."

"Then it's a done deal? Think about it carefully, okay?"

"I don't think I can avoid it."

The next few days blurred as Andrea struggled to come to terms with her torn emotions. Whenever she met Braeden, he would glance at her, nod politely, and walk away. She conducted her heart-smart lectures as usual but never received any feedback from him. Their

inability to connect must have been obvious to the nursing staff, yet no one questioned her aloofness, not even Nancy. She felt totally alone. She understood how Sylvia had felt.

New Year's Eve arrived, depressing her more. While nurses talked excitedly of the plans each had for celebrating, Andrea knew full well she'd be going to an empty house with nothing to look forward to at home. She rented two old movies, *Casablanca* and *Old Yeller*; they both had depth, but they both had great sadness. She needed to feel something for characters other than herself and Braeden. On the way home, she stopped at the liquor store and picked up a bottle of Asti Spumante.

After a lonely supper that she hardly noticed eating, Andrea carried the VCR upstairs to her bedroom and attached it to the small television set on top of her dresser. When she climbed out of a leisurely bubble bath scented with jasmine, she hopped into her new fluffy pink sleepers, complete with sewn-in feet and zipped up the front. She glanced in the mirror and laughed when she saw the reflection of something that looked a lot like a rabbit. Her hair fell gently down her back when she removed the fastenings.

The clock on her nightstand read almost nine-thirty when she started to watch *Casablanca*. Six candles flickered on her bureau, a partially empty wineglass sat next to the clock, and smoked oysters and Ritz crackers lay on a plate on her lap. Over Humphrey Bogart's raspy voice she thought she heard a car, but passed it off as background sound in the movie. She took another sip of wine. Deeply involved in the drama and romance, a loud knock on the back door startled her. She griped about the interruption as she thumped down the stairs. Turning on the porch light and without looking, she swung the door wide, annoyed enough to not think about the danger of a woman alone opening her door at night.

She could scarcely believe her eyes. In the yellow glow of the light, Braeden leaned against one of the posts that supported the porch roof. His dark tweed overcoat, open with a white scarf dangling around his neck, gave her the illusion of Bogart being there in the flesh. She blinked her eyes to clear her muddled vision. When she looked closer, she saw he had on a silver grey sweat suit, very



unBogartish, that brought out the grey in his hair. He looked more tired and haggard than she'd ever seen him.

A brief smile flickered across Braeden's face as he slowly scanned her body. "I took the chance you might be home, and when I saw your light on, I still wasn't sure I should stop." She sensed uncertainty and possibly questions in his pain-filled eyes. Didn't she say she had plans? Is she alone? Should he even dare be here? "Ah, I... I thought you had plans... but you're home." He looked sheepish. But what a welcome change from the damned self-assurance he always projected. He was almost endearing.

"I do have plans and I'm carrying them out now." She peeked outside, looking both ways on the veranda and over his shoulder to his car. "Where's your date, *Dr. Landry*? I thought you were going to some grand ball."

He raised an eyebrow, but didn't bite on her sarcasm. "I had an emergency, so it was impossible for me to go." He held her eyes with his. The sadness she saw tore at her heart. Common sense told her that the wine she'd had must be playing tricks with her mind. She hesitated, then sucked in her breath, ignoring the inner voice that ordered her to slam the door. "Do you want to come in for a *minute*?" She stressed the word 'minute', but he disregarded her sharp tongue, stamped the snow from his boots and brushed past her. She followed him into the living room and motioned for him to take a seat. What else could she do? He remained standing, looking around the room as if seeing it for the first time, then his eyes fixed on her. Her face heated; she hoped her eyes didn't betray how glad she was that he'd come.

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She looked pleased that he was here. There was no doubt the way her eyes sparkled. Braeden's stiff shoulders relaxed. He'd thought about her constantly; the harder he backed away from her presence at the hospital during the day, the more she entered his dreams at night. She possessed him and she wasn't even aware of it.

"Let me take your coat."

He took it off and threw it and his scarf onto the couch and turned to her. She was trying to cover her nervousness with simple hospitality. He took that as better than her earlier sarcasm.

“Would you like anything to drink?” she offered.

“Yes, please. I think I really need something strong.”

“All I have on hand that’s strong is brandy for when I have colds. Just a minute and I’ll get you a glass.” She returned with the bottle of cherry brandy and a delicate wineglass and handed them to him. He poured a small amount and gulped it, then placed the two items on the coffee table. “Andrea, I have bad news.” He took hold of her shoulders as she looked up, her brows furled. “The emergency case was Doug Jenkins. He died an hour ago. There wasn’t a thing I could do to save him.”

“Oh, no!” Her hand flew to her mouth. She turned away from Braeden and took a few steps, her head hanging, silently weeping.

“Andrea, can I get you something?”

She shook her head and turned back. “He’d wanted to talk to me and when he called last week I was relieved to hear from him. When I saw him, I knew it wouldn’t be long. I told him to get to the hospital, but he refused.” Her words rolled out as she yielded to her grief. Her shaky hand reached up to her cheek. Braeden saw her shoulders quiver. When she swayed, he steadied her and led her to the sofa. She snuggled into his arms as he sat beside her and he let her babble on without interruption as she told him how much Mr. Jenkins meant to her.

A short time ago, he’d broken the same news to Melissa at the hospital, but there had been no tears, and he’d kept thinking it was Andrea he wanted to comfort—Andrea, not Melissa. That’s why he’d come.

Melissa had coaxed and pleaded for him to take her home from the hospital, but he’d begged off and called her a cab. Now here he was and he knew he’d made the right choice. Lord! How he had missed Andrea—the feel of her soft pliant lips, the scent of her freshly washed hair, the touch of her smooth, satiny skin. He felt more comfortable with Andrea in this old house furnished with the bare necessities, than at his home filled with luxuries. Melissa couldn’t

touch her in warmth. He couldn't help wondering about her sexual passion. Melissa had made it clear she was available. She broadcast it every time they met. Andrea pushed him away—by design or circumstance he wasn't sure and it was the not knowing that drove him wild. He'd have to settle for being here to help her through this.

A considerable length of time passed before Andrea seemed to regain control of her emotions. Although the sobbing gave way to an occasional shudder, he kept her wrapped tightly in his arms, smoothing her hair, tenderly kissing her forehead.

"Braeden, will you stay with me tonight?"

"What?" Her words stunned him. He thought he must have only daydreamed her request.

"I asked if you'd be willing to stay with me tonight."

"If that's what you want, sure. What are the sleeping arrangements?" He brushed her hair back from her face and grinned.

"Whatever you want," she whispered.

"I've never followed a rabbit to her lair." He sat her back from him and focused on her eyes, feeling intense disbelief at his luck. "I *want* to sleep with you and you damn well know it, but I don't want to take advantage of you in a weak moment and have you regret it later."

"This isn't a spur of the moment thing. I've been considering it for a while." She took in a long breath. "I've realized how fleeting life is, but now it's hit me hard what a waste we make of it. With you and I going our separate ways, I want to remember this special closeness and..." Her words choked off; she waited a moment then let the rest of her thought tumble out. "I would like to have you as the one to introduce me to lovemaking—regardless of the consequences."

His breath turned ragged. Andrea clasped his hand in hers and got up from the couch. She pulled him to his feet. After turning out the lamp, she led him to the stairs where he paused and pulled her to his chest. "You must be sure this is what you want, for both our sakes."

"This is what I want. What I've wanted since I met you. Love me, Braeden—just a little, just for tonight?" Her voice was barely above a whisper, but the tone was bold, intentional, and firm.

"Andrea, I haven't come prepared with anything to protect you."

“The doctor told me I couldn’t have children, something to do with the medication I was taking. It was such a shock I barely listened to the details.”

“What med—”

“Oh!” Andrea tripped on the first step and would have fallen to the floor if Braeden hadn’t steadied her. Hand in hand they went slowly up the stairs to her bedroom door. Braeden hesitated. Never in his life had he felt so overwhelmed, so passionate. He looked down at her standing in the dim hallway light. Her eyes had an iridescent glow that punctuated her eagerness. And her sincerity. He could see no reluctance on her part; she knew exactly what she was doing. Weak with delight and uncertainty, he couldn’t let this chance pass. He wanted her body and soul, and he would take her this night. His soul demanded it. It was clear that she needed him with all of her innocence and all of his strength. He had her trust.

Andrea pushed the bedroom door open and flicked off the hall light switch. The candles she had lit earlier were still burning with a subdued light that projected silhouetted shapes around the room. The two of them entered a land of enchantment. Braeden quietly closed the door, afraid any noise might change her mind. He gently tugged at her shoulders and turned her to face him. When he looked down into her face, he was fascinated by the silent plea in her expressive eyes.

~ \* ~

There was no need to tell him that she never expected to meet another man who tugged at her heartstrings like he did, or to have a relationship with someone who made her feel more alive than she’d ever dare hope. Andrea placed the crackers and oysters on the bedside table. Raising her arms to encircle his neck, she wished she knew the intricacies of making love so she could please him. All she knew was what she’d seen in the movies and how realistic was that?

His arms surrounded her waist, pulling her against the hard wall of his chest. He lowered his head and held his mouth over hers, talking words of comfort to put her at ease. He brushed her lips with his, softly, deliberately. The warmth of his breath spread across her face. The scent of his cologne sent her mind skyrocketing, reeling with more desire than she’d ever known.

Unintentionally, she shivered, and he deepened the embrace crushing her to his body as closely as she could fit. She gasped for air but made no attempt to move away. His hands began a journey, swirling around her back in fluid movements. They slowed and meandered toward her rib cage and down over her hips. She turned her lips upward to caress his. His tongue gained easy access through the slight opening. As it mated with hers they began to explore the inner reaches of soft flesh and gloried in the magic of their intense feelings. Braeden broke free of the deep kiss, picked her up in his arms and carried her to the bed. He laid her back against the mound of pillows.

With one arm under her neck, he used that hand to hold her fingers as he switched his caresses to the front of her body. His free hand boldly explored the swell of her breasts and patiently foraged a trail down her abdomen to her thighs. Her expression changed from a questioning hesitation to enthusiastic encouragement. Her body stiffened at the erotic invasion when his hand moved between her legs. His hand flattened and focused on pressing inward with increasing pressure, then eased off.

She didn't have to say anything; he must know her muscles had tensed. She wanted more, but was too shy to ask. Suddenly, he faced the challenge: his fingers unzipped her nightwear and forged beneath the fuzzy material back to the same spot. The thought crossed her mind that he was probably used to filmy masses of sexy lingerie when he made out with other women. The material he dealt with now was anything but sexy; she wasn't sexy either, but at least she was honest. Maybe he could make do with that.

She wished she knew how to tease and bring him to the height of desire. Her invitation for him to stay had surprised her, but being here with him now was sheer happiness. She prayed he would be satisfied and for this little while she could bring him to great heights. It wouldn't be for lack of trying.

Her finger reached up and traced his mouth. She listened to every inflection of his soft murmurs, memorizing them along with every feature of his face. His skin bubbled tiny droplets of perspiration. His eyes became smoky. He quickly drew his sweatshirt over his head and

discarded it, then sank back into her hold. Her hands, pitched to the height of excitement, roamed over his skin. He leaned back and spread the opening of her nightwear wide and exposed the hardened nubs of her breasts. Braeden glanced one more time into her eyes seeking reassurance that she wanted him to continue. She nodded, understanding. He lowered his head and kissed her neck and shoulders. Her hands moved like quicksilver, wanting to explore every inch of him. Needing a much closer contact, she arched her upper body to encourage his advance.

The touch of his hand on her bared breasts sent shivers of ecstasy plunging into the deepest recesses of her flesh. Her wildest dreams couldn't have brought up such potent imagery. His light touch on the sacred parts of her body sent her mind exploding in all directions at once as she soaked in the pleasure-pain tension. She wanted to go to the limit, to feel his need, to wallow in his desire. She was ready for whatever came, completely willing to be his. Her mind floated free, oblivious to all except his loving. She thought nothing could be more pleasurable than this caress, but she was wrong again. His kisses had only just begun and already he was taking her breath away. Meeting no resistance, he slipped her clothing off, leaving her fully exposed. Her excitement grew when she noticed his scrutiny. She, in return, studied every muscle of his physique as he removed the rest of his clothes and threw them to the floor.

She clutched his shoulders, begging for greater closeness yet, moaning with pure delight when she achieved it skin to skin. Could anything be more wonderful, more sensuous, more lethal? She thought not. As his arm wrapped around her shoulders, one hand roamed the length of her at will, stroking in gentle tantalizing movements that brought her to the edge of insanity. Her body arched again to his will. With the inhalation of his scent, he awakened her senses setting her body and mind aflame.

Andrea looked deep into his eyes, fascinated by the reflection of her emotions. Overwhelmed by her willingness to trust again, she thrilled at her acquiescence to his power. In spite of her inexperience, she opened her body, and more specifically, her raw desire, for his use. This was her first time. One part of her wanted to race ahead; the

other part wanted to hold onto the glorious sensuality of the moment. She reveled in the sensitivity that made her feel she would split apart if she didn't soon reach the pinnacle. He obviously sought to delay the moment of penetration as long as possible; he wanted her ready. She knew she was.

Her eyes misted with the urgency for completion. With one last powerful kiss, Braeden eased his body into hers and entered her fiery depths. The heat percolated her blood stream. A quick burn caused her to yell out, but he smothered her cry with the tight press of his mouth. He absorbed her pain. The rhythmic rite of union built to the apex. Her world filled with bright colors. The burst dispelled all anxiety, all sadness, and any misgivings lingering in the shallows of her mind. The wild, reckless pace crested, then eased. Exhausted, they lay in each other's arms. Andrea steeped in her contentment—at peace with the world and herself.

Braeden glanced at the clock. "Happy New Year, Andrea."

She was convinced she'd seen heaven in all its beauty and was certain the rapture of that moment could never be duplicated. Wrong. Braeden turned to her more times through the night and she accommodated him with the same intensity as at the first. He filled her night with magic, her mind with wonder, her spirit with joy. He lifted her to the highest heights. She gave everything she had in return.

Lying awake after he'd fallen asleep, she pondered why she hadn't had an angina attack from the exertion. The answer came quickly, though it had never been mentioned to her amidst all the information she'd received about heart disease. Angina was caused by lack of oxygen and poor blood flow. She remembered how her heart had picked up the pace with Braeden's first touch. Her breathing had picked up as well—the frequent intakes of air must have compensated for the energy spent. She not only felt more alive than she could remember, she felt secure. A question at the back of her mind had been finally answered. She could make love.

In the glow of the moonlight, she freed herself to appreciate the handsome ruggedness of the man who had stolen her heart. With him, still as he was, as tender as he had been, she could breathe in his

strength without acting like one of the nurses on the make or a goo-goo-eyed schoolgirl. He was everything she'd expected and more and she'd not let herself be taunted by thoughts of what could not be. Tonight was surely enough pleasure for a lifetime.

Andrea awakened sniffing the smells of coffee and bacon. Sunlight drifted across her face as she stretched and snuggled peacefully under the covers. The scent of their lovemaking lingered on the bedclothes. Had anything ever been so perfect? She drifted into a twilight zone, happy to languish lest the spell be broken.

She felt Braeden's presence and opened her eyes to see him peeking around the corner of the bedroom door. He came over to the bed and tenderly stroked her cheek. She squirmed over to be near him and he slipped onto her bed. The touch of his hand, as he brushed a stray lock of hair from her face, was still erotic, and when he touched his lips to her bare shoulder, she wanted to make love again. He sat up and she squinted against the rays of sunlight. Her arms reached up pulling him to her so she could give him a kiss on his mouth. He obliged by returning the enthusiasm with kisses of his own.

"Breakfast is ready. You must be hungry, sleepyhead."

She sighed and wished they could make love every moment. They had so little time. Braeden helped her on with her robe and they sauntered down to the kitchen. As they sat across from each other eating the meal, a sudden shyness crept over her when thoughts of what they had done flickered through her mind. She was conscious of the fact she was naked beneath the robe and bare of makeup. Her hair had to be a mess; she'd only tied it back with a ribbon. He, on the other hand, looked full of life, energetic, bright-eyed and masculine—definitely masculine with the dark mat of chest hair protruding from the open collar of his sweat suit.

His enthusiastic flow of conversation helped her recover and it amazed her that they could behave so natural with each other this morning. Braeden had been patient with her lack of knowledge and taught her what she needed to know. She felt guilty that she had pushed her sadness for Mr. Jenkins from her mind, but this time she wasn't going to let her doubts interfere with the glow she felt. Not



even her awareness that there would be no further lovemaking could destroy what they'd had.

"I have to check in at the hospital this morning," Braeden said, interrupting her thoughts. "I'm on call, since I took Christmas off. I wish I could stay here with you, Andrea, but I have to go. I'll see you at work tomorrow, okay? I'm so glad I came out here last night." He squeezed her hand one last time.

"I'm the one that's glad. It was thoughtful for you to come and tell me yourself about Mr. Jenkins. I don't think I could have stood it otherwise. Thank you," she whispered. Her hand touched his arm.

"Will you be all right?"

"I'll be fine. I imagine the funeral will be in a couple of days. It'll be rough on Melissa, losing her father just after finding him. At least she had a little while to get to know him. It's better than nothing." Braeden looked surprised that she would care. She accepted his parting peck on her cheek and waved from the doorway as his car pulled out of the driveway.

The morning shone bright and clear, the snow glistened with the sparkle of a new day. Closing the door, she poured another cup of coffee and let her mind wander to the hours they had spent locked in each other's arms. She'd never been so happy, but why did she have this feeling of impending doom? Maybe this was the start of grieving over the friend whose death she had selfishly put aside to reap her own pleasure. She shrugged her shoulders in exasperation; she disliked this new self-serving image of herself.

## *Ten*

Andrea arrived at her office earlier than usual, the memory of her ecstasy conflicting with regret for her surrender. To free herself from the clash of emotions she needed to bring clarity to her mind. Her patient duties would fulfill that need. As luck would have it, she visited the cardiac floor and returned to the kitchen without a glimpse of Braeden.

Once back at her desk, her mind skipped into low gear when she wondered what methods Braeden used for setting his conquests free. Did he dump them abruptly or did he wine and dine them, then make a big speech reaffirming his aversion to a permanent involvement? One element had appeared that she hadn't expected. He seemed genuinely reluctant to leave.

She sensed Sylvia watching her as if she wanted to ask a question but didn't know how. Since talking about Braeden was not on the list of things Andrea wanted to do, she gave her no encouragement and pretended to be busy with a mound of paperwork.

The day dragged and Andrea found her spirits lackluster to say the least. Visiting hours at the funeral home were scheduled for the evening with the service to be held the next afternoon. Rather than drive all the way home after work and return to pay her respects, she had brought her street clothes with her. A plan to make a quick appearance and express her condolences was strengthened by her decision to have a pleasant dinner first. She hoped a small, but elegant

restaurant down the block from the funeral home would eliminate the uneasiness that at times overwhelmed her.

The hostess ushered her to a table in an alcove sided by a curved window. With the Christmas decorations gone from the lampposts, the streets appeared bleak. Splashed with a dirty covering of slush, the banks of snow had lost their pristine whiteness. While the waitress lit the table's single candle, Andrea watched pedestrians hurry home to their families. Her shoulders suddenly chilled; she missed the camaraderie of the friend who had cheered her whenever she felt down.

Andrea opened her menu and without giving it much thought, ordered the roast beef 'special'. Sitting back to relax, she scanned the room. She saw them seated on the other side—Braeden, in company with Melissa Jenkins—he was staring at her. His brooding eyes held her in place; a shot of adrenaline rushed through her blood. Instead of palpitations, a flood of mixed emotions inundated her nerves—embarrassment, resentment, and was that jealousy undercutting her self-respect? Every word of gossip she'd heard about Braeden and his women played in her ears like an endless tape recorder bent on destruction.

Grim-faced, Braeden nodded to her. Melissa looked to see what attracted his gaze and fired off a riveting glare. Seeing him with Melissa crystallized her own weakness. She knew his rules and had played his game anyway. Melissa could take on the challenge and more power to her. Andrea's determination not to enter into a carnal affair firmed. Next came the impossible part—not letting the experience interfere with their working relationship.

Amazed at the intensity of her dislike for the sour-faced woman, Andrea merely smiled half-heartedly and swiveled her face to the window. Her appetite gone, the prospect for a pleasant meal ended. Once the waitress placed her dinner in front of her, Andrea toyed with the food. When she finally finished the main course, she declined dessert but ordered a refill of coffee. She tried to persuade herself to accept the inevitable—she'd probably be seeing them as a couple from time to time and she might as well get used to it.

Braeden's voice broke into her thoughts as she watched an old man with a cane plodding along the sidewalk. "Hello, Andrea. Why don't you bring your coffee over and join us?"

He looked handsome in his three-piece charcoal grey suit. His eyes seemed darker, more intense; her heart jumped when she looked into their depths. The last thing she wanted was to sit with them knowing Melissa had his companionship, not only for dinner but no doubt later as well. "I don't think so, Braeden, but thanks for asking."

"Please? I'm sure Melissa needs your sympathy."

Questioning her susceptibility to his plea and feeling more down because of it, Andrea accompanied Braeden across the restaurant floor and sat down opposite Melissa. To boost her confidence, she managed a pleasant expression. She'd not allow Melissa to have an inkling of how miserable she felt. She inhaled sharply, braced her nerves and took the plunge to be kind. "I'm sorry for your loss. Your dad was a wonderful person and like a father to me."

Melissa's eyes turned colder than ever. The woman clearly resented her mentioning her dad. Melissa glanced up at Braeden's watchfulness, then settled for a simple, "Thank you."

If Braeden hadn't been present, this encounter could have been put off until later when Andrea was more prepared. She had to make the best of it, though, and there was a bright side—she'd fulfilled her responsibility. Now she didn't have to go to the home. Her tension didn't ease like it should. She tried again to be sociable. "The weather is milder today. Hopefully, it will hold for the funeral, too."

Melissa remained silent.

Braeden's composure amidst Melissa's rudeness caused Andrea's stomach to roil like a storm-tossed sea. To maintain her sense of equilibrium, she avoided initiating further conversation. She pretended to show interest in the general hubbub of the room as the waitresses served other guests. The strain in the air became unbearable. She didn't need this. She gulped her coffee and excused herself with, "I was going to see you at the funeral home, Melissa, but now it's not necessary. Goodnight to both of you."

Melissa's eyes lit. "Goodbye."

Andrea turned to leave.

“Wait!” Braeden jumped up. “I’ll walk you out.”

Andrea’s breath suspended on Melissa’s gasp. She wanted to escape the pressure and Braeden was doing his utmost to increase it.

“I’m certain Andrea can find her own way out. Can’t you see she’s in a hurry?”

Andrea steamed to the cash register without waiting for him.

“I’ll cover the lady’s bill,” Braeden announced to the cashier.

Andrea turned and frowned. “I’d rather you didn’t.”

Too late. The young girl had already swiped his card through the machine and was adding in the total for his charges as well. “Thank you.” Andrea marched toward the door.

Braeden’s hand clasped her shoulder. “I think we should talk.” His words speared like an arrow bent on preventing her escape.

“We have nothing to say to each other outside of work. This isn’t fair to your new interest.”

“It’s not what you think, Andrea.”

“You have no idea what I think, but I’ll tell you one thing I’m sure of—we’re better off forgetting about New Year’s Eve.”

He glanced back at his table. “All right, if that’s how you want it. Goodnight.”

Andrea drove straight home, thankful to be back in a comforting environment. Ginger curled in her lap as soon as she slumped in the easy chair. When the telephone rang at ten o’clock, she didn’t answer, and instead, allowed the machine to pick up the voice of the caller—Braeden. “Call me when you get in, will you please, Andrea?”

*In a pig’s eye!*

A night of restlessness didn’t help pacify Andrea’s churning nerves. She appeared at work, feeling pale and listless the next morning. Sylvia peeked around the doorway of her office. “You look sick, Andrea.”

“I’m not feeling well. I wonder if we could make a bargain: you visit the patients on the cardiac floor and I’ll supervise the kitchen and cafeteria while you’re gone. I don’t have any classes today.”

“Is Braeden the real reason you don’t want to be on that particular floor?”

Andrea swallowed and answered truthfully. "Yes, I don't think I can stomach him today."

"You've fallen for him, haven't you? I could see this coming, you know. Let's talk about this." The dietitian's eyes glistened as she pulled up a chair to Andrea's desk. "I think you'd be ideal for him. I'd love to see him happy for once in his life. He's been allowed to do his own thing too long, and now he's set in his ways. It won't be easy for any woman to break down those protective barriers he's built." She tapped Andrea's arm and stretched closer. "I had the impression he was very interested in you, though. What happened?"

Andrea's skin heated all over. "He got what he wanted. You know, 'the thrill is in the chase', at least it is for him. I knew better."

"I see." Sylvia leaned back in her chair. "And did he leave in a hurry to get to the hospital?"

"Yes, he said he was on call... In case you're wondering... I did the dropping."

"*You* did?"

"I didn't take his phone call after I saw him with Melissa last night. This way he doesn't have to force himself to let me down gently."

"I see. I did the same thing after I'd had enough. He didn't take it kindly. We've been engaged in a silent war ever since. Sylvia stood. All right, I'll check on the cardiac patients." Sylvia paused at the threshold and leaned against the doorframe, her arms folded. "Beware! Braeden isn't stupid. Be prepared for his temper. If you think he was angry with you in the beginning, that'll seem like child's play now. He'll not accept *you* ditching *him* easily. It'll be too much of a blow to his inflated ego."

Andrea leapt to Braeden's defense. "I never saw any signs of conceit, Sylvia. He's confident, certainly, he has a right to be, but he's also generous, patient, and helpful. I guess I don't really know him, and he sure doesn't know me." She blinked, surprised by her own vehemence in the last few words.

"Mark what I say, dear, consider yourself forewarned. I had such hopes for the two of you." Sylvia shook her head and left.

Andrea pushed Sylvia's comments out of her thoughts and she was able to function better with their exchange of responsibilities. It wasn't until noon, during her supervision of the cafeteria that she looked up into Braeden's face. He nodded and she tossed a quick smile from behind the counter, then busied herself calling for replacements for the desserts that had been sold. She wanted to run to the kitchen but was kept in place by a conscious refusal to let his presence overcome her pride.

After he passed through the lunch line, she occasionally glanced to the table where Braeden sat with Mr. Jeffrey, only to be met by an icy stare each time. An hour later, she was hungry and wished he would leave so she could take her break. The cafeteria would soon shut down until suppertime. The funeral was scheduled for three o'clock and called for nourishment beforehand or she'd be even queasier than now.

Since Sylvia frowned on eating in the offices, she reluctantly grabbed a tray and guided it along the rail, selecting bland foods. She carried her tray to an isolated table at the far side of the dining room and sat with her back to the diners. Braeden's penetrating inspection reflected in the windowpane and sliced through her like a knife cutting through butter. Andrea managed to eat half of her egg salad sandwich. When his image disappeared with a natural shift of the sun's rays, she then relaxed and sipped her tea. She didn't know if he was still in the room or not and fought the urge to check. There was an exit near his table and presumably by now he'd gone back to his patients.

"Do you mind if I sit down, or do you still want to ignore me?" His firmly set jaw and scornful tone set the mood instantly.

"It's a free country, Braeden. You can sit where you want. Why aren't you helping Melissa prepare for the funeral?" She couldn't keep the sarcasm from shading her voice.

"I'll be going to her home after I leave here. Is that some kind of crime? She's broken up by her father's death and I'm trying to help her through it."

"Like you helped me through the other night? Oh, Braeden, let's just drop it, before we say things we'll regret. I don't regret being

with you New Year's eve and you made my Christmas perfect, but it's over now. Go to Melissa, she needs you." She raised her hand, rethinking her lie. "Personally, I don't think she needs anyone. She'll get what she wants from her father's estate. Can't you see she was only interested in his money? Even he could see through her. Melissa would have made him go into the hospital, if she'd really cared."

Melissa's abuse of her father had spiked Andrea's intense reaction against Braeden's sympathy for the woman. By the incredulous expression on his face, he didn't agree with her. He tapped his knuckles on the table, his indecision clear, then he sighed and strode from the room. Andrea sat in silence, shaken by the unsubstantiated words that had poured from her mouth.

The hours until the service were marked by bouts of nervousness alternating with moments of fury whenever she thought about Melissa. If Braeden had been keeping company with any other female, she doubted she'd have reacted in such a degenerative way.

With the sun streaming through the stained glass windows onto the dais where he stood, Braeden's poignant eulogy moved Andrea and Nancy to tears. When he returned to the front pew, Melissa buried her face into his neck. Andrea tried not to watch him comfort her with his arm around her shoulder.

Andrea had taken an extra dose of her beta-blocker before she left her office. She knew this would be an anxiety-ridden time, but she didn't realize how stressful. She wished she dared use a spray to alleviate the tightening in her chest, but her blood pressure would lower too far and cause her to faint. She ignored the discomfort by concentrating on the colorful religious scenes on the church walls. When the choir sang the last hymn and the benediction ended the service, the pallbearers carried the casket down the aisle followed by Braeden and Melissa. Andrea lowered her head as they passed by her. Nancy squeezed her hand. Then the people filed outside and the fresh air breathed new strength into Andrea's body.

"I'm surprised Braeden isn't a pallbearer," Nancy whispered.

"Braeden probably thinks he's doing what Mr. Jenkins would want."

"Are they dating?"



"Shh. Yes."

"She's not his type."

"He likes any female."

"That's only rumor. Braeden is discriminating in his selection of dates, I've observed."

"Oh."

Andrea scrutinized Braeden's well-shined black shoes, evading his gaze when he suddenly turned away from the hearse and looked up at her. She breathed a sigh of relief when the pair climbed into Braeden's car and followed the vehicle to the cemetery's vault.

"I have to get back to work an extra shift. I'll see you tomorrow."

Nancy patted Andrea's arm and rushed to her car.

Andrea didn't drive straight home. She drove the country roads instead, and by the time she entered her yard she had calmed. She spent the better part of her evening leisurely watching TV and for the first time in ages she had a good night's sleep. In the morning, however, she seemed unusually groggy and not in the least rested. More tired than she had ever remembered, she chalked it up to stress.

The phone rang just as she returned to her desk from visiting patients. A smooth-flowing voice introduced himself as Brett Bentley, Doug Jenkins's lawyer. He wanted her to meet with him at his office for the reading of the will.

At four o'clock, Andrea entered Mr. Bentley's lavishly furnished domain. Heavy oak chairs with soft, black leather chairs strategically placed in front of a large desk set the mood for formality. Plush cherry red carpeting complemented the rich oak-paneled walls. Mr. Bentley extended his hand and grasped hers with a warm grip. In his mid-thirties and well groomed in a navy Armani suit and red tie, his bright blue eyes shone from beneath bushy eyebrows. His wavy brown hair stayed neatly behind his ears and just brushed the collar of his shirt. He motioned Andrea to one of the chairs. She had barely sat down when his secretary ushered Melissa into the room.

Melissa masked her lofty attitude with a fake smile. Her demeanor livened when she switched her focus to the lawyer. Her eyes bubbled excitement when Mr. Bentley extended his greeting. His hand merely brushed hers.

“I’ve called you ladies here because you are both mentioned in Doug’s will, which he revised a short time ago. I’ll skip the whereas and wherefore clauses and get down to the items of interest to the two of you. Doug left a sizeable amount to various organizations which are listed, and I’ll go over them later, but to you Miss Martin, he has left the sum of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars.”

Andrea’s hand flung to her mouth in disbelief. Melissa glared, then waiting expectantly, she turned back to the lawyer.

“Miss Jenkins, I will read carefully what is written here. ‘For my daughter, Melissa, who has found me only recently, a fact which I suspect is due more to the money she might inherit than any great need to have a father, I am setting up a trust fund. This trust fund, I hope, will make up in some small way for my absence in her formative years. I want to encourage her to find a life of her own that will give her a sense of dignity and ambition. I leave her the bulk of my estate to be given out in amounts of no more than thirty thousand dollars each year until she is fifty years old. At that time, the rest of the monies may be disbursed to her.’”

Melissa didn’t move for a few moments.

When her mouth opened, the words were harsh. “Thirty thousand a year? Why that’s a paltry amount considering how rich he is... er... was. He can’t do that, can he? Why should he leave that, that... her, all the money at one time? She’s only a dietitian, or did you do more than check out his nutrition needs, Andrea? Maybe you were after his money from the start?” Melissa leaped up from her chair, a look of pure hate crossed the woman’s face.

Mr. Bentley glanced from one to the other. “Sit down, Miss Jenkins. The will is very clear. It now has to go through probate court and hopefully that will be finished within six months. We can arrange for any of your immediate expenses to be taken care of, but I want you to understand, Doug was very clear regarding his intent in this matter. His mind was sound in spite of his body’s frailty.

“There must be some way around this and I intend to find it, Mr. Bentley.” Melissa twisted around and stomped out. The door slammed behind her.

Mr. Bentley winked as Andrea tried to comprehend her actions and the large amount of money involved. “Don’t worry about her, Andrea—do you mind if I call you by your first name?”

Andrea shook her head.

“The will is ironclad, there’s little she can do about it. Between you and me, I don’t think she even deserved what she got, but Doug felt guilty that she might have become a better person had he found her sooner. To change the subject, would you like to have dinner with me? I’m sure this has taken a lot out of you.”

“I’d like that, Mr. Bentley.”

“My name’s Brett. Let’s go to that seafood restaurant down the street. The food is excellent, if you like fish, that is.”

“I do... Brett. Thank you.”

The lawyer proved an amiable dinner companion and Andrea soon felt at ease. Pleasant, not standoffish or formal, he had a great sense of humor and regaled her with funny stories of law cases he’d handled. He garnered her absolute attention and she couldn’t remember a time she’d felt so at ease in a man’s presence. She hardly ever relaxed in her relationship with Braeden. With him, she had never known when she might say something that would set him off or vice versa. *Maybe some good comes out of everything*; a flicker of amusement skipped into her mind.

She wouldn’t have felt so cheerful had she looked off to one corner of the room and observed Braeden sitting alone at a table, his eyes locked on her.

Two hours later, she was on her way home, deep in thought about her inheritance. Her mind flashed back to her last employment—to her horrendous experience. A patient had left her money, but not nearly this much. Yet the family had been so upset they launched a lawsuit. The case was thrown out for lack of evidence that she had deliberately coerced the woman into entering her name in the will. Because of the accusations, she had refused the money. She had hoped people would realize she was not the gold digger the inheritance implied. But it made little difference to the rumor mill—constant whispering and pointed fingers caused stress that had aggravated her heart condition. She had to resign.

This time, she decided not to give up the money. Mr. Jenkins had looked on her as the daughter he wished he'd had. He hadn't known she was in debt. She never once alluded to the fact in his presence. Her conscience was clear.

She bit her lip when her thoughts jumped to Braeden. She anticipated his reaction when he got the news—satisfaction. He'd questioned her motives when they'd met, now he'd have good reason for questioning them again. Wearily, she got out of the car and ambled to the kitchen door. If only she wasn't so tired lately, she could ignore the tension between them. *Giving up Braeden must have had a powerful effect on my body.* She slowly made her way up to bed.

When at the hospital, Andrea kept the tidings of the inheritance to herself. There was no need to prime the gossip pump. No doubt a bulletin would circulate fast enough from Melissa's mouth. She expected Braeden would be the first to hear; yet during the next few days, there was no indication he'd found out anything. They remained their usual distant selves whenever they happened to cross paths.

Asked out by Brett Bentley a few times, she enjoyed his company, but had no designs on making it anything other than a good friendship. And so far, he accepted their relationship as such, which made it easy for her thoughts to sometime wander to Braeden when she was with him. She tried to center on remembering the good times during the Christmas season. Gradually, she could even recall New Year's Eve without getting teary-eyed.

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On a blustery day in the middle of February, Andrea staggered from her bed and made a beeline to the bathroom—sick to her stomach. The cold icy wind that blew drifts of snow across her frozen yard almost buried her car, convincing her she was in no shape to go to work. Reluctantly, she called Sylvia.

"I can't make it in today; I have the flu."

"Don't worry about things here, Andrea, I can handle it. Maybe you should go to the doctor. I haven't said anything before, but you really haven't looked healthy for some time. Why don't you go see Craig today after the roads are plowed?"

"I'm not well enough to go out of the house. I'll be okay if I stay in and rest. I'll be in for work tomorrow."

"All right, you're probably right not to face those winds. The driving will be treacherous, too."

Andrea made a hot toddy then moped about the house before giving in to return to bed. She had just climbed in when the toddy heaved. After cleaning up the mess and changing the bedclothes, she could barely crawl in to get warm. More miserable than ever, she lamented not taking the time to find a new doctor when she first moved here. She'd been told most weren't taking new patients, and although Nancy had spoken with her own doctor about taking Andrea on, Nancy didn't know she needed a cardiologist. Andrea buried her head under the covers and tried to get warm. Her stupidity surprised her. A general practitioner could handle this illness.

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Sylvia spied her husband speaking with Braeden and Nancy at CCU's nursing station. "Hello, Braeden." She didn't smile, but she didn't reciprocate his scowl, either. "Craig, Andrea has phoned in sick. Could you go out to her home and see her as a favor to me? I know she doesn't have a family doctor."

"She's lost a lot of weight, Sylvia," Nancy joined in. "I've tried to get her to see my doctor, but she keeps putting it off. She's had a lot on her mind lately. Maybe her immunity is down and she picked up the latest bug." Nancy rolled her eyes toward Braeden, and Sylvia laughed.

"Well, I suppose I could take the time and go, if you give me directions to her home," Craig answered, "but it will be late afternoon."

Sylvia raised an eyebrow. "I don't know where she lives, other than in the country."

"Neither do I," Nancy chimed in.

"Never mind, Craig," Braeden interjected, "I can go as soon as the roads are clear. I know where she lives and I've noticed how washed-out she's looked. You'd be soft with her and she'd twist you around her finger tighter than a camel's ass in a sandstorm. I don't intend to let her have that affect on me."

No one said a word.

~ \* ~

Andrea stayed in bed all morning, too weak to go downstairs and build a fire. The house had chilled from the wind blowing through the cracks around the windows and under the doors. She snuggled deeper under the covers trying to gain warmth from the extra blanket she'd managed to lug back to bed on her last bathroom excursion. "There must be a bad virus going around, Ginger." The cat circled and curled in a ball on her feet. Although her forehead didn't seem overly hot, each time she tried to sit up weakness forced her back. Her parched lips and empty stomach longed for a drink of ginger ale. *I could lay here and die and nobody would care, except for Brett. Maybe I should call him, but then he'll want to come out and he'd catch it, too.*

She thought she heard a thud outside but passed it off as the wind knocking over the planter on the porch. *No sensible person would be out here on a stormy day like this; I bet the roads aren't even plowed.* She drifted off.

When someone jiggled her shoulder and called her name, she awakened from the fog. How long had it been—seconds, hours? The voice of the blurred face hovering above sounded hauntingly familiar. It couldn't be. "Braeden? Is it you, or am I hallucinating?"

"It's me making another house call," his gruff voice replied. "I found your key in the planter on the doorstep. How long have you been like this?"

His strong hold of her wrist brought her around to face him. She shook her arm to get free but he held her fast. She had no choice other than to answer. "Since this morning when I first woke up. I don't have a fever, but I don't have any strength, either. Is there a virus on the go?"

"There's always a virus on the go in winter," he snapped. "When did you eat last?"

There was no mistaking that belligerent tone; it was the one that made her shudder every time she remembered it. Had he landed here to haunt her to death in person? If so, she was well on her way. "Sometime yesterday, I think. Lunchtime, that's when. I haven't had

much appetite lately. This bug must have been incubating for a while.”

Braeden pulled his stethoscope from his medical bag and sat on the edge of her bed to examine her. She attempted to move away. The dizziness swirling inside her head worsened with her movement. It was easier to give in. She disregarded the tingle from his touch as he unbuttoned the top of her flannelette pajamas and listened to her heart. She avoided the dark glowering eyes fixed on her face, too.

“Sit up and lean forward, so I can listen to your lungs.” His firm order held none of the gentleness he’d shown with his patients. He obviously left that for the benefit of those who hadn’t dropped him like a hotcake. Why should he be ticked now? He’d had plenty of time to get over it. Oh, yes, she forgot—he held grudges. “I thought doctors were supposed to be sympathetic to their patients—you sure have a lousy bedside manner.” She tried to sit up, but couldn’t muster the strength. Her irritation switched to apprehension as she realized how sick she was.

“I’m calling an ambulance, Andrea. You’re badly dehydrated and need fluids intravenously. Stay put, while I go make the call.”

“I can’t do anything but stay here. This will pass, Braeden, can you get me something to drink?” She didn’t like the way he turned and raised his brow. His expression warned her not to trifle with him. He’d do what he always did: take matters into his own hands. When Braeden disappeared without another word, she knew matters were no longer under her control.

She didn’t want to be a patient in the hospital and specifically, didn’t want to be *his* patient. It had been all she could do not to quiver when he’d touched her body during his examination. She’d missed him. Although she had thought herself beyond his seduction, in the end, she’d only fooled herself. Hiding it from him was the best she could hope for.

When Braeden returned, he pulled a suitcase from her closet shelf and a blue robe from the door. Stamping around the room, he collected things she would need, even threw her cosmetics into the conglomeration. With his hand on one of the dresser drawers, she obliged by telling him where to find her spare nightgown and

underwear. Finally, he turned to her; his eyes softened as he sat down on the mattress.

“You don’t think I have a good bedside manner, eh? I guess you’re right where you’re concerned. You exasperate me. Whatever happened, Andrea? Looking at you now, I feel the same as I did at Christmas and New Year’s—hell, maybe even more so.” He gently pushed straggled wisps of hair behind her ear.

Her eyes misted when she saw his eyes cloud. She understood. He’d tried to hide things from her as well—the pain of being shunned. He’d never been treated this way, she’d bet. Did he not appreciate that it was her only hope of dealing with her loss? Just when she wanted to lean into his touch, he stood and with a wink left the room.

There was no getting this man out of her system. She loved him and would until her dying day. Sick as she was, his strength of purpose, utter masculinity, and profound sincerity overwhelmed her denial that she didn’t care. She lay on the bed and listened. Braeden’s footsteps on the stairs brought up a wave of dread until she saw a glass of ginger ale in his hand. He raised her head gently and held the glass to her lips. After she swallowed a small amount, he waited by the window peering out as she struggled to keep the fluid down. She succeeded. Andrea heard his loud sigh of relief when the ambulance’s siren blared its approach.

Once inside, Andrea’s eyes scanned the vehicle’s grey metal interior as the attendant monitored her condition and administered oxygen. She’d been through this before, only it was of a more serious nature when her heart had been involved. The wail of the siren proclaimed an urgency she didn’t feel but couldn’t protest. Surely Braeden was overreacting—again. Upon questioning from the paramedic, she tried to think if she’d eaten anything that would cause food poisoning. The meager list of foods she’d downed contained little apt to cause a problem. If anything, she was embarrassed at how poorly she’d managed her nutrition. Her mind, confused and tired, tired of thinking, tired of missing Braeden, was most of all, tired of loving him with no hope for a future together.



Upon her arrival in Emergency, many hands took over getting her from the gurney to a bed and an EKG hookup. In no time, the efficient staff had her attached to monitors and an intravenous drip.

The vomiting had stopped just before Braeden had come to her home. Now the nurses and doctors were left to deal with her weakness. After the initial commotion died, a nurse entered her cubicle and slipped a pill into her mouth. As she held a glass of water to her lips, Andrea swallowed, too weak to question it. She lay her head back against the pillow and soon was only vaguely aware of Braeden's presence, of his holding her wrist again, of his stare. It didn't matter—her body had floated off on another fluffy cloud.

Several hours later Andrea came out of her deep sleep. Her eyes darted around the room searching for something familiar. When she stretched her neck to look above, she recognized the hospital equipment. A nurse, whom she had often seen in the cafeteria, popped in, took her pulse and blood pressure then spoke. "You've had a rough time of it, but your color is much better than when you were brought in. How do you feel?"

"Like I've been hit by a bulldozer. I must have the flu."

"I'll contact Dr. Landry to let him know you're awake. He said to let him know right away and he'll be in to see you." The nurse's white uniform rustled as she hurried across the threshold.

Andrea studied her surroundings—a large room of gleaming steel fixtures and spotless white walls where six of the eight beds held patients. In the center, perched on a raised platform, a circular nursing station with a number of computers overlooked the occupants. Braeden entered the station and sat at one of the computers. Periodically he glanced up at her, then went back to reading the computer's data.

Obviously, he was reading information about her case and by the time he finally came to her bedside she was feeling like a frog that had just been dissected. Her pulse rate immediately shot up, confirmed by the monitor above her head. Andrea hoped he wouldn't look up, but when she glanced back at him his eyes had focused on it. Nor did she want him to take her pulse manually again. The machine might explode. For the first time she smiled.

“Okay, what’s going on here, Andrea? Do you have any idea? You don’t have the slightest fever nor did you complain of aching.” He studied her closely. She looked away, shaken by the probing force. “Don’t do that. Look at me. I can’t help you if you can’t give me some clues.”

“Why don’t you go repeat your course in bedside manners?” She’d bet she had color in her face now. She’d had it with him and his dogmatic approach to everything that involved her. When she barked at him, an uncanny puzzlement flashed in his eyes. Was he annoyed with her for being sick, was it worry that showed, or was it a mixture of both combined with irritation at her audacity? She craved the sensitivity he’d displayed during their lovemaking. “I don’t know what’s wrong, Braeden. I feel better,” she lied. “I just want to go home.”

“You *were* home and it wasn’t doing you much good. You have nobody there to watch over you. We’re going to keep you here overnight, run some tests, and hopefully get to the bottom of this. Now tell me when you first started feeling sick.”

Andrea thought carefully. “I remember that after the holidays my appetite dwindled. I assumed it was because I had a lot on my mind, and I missed Mr. Jenkins.” She lashed out. “I can’t stand this constant emotional upheaval you and I put each other through. This sickness has been coming on for a while now because I’ve been nauseated, but it got out of control early this morning. That’s all I can tell you. I’m not doing this on purpose, Braeden, and I resent you looking at me like I’ve inconvenienced you.”

His eyebrows contracted with his frustration. “Andrea, you aren’t inconveniencing me. I’m worried. There’s something we’re missing and I want to know what it is. We’ll wait for the tests. Relax for the duration of your stay. We’ll have to keep you in Emergency; the hospital is fully occupied. I know that’s not good for your rest, but do the best you can. I’ll be back later.”

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Worn from his hectic schedule, Braeden nevertheless managed to find the energy to check in on Andrea late that night. He stood at the foot of her bed watching her sleep peacefully. The rosy color in her

cheeks pleased him. The heart monitor displayed a steady even rhythm. She looked like a sleeping princess in need of a dashing prince to bring her to life. Some prince he was—prickly and bossy. Why the hell did she annoy him so much? He rotated his shoulders to loosen the tension that had been there since he first heard she was ill.

Braeden knew she hadn't planned this, but her sickness was baffling. It had provided an excuse to see her away from their professional setting, though, and that he didn't regret. When he'd arrived at her home and saw how ghastly pale and weak she was, he'd been worried for her and for himself—more than he cared to think. He couldn't take much more of this emotional upheaval either. Something had to give if one of them couldn't come to terms with the basic root of the problem—his avoidance of commitment and her refusal to accept their mutual attraction and participate in an affair that could be spectacular.

## *Eleven*

Andrea felt better in the morning and managed to keep down a light breakfast of tea and toast. She waited anxiously for Braeden to authorize her release. It was almost noon before he came to her bedside and pulled the curtain for privacy. By the look of his green scrubs and the mask dangling from his neck, he'd been busy in the OR. Dark rings circled the eyes on his drawn face. She was happy to see him. "Sorry I couldn't get here earlier. I see by your chart you've kept food in your stomach."

"I feel well enough to leave. I'm sure they need the bed for someone sicker than me. See, I told you it was probably the flu."

His index finger ran along his chin, but he didn't smile. "We don't have all the reports in yet, but one test showed your hemoglobin level is low. I'll prescribe iron for that. I'd keep you here another day or two, but due to cutbacks, I have to release you."

The fatigue she saw etched on his face made her wish she could pull him to her breast and comfort him. Her fingers itched to run through his hair; her mouth wanted to meld with his. What a shocker that would be if she cast protocol aside.

Braeden held his stethoscope to various points near her heart, then onto her back. She stared at the ceiling to avoid the intensity of his gaze and gritted her teeth to stop their mutinous chatter. Concentrating on a spider scaling the wall, she suppressed the arousal triggered by his touch. But when he brushed against her shoulder, her thoughts jumped to New Year's Eve. The distraction technique no

longer worked; her breasts betrayed her with their peaked revelation. Heat flamed in her cheeks.

She glanced up just as his lips crushed hers. She could no more stop him, than stop the sun from shining. And she didn't want to miss this tenderness. She melted into his embrace, struggling not to make a sound that would reveal their indiscretion. She reveled in this glory so much that tears came to her eyes.

Braeden whispered in her ear. "Andrea, come home with me... please?" Her heart thumped. "I have the rest of the day off and you shouldn't be alone until you have more strength."

"I thought you were going to ask me to your apartment only the one time?" He didn't try to argue the point, so she backed off. "All right, if it'll lessen your worry. I owe you that much. Just get me out of here before I go stir-crazy." She grinned. "I'm not staying overnight though, so put that thought out of your head."

"We'll talk about that later," he replied, a gleam of pure devilment flaring in his eyes.

Andrea was on her way within the hour. Braeden's sidelong glances of suspicion in the car created intolerable pressure. By the time they rode up in the elevator and arrived at his door, she was ready to cave. Tired and weak from the effort to appear better, she no longer cared how sick she looked. After he unlocked and opened the door, without a word, he swept her into his arms, and kicking the door shut behind them, carried Andrea to the couch. He gently set her in a sitting position.

Andrea started to remove her coat, but Braeden's hands moved hers aside and carried out the chore. Boot removal figured next on his agenda. She shook her head: sometimes his pragmatic approach came at the most opportune time. He grabbed a blanket from the closet and spread it over her lap then removed his own winter garb.

She thought he was done with his thoughtful care, but she was mistaken. He disappeared for a moment and when he came back he carried and plumped a large pillow onto the end of the sofa. Lifting her knees, he swung her into a horizontal plane. Andrea thought the Queen of Sheba never had it so good. The security of being with him couldn't be denied. It was then she realized how scared she'd been.

Her fingers fiddled with the satin-bound edge of the blanket. “You’ve gone beyond the call of duty and I appreciate the trouble you’ve gone to,” she murmured.

Braeden sat down beside her. “I don’t have much practice at being a host, but would you like some tea? I think I can find some sugar cookies to go with it.”

His willingness to lower himself to wait on her, surprised her. His admission that he wasn’t practiced at hosting shocked her and she wasn’t sure she believed him. Still, his eyes stared straight into hers and didn’t falter. His action contradicted the authority figure he presented at the hospital. Although she wasn’t hungry, she sensed he needed a break from the pressure, too. “That would be great, thanks.”

Her embarrassment at being in his home struck her as childish. What must he think? She couldn’t help that his charm did something to her sanity. Their relationship was a lose-lose proposition. Why couldn’t he understand? She needed time away from him to strengthen her resolve. When he was near, she lost all semblance of reason and most of her will.

While he was absent, she assessed the luxuriousness of her surroundings. She saw he had updated some of the furnishings and a Van Gogh painting above the sofa was now the focal point. Without meaning to, she compared his lodging to her simpler home. She was happy in her lifestyle, even though it was far more humble than his. With her inheritance, she’d be able to buy her home outright and pay off debts. The future looked clear of most of the ills that had dogged her life.

Braeden had said he wasn’t used to playing host, but with his high-level performance in his profession, she was convinced that he should be good at anything he tried. *His hosting abilities would be more than aptly demonstrated in his bedroom, I bet. Especially beneath those silly mirrors. I wonder if he got rid of them?* A moan of revulsion escaped her lips.

Andrea remembered her date with Brett for tonight. There was no way she’d be able to keep it. She picked up the phone from the end table and dialed his office. The secretary forwarded her call. Her eyes centered on the kitchen doorway.

"Hello?" Brett's velvety voice seemed to welcome the interruption. Come to think of it, she'd never heard him out of sorts. Not like another professional she knew.

"Hi, Brett," she whispered.

"Andrea, speak up. Where are you? I called your home several times last night. I was just about to phone you at work." He sounded relieved, yet a touch of irritation crept into his tone and caused her to rethink her judgment. She stiffened. She hadn't known him long enough for this demand to apprise him of her whereabouts; she resented the presumption.

"I'm sick, Brett, and resting for today." Her hand smoothed the wooly softness of the blanket's folds.

Braeden reappeared with a snack tray and quietly placed it next to the telephone.

"I'm afraid I'm still too weak to keep our date tonight," she told the lawyer. She noted the grim expression that crossed Braeden's face. Silence reigned on the other end of the line. "Did you hear me, Brett?"

"Yes, I heard you. I'm disappointed. Why don't I come out and keep you company?"

"No, that's not possible. I'm at a friend's house. When I go home I'll be going straight to bed. Call me tomorrow, okay?"

"All right, tomorrow it will have to be. Take care of yourself. Bye."

Her hand lay on the telephone a few minutes as she thought about Brett's obvious irritation. There was much to be said for independence—freedom. She'd always thought loneliness was the downside. Perhaps she should rethink a few of her ideas. Loneliness and being alone were two different things and depended strictly on point of view. She turned her attention to Braeden, nonchalantly pouring the tea. He remained quiet, his hand steady. She'd have preferred he hadn't heard the conversation, but there was nothing she could do about it. After all, he *should* know she wasn't sitting home pining for him. "That was Mr. Jenkins' lawyer."

"You've been dating him?" Braeden's lips pursed. "He must be the one I saw you with at the restaurant the other day."

“Is there any reason I shouldn’t go out with him?” Apparently, exasperation—hers—was the order of the day.

“No, no. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry.” His dark eyes softened.

“I didn’t see you. Why didn’t you come over to say hello?”

“Like you did with Melissa? No thanks.” She bit back her words. There was no need to be hostile with the man who had probably saved her life and was only curious. “I’m sorry, too, Braeden. I shouldn’t have snapped at you. I seem to be bad-tempered lately. Thank you for the tea. I’m sure it’ll perk me up.”

She was right. Her even disposition returned as they munched on the cookies. Until she said, “I should be going home soon.”

“No, Andrea. You should not. I want you to stay overnight so I can check you out tomorrow. You can sleep in the bedroom. I’ll sleep on the couch... if that’s the way you want it. Strictly on the up and up. I won’t bother you.”

“On one condition...” She was bold in attaching any conditions—she didn’t have the strength to go against his wishes. “I’ll take the couch. It’s comfortable and you may have an emergency during the night. You need your rest, too.”

“Okay. You win. If you want to join me at any time, I’m available.” Braeden laughed. His eagerness showed in his eyes. “Just crawl in.”

They spent the afternoon sharing the newspaper and listening to music. Braeden cooked a simple supper of macaroni and cheese and pulled rolls from the freezer. In spite of not wanting to come here, Andrea felt stronger and more content as the day wore on. In the evening they watched a Stallone movie. She couldn’t have repeated the title to anyone; the pleasure was in the camaraderie with no need for conversation.

When the movie ended they decided to call it a night. As Braeden tucked more blankets around her and planted a light kiss on her forehead, she almost abandoned her decision to stay detached. The scent of his cologne challenged her promise to avoid complications. Her stubbornness held her in good stead, though he didn’t make it easy. Andrea giggled when she noticed he left his bedroom door ajar. Relaxed and at peace, she fell asleep almost immediately.



When she awakened, dawn was a mere slit across the sky. The familiar queasiness spoiled her anticipation of a better day. She started to get up, but a wave of dizziness sent her reeling back against the pillow. Worried, she retraced the course of her discomfort over the past weeks and when the answer emerged, "I'm pregnant!" slipped out of her mouth.

Spoken aloud, the words echoed in her ears. Visions of Nancy and Sylvia, shocked by the news, loomed in her mind's eye. To the forefront lunged Braeden's face. His eyebrows raised above an accusing coal black stare sent her plunging into the doldrums.

They had taken a urine sample at the hospital. Being of childbearing age, it would be tested for pregnancy. Strange that the admitting officer hadn't asked her about the possibility, but since she knew Andrea wasn't attached she must have skipped over that part. If the doctors had planned to take x-rays, or administer medication, pregnancy was so remote from her thinking she wouldn't even have considered it. Look at the danger that could have put her and the baby in. Someone must be looking out for her. Andrea peeked over her shoulder, convinced Braeden would rush from the bedroom to gloat over the error of her ways. No, he wouldn't gloat; he'd promote her to the realm of the highest order of stupidity.

Her mind in a state of chaos, she tried to find an escape from the inescapable. They'd not used protection on New Year's Eve. She vaguely remembered Braeden mentioning not having any with him, and she'd casually pushed the possibility aside based on what a doctor had told her. She'd insulted her intelligence and lost her self-respect. Had Braeden risked pregnancy with his other conquests? If he had, there was the chance of disease. Her world crashed around her.

Andrea's vision blurred with panic. She sat up and listened to the sound of silence. Her temples throbbed like a thousand drums eager to beat the word 'idiot' into her brain. Doctors can be wrong. She brushed her hand across her forehead; it felt damp to her touch. How could she think clearly in an environment guaranteed to accentuate her foolishness? She had to make a quick getaway.

Andrea's hands shook as she sifted through the phonebook in search of the taxi listing. She stifled the urge to wail her distress.

Once she ordered the taxi, she dressed, dreading that Braeden would wake up and discover her plan to leave. He wouldn't let her go until she told him what was going on. Then no doubt she'd be bounced out on her ear. That she could handle, but his look of recrimination she couldn't deal with. She snatched her nitro-glycerin bottle from her coat pocket and shot a spray into her mouth to ward off trouble. She prayed it would work. She didn't want to take the time to count out pills from her purse. Immediate flight was essential. When she was away from him she could contemplate this blunder and plan a course of action.

Tears welled in her eyes as she watched the countryside shoot by the taxi window. The kaleidoscope of color peeking above the horizon failed to lighten her burden. Numbness over what was happening to her body governed her mood.

Once she arrived home, she lit a fire in the wood stove, steeped a pot of tea, then sat at the kitchen table to drink and ponder. The walls of this old house seemed to wrap her in its warmth, and it had nothing to do with the heat pouring through the kitchen. Generations of children had thrived in the freedom offered here. She could almost hear their laughter. Secure in her own surroundings, her head cleared. Now certain of the issue, she had to deal with it as always—alone. But it was different now. There was no margin for error. No allowance for making mistakes like those that had previously sent her into dire straits. She'd stand her ground and keep the inheritance. Braeden be damned.

Andrea took her medication, sipped at the tea and gazed out of the window. Despair would not be allowed to enter her life again. The fact she was in love with a womanizer was the least of her worries. There was another life to consider—the life she'd been told would never happen. She'd dealt with that disappointment and even accepted her fiancé's inability to face it. Her problem could be disposed of quickly, efficiently, and in secret. There was a well-known, private abortion clinic in the city. A remedy was a phone call away.

The ring of the phone brought her from her misery and she sensed in an instant, it was Braeden. She debated about answering, but if she didn't, he'd come to her house causing a disruption she didn't want.

Needing to hold herself together, she lifted the phone with great trepidation. “Hello?”

“Andrea! Why in hell did you leave so early? I told you I wanted to check you over.”

She didn’t appreciate his anger but held her tongue. Nothing must arouse his suspicion. “I woke and felt great. Whatever the bug, it’s gone. Ginger had to be fed.” She swallowed another bracing sip of tea. “I knew you’d make a fuss so I chose not to disturb your rest. Sorry if I gave you any cause for worry, but I’ll stay here today and go into work tomorrow.” Her firm response boosted her pride. Maybe some of the good doctor’s determination had brushed off on her.

She rolled her eyes as Braeden tried to persuade her that he should come out and examine her again. “No. It’s not necessary. All I need is rest.”

Surprisingly, he stopped pestering. She heard him inhale and struggle to speak in a controlled manner. She smiled, picturing his white-knuckle grip on the phone, flashing dark eyes, and hunched shoulders, as he paced back and forth. “I’ll be all right, just leave me in peace. Thank you for everything.”

The reluctance in his voice was telling. “Okay, but take it easy today and call if you need me.”

She’d won the battle.

“Fine, I will. Thanks for seeing it my way for a change.” Her success in this small matter energized her beyond her hopes. She’d already made the first decision: to decree what was best for herself. Her hand caressed her stomach. *Holy cow! New Year’s Eve is easy to figure—I’m already six weeks pregnant—forty-six days from the sperm inoculation. Less than eight months from becoming a mom. And then a staggering thought hit. My finances will soon be in good shape; I could support a child. The only stumbling block is my health—maybe, maybe not. There’ve been major improvements in heart care in the past few years, maybe the danger of pregnancy is one of them.*

She had to find a cardiologist that she could trust to make an unbiased assessment. Braeden sure didn’t fit the bill. She had a working relationship with heart specialists on staff, and Sylvia’s

husband was the best possibility. She'd already spoken with him a few times when he'd come into the hospital kitchen to pick up his wife. From what Sylvia had told her, Braeden didn't like him, but that was probably due to jealousy, not professional ineptitude. Anyway, Braeden had no say in this.

A surprise was in store: a brand new excitement lifted her spirits—she wanted this child. Until she was told the pregnancy could cost her life, the phone call to the abortion clinic was not an option. Andrea finished her tea quickly and went to the fridge. She was hungry!

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Last night Braeden had been exhausted by the time they settled for the night. Worry that Andrea would insist on leaving had taken more out of him than he'd expected. Her health had played on his mind ever since Christmas and he found himself caught up in actions that were foreign to him—such as peering around his bedroom door afraid she'd try something idiotic—like hightailing it home. His insecurity where she was concerned had been unusual. His distress reminded him of the depth of his feeling toward Sam. He loved Sam.

Braeden knew Andrea disliked being anywhere near him and he counted it a major victory that she'd tolerated his presence. She seemed to enjoy it once she'd given in, though. He was certain, with private time between them, he could sway her back into his arms and satisfy his urge to make love with her. His ridiculous infatuation had to end. A good night's sleep for both of them would be a step in the right direction.

The fury he experienced in the morning when he came out of his bedroom and found her gone, struck at his confidence. He hated it when his plans didn't work the way he wanted, but more than that, he was afraid for her health and disgusted with his failure to anticipate her early departure. What could he have done? Tied her hand and foot? He shook his head in disgust at his stupidity and her bullheadedness. His hand shook as he dialed her number, but her soft voice brought a quick release of his tension. She had made it home safely. Then he remembered that she'd outsmarted him and his temper erupted.

Her forceful voice signaled she would not be deterred from her course. He had to accept that or risk getting her needlessly upset, which would start more worry. There was nothing he could do but wait for another opportunity. She might think she had won, but her victory was temporary.

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Much improved by late afternoon, Andrea drove to the pharmacy to get Braeden's prescription filled. She relished the freshness of the mild winter air. Brett joined her in the evening for a couple of hours, giving her a good excuse to set her distress aside.

In the morning, before the nausea could strike, she ate several crackers in bed to see if the old wives' tale would stop the sickness. It helped, and when she got up a short time later, she looked forward to going back to her job. With no hesitation she made her way to the cardiac floor. She needed to catch up with Dr. Marshall.

She found him standing at the nurses' station reading patient charts. She didn't see Braeden look over with interest from a patient's room across the hall.

"Dr. Marshall? I wonder if I could see you for a moment. It's urgent."

"Sure, Andrea... where shall we go, into the supply room?" He smiled pleasantly. She blushed, knowing that through his wife, Dr. Marshall had been privy to exactly what had happened with Braeden in the small room. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't make light of the situation, but I can't help enjoying it when Braeden gets his comeuppance for his shenanigans."

"Let's go somewhere else. Any suggestions?" she asked.

"How about the lounge? It's empty. We don't want to feed news to hungry minds, do we?"

She shook her head and grinned. "Great neutral spot." Andrea liked him already. He followed her down the corridor.

Braeden peeked around the doorway and watched; his frown deepened.

Once in the visiting area, made comfortable with soft navy and black furniture, Andrea turned and looked Dr. Marshall squarely in

the face. How did she start the conversation with the cardiologist, who would no doubt be astounded?

“Okay, Andrea. What’s so urgent?”

Her fingers pressed tight to her palms. “I hope I can trust you not to tell Sylvia of our meeting.”

“If it has to do with medicine it’s privileged information. Go on.”

“I’ll make this as simple as I can. I have a heart condition, Dr. Marshall—angina. I already had a heart attack when an angioplasty failed.” The amused sparkle in his blue eyes disappeared, usurped by his medical interest. “I was told I couldn’t get pregnant, but I think I am. I need your advice on what I should do, who I should see, and if it’s possible for me to carry on with the pregnancy.” She waited for the words of reproach.

His eyes widened, but he took her hand. “Let’s sit down on the couch.” His frank inspection of her face and figure embarrassed her. “How far along are you?”

“Six weeks.”

“That takes it back to Christmastime, right?” He maintained his hold. His hands kept their warmth, making it easier for her not to stammer.

“I’m afraid so.” The truth was out, but didn’t set her free.

“I didn’t think a family was up Braeden’s alley.”

She stiffened again. “No, I doubt if it is.”

Dr. Marshall let go of her hand and sat back, taking a small black book from his inside pocket. As he thumbed through the pages, she wondered if it was just a prop to give him time to assimilate her information. She fidgeted with a button on her lab coat.

“Do you want the baby?” His eyes narrowed.

“Very much.”

“I’m surprised Braeden would let you discuss this. Frankly, he has no use for me.”

“Braeden doesn’t know.”

Dr. Marshall’s jaw tensed. “You can’t keep this from him for long.”

"I can until I decide what's best, Dr. Marshall. Right now I don't know what to do about it. That's why we're having this talk." Tears filled her eyes and she found it hard to see through them. "I—"

"Hold it now. No tears. We'll work this out."

His words broke an invisible dam of restraint, releasing the pressure. Her apprehension flowed away. "I want to find out what my options are before I tell him. He won't be pleased, that's for sure. He'll think I tried to trap him, but I don't expect anything from him—no marriage, no support, no influence on what I choose. As far as I'm concerned, he's not a factor to consider at this point."

"I don't agree with you, but we can argue that later. What medications are you on?"

"A beta-blocker and a baby aspirin." She withdrew the prescription bottle from her pocket and handed him the vial. "Oh, yes, I use a nitro-glycerin spray when I need it. My angina is well controlled and only appears under stress."

"We *could* handle the pregnancy with this medication if everything else is stable, if you get past the first trimester, and if—We're putting the cart ahead of the horse here; let's find out if you *are* pregnant first. He reached over and covered both of hands with his. The warmth generated comfort. Releasing her hands, Dr. Marshall scribbled a name and phone number on his notepad. "I'm going to line you up with a friend of mine, a top obstetrician, Dr. Mason. She and I will work together on your case. Sylvia said you were in Emergency overnight. Did they run any tests?"

"Yes. Braeden said my hemoglobin was down and prescribed pills to boost it up. He hadn't received the other reports. I'm afraid the urine test will show I'm pregnant and he'll know."

"I'll go down and see what they've come up with. You should tell Braeden now, before he finds out from the lab. I won't work behind his back. I'll discuss your case with Dr. Mason; you can contact me after she's seen you and we'll set up an appointment. Until then, take very good care of yourself and try to build up your strength." He winked. "We need a healthy little mother."

Dr. Marshall headed for the door but turned before reaching the threshold. "Andrea, I want you to know that I'm a good doctor in

spite of what Braeden may think. I'll take excellent care of you. He doesn't understand how much I love Sylvia and have for years. She's my life, and I want to spend as much time with her as possible. Not being at the hospital day and night in no way detracts from my concern or care for my patients."

His straightforward analysis of Braeden's dislike overwhelmed her and caused her faith in Dr. Marshall to hit a high note. The fact that he didn't seem to resent Braeden's antagonism said much for his character. She wondered if Braeden had any idea of how unimportant his opinion was to this man. She was about to mention it when he startled her.

"Understand this, Andrea... Braeden doesn't like to lose. We may see that as a flaw, but not accepting defeat easily is his strongest asset as far as his patients go, and it's what makes him the top surgeon he is. Don't sell him short."

Andrea's eyebrows raised high. The doctor grinned and left the lounge. She liked Dr. Marshall's openness. He'd been easy to talk with, once she got started, and better yet, he hadn't judged her. Her conclusion that she was stupid and naïve belonged strictly to her until Braeden found out and agreed. She walked out of the lounge, her outlook optimistic.

A short time later Dr. Marshall phoned to advise her of an appointment with Dr. Mason at three o'clock. He told her the urine report had been misplaced and the lab technicians were looking for it. Although she'd be racing against time, she thought she'd better hold back her information from Braeden in case it was a false alarm. The hours passed slowly, and by the time she walked into Dr. Mason's office her nerves were strung tight. She had daydreamed of being a mother. She'd never envied those who had life financially easier, but she *had* felt envious when she saw mothers with their newborns. If her pregnancy turned out to be a false alarm, she was prepared to be miserable.

It didn't take Dr. Mason long to size up her condition after a pelvic exam. Her due date was calculated as October 1. She advised Andrea to stay off her feet as much as possible and avoid stressful situations, especially anything that might cause a flare-up of angina. A



balanced diet was essential and she would have to work hard on that one. The doctor suggested medication for the nausea but Andrea declined, content to stay with the cracker approach. She left the doctor's office filled with her dream.

Now for the crunch: would Dr. Marshall think her pregnancy could be carried to term? Dr. Marshall phoned, fitting her into his schedule at six o'clock. He asked for her medical reports. She immediately took a break from work and drove home to get them. When she returned to the hospital, she dropped them off with his secretary. The agony of waiting another hour was almost more than she could bear. During their chat in the lounge, the doctor had left an 'if' lingering in the air.

Andrea approached Dr. Marshall's office with a mixture of nerves and excitement. Her stomach took over and quivered as she waited for him to lift his eyes from her reports. "Okay, Andrea, like in a game of Monopoly, we've passed go; we now know you are pregnant. An abortion has to be a strong consideration."

Andrea raised her hand to interject, but he motioned it down. "I want you to know the facts."

"The doctors told me pregnancy increases the strain on the heart, but maybe if I took it easy it wouldn't happen."

He shook his head. "The problem is the build up of fluid during pregnancy. The increased volume of blood is due to retention of sodium chloride, which can cause high blood pressure. The heart has to work harder to pump the blood overload." Dr. Marshall stared her straight in the eyes. "My worst fear is that you'll develop preeclampsia during your last trimester."

Andrea sat on the edge of her seat. "I know that's a toxic disturbance of pregnancy."

Dr. Marshall nodded. "Yes, and it can progress to eclampsia and in turn lead to convulsions, coma, even death."

"I've instructed patients with that condition to follow the salt-restricted diet their doctor orders. I've learned that black women who eat a lot of salt-laden fatty food, as well as diabetics, obese women, and those with high blood pressure deal with the problem, too. But they still have children."

“Andrea, if you develop preeclampsia with your heart condition, there’s a chance you will die.”

“I watch my salt intake now, and I can drop it lower. My beta-blocker keeps my blood pressure very low. It hasn’t been a problem.”

He looked over her previous checkups. “That’s true, you have a good record here. Something else, Andrea. As far as your angina goes, the delivery could be tricky for both you and the baby.”

“Couldn’t you give me nitro-glycerin by IV during delivery?” She leaned back and studied how serious he was as he presented his case. “Look, Dr. Marshall, if you say we can’t manage, then I’ll have to go with an abortion. But I want to point out that I can work with you. I really want this child. It sounds selfish, but it may be my only chance to have someone in my life that can return unconditional love.”

“I want to emphasize, it’ll take dedication on your part and we’ll have to monitor you closely. Again, Braeden must know.”

“I agree, but is there a chance?”

“If you have any irregularity in your heartbeat, anesthesia isn’t an option I’d want to explore. It could be tricky like I said, but not impossible.” He forced out a puff of air. “In your favor there’s no indication of congestive heart failure and you have expertise in what you should eat.”

She held her breath.

A glow spread inside her as a smile creased his face. “It’s a deal?”

“It’s a deal if you do exactly as I say.”

“Wow! I have plans to make.”

“Make sure those plans involve telling Braeden.” He frowned. “I can tell you right now, he’s not going to be pleased with either of us.”

“That’s his problem.” Andrea rose and almost skipped through the door.

The ringing of the phone greeted her when she entered the house. She didn’t want to chat with anyone so she let the machine pick it up. Braeden’s frosty voice changed her mood. “Andrea, I’ve got the test results back from the lab. Please call me at home when you get in.”

She didn’t like his tone. What had he found out? With her whole body trembling, she decided not to phone him back. Dr. Marshall would let her know if the tests revealed her secret. The rest of the

evening was hers to choose as she liked and though she could be headed for a downfall, she chose to be happy. An unexpected gift had been handed to her on a plate of love. Her love.

She scanned through her Sears catalogue. Enthusiastic over the baby paraphernalia displayed, she decided to check out a wider range of goods and drove to the nearest mall. As she browsed amongst the baby things, a quiet peace settled inside her heart. This was right; she was sure of it.

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Andrea wished she could share her news with Sylvia. The dietitian watched her like a hawk at work the next day. She ignored Sylvia's concern, believing Dr. Marshall had kept her confidence. As she sat in the empty cafeteria during her coffee break, her mind drifted lazily to practical thoughts of life with a child. She pictured what it would be like with a family again. *To have Braeden as a permanent fixture in my life is only wishful thinking but he can still enhance my dreams.* Realizing her thoughts had struck a fragile chord, she allowed her thinking to switch gears.

Her mind played back Dr. Marshall words: "Braeden has to be told he'll be a father." *I'll let him know tonight, and I'll tell him in person.* A rush of goose bumps peppered her arms.

~ \* ~

The night was crystal clear and every star seemed to shine just for her. She needed their encouraging luminescence to light her way, figuratively speaking—to give her no justification to turn back. The crescent-shaped moon hanging high in the blissful night lent its support as it beamed on the path to Braeden's apartment building. Loath to face a confrontation, she'd waited until it was almost too late to visit, attempting to convince herself to avoid this anguish. Ashamed at her lack of courage she'd taken the plunge, but now, with reality at hand, she was faltering badly. She couldn't stand in the street looking dim-witted any longer.

Andrea prayed for inner strength as she strolled up the walk. When she entered the security building's foyer, her hand rested on the buzzer but didn't press. A lady and her two dogs appeared and held

the door for her on their way out. Andrea smiled her thanks and stepped inside. Now what?

Breathing deeply, she marched into the elevator and pressed the button for the penthouse floor. The plush carpeting in the hall muffled her footsteps as she walked to his door. Her hand lifted toward the doorbell and dropped to her side. She waited a moment longer, then earnestly controlling her shaky finger, pressed the pearled button. She listened, her eyes roaming the gold embossed wallpaper that lined the narrow hallway. The exquisite flowered pattern and rich texture hadn't been noticeable when she fled previously. The door opened.

Her numb feet automatically stepped back. She waited patiently for his shocked expression to fade. With his hair disheveled and clothes rumpled, he looked different from the autocrat she knew. The dark hair on his chest exposed within the opening of his shirt awakened her erotic senses. He looked unbelievably rugged and sexy, like he'd looked the morning after... Knowing she mustn't go there, she put the brakes on her memory. He could still turn her on without saying a word, but she hoped he didn't know. When he leaned against the doorframe, his eyes carried an inhospitable glare. His sexiness disappeared. He obviously didn't like surprise visits.

"Hello, Andrea." His greeting, barely audible, sounded forced and condescending.

Her throat closed, threatening to choke off her words. "Hello, Braeden. I—" Her voice broke. Not a good start in her determination to speak from a position of strength. "I need to talk with you."

Why was she whispering, too? Now wasn't the time to show weakness. Andrea straightened her spine and forced strength into her wobbly knees. She wouldn't let her courage wither away. Not tonight. Heat rushed into her face when she realized she hadn't been invited inside.

"May I come in?"

Braeden grimaced as a voice rose from behind him. "Who is it, darling?"

## *Twelve*

Braeden stood with his hand on the door, his eyes locked with Andrea's judgmental stare. The first thought to flash through his mind was: *Why did Andrea have to choose now for a visit?* When Melissa slipped up beside him and draped her arm around his waist, he inwardly cringed. He knew full well the impression her clinging gave. He was speechless, not understanding why he felt as if he'd been caught red-handed in some dirty trick. *Damn the luck!*

He glanced from one to the other, noting Melissa's expression had shifted from curiosity to indignation. Andrea's face showed her mortification. Braeden shrugged off Melissa's hand but not soon enough. Andrea fled down the stairs.

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Why had she expected to find him alone? Andrea wondered. Her continued stupidity played on her mind as she raced down the steps. Thank God, only the thud of her boots resonated through the stairwell.

She'd known she wasn't the only woman in Braeden's life and that's why she'd made the break. If he preferred Melissa's company, they deserved each other. There was no accounting for some people's lack of taste. It hurt that Braeden could be bowled over by that heartless witch's boldness. She had thought about giving a nasty response to Melissa's question using the same sultry tone, but resigned herself to the possibility she'd stammer and make a fool of herself. Besides, being a vamp wasn't her style. *The hell with him. He doesn't need me and I don't need him.*

After she'd hurried down six flights of stairs, she leaned against the wall to catch her breath. As if on cue, an angina attack erupted, forcing her to reach for her nitro-glycerin. When her body adjusted to normal, she took the elevator the rest of the way. Her vehicle was her sanctuary. She brushed away a tear as it scalded down her cheek, then concentrated on her driving. She wouldn't let thoughts of the past few minutes rip her in shreds—until she got home safely.

She felt barely functional at the office the following day. Luckily, nausea didn't add to her woes. Her vow to tell Braeden of her condition fell by the wayside. *Let him find out I'm pregnant when everyone else does. If he asks, I'll allow Dr. Marshall to tell him he's the baby's father.* She automatically shivered as she pictured Braeden's fury when he found out. She'd always dealt with her problems to her satisfaction before; this time she wasn't up to the task.

Since Sylvia wasn't on duty, Andrea stayed in the kitchen. She intended to hide there, but Mr. Jeffrey's secretary phoned and summoned her to his office. Surprised by the urgency of the command, she quickly glanced in the mirror, straightened her lab coat collar, and tucked back strands of hair poking out from her French braid.

The secretary ushered her inside where she was startled to see Braeden standing at the window with his back to her. Mr. Jeffrey rose and motioned for her to sit in the chair in front of his desk; he sat down and faced her. The secretary closed the door, her narrowed glance a grim warning all was not well. Solemn-faced, Mr. Jeffrey showed no sign of his usual friendliness. He leaned across the desk and peered over the rim of his glasses. A sickening sensation flooded her stomach when Braeden still didn't acknowledge her presence. Tension hung heavy in the air, discouraging her from breaking the maddening code of silence. She folded her hands in her lap and looked from the administrator to the surgeon. Instinctively she remained quiet until one of them spoke.

Mr. Jeffrey broke the stillness. "Andrea, we have a serious problem we need to discuss." She couldn't ever remember seeing him so stern. Not even when she'd complained about Braeden's hostility.

“What’s the problem, Mr. Jeffrey? Is a patient unhappy with our meals or their diet?”

“I wish it were that simple. I’ll get right to the point. It’s come to our attention that Doug Jenkins left you a large sum of money. Is that true?”

“Yes... two hundred and fifty-thousand dollars to be exact. Why do you ask?” She knew what was coming next. She’d been down this road. Her fingers flexed tightening her clasp, her eyes focused on him. The situation was different this time. She would handle it differently.

Mr. Jeffrey leaned back in his chair studying her response. Her hackles rose when Braeden turned and glared. *Where does he come off judging me?* She turned back to Mr. Jeffrey.

The administrator glanced at Braeden, then cleared his throat. “Apparently your inheritance is not setting well with Miss Jenkins. She’s considering taking you and this hospital to court to prevent your access to it. Do you realize we could be forced into a litigation process here?”

“I’m not surprised, but I’ve done nothing wrong. I did not use ‘undue influence.’”

Braeden’s voice held disbelief. “You already know what the charge will be?”

“Yes. A similar thing happened at the last hospital where I worked.” She stared at the surprised faces. “Mr. Jenkins’ lawyer told me that Melissa couldn’t do anything about it. Mr. Jenkins was of sound mind and she would have a hard time convincing the court otherwise.”

Mr. Jeffrey’s mouth dropped. “To proceed, she only needs a doctor’s opinion that he was not of sound mind.”

Andrea glanced at Braeden. “Then I don’t see the problem. Braeden was his specialist.”

“Then let me explain it so you do see the problem,” Mr. Jeffrey snapped. “If Miss Jenkins claims and proves that you influenced her father to put you in his will, the will can be declared invalid. Legally then, no will exists and he is considered to die intestate. All property goes to the only living heir—her. Just because you got off before, doesn’t mean you will this time.”

"I have nothing to hide, Mr. Jeffrey. My conscience is clear. I—"

Braeden interrupted, his eyes flashing curiosity. "What happened in the other case?"

"I didn't accept the ten thousand dollars. I sure could have used the money for my student loan."

The administrator breathed a sigh of relief and looked at Braeden as much as to say, 'I told you so'. "Then you'll be turning down this inheritance and we can forget the matter."

"Not on your life, Mr. Jeffrey. That was a mistake I won't repeat."

"What? Why not, Andrea?" Braeden drew a sharp breath and continued. "Melissa could go after you with all she's got."

"For two reasons, Braeden. Mr. Jenkins wanted me to have the money and that alone is enough for me to fight to keep it."

"And the other reason?" Braeden's eyebrow arched above a curious gaze.

"I'm pregnant with *your* child." There, she'd done what was proper—informed the father—in an improper way. So much for her maintaining her self-control. *If I drop a pin on the floor, it'll resound like a clash of cymbals.*

She felt impelled to say something to cut through the stunned silence. "I need the money to pay off my debts and raise the baby. Alone." She rose from her seat, and ignoring the shocked expressions on the two men, she turned. Head held high, she breezed from the room.

Andrea strutted to her office. She caught the phone on its first ring and barked, "Hello!"

"Whoa, girl! What's got you so fired up?"

She recognized Nancy's voice and immediately her face heated at her rude manner. "I'm sorry, Nance. I've had a bad start to the day. Don't know how I'll last at this rate. What can I do for you?"

"Dr. Marshall wants a patient of his to have a low-fat diet sheet."

"Sure. I'll take it right up."

Andrea delivered the paper to the patient, who was dressed and ready to leave as soon as his driver arrived. She was proceeding down the hall in the direction of the nursing station when she was grabbed firmly by her right elbow. She looked up into eyes filled with anger.



"We're going to have a little chat, Andrea." Braeden's glowering expression assured it wouldn't be a pleasant discussion.

She struggled and he loosened his grip. Her arm fell free. "In the supply room again?"

"No. There's a private room empty up the hall." When they reached it, he ushered her in with his hand at her back. She heard the door close and whirled to face him. Noting his surly mouth, she backed to the window.

"You should be happy now, Braeden. My inheritance will confirm what you thought from the beginning: that I use patients for my own benefit. I can't change your opinion and you know what? I'm not going to try. I no longer care one iota what you think, but let me tell you this. You are wrong about Dr. Marshall and you are wrong about me." The hostility in his eyes exacerbated her already raw nerves. Powerless to stop it, her face reddened, as adrenaline flowed into her blood vessels.

"I was impressed by that little gem you added about the pregnancy." Braeden appeared to be keeping a check on his tone. "I just got your test results; you're pregnant all right. If it's a worry that you picked up any diseases, the blood tests are negative. With your low opinion of my social life, it probably was one of your first afterthoughts." He folded his arms and leaned against the wall.

Andrea braced her hands on the windowsill behind her. She glared and defiantly tilted her chin. "It *had* crossed my mind."

His eyes narrowed. "You told me you couldn't get pregnant, so explain this little episode."

Focused on his command, she ignored the increasing pressure in her chest. "I don't have to explain anything."

"I underestimated you, Andrea. Is it mine or are you trying to pawn off a mistake you and your lawyer-friend made?"

His words shredded every loving thought she'd ever possessed for him. Andrea's gasp hissed through the room. Her hand moved to her mouth, but quickly dropped to her chest in an attempt to smother the explosion of pain to the left of her sternum. She reached into her pocket and pulled out the spray. The fire inside her body dropped her

to her knees. The medication fell to the floor and rolled to Braeden's feet.

Braeden snatched the bottle and shot a dose into her mouth. He yelled for Nancy. Andrea heard the running footsteps and opening door. Aware of what was happening, her terror worsened her condition.

"Stay with us, Andrea, don't pass out. Breathe in deep breaths," Nancy whispered.

Amidst the crushing pain, Andrea glimpsed another set of male shoes and recognized Dr. Marshall's voice: "You gave her one shot already? Try a second one, Braeden. I'll get the oxygen started."

Nancy's hand felt cool against her own. Weak and barely conscious, Andrea groaned her need. "Help us, please, Dr. Marshall."

His sober face cut to the quick. "I will, hold on."

"Open your mouth and lift your tongue, Andrea." She obeyed Braeden's order. The spray hit his target. She saw him glance up at Dr. Marshall and nod. She felt the oxygen mask and breathed in the cool flow. Nancy shoved a pillow under her head.

After a minute had passed, Dr. Marshall asked, "Is the pain going away?"

Andrea focused on her chest instead of on the fleeting thought that this could be the end. "I think so."

Braeden's voice offered encouragement. "If we have to, we can give you a shot of a clot-busting drug."

She raised her hand. "It's almost gone."

Dr. Marshall patted her shoulder. "You'll be all right now. Relax."

Braeden placed his stethoscope on her chest. He nodded to the others. Andrea calmed as the last remnants of agony faded. When Braeden looked back at her, the anger in his eyes had dissipated, replaced by an unbelievable expression—fear. Fear for her? She'd always heard he remained detached in emergencies, but the way he looked this instant showed he was anything but neutral. The following moments passed in a blur until she regained her senses in a private room hooked to an IV and heart monitor.

Dr. Marshall stood at the foot of her bed. "Hello, there. You gave us a scare. How do you feel now?"

“Weak,” she replied. “Was it a h-heart attack?”

“I don’t think so. You responded to the second dose of nitro. We’ll run a couple of tests, eight hours apart and see if there’s a rise in the blood level of cardiac enzymes. If there is that will show a heart attack occurred. We need to be certain.”

“Am I still pregnant?” Her fingers dug into the sheet.

“So far, yes. I don’t think that’ll be a problem if you rest for a while. We’ll keep you in the hospital until we see where you stand. Do you want to see Braeden now? I asked him to wait outside.”

“No.” She shivered. “He made his position clear. We have nothing more to say to each other and seeing him might bring on another attack.”

“Very well. I’ll send him away.”

~ \* ~

Dr. Marshall strolled into the lounge where Braeden sat alone, a cup of coffee in his hand. “She’s awake, but doesn’t want to see you. As her doctor, I recommend you don’t go in just now. She’s frail and could be in serious trouble.”

“I understand.” Braeden sipped his drink. “Thanks for your help, Craig. I was afraid I’d lose her, and knowing I had caused her attack... well, it just blew me away.”

“I’ll tell you the same thing I told her, Braeden. I’ll take good care of her and maybe with Dr. Mason’s help she’ll be able to deliver this baby she wants so much.”

“She wants to keep it? I didn’t know. But then I didn’t give her much of a chance to tell me how she felt.” His shoulders sagged. Speaking more to himself than Craig, he muttered, “She told me she couldn’t get pregnant because of her medication. I don’t know of any heart medication that would prevent it and I was going to ask her about it but got distracted when she slipped and was so worked up sexually... needless to say I put my own needs before common sense.”

“Ask her about it again some time, but keep away from her for a few days. Even then, you’ll have to be careful how you approach her. For God’s sake, Andrea is a warm, loving young woman and not afraid to face up to her responsibilities. If you can’t deal with that, then leave her in peace.” He placed his hand on Braeden’s shoulder

and grinned. "From what I know of her strong will, and it's almost as strong as yours, no matter what your opinion, you'll only be an afterthought. She'll see this through *with* or *without* your help."

Braeden gulped the last of his coffee and watched Dr. Marshall head for the door. "Hold it, Craig. I want to apologize to you."

"For being angry that I stole Sylvia out from under your nose?"

Braeden stood. "Not exactly—for letting my personal grudge get in the way and misjudge you these past few years." Braeden paused and swallowed. "For the first time, I can understand why Sylvia chose you... I've never seen you lose your temper. I imagine there were times with me around you were provoked enough. Sylvia made the best choice for her."

"I'm glad you see it that way. Let's shake on it."

Braeden clasped Craig's hand firmly, relieved to put an end to the feud he'd carried on by himself. Craig grinned. "Braeden, I'd like you onside as a consultant. Okay?" When Braeden quickly nodded, he left the room.

Braeden smiled. Since he'd met Andrea, his hostility toward Sylvia and her husband had lessened. He felt good about it. Andrea had been a good influence on him in some ways.

His smile vanished with an unpleasant thought. Unfortunately, he'd not exerted the same good measures with her. He'd prided himself on avoiding the pitfalls of sexual encounters with the use of condoms. Braeden shook his head. Where Andrea was concerned, he lost all perspective.

He had to shoulder the blame for her condition as much as she did, and more for his hurtful accusations. Andrea didn't lend herself to romps in the hay easily. Who knew better than he? He didn't believe for a moment the lawyer had been involved, but the cruelty had slipped right out of his mouth.

As he walked past her room, he caught a glimpse of her propped up in bed staring out the window. Without thinking, he stopped and quietly watched. He wanted to go in, take her in his arms and make amends, but he might make matters worse. The sunlight caressed her hair reminding him he'd first been attracted to her when she'd sat on Doug's bed. At the time, he'd brushed off the vision as ridiculous.

She'd cast a spell just like she was doing now. A spell that tugged at his heartstrings stronger everyday. He sighed and moved on.

~ \* ~

Andrea remained in the hospital until the test results cleared her way to leave. She'd not had a heart attack and there was no damage involved. Yet Dr. Marshall advised her to stay off duty for at least a week to give herself and the baby time to adjust from the upset. After resting at home two days, cabin fever set in. Needing a change of scene, she phoned her friend.

"Nance, do you still rent out your cottage?"

"On Little Doe Lake? Sure, why do you ask?"

"Could I rent it for a week?" Andrea was certain a change of scene would boost her morale.

"The nearest neighbor is a mile away. What if you got snowed in? I'd worry about you being there alone."

"My neighbors here are farther away." She wasn't worried about snowstorms with a cell phone in her possession. A phone call to nine-one-one would get the plow through in an emergency. "I've been moping lately. Maybe I'll snap out of it there. Must be the pregnancy blues. It would be better for both the baby and me if I could get my thoughts straightened out."

Andrea's mind momentarily slipped to Braeden, wondering what he was doing. She'd heard from Sylvia that he'd not been at the hospital while she'd been home. Possibly he needed his space, too. There, she was thinking of him again; she needed a break badly to give her emotions a chance to level.

"Well, if you think it's okay, I'll draw a map and give you the key." Nancy hesitated. "I might take a drive up myself to check on you occasionally. It would put *my* mind at rest and we can have a good gab."

"That's great, Nance. One more thing: I don't want anyone to know I'm there. Not anyone!"

"You mean, Braeden, especially, I presume."

"Dead on. I'll pack now and drop by the hospital in about an hour."

Andrea hung up and extinguished the fire in the stove. She packed immediately. Placing Ginger in her carrying cage, she moved her into the car, then picked up Nancy's key and the map. She stopped at a grocery store along the way and picked up more supplies. Her energy rose with her excitement. She phoned Brett's office from her cell phone. Because he was out of town, she left a message with his secretary that she was going on vacation and would call when she returned.

Her car piled with suitcases and reading material, plus food, she marveled at how alive she felt as she turned onto the dirt road leading into the heartland of the countryside. With the route easily negotiable, she traveled with her radio turned up loud. Her fingers thrummed the wheel in time to a real oldie: *Que Sera, Sera*. Doris Day's cheerful tempo and words fitted her mood. When the car rounded a sharp turn, the spectacular lake area came into view. Covered in snow, Little Doe's far shore boasted large fancy homes with long docks stretching into the frozen expanse of the lake.

She checked Nancy's map again, then took the left fork under an umbrella of pines. A weathered red log cabin peeked through white birches near the shoreline. She backed in close to the structure and parked.

The door opened easily to the turn of the key, but before entering, Andrea stood on the porch and gazed once more across the lake. *This is the real meaning of serenity*. She rubbed her jean-clad tummy that had yet to show a rise. *I can find peace here. We'll have a great time, little one.*

~ \* ~

Braeden thumbed through his patients' charts. "Where's a pen? I left mine at home."

"There should be one in the drawer in front of you, doctor," Nancy answered, maintaining her composure.

He opened the drawer and rifled the contents. No pen. Braeden rose and searched the nursing station's countertop with no luck. He dropped into a chair and scowled. His muddled mind refused to focus on the hand-written details accumulated during his absence.

Returning to duty brought his misery back. His mind jumped without warning to Andrea's arrival at his apartment. She probably had intended to tell him about the pregnancy, but she'd caught him off-guard. Melissa was a pain in the neck, a constant bother that started when he tried, out of respect for her father, to comfort her.

Being surprised at Andrea's appearance at his home couldn't compare with the shock of her announcement in Sam's office. He'd reacted like a dunce in letting her run from his door. He'd always been confident he could handle unexpected mishaps better than most men. His steel nerves were what made him such a skillful heart surgeon. But he sure hadn't been able to handle her blunt proclamation.

*I was downright cruel to question the baby's paternity. Andrea isn't the bed-hopping kind; I can attest to that. It's a wonder Sam didn't skin me alive for retaliating that way. Instead, he gave me the brush off with the hint I should leave his office. Hell, the flare-up was in self-defense.*

Braeden looked across the hall at Doug Jenkins' former room. When Doug had spoken of the new dietitian, who frequently visited and lifted his moods, Braeden's curiosity had peaked. He'd often wished he could express warmth to his patients as easily as she did. He took his work seriously. Saving lives depended on his skill, not his personality, but he thought he had a sense of humor. Too bad certain others hadn't always seen it in the same light—namely, Andrea. He'd learned to understand her better at Christmas, but he'd still had doubts. Instead of discouraging him, her mystique—the feeling she was holding something back—had drawn him like a damn magnet.

Doug had been his pathway to tidbits of information because he loved to talk about her. The older man couldn't relay much about her personal life, but his admiration for her came across strong. Had she planned it that way? He shook his head.

And that was the trouble with being involved in a relationship with her. Her stubborn self-sufficiency shook his confidence. Still, he saw room for doubt in her favor. If pressed to give an opinion on his greatest flaw, it wouldn't be his arrogance, temper, or dry wit, as both she and Sam pointed out. His need to see everything as either black or

white was the culprit. Her tendency to see mostly in color had spun him into a whirlpool of skepticism that might not be fair to her.

One disturbing change that Andrea had precipitated was to make him more introspective. That trait had long since shriveled after he'd overcome his struggles in medical school and become a highly respected surgeon. The last two days of thinking about their relationship had been devastating to his pride. He longed to think the best of her and he could even admit that he wanted more than sexual play. He wanted the challenges she hurled into his life—permanently. Then there was the baby to consider—his baby. He felt a sudden burst of joy. Dammit. The whole focus of his life was changing before his eyes.

A touch on his shoulder startled him. "Did you learn anything important at the conference?" Nancy asked.

"Not much. I did the lecturing." He ignored the head nurse's smirk. "Have you seen Andrea this morning?"

"She's not here. She decided to take time off and head for parts unknown."

"She's not at home?"

"No, she packed up and left."

"Did you know about her pregnancy?"

"Not until I read her chart. Dr. Marshall put it in. Then she told me the same day and she told Sylvia, too. We're going to do what we can to help her."

"I see. How long has she been going out with that lawyer?"

"She only met him after Mr. Jenkins' funeral. There wasn't anyone else on the scene, except you." Nancy threw her pen on the desk in front of him and started to leave.

"Wait. Did she tell you about the lawsuit?"

"What lawsuit?" She stopped in her tracks.

"See? I wasn't the only one she deceived."

Nancy's eyes turned icy; her words blistered. "How is it deceit? It's no one's business but hers. For someone that knows the mechanics of the heart so well, you sure don't know much about its contents. Braeden, let me give you a piece of advice. Get a life."



In a knee-jerk reaction, he picked up the pen and flung it against the wall. It bounced back to the desk. When he looked up, Nancy had left; there was no one to argue the point. He reached over and grabbed it. Flicking the end back and forth, Braeden thought about what she had said. Yes, he *had* behaved badly. Now to choose what to do about it. He had to get to the truth. And it would take confrontation.

The best place to start would be at the beginning and visit Andrea's former employer. He phoned the hospital administrator, then caught the early morning flight to Detroit. Shortly after one o'clock he entered the administrator's office. He introduced himself and sat down to learn the facts regarding her departure.

Next, feeling sheepish at his deception, he contacted her former doctor, posing as her current specialist. Key to his involvement was why she'd said she couldn't get pregnant, and the extent of her heart problem. Heart medication wouldn't prevent pregnancy. That should have been a signal to him when she mentioned it. Dammit, her eagerness to let him bed her had walloped his intelligence at the time.

The elderly doctor had no problem recalling her case because it had been unusual that someone her age, with no obvious heart risks, should be so sick.

"It's important that I know the details surrounding Miss Martin's treatment," Braeden announced. "She's pregnant and there could be trouble down the road. The last trimester puts a severe strain on the mother's heart, a difficult labor could put her into heart failure and kill her." Braeden put a clamp on his impatience, but his stomach knotted just thinking about the danger.

"Very true." The doctor buzzed his receptionist to pull out Andrea's file and passed it to Braeden when she brought it into his office.

Braeden scanned through it. "Let's throw her x-rays up on the view box and see what we have." Braeden's heart leaped to his throat when he studied the films. "The right coronary artery is where the blockage occurred. That's a bitch of a place to operate on because the artery is behind the heart."

"And she refuses an abortion?" Dr. Smythe asked.

“Yes. She’d been told she couldn’t have children. Can you tell me why?” Braeden tried to keep his cool, but he noticed his hands already fisted by his side.

“I doubt she was told she couldn’t get pregnant. If I did tell her, I meant that because of the large dosage of medication at the time, she *shouldn’t allow herself* to get pregnant; it would be detrimental to her health and a baby’s, too.”

“I can see how she might have misinterpreted what you said.” It always mystified him why some doctors glossed over their reports to their patients and didn’t take time to insure they were properly understood.

“I’ve seen her a few times since she quit working in this area. With less stress and close attention to her diet and exercise, she was able to reduce her medication and do well.”

“Thank you for your help. I wanted to be certain I had my facts straight.” As Braeden walked down the hall, he wondered if there were such simple explanations for other facets of her behavior.

It was late evening before he reached home. The red light flashing on his answering machine gave him hope that Andrea had tried to contact him again. When he pressed *play*, Brett Bentley’s voice spoke: “Dr. Landry, I need to see you. Could you come to my office tomorrow at ten-thirty?”

Braeden muttered out loud as if the lawyer were in the room. “I’ll be there; this meeting with you might have a payoff for me as well.” He and Andrea had a lot to discuss—her heart problem, the pregnancy, the fact he’d hurt her, the list went on, but he remembered she’d gone away. Brett could have the answers. As he pulled off his shoes, he smiled. *Tomorrow will be a busy day. I’ll do my best to see a few things change around here.*

Exhausted from the flight and with no surgeries scheduled, he slept in. At eleven o’clock he sped to the building that housed the law offices of Mr. Jenkins’ lawyer. His long strides quickened their normal pace and carried him straight to the receptionist’s desk.

Braeden had not met the young attorney previously. He resented the lawyer dating Andrea and hoped it didn’t show. He had to find out

how far their relationship had progressed and discourage it. Why did the lawyer want to see him?

Brett rose from his desk and shook Braeden's hand. "I tried to get hold of you, yesterday, Dr. Landry, but you were out of town. Please, have a seat."

Braeden did so and scanned the office. He hated lawyer's offices; he'd seen enough of one last year. "Why did you want to see me?"

"You were Doug's doctor and you know the beneficiaries of his will. You must be aware of a pending lawsuit."

"I thought Melissa was just whistling in the dark when she mentioned it. She's going ahead with it?"

"The basis for her case is the state of mind of your patient."

"Then she has no case. Doug's mind was as sound as anyone's and it was obvious how much Andrea meant to him."

Brett leaned across the desk as if being closer to Braeden accented the truth of his words: "Justice deals with tangibles. There's no way to prove that she deliberately encouraged him to put her in his will."

"She was involved in a similar situation, did she tell you about it?" Braeden felt as if he were telling secrets out of turn, but this legal quandary had to be above board.

"As a matter-of-fact she did... a habit of doing these things could rouse suspicion but that wouldn't be admissible in court. She told me right away about the other case."

"I see." Braeden sucked in his breath. He shouldn't have suspected her honesty. There'd been plenty of times he'd wished she hadn't had that quality and he could go on blissfully unaware of his shortcomings. "Just out of curiosity, what *is* your relationship with Andrea?"

"We've dated a bit, but I can't seem to get to second base. It's as if she's interested in someone else. She denies it when I ask. I know she was engaged at one point, so perhaps she hasn't gotten over her fiancé yet. She's seemed tired lately; this flu bug has taken a lot out of her. I intend to keep trying, but don't worry, I'll not push her and get her upset. I've got time on my side."

Braeden's mouth set in a determined line. *The hell you have.*

He thanked the lawyer for the information and left. *Talk about deception on Andrea's part, I need a complete overhaul to ever be honest after this chicanery.*

His last stop was at Melissa's home. Braeden had difficulty curtailing his impatience as he stood on the doorstep waiting for her response to the doorbell's chime. His objective took less time than expected, though. With a considerable measure of jubilation he returned directly to the CCU nursing station and searched for Nancy. He found her checking the linen closet.

"Were you on the level when you said you didn't know where Andrea went?" Braeden asked.

"Would I lie?"

"You didn't exactly lie. Where is she?"

Nancy closed her mouth tight. Her eyes avoided his. Her face flushed.

"Nancy, she has no close family. Where did she go? It could be dangerous for her to traipse off on her own."

"I didn't like the idea, either, but she was adamant. She rented my cabin for a week. I couldn't turn her down, but I've been worrying about her up there alone. I intended to check on her in the next day or two, but I have to work double shifts for a nurse who called in sick. Could you go and make sure everything's okay?"

"I'll do better than that. Sam thought I should take time off. Time at a lake sounds like what this doctor should order for himself. I can line up others to cover my schedule. How's that? In fact, I want to rent it for a second week."

"I'll draw you a map. Be careful, Braeden. Her nerves are shot and you *know* how you affect her."

"Nancy, you know I'm going to be a father?"

"Yes. I just thought it hadn't struck home with you yet. The question is with your record for avoiding complications, how close to raising the child will you want to get?"

"Maybe closer than you think."

~ \* ~

Braeden grinned as he set out in the rented Cherokee. Not wanting to damage his Jag, which was built low to the ground, he thought it

best to use a four-wheel-drive vehicle that would withstand drifts of snow should it storm. He had a few clues why he felt compelled to be with her. For one thing it would ease his worry, for another, he'd not been able to shake her from his mind. And that was the part he didn't understand. It had nothing to do with the pregnancy. Perhaps they could get to know each other and come to a resolution of the antagonism that dogged their relationship. How did one blend two stubborn minds?

Nancy's map was easy to follow. His excitement rose the closer he got to his target. He and Andrea would be alone with no interruptions. No hallways for her to hurry down. When he thought about their past encounters, he realized the charm he used with others hadn't worked with her. He'd never had this much trouble before with a woman. *I'll have to use a different tactic. No more Dr. Nice Guy.* He laughed out loud.

Braeden spotted wisps of smoke billowing above the trees before he saw the cabin partially hidden beneath it. He nudged his vehicle tight behind hers and turned off the engine. He looked at the perspiration streaks left behind on the steering wheel. *Nerves or excitement?*

Braeden hoped Andrea offered as warm a welcoming as the cabin's porch piled with cut wood. Squawking blue jays broke the winter's silence as they swooped around a bird feeder mounded with breadcrumbs. Black-capped chickadees and juncos flitted from bush to bush eating tiny buds off the barren branches. The last time he remembered noticing nature in the wild was at Andrea's home in the autumn.

Now that he was here, his plan came to a standstill. A knock on the door might be a step in the right direction. He leaned against the Cherokee taking in the scenery and smelling the fresh woodland scents. He noticed the footprints tracked through the snow. He followed their path and saw Andrea standing at the end of the wharf. His heart skipped a beat. Then another. With her jacket pulled tightly around her, she looked waif-like as she surveyed the lake. Obviously, she hadn't heard him drive in and he was thankful for that; otherwise

she might have barricaded herself inside. This way, he stood *between* her and the cabin.

He approached the dock cautiously, like a photographer sneaking up on a wild, skittish creature for a perfect shot. Perhaps he should call to her so as not to alarm her, but he was bewitched by her slim figure outlined by the sun hanging low in the western sky. Had it delayed its demise just to give him this pleasure?

Her loose hair fluttered in the gentle breeze. She appeared to be talking to herself, but as he neared, he understood she was cooing to her stomach where her hand lay. With a sense of wonder he listened to her words. He'd intruded into her private world, but the astonishing thing was his sudden need to make it his world, too.

A rickety board on the wharf unexpectedly creaked and she whirled around suddenly. Andrea backed a few steps, but there was no escaping his presence.

"Take a shot of nitro, Andrea. Please do it now, then I'll tell you why I'm here."

Her quick obliging response calmed his jitters, but it indicated she did not welcome him. After the spray, she held her breath for ten of the longest seconds he'd known.

~ \* ~

Andrea's temper didn't take more than the ten seconds to peak because of Braeden's unexpected arrival. "W-What are you d-doing here? I told Nance I wanted to be alone." Anger flared in her eyes. Irritation with herself for yielding to his command, even though warranted, didn't help. "You have no right to be here." She started to walk past him, but changed her mind when she saw they would brush against one another. He had her trapped.

"How did you get Nancy to tell you where I am?"

"I plied her with common sense... occasionally that works."

Andrea sighed. She knew only too well how he'd charm Nancy into pitying him. He was charming her just standing, feet braced apart, eyes prodding and assertive. His staunch pose made her almost wish they were sweethearts. His brown fleece-lined suede jacket and five o'clock shadow produced a rugged appearance far different from what she'd seen previously. Her heart fluttered in spite of the nitro. She

resented her body's mutiny and hadn't expected he could still make it surface after their last encounter.

"Don't back away from me, Andrea. I'm not the ogre you think. Let's go up to the cabin before you get chilled." Braeden stepped aside and, with a sweep of his arm, motioned for her to lead the way.

She took note of his vehicle, black and ominous, blocking any chance of escape. Gritting her teeth, she stormed to the porch. The screen door swung wide and hit the cabin wall. The inside door stuck and pushing didn't dislodge it. Braeden shifted her out of the way so he could force it open. "You might not have been able to get back in. The cold weather has warped it." His breath formed white clouds that curled against her lips. Was there no end to the way he connected with her in a matter of seconds?

The interior open layout didn't seem as appealing as she'd first thought when she'd landed here last week. Not with him here to spout off reprimands and insinuations. The fire had died, just like her enthusiasm. Before she could coax the flame, he'd grabbed the poker from her hand and stoked the embers. The resulting puff of smoke didn't inspire her as it usually did, but the burst of heat felt good. She gathered a few chunks of wood from the bin in the small pantry.

Braeden snatched them out of her arms. "Sit down. I can do that." The weakness in her knees forced her to comply, but she didn't have to like it. He was taking over again; right now that was a plus.

She sat at the kitchen table and watched. Actually he didn't do too badly in encouraging a blaze. He poured water into the electric kettle and plugged it in. When the room warmed, she shrugged out of her jacket and draped it over a chair. He pulled off his jacket without saying a word, but hung it on a hook by the door.

She avoided his eyes and looked out the window when he sat across from her. On edge from his proximity, she got up and pulled a teapot, two mugs, and a package of teabags from the cupboard. She waited for his order to sit, but he remained silent, probably gauging his temper. Feeling encouraged, she hauled out a box of shortbread cookies and plunked them on the table. Maybe a snack would send him on his way. Wishful thinking on her part, she knew. Ginger brushed against his legs, the traitor. Andrea sat back down.

"I see you've made yourself at home," he muttered.

"What can I say? I'm a country gal." She glanced at his hands and thought she saw a slight tremble, but he flexed his fingers and flattened them on the table. "Okay, why are you here?"

He leaned back, balancing his chair on two legs and smiled.

"Well?"

"I think I might make a great dad."

"You have to be kidding."

Braeden suddenly turned serious. "Andrea, I know you don't want me here, but I paid for another week's rent and so, like it or not, you're stuck with me. I arranged for you to have an extra week off work."

"*What?*"

"Hear me out. I said cruel things to you and I'm sorry for that. I thought if we had a chance to be alone, we might work on our problems. Let me get to know the real you, the woman I had glimpses of when you held patients' hands, the woman who leveled with me at Christmas, and the woman I held quivering in my arms on New Year's eve.

She couldn't believe her ears. She didn't want to hear this, not now.

"In return, perhaps I'll let you see the real me... the one hidden behind the cockiness, the one just trying to figure out what would be the best way to handle this." He bounced the chair legs back on the floor. His eyes beamed cooperation but her past experience with him shouted control.

"You have to have lost your senses, Braeden. I'm not interested. *We* don't have a problem. Go dominate Melissa, if you can."

Instead of arguing the point as she expected, he stood and poured the hot water over the teabags. "I'm hungry for something more substantial than cookies and you need nourishment for the baby. Got any eggs and cheese?"

"Yes, but..."

"I'd like cheese omelet and it's past supper time. Do you want me to cook or will you do it while I bring in my gear?"



The tip of her tongue barely held back her objection. But she'd heard things go bump in the night, and as much as she'd tried to ignore them, she hadn't slept well here. She splayed her hands in the air. "I'll cook. You're on cleanup."

While she set the table and pulled out a frying pan, Braeden piled his belongings on the living room floor—sleeping bag and pillow, duffel bag, and a couple of boxes of groceries. "Where should I put this stuff?"

"There's a bedroom next to mine. It's small, but I'm already moved into the larger one." She eyed the grocery boxes with interest. You wouldn't happen to have any cans of smoked oysters in there would you?"

"Hell, no. I meant to bring them." He laughed—the first time she could remember him coming out with a hearty guffaw.

"What about pickles or oranges?" she persevered.

"I have bananas, no pickles. Cravings, huh?"

"Afraid so." She turned her back and whipped six eggs with gusto. Her nerves energized her into a work fast mode, but when she saw him stow his things in the bedroom she'd designated, she slowed. This might not be all bad if he remembered his place.

"Hey, Andrea, there's a hook on my bedroom door. Do I need to fasten it tonight to keep you out?"

She shook her head. "I wouldn't worry about me attacking you. Mine will be latched though."

He peeked around the corner. "Spoilsport."

This light-hearted Braeden she'd never seen before.

### *Thirteen*

Braeden's switch from his usual formal, straight-laced demeanor astonished Andrea, but she'd make the most of his good mood while it lasted. The previous night's attempt to eat by the kerosene lantern had been downright spooky with the wind scrubbing branches against the cabin walls. She'd been forced to turn on the light. Now, with darkness settled outside and having company in the cozy interior, the lamplight lent a soft relaxing atmosphere—until she glanced at his bedroom door. More aware than ever that he was behind the panel unstrung her composure.

Since Braeden seemed determined to stay, the wisest course was to look on it as an opportunity to get to know him better—a fresh start so to speak. She'd ignore the tingling sensations that erupted whenever he was near and keep him at arm's distance so she could think clearly.

During the night, she'd faced reality: the pregnancy put her life in jeopardy. Her uppermost fear was not for her life, but what would become of this miracle growing inside her body should anything happen to her. The answer lay with Braeden. He could make the risk so much easier to bear if she knew he would take on the responsibility of raising their child because he wanted to, not because he felt forced into it.

As much as Braeden's arrival had caught her off guard, it could solve her dilemma. With this fortuitous time together, they could rationally discuss her need for assurance. He had sacrificed a family

life for his career, yet surely some part of him must yearn to leave a legacy. What could stand as a more precious testament than his own flesh and blood?

Her need to provide the right atmosphere for the discussion carried its own difficulties; his charisma could get in the way. She cringed when she thought of the other women rumored to be on his list of conquests. She'd weakened and joined the group, knowing there was nothing that set her apart, but surely he could commit to their child if she handled it delicately. With the promise of a new spirit in her life she wasn't about to regret their lovemaking. It had been honest from her standpoint. She'd learn in time not to care—no matter what, she wouldn't open herself to heartbreak with his philandering ways.

Andrea glanced around the kitchen. The bewitching shadows created an exciting charged atmosphere, not what she'd planned. All she had to do was flick the light switch to inactivate the energy. She lifted her hand, dropped it, and wiped the sweaty film on her jeans. The ambience created was invigorating and conducive to a stimulating meal if she put away her silly illusions. And that's what she wanted—a chance to bring out the best of their personalities. Otherwise it would be a long two weeks. She had to take a chance.

Braeden's stake in her pregnancy hadn't dawned on her until he had said that he'd make a great dad. Was he really interested in his child or just blowing smoke? He'd dropped the subject, yet his sincerity appeared real. She'd never known how to take him, now she could find out. Reasoning had to take precedence after all was said and done. If he were even starting to consider being an active participant in their child's life, so much the better for them all.

Before calling him, Andrea entered her bedroom and swiftly changed into the only blouse she'd brought—a red one. Satisfaction with her mature decision to act responsibly was reason to dress up and celebrate. Her low cut blouse was missing the top button, but it would do, or would it be like waving a red flag in front of a handsome bull? The dresser mirror spotlighted her cleavage. She noticed the bloom of crimson in her reflection and nodded. Definitely a red flag. Oh well, she'd be on her guard.

Andrea patted her stomach. *If only Braeden and I can end our differences, you might end up with a daddy, little one.* She wished she had time to figure out what to do about one obstacle. Melissa. That woman might find some way to vent her resentment through the baby. Andrea doubted that Melissa was mother material, but she knew she couldn't plan for everything. *Judging by how frequently Braeden changes women, he'll drop Melissa before long.* She smiled. She'd count on that.

The meal was ready; she only had to call him. No, she'd do more and pave their way to a harmonious friendship that could benefit them both. Excitement gave her courage. Andrea tiptoed to his bedroom and knocked before opening the door. What she saw took her breath away. A small candle burning on the nightstand allowed her to see him stretched full length on the bed, hands under his head, staring at the rafters.

The bed springs squeaked when he turned toward her. His raspy words almost overturned her decision to try a forward approach. "Oh, you're coming into my bedroom already, are you?" He winked. "I thought it would take longer."

Because of his obvious teasing, she bit back a snippy retort. Heat crept up her neck and spread to her face. She turned and retreated, tossing her words over her shoulder, "I came to tell you supper is ready." She left abruptly. And waited by the table.

Braeden sauntered into the kitchen and gallantly pulled out her chair. "Hey, I like the lamplight. It makes your eyes sparkly."

*He's working his charm. It may be a struggle to maintain my equilibrium tonight. This is going to be harder than I thought.*

Before joining her, Braeden moved his place setting at right angles to hers, bringing his left arm within a hair's breadth of her right one. Andrea slid her hands to her lap. He appeared to ignore her reflex, choosing to divide the omelet in two and motioning for her plate. She passed it, watchful that her fingers didn't brush against his. The electricity in the air would surely cause a major eruption of sparks should they touch. *I wish he'd wipe that silly grin off his face. He thinks he's the one in control.* Aloud she said, "I noticed the wood

box is getting low, the last tenants here didn't replace what they used."

"Good thing I came. I'll fill it after we eat. I don't want you lifting anything heavy."

"I'm not an invalid, Braeden. I managed before you arrived."

"I know, but I don't want you taking chances."

She blinked when she saw his eyes lock on her neckline—like a puppy, that had just found a juicy bone. She half-smiled from the small pleasure of finding him interested in her femininity.

Braeden took a bite of omelet, then wiped his mouth with a paper napkin when the melted cheese started to drip down his chin. When she sat fixed and didn't make a motion to eat, he asked. "Aren't you going to feast away before it gets cold? It's delicious, but you'll have to watch your intake of cheese after this. You want to avoid anything that might cause fluid retention."

Was he going to start badgering her over everything she did? If so, nattering about the risks and the need to abort the pregnancy would probably come next. For her self-preservation she had to take a stand. She inhaled, then replied softly, "It was your suggestion we have cheese in it, but I'll *bow* to your expertise. No more cheese after tonight." She forked a mouthful and savored the rich flavor; it might be her last for a while if Braeden had anything to say about it.

"Good." A mischievous grin brightened his face. "Now you have the idea. I'm just pointing out one of the many ways I'm going to take care of you."

"And how's that? By nagging me day and night?" She longed to let go and blast him hard, but that wouldn't suit her need. She gentled her voice. "You're not my doctor; you aren't responsible for me."

"Andrea, I'm partly responsible for your condition." He suddenly turned serious. "Just for the record, I'm sorry for what I said. I never thought for a minute it wasn't my baby." His dark gaze wandered toward the lake. "I deal with unexpected events everyday, but you caused what a bleeding artery can't—stupefied shock." Braeden shook his head and placed his napkin on his lap.

His reaction wasn't a confidence-builder in her eyes. She wanted to reach over and give him a wallop. Instead, his fingers reached

across the table and patted hers. “I’m on your case as a consultant—at Craig’s request. I imagine it’s because of your heart problem more than the fatherhood aspect. Still, Craig had a gleam in his eye when he mentioned it.” Braeden looked around and smiled. “This country atmosphere can sure do wonders for your appetite. Now, dig in.”

His easy-going manner threw her off balance. Dr. Marshall had never suggested he’d call upon him. Braeden passed her the plate of toast and when he noticed she was holding her fork in midair, he placed two half slices on her plate. Another example of the subtle way he could take over a situation if she conceded, even for a minute. She deliberately put one piece back on the pile. He never batted an eye, and so she received little satisfaction for her childish act of defiance.

“We’ve got to get meat on your bones and color in your cheeks.” There was that twinkle in his eyes again.

Her eyebrow raised as she visualized throwing him off the porch into the deepest snowdrift available. She again held back rude words aching to leave her mouth. If he kept up this pace she wouldn’t have a mind of her own much longer. At this moment, though, sitting next to him with a crackling fire in the background and the distraction of the glimmer in his eyes, she found it hard to concentrate on her goal of just being rational.

She cleaned up her plate, and not quite full, retrieved the second slice of toast. Braeden took note and grinned but was smart enough to not to remark on it. It seemed he intended to make the best effort he could toward revamping their relationship. She could do no less.

Andrea poured the tea into two mugs. “Good thing I took the teabags out or this tea would make the hair curl on your chest.” She turned away and rolled her eyes. It had been an unfortunate choice of words. She knew only too well that his chest hair already curled beneath his sweatshirt. “Er... Do you want dessert?”

“I’d love dessert.” He grinned. “What do you have in mind?”

Her mouth dropped in exasperation at his flippant remark. Her shoulders stiffened.

“Oh, don’t get your feathers in a flap.” Braeden reached over and pulled two bananas from the counter; he passed one to her. Andrea considered refusing it, but accepted it as graciously as she could. She

and Braeden had hardly spoken during the meal, each lost in private thoughts, but now his eyes became flirtatious again. Nervous as she was, she wasn't feeling up to starting a sensible conversation. Regarding herself out of her league and useless, she frittered her time away by examining the banana end to end, hoping to erase her jitters. He hadn't done anything to win her disapproval yet. She wished he had. "I get the impression you're expecting me to start a conversation, Braeden. Cat got your tongue?"

He suddenly sobered. "I don't want to intrude on your thoughts; I know you have a lot on your mind or you'd be at home."

"What else do you know?" She peeled one strip halfway down the banana.

"I know you're quite naïve."

Her fingers stopped. "In what way?"

"You don't seem to realize the seriousness of your situation. As much as I don't like the thought, since the child is mine too, I have to mention an abortion should be strongly considered." He raised his hand to silent any interruption. "Now hear me out. I know you're thinking I'm cruel, but that's not the case. The risk to you concerns me. I recommend termination of the pregnancy in all heart cases where the mother's life is at stake."

*Here it comes. I knew it.* "Because it's easier on you? Sweep the dirt under the carpet?"

"That's not fair and you know it. Setting my involvement aside, I'm concerned about your health."

"You're right about me being naïve. I was naïve not to take the money the first time I inherited it. I was naïve to chance the pregnancy, I—"

"And you're naïve in thinking I'm not seriously thinking about your welfare." His eyes turned hard as flint for a few seconds. "I don't know how you'll survive."

"Survive?" Taking time to think and curtail rash statements that would put them at war, she slowly peeled two more strips down the banana. Her voice remained cool and steady when she finally spoke, "I wrote the book on survival, Braeden. Do you know that almost every day of my adult life has been spent in a fight for survival?"

Survival in university, in earning a living, and most important in dealing with heart disease. I'm still here...doing what I do best...surviving. One thing I've learned is if you want something, you work for it, and you don't let anything stand in the way."

"Then you're more like me than I thought, but I bet you've never done one outrageous thing in your life."

With his heavy sigh came an annoying realization he was right. She dragged her gaze away from him and concentrated on the banana's flesh. The fruity aroma indicated it was at the perfect stage for eating. Hesitantly, she placed the banana in her mouth and drew it out through her closed lips. She sniffed at it again and bit off a morsel. *Nothing outrageous huh?*

She saw Braeden's mouth agape; his eyes, glued to the banana, recorded every move she made. His tongue slid side-to-side licking his lips. Her eyes darted back to his. In the flickering dimness, his expression had taken on a sultry mask, dark, deep and mysterious. She would have given all she had for one moment's insight into his thoughts.

Breaking away from his distraction, she peeled the banana further exposing more of the bared flesh. The probe-shaped fruit stayed rigidly in one hand as she licked off the fingertips of her other hand. She heard his slight groan. "Something wrong, Braeden?"

"Uh... no... I just noticed how er... attractive you are tonight."

Braeden was almost as red as the napkins and it took only a minute for her to get wise to the fact she'd aroused him. She fought down the urge to peek under the table and check matters out. The memory of an erotic movie she'd once watched on TV came to her mind—a banana had been used as a tool to entice the hero. Had she been following the process subconsciously? It hadn't been her plan to seduce him—he'd never shown any commitment to anyone he'd bedded. Being the womanizer he was, no doubt he got turned on easily. She'd ignore the ridiculousness of the situation—or would she?

Andrea pulled the skin all the way off the banana, held the naked fruit in the air and commenced to nibble at it indiscriminately, a nip out of one side, then another, and another. By the time she had



whittled the flesh to the end, Braeden's face was perspiring heavily, his complexion fired.

Her mind reeled from the assault on her senses and that damn tingling sensation prodded low in her belly. This couldn't be her—an escapee from the centerfold of a raunchy sex magazine had captured her persona. She swallowed the last bite.

Braeden gulped and looked at his banana.

Andrea's heart pounded so hard she feared he could hear it.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "You look a bit stressed. Aren't you going to eat your fruit?"

"Ah... I would rather have a cookie, I think."

He channeled a quick breath into the air when she got up and brought the shortbread cookies to the table. "The wood stove sure packs a lot of heat," he said.

Andrea laughed to herself when he ran his finger around the damp neck of his navy sweatshirt. Braeden turned away from staring at her and peered in the cookie box. After he made his selection, Andrea smiled politely and helped herself to one. Their eyes met again, but her words died on the first breath with his statement: "I had a little chat with Melissa yesterday."

"Bet you had more than a chat." The sarcasm slipped out. With the mention of that woman's name, Andrea's playful mood vanished and she couldn't hold back the frown that betrayed her dislike.

Braeden coughed to clear the catch in his throat, started to take a bite of cookie, then stilled. His eyes focused on hers. She expected a tongue-lashing. What she got was hesitancy—not at all like him. "You don't need to worry about a court case. Melissa is dropping the matter." He laid his cookie down and rested his chin on the backs of his folded hands. The intensity of his gaze created more uncertainty. She couldn't allow herself the luxury of believing he'd cared enough to help her.

She tried to temper her tone, but it didn't work. "Of course. Melissa succumbed to your persuasive powers. The hospital's reputation is saved." She threw her arms in the air, but bit back a sarcastic, "Hooray."

"I did it for you, to hell with the hospital."

“You did? Honestly? Why would you care if she took me to court, Braeden?” Andrea whispered, “You’ve believed the worst of me from the beginning.”

“Okay, maybe I deserve that. Let’s clear the air. I made a mistake when we met. Why don’t you forget that and move on? Melissa is a conniving little bitch. She reconsidered her decision when I pointed out that both Craig and I would swear her father was of sound mind and she’d look like a greedy, vindictive fool. Melissa’s going away to start her life anew,” he paused. “Remind you of yourself?”

His question begged a response, but she first had to collect her thoughts. “Will you miss her?” She laid the banana peel on the table and smoothed out the sections. So much for her prop. Now what should she do? What a flake she was.

“There was nothing between Melissa and me.” Braeden shook his head. “Ever.” His eyes latched onto her with steeled intensity.

Andrea sat up, aimed, and tossed the banana peel into the wastebasket. He was giving away a part of himself. She couldn’t forgive herself for the way she’d shocked him with the blunt news of her pregnancy. He now concentrated on her facial expressions. What did he see? She didn’t want to talk anymore. This sincere Braeden baffled her. She noticed a skim had formed on the top of his tea. “Better drink your tea before it gets cold.”

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Braeden took a few sips and set his mug down. He swiped his hand across his mouth as he tried to get a tight rein on his emotions. He wondered if she could see the gears grinding in his head. He’d have to choose his words with care. If he had his druthers, he’d whisk her off into the damn bedroom right then and forget about their differences. He was in favor of enjoying what they had in common—a need to be in each other’s arms. Andrea didn’t fool him one bit. She was out to taunt him and make his life miserable, and damn, she was succeeding. He’d never let on she was getting to him, even if it killed him. He shifted in his chair. The way his jeans were tightening, he’d be bursting at the seams soon. No, their difficulties had to be cleared away with honesty—not sex. For once he was going to have to think

of more than his physical needs if he wanted to have their relationship survive the storms ahead.

"I was in Detroit yesterday... to the hospital where you worked before coming to Bayview." Braeden stopped. The fury in her eyes impaled him. He'd anticipated her reaction to his prying, but he had to come clean. He had a lot to atone for and his revelation was the only way to give him an opening. Still, his confession unnerved him. He never confessed to anything, just let people think what they wanted.

To his relief, the change of subject suppressed the desires of his body. The tightness in his jeans eased. His ability to concentrate increased. "The administrator verified that you didn't accept the money a patient left you, and he explained that it didn't stop the ugly rumors. Your boss tried to squelch the gossip because it was unjustified, but he failed. That's when he called on Sam to hire you."

"I could have told you all that had you asked. You didn't trust me to give truthful answers?"

"Not when you go to such lengths to avoid me. Damn it, Andrea, I don't blame you for accepting the money this time. Doug wanted it that way."

He drew as much air into his lungs as he could. He needed the energy. "I also talked with your former doctor. He thought he'd made it plain that you *shouldn't* get pregnant because of your medication and delicate condition, not that you couldn't. I know from experience that we doctors are often not as precise as we like to think.

"I thought he meant the medication would make me sterile. It doesn't matter now. I want this baby more than anything. I hope I can raise our child, but I need something from you."

His chest lightened. *At last she can admit to her desire. This'll be a walk in the park from here on. She'll need me; I can live with that.* "And that is...?"

"I have to know that if anything happens to me, you'll take responsibility for raising our child."

Her words exploded in his ears. The sincerity in her eyes tumbled his expectation, numbing his thought process. He levered from the table, grabbed his jacket, and stormed to the porch. The slam of the door echoed across the lake.

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Andrea flinched at the door's vibration. *So much for Braeden wanting their child.* Her insides felt like they'd been crushed by a bulldozer. Running her fingers over her abdomen imprinted her memory with how close she was to having unconditional love. Yet she needed Braeden in her life, too. Tears welled in her eyes, but she wouldn't let them escape in a torrent. Her anguish burned deep to the point she thought the grief alone might be enough to do her in. What was the point of going on alone? She peered out of the window to see if Braeden had stalked to his vehicle and left.

No. He stood on the top step, his arm braced against a post while he stared in the direction of the lake. The relief she felt at his continuing presence sent resounding shock waves into her system. His anger wasn't caused by the inconvenience of a child in his life or he'd be gone now. Until this minute, she hadn't anticipated *his* difficulty in accepting the downside of her situation—the possibility she could die.

She rose and cleared the table. As she piled the dishes, her exasperation created tension that needed termination before it caused physical repercussions. She needed fresh air, and as much as she didn't want to go past him, she slung on her coat and boots, hurried outside, and fled down the steps.

Andrea tramped onto the dock without a backward glance. The crisp air, instead of soothing her mind, crystallized her predicament. She alone bore the choice of whether the pregnancy should go forward.

The odor of fireplace smoke drifting across the lake brought a longing for the thing she wanted most in her life—family. She should hate Braeden for being such a cold-hearted rat that he wouldn't even say he wanted his own child. She couldn't hate him. She'd brought nothing but confusion into his life.

"You're not getting rid of me that easy, Andrea." Startled at the nearness of his voice as she hadn't heard him creep up beside her, she teetered on the wharf's edge. Braeden grabbed her and prevented her from falling to the ice. It felt so good being in his arms, she clung to him a few minutes longer than necessary. What was her muddled mind thinking?

The white plumes of his breath caressed her face; his eyes penetrated her sense of failure. “Just because you drive me to distraction, doesn’t mean I’m going to leave. See? You need me to protect you from yourself. I said I was staying here with you, and I am.” His words reassured her.

Andrea marched hup... two... three... four... back to the cottage. Braeden hadn’t answered her question about the baby’s welfare but her instincts warned her not to press the issue at this moment. She would have to before they left, though. Her final decision hinged on his answer.

Braeden trailed behind, clearly the one in control. When she reached the porch, she turned and stared at the resolute look on his face. Her heart flip-flopped. She shuddered and uttered a groan of self-disgust as she went inside.

To keep her mind and hands busy, once she’d removed her outer clothing, she started washing the dishes. Braeden hung up his coat, scuffed off his boots, and grabbed a dishtowel. He dried each item as soon as she placed it in the rack. Finally, she laughed. “It still surprises me that you’d lift a finger to do menial chores.”

“It’s not the chore that I enjoy, it’s the company, and I want to help in any way I can.”

*If that were only true.* She had to learn not to inject personal assumptions on statements meant to flatter her. *That’s his charm in action.* After she stowed the dishes, she announced, “It’s getting late, I’m going to bed.” She hid her smile, knowing the uneasiness of being alone would be held at bay. It would return soon enough as the pregnancy progressed. She hoped her emotions stabilized soon, otherwise she’d be a slave to her hormonal impulses.

Braeden looked disappointed, but only grunted. “You need a good night’s sleep. I brought some papers to read. Goodnight.”

She paused in the doorway to her room, wanting to follow up with something that might give a reliable indication she was happy he was here. Her voice trembled. “Thanks for being here, Braeden. And thanks for what you did about Melissa.”

His expression conveyed his surprise and the smile that followed sparked her joy. She entered her room and readied for bed, dressing in

her old blue sweat suit. She heard Braeden go into his room and unzip his duffel bag. When she returned from the bathroom, she noticed his door was shut. She smiled, wondering if he'd locked it. She noisily fastened the hook on her door. Since the walls didn't reach the rafters, sound carried. The bed squeaked as she crawled beneath the covers and listened. She assumed he was reading.

"Braeden?"

"Yes?"

"We should have used condoms... Dumb, huh?" She thought she *heard* a smile.

"Goodnight, Andrea."

"Goodnight, Braeden."

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The tantalizing aroma of bacon and coffee lured Andrea from her deep sleep. Groggy, and unstable when she sat up, she thought she'd been dreaming and only imagined Braeden in the cabin. Her curiosity got the better of her though, and she stumbled into the kitchen without considering her disheveled appearance. The sight of him, standing by the stove pouring pancake batter into the frying pan, shocked her to consciousness and she hurried back to the bedroom.

"Breakfast is ready now if you want to come and enjoy my culinary expertise. It's 'come-as-you-are time.'"

"No thanks. I'll dress first and be presentable." Was there no end to his talents? *Fatherhood* leaped to her mind and her shoulders slumped. She'd work on that one. A new day, another try. She straightened her shoulders and glanced in the mirror, happy to start off with him in a light-hearted frame of mind. A good nature would put less strain on their proximity. But just how long could he maintain the façade of a fun-loving human being? Not long, she suspected, he hadn't had much practice.

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Braeden whistled while he set the table, but when Andrea appeared in tight jeans and a knit burgundy turtleneck that clung as if there were no tomorrow, he changed the pitch to a wolf whistle. He thought she'd cringe and redden, but for once she maintained her

great posture—ramrod straight—as if she were proud of her assets. He knew he was appreciative of them.

Andrea slipped into the chair across from him, only a slight flush on her cheeks. He tried hard to keep an even perspective, but the way she filled out that sweater sent the blood rushing straight to his nether parts again.

“So you excel in many areas don’t you?” She laughed, her eyes sparkling as she admired the stack of pancakes in the center of the table.

“I do my best.” He’d be cautious to avoid smart aleck behavior. Andrea usually wrung him out with those damn emerald eyes. But her femininity made it hard to keep his sight or his mind on the food. Today would be a trial like every other day with her. One of these times, by the law of odds, he should come out the winner.

“Braeden, if you talked with my former doctor, you must be aware of my heart problem. Would there be any chance you could at some point, after the baby comes, jump in and perform a miracle?” Her eyes looked hopeful.

“By all reports, you’re handling your condition well. I know you’ve had a few angina episodes, but I’m not a cut-happy surgeon, Andrea. Your right coronary artery is involved and dangerous to work on. Besides, after a bypass in a woman, sometimes the quality of life is not what the patient hopes it will be... anxiety and depression are big factors. I don’t want to take those risks. I feel medication is the way to go unless there’s an emergency.”

“My feelings exactly. Thanks.”

The warmth of the sunny morning caused icicles to melt and trickle from the eaves. With the window open to clear the smoke from over-heated fat, the tinkling drops on ice-crusting snow gave hope that nature’s harmony would bloom inside, too.

Before helping herself to pancakes, Andrea breathed deeply of the fresh air. As she did so, her breasts rose and fell, inviting his touch. He controlled himself with great difficulty and wondered how he would endure the meal. Last night was bad enough. He’d barely survived. Getting through breakfast would be a struggle, too.

She offered light conversation so he worked on stifling his lustful thoughts with calm comments. To have another stimulating meal brought visions of what it might be like to have this continue. He couldn't recall ever feeling this excited in the morning. His sexual escapades were generally short-lived, the mornings after marked by a quick getaway in response to a page from the hospital. She'd woven a spell, and he'd not even been stirred by a prelude of good sex. What was his world coming to?

After the meal ended, they dressed warmly and took refills of coffee to the porch. The drips from the roof gurgled as they splashed and ran in a newly created ice trench around the porch.

"What would you like to do today, Andrea? We both need exercise; how about a walk along the lake?"

"I'd like that. There's no wind and it'll take the place of my treadmill. If I don't get moving, I'm going to be as fat as a turkey by the time I get out of here."

"You'd better take a shot of nitro to open your arteries. You know a lot of the blood flow goes toward digestion."

"Yes, doctor." Her immediate aversion to his stare indicated she was trying to put a lid on the impudent reply that he probably deserved. They both needed to shore up their impulses. At least she didn't change her mind about accompanying him. The companionship in the fresh air could take on a new vibrancy.

They strolled the wooded road side by side. The crunch of snow on the sparkling white ground lent a solitude that in itself should have been relaxing, yet he found himself more keyed up than ever. One thought played over and over in his mind. He'd come here to ease into a truce of sorts. Now he wanted more, a great deal more, but was she up to it? Her mixed signals continually stumped him. *Hell, I'm going for it.*

They'd only gone a short distance when he suddenly tugged on her arm and put action to his thought by pulling her closer. "Are you still sorry I intruded on your vacation? It's important for me to know you don't mind." Her eyes shone her indulgence of his need.

He tried not to sound artificially apologetic. "I have a habit of taking control of situations." She nodded and grinned, encouraging



him to continue. "In surgery it's appreciated; sometimes in real life it's not." His hand squeezed hers. The glow in her eyes mesmerized him. It was vital she know the real him. He wanted her energy and spirit closer. Dammit. Was he falling in love?

Andrea didn't reply. The only evidence that showed she'd heard his admission was the shrug of her shoulders. He'd expected sarcasm. Maybe he had shocked her for a change, leaving her at a loss for words. Her sudden wide-eyed search of his face rocked his self-assurance.

"You need to understand that surgeons are highly stressed, self-centered, and accept little that doesn't comply to their routine."

Finally, she spoke. "It's true, your autocratic habits get in the way, but looking at it realistically I guess there's reason and value in them. Braeden, I know it was risky for me to come here alone, but I needed to make plans."

His nerves stretched taut. Should he go so far as to make a commitment? He wanted to be part of her plans, not just a medical advisor. He held his tongue. They were approaching more solidity in their relationship and a mistake at this point could dismantle the progress.

"I'm truly glad you're here. Thank you for coming. Don't expect any more of me than enjoying your company, though."

"Then why dress so provocatively? You're still sending mixed signals."

"Because I'm so mixed up myself. Hormones, maybe?"

"What's at the heart of all this, Andrea? Pardon the pun."

She scuffed her booted foot on a snow bank. "I don't want to put myself in the position of being hurt again. The baby is all I need. But my question still is valid and I need an answer to make an informed decision. Will you look after our baby if I don't make it through?"

"Yes, of course. How could you doubt it?"

He couldn't believe the sweep of relief that crossed her face. He wrapped his arms around her and noticed she didn't fight him. Her arms gained a hold on his back and returned the comfort. He wasn't buying that all she needed was their child. She needed more. Was it more than he had in him to give?

Whatever kept them apart, he would clear the roadblock to happily-ever-after. “There’s something beyond what you say and I’m going to get to the root of it. I can feel your excitement when I’m near and that’s not my ego, dammit, that’s plain fact.”

She moved away and continued on the walk.

He followed, shuffling his feet, his empty hands buried in his pockets. *This isn’t going to be as easy as I thought; she still doesn’t trust me. Well, maybe she shouldn’t.* A slow smile crossed his mouth. His long strides caught up to her and he walked beside her in silence.

“Braeden, how come you decided on the medical profession for your life’s work? It takes so much time and dedication to get where you are.”

“My mother died of heart disease when I was fifteen. Each night as I sat at her bedside in the final days I wanted to make her better, or at least alleviate her pain. The torture stayed with me in college and Sam encouraged me to go for broke.”

“What would you have been if you hadn’t become a doctor?”

“I played drums in a band in high school. I’d have been a Jazz musician like Miles Davis, I think.”

Andrea’s eyes lit up. “No one plays the trumpet like he does. I brought one of his CDs. I’ll play it while we’re getting lunch.”

Upon their return to the cabin, Andrea made tomato and lettuce sandwiches, while Braeden heated chicken noodle soup. In the background, Miles Davis played *The Surrey With The Fringe On Top*. *A few more days like this and I’ll be so domesticated I’ll be acting like a damn lap dog. For now, though, helping her has its purpose—I get to know her better on a different level. Not only that, this is fun.*

They ate at leisure, no expectations, no dispute. He encouraged her to take a nap while he studied two patient files, but he ended up staring out the window thinking about her... and a child playing at his knee.

After an hour he tapped lightly on her door and it pushed open. He stood on the threshold watching her sleep. She suddenly stirred, kicked off the covers and stretched full length, exposing her clothed body in such a sensual way that prickles peppered his arms. His fascination with her made him feel like he was spying on something

intensely private. Yet he couldn't draw his eyes away. When she started to wake, he sneaked back to the kitchen's safety and paced the floor. He would not be able to stand this 'hands-off' policy much longer. It was driving him crazy.

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Andrea caught a glimpse of Braeden leaving the doorway. She wondered what his intent had been, but whatever it was, he'd decided against it. As she lay pondering his unique way of forever making her dwell on him, she realized that today she'd learned more about the inner man—his strength of purpose, his sensitive side. They had other things in common besides their interest in hearts. They both thought the world of his family, liked the same music, and they both worked hard toward specific goals. His goal of being the best damn surgeon he could be, complemented her striving to lead a normal life. Someday she may have to call upon his expertise. These things could make them compatible if they chose to overlook the irritations that drove them apart. Wishful thinking on her part, she surmised.

Andrea combed her mussed hair and entered the living room. Tension resided in the lines on his forehead as he studied his files. He needed to take a break. She felt like a vixen—a vixen who suddenly wanted to play.

She placed her hands on her hips, feet apart, breasts full and high. "I had a great nap, why don't I make us coffee?" His Adam's apple wobbled up and down, pushing down a gulp, no doubt. But he merely nodded then lifted his feet up on the windowsill.

*Hmm. He wasn't tempted. Just as well.* A few minutes later, two mugs of steaming coffee in her hands, she slipped into a chair beside him and passed him a mug. With the homespun drapes pulled back, except for the disappearance of the sun, the wide view produced a winter landscape fit for a calendar. They were a picture of family bliss. She wondered if the camaraderie merely covered a pressure cooker situation.

"Are you going to be able to take this inactivity for long, Braeden?"

"I don't know. I never tried it before. There are a lot of things I've never tried before I met you."

"Such as...?"

"Such as watching what I say. You know, I have a tendency to bark when things don't go my way."

"I noticed that." She couldn't hide her grin.

"I've tried looking at myself from your point of view." He hesitated. "I've never bothered with what anyone thought about me before. I can see room for improvement."

"We can all stand a makeover at times. Don't worry yourself over it."

"What I'm trying to say is that I can make changes."

"That would be a stretch, Braeden. What's driving you to consider this now, the fact you'll be a father?"

"I suppose so. I'd not given having my own family much thought."

For the first time she saw a glimpse of melancholy. It set her into wanting to ask a question that must be ignored. *Had he never wanted to raise a family with Sylvia?* "Need makes strange bedfellows, don't you think?" She smothered a grin.

"Andrea, I was thinking—"

A clap of thunder cut off his words.

Andrea set her mug on the windowsill and stood. "Looks like we're in for a storm."

"The temperature has risen, it could come as rain."

No sooner had the words left his mouth than the skies opened up with a torrential downpour. Luminous flashes of lightning streaked across the lake. His arm reached for her waist. Instead of scurrying away, she leaned against him. Afraid to look into his eyes, lest she see rejection for her boldness, she was glad of the excuse for close contact. She liked it so much, the thought crossed her mind she'd like to rub against him forever.

The rumbles of thunder increased in quantity and intensity. Andrea hated storms as much now as she had as a child. If she were going to be a mother she had to get over her fears. But not just yet. Braeden stood and hugged her. Then he did a remarkable thing: he squeezed her whole body tight against him in such a way she could feel his energy, his need, his arousal.

She tried to plead innocent, but her excitement wouldn't allow her. Words of resistance refused to leave her lips. Another loud clap made her jump. Before she knew it his mouth had descended to hers.

Their bodies meshed as every sense lost track of anything but the electricity sizzling in the air. Electricity not due to the storm. Andrea shivered from the sensuality, from his touch, from his power. The very last thing she wanted to do was surrender, but what she wanted most at this moment was to be in his arms. How mixed up was that? She looked off in the distance, careful to avoid seeing his disappointment, anger, whatever her emotion had provoked. Her hope to have him involved with the pregnancy could lead to disaster for them all if she got hooked by his charisma again. She'd better forget about her goal. Goals and dreams can change. She'd do what she could to avoid the nightmare of a relationship with a womanizer. Only one choice reared its head—she broke away.

She rushed to the kitchen to tidy up. Braeden retreated to his chair and picked up his papers to read again. If anything could have annoyed her more, Andrea didn't know what it could be, except for giving in to his overtures of romance. She sat at the kitchen table and thumbed through some old Home and Garden magazines.

The rain dwindled and stopped altogether during supper. Neither ate much of her noodle and meat casserole or made any attempt to converse. There was time for thought, though. Too much thought. The chill existed because of the damper she'd placed on the mood in breaking away from his kiss. She served tea and noticed that instead of taking his mug into the living room to escape the stress, he leaned back in his chair and waited. *Waited for what?*

She didn't want to look up, but finally gave in to her curiosity. His eyes didn't carry that brooding look she knew so well. If anything, they were shining, as if he'd hit a home run. Still, he remained quiet. Was his goal, to drive her crazy?

"Okay, what are you thinking, Braeden?"

"I'm concerned at how frightened you were of the storm. Would you mind if I listen to your heart and take your pulse?" He waved his hands wide. "No sexual advance planned. Strictly medical care."

She readied to brush him off and say no, then remembered the baby and thought she should chance it. “All right, maybe it would be a good idea. Storms make me nervous.” *But not nearly as nervous as you’re making me now.* “Where do you want me to go?”

At his motion, she moved to the couch, regretting her choice to wear the turtleneck. With this doctor-patient relationship, she’d look immature if she excused herself to change to her blouse.

Reluctantly, she pulled the sweater over her head. She denied the sexual implications, but there was no denying the fuzzy sensation filling her body. She was desperate enough to hope her clenched teeth would keep her breasts from showing stimulation. At least she had on a decent brassiere. *Why do women always think about such things? Why should he care what the state of my bra is?* The one she’d chosen to wear that morning gave her a great shape in the tight clothing. Although she’d never intended baring her chest, the frothy see-through lace had given her a heads up on feeling feminine. She assured herself he’d maintain his professionalism.

Braeden returned from the bedroom with his medical kit and pulled out his stethoscope. His eyes never left her chest as his hand moved skillfully above the bra. “You’re doing fine.” Then he hauled out a strange device.

“What’s that?”

“It’s a Doppler unit—an amplified stethoscope. I use it to listen to the arteries in the extremities and the neck, but at eight weeks I should be able to pick up the sound of the fetal heartbeat and blood flow, too.

“What do I have to do?”

“Lean against the cushions and undo the top of your jeans.”

Andrea did as directed and flinched when he spread a gelatinous substance over her abdomen with the flat of his hand. With the coldness of the instrument placed at intervals, she found it hard to maintain herself on an even keel. She watched every motion as he searched. She tried to hide her embarrassment. It wasn’t as if he were thinking erotic thoughts. He was listening for the baby—his baby. As he pressed the probe against her flesh, she wouldn’t have been surprised to see steam issue from the cold touch. Finally he sat up straight. She withered under his probing stare. “It may be only eight

weeks, but inside your uterus, a whirlwind of activity is going on. At five weeks, your embryo has every organ under development. Even facial features, such as eyes and ears, begin to form. Leg and arm buds sprout outward. Do you want to listen?"

She forgot about maintaining decorum, forgot about the sparks igniting from his touch. "Could I please?" The way he furrowed his brow, concentrating on the job at hand, only added to his appeal. Andrea's temperature rose. At last, he let her listen through the Doppler earpiece when he stopped in one particular spot. Listening hard, she heard a faint, delicate beat amidst swishing sounds.

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Her moist lips opened as she focused on the sound. The innocent glow on her face took his breath away. Braeden watched until she'd had enough. When she refastened her jeans, he went to the bedroom, ostensibly to pack his equipment away. He leaned against the window frame staring at the birch branches swaying with the wind. His mind swirled with the mixture of emotions that had unexpectedly overwhelmed his ability to remain detached. Perspiration dotted his brow as he came face to face with his need for her overwhelming his need for freedom. He glanced back through the open door and watched her slip back into her sweater. Would he ever be able to doctor her again with an impersonal touch?

## *Fourteen*

Desperate to forget how her body felt beneath his touch, Braeden glanced around and discovered a stack of games on his bedroom shelf. “Hey, Andrea, want to be beat in a game of Monopoly?” If she’d play a few harmless rounds, his concentration on amassing properties would occupy his mind.

“You’re on! Take it to the kitchen table.”

As the evening’s play progressed, he found he was studying *her* more than his collection of hotels. Her eyes narrowed at his latest move.

“No fair, you’re landing on the best places to buy,” she grumbled.

His heart pounded at her tiny, breathless gasps of surprise when she landed on one of his properties. He couldn’t avoid looking at the lips that carried the sound—luscious, sensitive tissue he’d tasted. His mouth ached for a repeat performance of the special intimacy. Finally, he’d had enough. “I haven’t the heart to see you in the poorhouse, I think I’ll hit the sack.”

“You just had a string of good luck; next time we’ll see who has the skill.” Her eyes shone with anticipation. How he’d love to anticipate waking up with her beside him—expectation in her eyes. After he turned out his light, he filled the moments prior to sleep by listening to her preparations for bed. The sound reminded him of the one time he’d had to remove her clothes, the one chance he’d had to make her his. He cursed his active imagination and wished he didn’t have such an accurate memory.



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The cabin seemed extra warm tonight. She should have let the fire die sooner, but she'd been too engrossed in her attempt to beat Braeden at the game. Andrea put on her black filmy nightgown. She'd brought it to make herself feel pretty and sexy, even when no one was around to admire it. Good thing, too, because tonight she would roast in her heavier sleepwear. She could change into her sweat suit later if she became cold. Though hard to explain why, she felt lost without Braeden's company. She padded to the window and peered out. The dropping temperature had transformed the light drizzle into fluffy snowflakes that fluttered like feathers to the ground. Her spirit saddened. The scene outside was perfect for lovers isolated from the world's ills. She pushed two blankets to the side, sighed, and climbed under a third. The hormonal mood switches of pregnancy had to be kicking in.

She'd been surprised by Braeden's early departure to bed. However, exhaustion from the strain of pretending to relax should help her sleep well again tonight. She recalled the events of the day; her mind on Braeden's touch. Every time they came into contact she felt more sensitized—more emotionally dependent. Try as she might, she couldn't shake the special glow that had first appeared when she'd danced with him. It followed even here during a simple game. With his child on the way, she knew he had a vested interest in her life now. She couldn't minimize his importance or get free of it, but how could she survive it?

Andrea drifted off to sleep only to wake when the wind whistled through the trees followed by ice pellets hurling against the window. Somewhere a loose shutter banged noisily against the cabin wall. The racket ruined her attempt to be brave. With the tin roof magnifying the sleet's pandemonium, her courage abandoned her. *Enough of this!* She leaped out of bed and fled to Braeden's bedroom. To her relief, his door wasn't locked. Without pause, she dashed straight to his bed.

In a flash of lightning, she saw his eyes widen. She probably looked like an apparition coming to claim his soul.

“That’s some nightgown,” he murmured and lifted the edge of his sleeping bag, moving back to give her room. She backed in, angling her back as close to him as she could.

The roar of the storm blocked out her moan of satisfaction when he wrapped his arms around her, cocooning her to his bare chest. His breath warmed the back of her neck; his leg slipped over her thigh. Instead of rebelling from the imprisonment, her fingertips brushed and circled in the soft hair on his leg. Large fingers entwined with hers, clenching tightly.

Braeden sniffed her hair, then buried his mouth in the tresses. She turned her face in his direction and he boosted himself on his elbow to hover above her. He rained tender kisses down a path from her temple to her chin. His mouth shifted in one nuzzling movement to her lips.

Andrea responded by turning onto her back and pulled him over her. Her mouth parted and allowed him to deepen his kiss. Her arms circled his neck. She curled her fingers into his hair as if she were playing a harp... delicately harmonizing her desire with his. The willingness she offered discarded her pride, leaving her defenseless—a victim of her desire.

Could he appreciate what it cost her to yield to him like this? Did he know how vulnerable she’d become? Unlike before, her heart ruled—not her head.

Braeden’s mouth began a tremulous journey down the silky fabric of her gown, exciting her body with his intimacy. When he reached the hem, he eased the clothing upward and over her head. Her body gleamed in the streaks of light and she was eager to offer it without embarrassment. With a firm grasp, he held her wrists motionless above her head. She waited with expectation and watched as his eyes lingered on her exposed skin.

His mouth retraced the path of his hands, pressing against her heated flesh as he wove his way to her breasts. The hot fire of his lips seared nipples driven to their highest peaks, then scorched onward until she squirmed and arched to meet the pleasure he brought.

Subservient to his needs and hers, her mind became lost in the ecstasy and his unspoken promise to fulfill her wants. She felt her essence as a woman, felt her power and reached for the ultimate. She

opened her mouth to speak, but Braeden placed his finger on her lips. “There’s time enough later, shhhh. Let’s sail where our feelings take us.”

Andrea stared into the steamy depth of his eyes and nodded. At this moment, she’d sail anywhere with him. She needed him to satisfy the yearning that had stayed with her since New Year’s Eve. By the pressure of his arousal he’d just about reached his destination—so had she, driven by the complexity of wanting what she couldn’t have for long. Any delay now would be heartlessly cruel.

With no recrimination or regrets, she urged him to remove his only clothing—a pair of briefs—mount, and seek pleasure in making love. Their bodies smoldered and fused becoming one with fervor—sweat filmed their bodies. Keening moans splintered the air, then culminated in a blend of two sighs.

Exhausted, but satisfied, she lay beside him, her head resting comfortably on his forearm. “This isn’t what I expected when I let you stay.”

He nudged her shoulder with his mouth. “That’s funny. It’s what I hoped for, but it looked unattainable until you walked through the door a few minutes ago.”

“When I’m with you, Braeden, I almost believe anything is possible.” A tear crept to her eye but she hastened to remove it.

He reached over and kissed the wet streak left behind. “Close your eyes and dream. I intend to see that everything is possible for you.”

She sighed, wishing it were true as they basked in the afterglow of their emotions. Locked in each other’s arms, they soon fell asleep, only to awaken later seeking a repeat of the joy.

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“Andrea? Wake up, sleepyhead,” Braeden gently shook her shoulder.

She rolled over and opening one eye looked at him through a jungle of mussed hair. When his finger flipped the drooping strands aside, she opened her other eye and smiled.

His next words were so soft, she scarcely believed she heard right. “I want you to marry me.”

Were her ears playing tricks? She studied his features and noted the sincerity carved into his jaw. She jerked upright, pulling up the sleeping bag to cover her naked breasts.

"I want to make this legal so we can be together the rest of our lives." Braeden quieted and watched for her reaction. Her mind whirled with confusion. Part of her wanted to pound him for provoking her instability. But she also wanted to press her nudity hard against his and savor the luxurious feel of his body. *What to do? What to say?* This was no time for sacrifice—her greatest fantasy lay within reach of her voice. His next statement captivated her heart: "I never thought I'd ever be asking this, but can you put up with my quirks in return for my love?"

"Braeden." She checked the lump in her throat and gulped. "Let's be realistic. I think you've been carried away by last night." Her eyes brimmed with tears as she watched his face become solemn. "You can't want to take on the responsibilities of not just any husband, but one of a woman with no guarantees for a long life."

"Listen, sweetheart, that won't wash with me. None of us has guarantees. Look at it this way, you'll have the best medical attention at your beck and call."

"Ah... is your ego showing, doctor?"

"I'm being honest. If I see trouble, I'll know who to call. Can't you understand that? Dr. Smythe and Craig say you are doing well and I trust their judgment. There are continual improvements in the treatment of heart disease and I intend to see that you get every benefit."

"But, Braeden, my condition is not what's keeping us apart."

"Well, what the hell is then?"

She swung her feet to the floor. *Why can't he just forget this foolishness so I don't have to hurt his pride?* He reached over and tugged gently on her bared shoulder forcing her acknowledgement of his question. She hugged her covering for extra courage and turned to face him. "All right, you asked. I can't trust this sudden willingness to accept the confines of being with only one woman."

He moved back. "I see. We've come to the real issue then, have we?"

“Yes. My uncertainty about the future, your bite of the apple.”

Braeden sat up. His finger reached under her chin tipping it upward. For a moment he simply cupped her cheeks between his two hands and probed her eyes. Then he spoke. “Remember how your refusal of money didn’t end the rumors where you worked?”

“How could I forget?”

“My actions *fed* the rumors at the hospital, just what I wanted—to retaliate against Sylvia’s rejection. I hadn’t wanted her particularly, she was like a broken-in shoe—comfortable—and I thought she required little maintenance. I was a different person at that time. I’m not proud of who I was as a man.”

His fingers released her face and traced down her neck, his thumbs mapping out an invisible route on her skin. He took a second to depart from the journey and touch her throat when she swallowed. The depth of his focus lessened her resistance. Hypnotized by his visual caress, she stilled. His voice was sure and steady like a lighthouse secured on solid rock. “I could stay married to my profession and continue to wallow in the admiration, but that’s no longer what I want.” He kissed her shoulder before he continued.

“Sylvia knew I took her for granted. I was the one at fault and when she’d had enough she said so. I didn’t want to look like the fool I was. I dated others. Rumors embellished my nightlife and I let it go, thinking I could show her what she’d miss. I’m not the womanizer you think. I didn’t bed them all or even want to.”

Andrea found it hard to believe him. She empathized with Sylvia and was about to say so when Braeden’s index finger brushed along her lips in a slow seductive manner. “I guess I shouldn’t have paid attention to the gossip. I know what harm it can do, better than most.” Her tension dwindled. She closed her eyes and leaned into the enchantment.

His breath caressed against her face. “You made me see I should strive for more in my personal life.” His words filled her heart. “I never trusted myself enough to get close to another woman. I didn’t want the humiliation of not being a man on top of his game. Sylvia injured my ego. At the time I thought my heart was involved, but I

know now—I was wrong. You, sweet Andrea, taught me it wasn't fatal."

"You're admitting you were wrong? I like this new Braeden. Clue me in—how did I show you it wasn't fatal?" Braeden walked his fingertips along her left shoulder. Spasmodic twinges sprinted down her arms; her breasts swelled with the titillation.

"My ego bit the dust on our first meeting. It could only rise if I used caution." He paused, never had he looked so sincere. "Instead of my pride turning me against you, it pulled a fast one and changed me into a man obsessed far beyond what I'd felt for Sylvia. I don't say I dealt with it well or even yet know how to cope with it, but I'm sure as hell ready to spend a lifetime finding out. I need you in my life, Andrea, and in my bed. Can you deal with that?"

Her eyes filled with moisture. Challenges lay ahead whether she chose to be with him or not. The assurance of excitement traveled the path he rode, without him the way would be bleak. "How do I know I wouldn't become 'an old shoe', too?"

"The only answer I can give is that I'll spend the rest of my days proving I'm not in the wrong this time. What's your answer? And keep in mind how persistent I am. You won't have a moment's peace until you're my wife."

"My bet would be that I won't have a moment's peace afterward, either." She turned away, made her decision, then turned back. "If you can accept me as things are, I guess I can take a chance on you. How about a week from Sunday?" His eyes flashed a brilliance that strengthened her hope.

"We could consider this time at the cabin as a honeymoon before the fact," Braeden murmured as he lowered the blanket.

His playfulness back in full force, she laughed, determined to shut out the worries that had become such a part of her life. At least for the time being. "Let's make the most of it then."

"It'll be my pleasure." Snuggling under the covers, their laughter blended with the rampage outside.

Braeden and Andrea managed another four days of light-hearted fun interspersed with lots of loving. A call on his cell phone forced them back to Bayview for an emergency—Sam. Felled by a heart

attack, bypass surgery gave the only hope for survival. With Sam near death's door, as the doctor most skilled in the less invasive mini-bypass operation, Braeden performed the surgery. The operation's success restored new vigor into the administrator's life.

Sam's recovery enabled him to attend the wedding in a quaint stone church on the edge of the city. Nancy assisted Andrea as bridesmaid. Due to Sam's still evident weakness, Ted acted as Braeden's best man. The assembly of guests included Sylvia and Craig, as well as Marianne and Sara, and a small group of Braeden's associates.

An elegant dinner at the hotel where the staff Christmas party had been held successfully restrained Braeden's wit. Lucky for him, because Andrea was fully prepared to give as good as he dished out concerning his mirrored tile ceiling.

When the happy couple retired to their room upstairs, Braeden carried her over the threshold and nudged the door shut behind him. He placed a quick wet kiss on her cheek and steadied her on her feet, then moved to his suitcase at the end of the bed. She saw him slip something into his white tuxedo jacket's inside pocket.

After a moment's disappointment at not receiving a more consequential kiss, Andrea remarked, "That's all you can come up with?"

"No, it gets better. I have my wedding present to give you." He opened the Venetian blinds and turned out the light. "Come sit on the bed beside me."

"I didn't get anything for you except the slinky nightgown I'll be wearing."

"If you bought it with me in mind, I want nothing more."

Andrea sauntered to the bed, mystified. She looked around and didn't see any package. Braeden grabbed her hand and pulled her down with him, shifting her until the streetlights illuminated her face.

"Remember, I said I intended to redecorate my apartment? Now the chore falls to you."

"Okay." She smiled and plucked confetti from his hair. "If it's all right, I don't think I'll get rid of those ceiling mirrors."

“Good. I like them, too, when I have you to ogle. But I want you to have something more substantial than the suite in a building that’s not ours.”

“The apartment is close to the hospital, Braeden, it’ll be fine when I add some color.”

“I want you to have something better.” He pulled a narrow blue folder from his inside pocket. “This is yours.”

Andrea held the official-looking document up to the light and read the words: *Property Deed*. Throwing her arms around his shoulders, she whispered, “Is this what I think it is?”

“The farmhouse is now ours, and we’ll see about making changes for family living.”

“Oh, Braeden, you’re making me cry.”

“And, Mrs. Landry, you’re making me happy to be able to give you such pleasure. Now, put the deed away and let’s experience some of that pleasure together.”

Andrea knocked him off balance, physically this time, and flattened him against the flowered bedspread. Her tears of happiness dropped on his mouth. He licked the salty drops and rolled her underneath him, smothering her lips with his own brand of joy.

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The months drifted by and, enveloped within Braeden’s love, Andrea’s insecurities faded. A leave of absence, six months into the pregnancy, allowed her the freedom to avoid overtiring. Her life stabilized with happiness and good health, she was able to set aside the inherent dangers of the delivery.

As her time drew closer, subtle changes caused Andrea to wonder if Braeden had bitten off more than he could handle. She’d catch him gazing at her with a faraway look, and she heard grumbling from Nancy of his snappish disposition at the hospital. She passed it off as weariness from his never-ending caseload, but sometimes the devil intruded into her thoughts and she began to wonder if he was unhappy with the restrictions married life posed. Some nights Braeden fell into an exhausted sleep without down time with her. Then the fear arose—fear of losing the love and hope that had come her way.



Braeden stayed at home when possible, always watching to make sure she didn't do anything strenuous. His constant nagging irritated her. She sat watching him one evening as he filed papers in his desk. *He warned me he couldn't change some things and his compulsion to control everything still bugs me. The leopard is dotting on his spots instead of even trying to remove them.* She mused how his bad moods had become frequent and little time was devoted to the passion once so important in their lives.

Andrea knew Braeden assumed that her sulky disposition was because of the approaching birth. But she worried more about the hopelessness of their deteriorating relationship. Did he find her mushrooming figure and clumsiness repulsive; was he bored? His mind on things vital to patients' lives, she didn't want to broach him with her worries lest she sound as immature as she felt.

Even this morning they'd spoken sharp words to each other before he'd left for the hospital. She remembered them only too well and knew they'd stay with her all day. She'd had a simple request: "Braeden, do you suppose we could go to the Five Star Lounge tonight? I don't want anything to drink but it might be fun to enjoy a meal out and watch dancers having a lively time."

"You know damn well, I don't want you in smoky bars, getting over-heated and over-stimulated by the blaring music."

"Come off it, Braeden. That place has been smoke-free for a year and their food is superb. Are you ashamed to be seen with me? Do I cramp the big doctor's style?"

"You're overreacting again and proving my point. I'm going to the hospital. Rent a good video and I'll try to get home in time to watch it."

She groaned in disgust. With everything ready for the baby, she had too much time on her hands. With three weeks left until her due date, she prayed their quick tempers and bitter words would end. She wanted the magic back.

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"Sam, I'm taking time off until Andrea has the baby. I'm not doing anyone much good around here when my mind is on her. To be honest, we're running into trouble."

“Medically?”

“No. Marriage-wise.”

Sam placed his hand on Braeden’s shoulder. “Time with your wife is a step in the right direction. What are your plans?”

“We’re making one last trip to the country this weekend. I intend to make the most of it... candlelight eating, soft music, two dozen red roses. I’ve been negligent of late.”

“Take what time you need, Braeden. The first child is often the hardest to deliver and with the anxiety of her health involved, it’s the devil to bear—hard on both of you. Keep me informed and get her in here in plenty of time.”

“If something happens to her, I don’t know what I’ll do.”

“You’ll see that it doesn’t. You’ve got a good team on standby. She’ll do fine. I want you to remember how so many times you lost faith that you could make it through medical school. As it turned out, you went further than your dreams. All things are possible.”

“Funny, Andrea said that once. Thanks, Sam. If it’s a boy, we’re naming him after you.”

As he walked to his Jag, Braeden decided to wait until Monday before telling Andrea he would be taking time off. He wanted to lavish her with increased attention and handle the news tactfully, so she didn’t realize how much he worried about the birth. He patted himself on the back at his success in keeping his concern hidden this long. But his stress was taking a toll. The obstetrician and Craig had assured him she was in good health and his own checkups on her confirmed it, but they couldn’t sugarcoat his awareness that a diseased heart could bring change in a fraction of an instant. And this worried him more than he’d ever want her to know, making him downright cranky when what he really wanted was to shield her with his love.

Braeden shut off his engine and tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. Their weekly ritual had been to go to the country house on Friday night and stay until late Sunday. Events he’d considered insignificant—going for drives or playing scrabble—had become increasingly important with each stay there. It was their time away from the demands of his world. Although he’d not been sexually aggressive for two months, he was coping; after all, he had to consider

her safety. She'd not complained, but some nights he'd wished she would grumble about it if for no other reason than to let him know she missed him. He tried not to think about having to wait another six weeks after the baby came until it was safe to resume making love.

When he entered the suite, there were no boxes of groceries or suitcases standing by the front door. He searched room to room and found Andrea on the balcony staring over the city. "Aren't we going out to the country?"

"Yes, but I'm afraid I'm a bit lazy now. I had a burst of energy this morning and cleaned the entire apartment, even cleaned out some cupboards. I'm tired."

"Why don't you rest? I'll gather up what we need, then we'll go."

"Okay." She tilted her head for his kiss and returned the gentle peck with a quick one of her own. "I'll sit out here for a bit. Call when you're ready."

Braeden lost no time in assembling the few supplies they needed. "The car's packed. I don't know about you but I'm ready for some of that country air."

"Great. Me, too. Can you give me a boost out of the chair?" Andrea smiled as he grabbed her arm and pulled. "I'll cook a decent dinner to make up for you having to get us ready. Hope I don't burn anything. I swear I never thought I'd be so inefficient and awkward."

Braeden felt less pressure than he had for some time as he held the car door and waited for his wife to get comfortable. Once at their destination, they opened up the house with the usual fanfare of starting a fire in the wood stove. As the dampness dissipated, Andrea waddled in her slippers to the stairs. Braeden couldn't help but smile at the way her bulk slowed her down. He flipped through the *Sports Illustrated* magazine he'd brought and sat on the living room couch. When he looked up he saw Andrea on the stairwell's top landing. "What did you say, sweetheart?"

"I said I'll start dinner as soon as I change into something lighter. That stove is kicking up quite a heat."

He went back to reading. He could understand her body temperature rising under the homely flowered maternity top that the dietetic staff had given her. There was no accounting for some

people's sense of taste. Every time he saw the huge daisies he had an urge to sprinkle water on them.

When the sound of her footfall changed to several thuds, his head jerked up. Frozen in position, he watched helplessly as she tumbled down the steps and landed near the stairpost. "Oh, my God! Andrea!" His heart hammered against his ribcage as he ran to her sprawled form. Andrea lay writhing on the floor clutching her side.

"Don't move 'till I check you out. What happened?"

"I tripped and lost my balance. I don't think anything is broken, but I'm having sharp pains where my hands are. Oh, Braeden, do you suppose the fall hurt the baby?"

He checked her over carefully and sighed with relief when he couldn't detect any broken bones. "Just stay where you are. I'm calling an ambulance—"

"I'm okay, but the baby—"

"Shhh. We aren't taking chances." Braeden pulled his cell phone from his jacket pocket and dialed nine-one-one. He held her wrist in his hand. "Try to relax and slow your pulse. Breathe deep." He placed a pillow under her head and covered her with a multi-colored afghan from the chair, then rushed to the car for his kit.

Upon his return, he slipped his stethoscope in the v-neck of her top. He felt the burn of her eyes as she watched him intently. There was no point in trying to hide his concern, she'd see through him in a minute. "There's an irregularity in your heartbeat that wasn't there before. I'm giving you nitro. Open your mouth."

Andrea responded quickly without question. Her mouth clamped tight as she let the medicine open her arteries. Braeden tucked in wisps of hair loosened from the clasp holding her hair behind her ears. "Still got the pain?"

"Yes, I... oh, Braeden, I'm scared. My chest feels better but the baby *must* be in trouble."

Braeden withdrew the Doppler unit from his medical bag. He lifted her maternity top and pushed down her navy elasticized pants so he could smear the K-Y jelly onto her abdomen. As he placed the microphone at various intervals, he struggled to keep his expression stoic. She mustn't see the fear prodding his gut.

“When was the last time Dr. Mason listened for the baby with a Doppler?”

“Two weeks ago, why?”

“And she indicated everything was normal, right?”

“Yes, and remember the sonogram last month was normal too, why? Do you hear something wrong... Braeden, do you?”

“Don’t worry, honey.”

“Braeden, level with me for once!”

Braeden’s mouth dropped and only closed when he gulped. His voice cracked when he started to talk, but a quick cough cleared the hoarseness. “The placenta may have ruptured...the Doppler sounds are muffled. A ruptured placenta is an absolute indication for a Cesarean section. You have to be in the hospital—now. The baby could go into distress.” He patted her hand. “Listen to me. We don’t have time to get to Halifax. There’s a small community hospital ten minutes from here. I checked it out just in case. They have an operating room and a doctor in emergency twenty-four hours. I’m calling to warn them we’re coming so they can get an anesthetist and enough medical staff on hand.”

“Okay. Do whatever you think is best.”

He made the call and as Andrea watched, he saw her eyes enlarge with the change in his tone from an urgent request to a sharp command. “Get the anesthetist there!”

The siren screamed its arrival as the ambulance braked in the yard. Braeden ended his phone connection and raced to open the door wide enough to accommodate the stretcher. “She’s a heart patient and needs oxygen, Stat!” While one of the attendants ran for an oxygen tank, he helped maneuver the gurney to the living room. Andrea’s narrowed eyes reflected another spasm. The attendants lowered the oxygen mask before they slid her onto a backboard. Andrea’s eyes closed as she concentrated on breathing in the gas.

While the paramedics covered her with a red blanket and strapped her securely in place, Braeden’s fingers kneaded her hand. “Hold on, you’ll be all right; it’s just going to take a little speed on our part. The best thing you can do for us all is to remain calm.”

Her other hand raised and beckoned him closer. In a muffled voice, she said, "I am calm, Braeden. You're the one who's a little uptight. I'm the one with faith in you. Keep your wits about you or the paramedics will have to resuscitate you."

"Okay, you're right. You're someone else's wife, do I like her?"

"You were thinking of having a wild fling with her when she got her shape back." Her humor died with the onset of more pain. Braeden flinched at her grimace. He motioned the attendants to move her out and kept to their speed as he followed in his car.

By the time he finished filling out papers and answering questions, Andrea had been examined. Two doctors stood outside the examination room door in a heated discussion. Braeden walked over to them.

"I'm Dr. Braeden Landry. I'm a cardiac surgeon. What's the problem?"

One doctor scowled. "Her water broke and she's bleeding, but not dilated much. I don't do sections—I call a general surgeon for that and there isn't one in the hospital now."

The other doctor splayed his hands. "I'm an anesthetist."

Braeden turned back to the first doctor. "Dammit, man, this woman could bleed to death and the baby die before a surgeon gets here. Let's suit up and scrub—you're assisting me."

Without another word of protest the doctors prepared for surgery. An orderly wheeled Andrea into a small operating room. Braeden lowered his mouth to Andrea's face and whispered through his mask, "Any signs of angina?"

"Not yet," she replied, but her voice was weak, her face ghastly white. Her fingers fisted as they lay by her side.

"The high concentration of oxygen should keep your heart holding its own. If we have to, we can give you nitro through the IV. We'll keep a close watch on you, don't worry."

"I'm trying to keep my mind occupied, Braeden, but I can't stop shivering."

"It's the IV fluid going into your arm at a different temperature than your body. You're doing fine. There's just one thing I want you to think of."

“What?”

“How much you mean to me. I still need to show you how much I love you, Andrea. I sure as hell don’t intend to lose either of you.”

“I love you, too, Braeden, with all of my heart.” She grinned faintly and blinked back her tears.

With Andrea under general anesthesia, the circulating nurse prepped Andrea’s abdomen with a brown disinfectant. The doctor assisting Braeden spoke. “I’m Chris Seymour. I’m sorry we couldn’t have met under better conditions, Dr. Landry.”

“Can’t be helped, let’s get started, Chris. One thing you need to know is that because this is a heart patient, we’ve got to get in and out fast.”

“Damn, this is risky. Okay, lead the way.”

The scrub nurse handed Braeden the scalpel. He glanced at it, then at what he could see of Andrea’s face. His steady hand cut a crescent shaped flesh incision low in her abdomen.

“Where did you learn to make a Phannenstiel incision?” the young family physician asked.

Braeden looked up at Andrea’s face again. He’d made the bikini incision without giving thought to the fact he’d never seen her wear one due to her summer pregnancy. He still had that pleasure to look forward to along with the other things he hadn’t discovered about her yet. “I had four years residency in general surgery before I took on the eight-year residency in cardiovascular surgery.”

With Andrea and the baby on his mind, he didn’t want to waste time talking, but his assistant had to know he was no slouch. As Braeden opened up the abdomen, he and Dr. Seymour surrounded Andrea’s watermelon size uterus with sterile hand towels. “Sponge on a stick,” Braeden ordered.

From her Mayo stand packed with instruments, the scrub nurse grabbed foot long stainless steel forceps, its jaws clamped on a walnut size gauze pledget. She popped it into Braeden’s palm. He used the gauze pad to break away the soft tissue that glued Andrea’s bladder to her uterus, then pushed the organ out of his way. Considering he’d not performed abdominal surgery in more than ten years, he was reasonably calm; he’d stay that way.

"Her pulse rate is ninety, not bad for the situation," the anesthetist called out. "But her blood pressure is one ninety over one hundred, still too high."

"Give her plenty of oxygen. Stat!"

"She's getting it!" The anesthetist turned and out of Braeden's earshot whispered to the nurse, "I've heard about this guy. Hell to work with they say."

"Come on, she's his wife."

The anesthetist's eyes showed his shock, but without saying another word he turned back to monitor his equipment.

Through Braeden's transverse incision in the uterus, a quart of straw-colored, amniotic fluid spewed out of the uterine cavity. He quickly put his index fingers in the opening and pulled on the ends to make the uterus incision long enough to allow passage of the infant's head. The nurse swabbed the moisture from his sweat-dampened forehead.

At the head of the table a red light on the oscilloscope flashed. "Fetal distress!" yelled the anesthetist.

With his right hand, Braeden grabbed the baby's ankles and pulled them downward. He delivered the buttocks through the incision, then extracted the head. The baby turned blue. Braeden placed the child on Andrea's thighs and clamped the umbilical cord. "Clamp your side of the cord, Chris."

"I usually let the baby's father put on the first clamp when I deliver a child."

"This baby's father *has* put on the first clamp. Clamp the friggin' cord... we have to cut it. Can't you see the child has turned purple? She's not breathing."

Braeden started to hand the newborn to Dr. Seymour for resuscitation... to him the guy looked like he wasn't old enough to be an Eagle scout. Shit, he wasn't handing his daughter over to an amateur. Braeden pinched the baby's nostrils together, puckered his own lips and began painstakingly blowing into the infant's mouth. He remembered that if he blew more than three teaspoons of air into the infant in one breath, he could rupture her lungs. His heart quickened it's beat. With each puff, the baby's color improved. Braeden had



never been a foot-of-the-cross Christian, but he prayed now. His daughter sucked in a deep breath—then cried.

Tears slipped over the brim of Braeden's eyes. Unashamed by the wetness on his face, he looked around at those watching in fascination and smiled. He was a dad.

~ \* ~

Braeden cleaned up and, still in his green scrubs, hurried into the recovery room tired but happy. He wanted to be there when Andrea regained consciousness. Finally, she opened her eyes. "Well, Ma, you have a beautiful daughter—that wasn't such a hard job after all, was it?"

"I guess you did all the work." Her smile lit up his heart.

"It was my pleasure, ma'am. You didn't have angina, after all, did you?"

"It all happened so fast. I kept trying to convince myself that anything the body perceives as pleasurable isn't likely to cause chest pains. It was hard with those cramps, though. I tried to concentrate on the passion involved in her conception; if you remember, it never caused me any difficulty." She beamed when he winked. "Then too, I knew I had an excellent doctor, and Braeden, your bedside manner was terrific. You weren't gruff at all. I was impressed."

"You didn't hear me during surgery. I think I need to work on my patience." He bent down and kissed Andrea's flushed cheek, her look of contentment made him feel warm all over.

"She's okay?"

"She's beautiful, just like her mom. I'll bring her over so you can see her."

Braeden lifted the tiny pink bundle from the crib against the wall and laid her in Andrea's arms. "So much for giving Sam a namesake."

"Sure we can, Braeden. Meet Samantha. If it's all right with you, that is. Sam has done a lot for me, too. She's perfectly healthy isn't she?"

"She was well buffered by your body when you fell. I'll bet you're feeling sore though. To stay on the safe side, we won't let you up for a while. You sure scared the hell out of me. Thank God, it's over.

They'll be taking you to a private room. I want you to get some sleep with nothing on your mind but being a mother."

"I am tired, will you be going home?"

"I'm staying at the hospital, just to keep an eye on the two of you." She didn't need to know he felt uneasy about the baby. He'd detected a few runs of premature heartbeats right after her birth, but Samantha's heart had stabilized after a few minutes. "I'm going to the cafeteria for coffee while you rest." He paused at the doorway. "Andrea, sweetheart—"

"I know, I love you, too, Braeden. I know you don't like to see hanky-panky in hospitals, but just this once would it be all right to give your wife a sexy kiss, not just a peck? I mean the kind of a kiss that can send us rocketing to the heavens."

"Lady, I like the way you think. Just wait until I close the door." He returned to her bedside and leaning over the steel rail, slid his finger down the side of her face. "Hanky-panky has its place as I recall you telling me when we first met. I concur."

The golden flecks amidst the green of her irises sparkled and sent longing to every part of his masculinity. His palpitations increased as he lowered his head. He heard someone open the door and close it softly again. Lost in the faint drift of lavender wafting into his nose, he didn't care. How he loved that aroma; he'd been away from it too long.

Andrea's moist cheek heightened the surge of pleasure as his lips caressed her skin. Flesh, much more tactile when wet, sent them both rocketing on a wing and a prayer of thanks. She was soft and warm and willing. Her arms flung around his neck like they used to, almost like she'd been starving for his attention. How could he manage to stay at arm's length for another six to eight weeks? He could see now it had been the wrong thing to do so far in advance of the delivery because even just this amount of nearness was sensual, delectable, barely controllable. Never would he allow them to get so far apart again. *What must she have thought?*

Her lips nuzzled his neck then moved up for the fulfilment she sought. He'd never told her how much he loved those tiny nips she gave along his mouth. The tender graze whipped his hesitancy to a

tornado of shameful lust. His hands pressed against her back, slipping through the opening of her yellow Johnny shirt. Her cool skin did nothing to bring his temperature down. The love in her eyes egged him onward. "Andrea, I—"

"Shhh. After a day like today, I know what you've been going through; you don't have to explain. We can catch up in time."

"Well, not for several weeks, but trust me, it'll be fun when the time is right. Now give me one for the road and I'll go get my coffee." Her lips parted leaving him free to explore the honeyed taste and wonderment of such quickened sensual responses. He laughed, and fait accompli, backed away reluctantly. "I'll put the baby back in her crib and you rest. Be back shortly."

With a light love tap on the baby's shoulder, Braeden ambled to the door. At the threshold he glanced at Andrea as she snuggled under the white thermal blanket. Her happy smiled spread wide on her lips. His eyes darted to the crib where his daughter lay, her little pink nose peeking out from the bunting wrap embellished with yellow and green teddy bears. His family was complete and he'd never felt happier.

Braeden stepped back to the baby's side and kissed her forehead, doting on the new baby smell. His large fingers automatically pressed against her little wrist and brought him up short. Samantha's pulse was a tad fast for his liking. He noticed her breath came in tiny spurts. He yanked his stethoscope from his neck and placed the half-dollar size head of the diaphragm against her chest. Listening at numerous spots, he straightened and snatched a pediatric scope from the wall hook. When he held the rubber rimmed, dime size bell to her chest, his eyes told the story of his alarm.

"Is something wrong?" Andrea raised up on her elbow.

He concealed his anxiety, well practiced at doing so. "Samantha has a heart murmur."

"Oh, no!"

"Now don't worry yourself. I'll get Chris to check and confirm. He's the doctor that assisted me. I'm going to wheel her to the examination room. You rest and I'll get back to you when I can."

"I want to come."

"No. You're too weak and I don't want you fainting on me when I have to concentrate on Samantha."

"Okay, but hurry back when you know something."

When he rolled the crib past the nursing station, Braeden caught the head nurse's attention. "Get Dr. Seymour here immediately, and I want an echocardiogram done right away on my daughter. Call the anesthetist for standby."

"Yes, doctor."

"What's the problem?" Chris rushed into the operating room as Braeden draped his stethoscope back around his neck.

"Listen to Samantha's heart."

His colleague's eyes confirmed Braeden's judgment.

"There's a continuous to and fro murmur." Chris straightened and stared Braeden in the eye. "I'm thinking patent ductus arteriosus."

"Here comes the echocardiogram cart now," Braeden replied. "We'll know in a few minutes."

Working together, they performed the test and studied the animated image on the machine's TV monitor. Braeden's breath sucked in sharply at what he saw. "Twenty-five percent of her cardiac output is being detoured into her lungs. That's a tremendous strain on her heart."

"What do you think," Dr. Landry? "Most surgeons don't operate on a ductus until the child is four or five years old."

"We can't wait, she's struggling now. I'm going to speak with my wife."

"Okay, let me know what you decide; I'll stay here."

When Braeden walked in, Andrea, propped up in bed by two pillows, turned her worried-eyed gaze from the window. He sat down on the mattress beside her and fingered her palm gently. "Sweetheart, we're going to have to operate on Samantha." At her horrified expression, he gave her a quick hug, then pushed back and studied the liquid glaze that welled in her eyes. "I have to tell you what we face as parents. If we delay, there's a huge risk because of the strain on her heart, but there's also a risk in operating on an infant with such small anatomic structures."

He never wanted to see such distress in Andrea's features again. He'd married her determined to push her unhappy years into oblivion and concentrate on fulfilling all of her dreams. Instead, he'd brought her pain of the worst kind. His insides ached.

Andrea's hand flew to her mouth as she tried to smother her gasp. "Oh, Braeden. She's so little."

"I know. But her breathing is too rapid. I don't know if she can make it to Halifax. The doctors that assisted me with the delivery are still in the hospital." He focused on rubbing her back, trying to soothe the hurt he recognized only too well.

"Are they heart doctors?"

"No, dammit! I'll have to do it."

"Okay, then. You'll pull her through."

His heart swelled with pride at her vote of confidence and he cloaked her in his arms. She gave him strength, but more than that, Andrea gave him the faith he'd need. One last quick kiss and he was out the door on the run.

Within fifteen minutes, the baby, under general anesthesia, lay on her right side. Braeden cut open her left chest. On the other side of the table, stood his assistant. "Chris, I'm going to move the vagus nerve out of harm's way—"

"That can be tricky."

"Right, but I have to do it." Braeden sighed. "The pulmonary artery and the aorta are no bigger in diameter than a pencil and the tube that joins them is the size of a kitchen match. Not much maneuvering room either. I'm going to loop a large suture around the ductus, tie a few knots in it and we'll be finished." Braeden leaned toward the circulating nurse. She wiped his forehead with a gauze pad. "There's not much to this operation when things go well."

"If it's okay with you, Dr. Landry, I'd like to stick a needle in the ductus and measure the blood pressure—I have my manometer right here."

"Go ahead." Braeden waited.

"Shit!" Chris' roared. "My needle tip cut the ductus in two. She's bleeding from the aorta and the pulmonary artery."

Instantly, Braeden pressed his left index finger on the two bleeding vessels. The bleeding stopped. He steadied his voice. "All right, Chris, you must realize that both ends of the ductus are hemorrhaging. I needn't remind you that if this baby loses as much as a teaspoon of blood, she'll go into shock and die." He noticed Chris' hands had started to shake. "Listen my friend, we've got to sew up those two bleeding points... and not let my daughter bleed to death while we repair the damage."

Braeden knew he had to keep his own emotions in check and mustn't let Chris see how scared he was or the young doctor would be of even less help. Damn, he'd like nothing better than to pitch him the hell out of the window.

"If you lift your finger, there's no way you can save her... and it's all my fault..."

Braeden thought about what it would be like to tell Andrea that he had let their daughter bleed to death on the operating room table. It tortured him, too, to think of losing his own flesh and blood.

"There's no time for wallowing in blame, it's done, the openings have to be stitched and closed. Here's what we have to do. With my left hand, I'll keep my index finger on the two bleeding points—with my right hand, I'll put the sutures in place. We'll sew up the two holes. We don't have any choice."

"How can we do that?"

"Just do what I tell you and don't ask any dumb-assed questions."

"It's impossible... you can't do it."

Braeden's eyes flared fire. "I don't want to hear your negative thoughts." Meticulous to the limit, he placed a stitch on the edge of the opening in the aorta. "Okay, tie a knot in the suture."

"Have you gone crazy? That piece of thread is thinner than a spider's web, even under these fiberoptic magnifiers. I can barely see it and you want me to tie a knot in it?"

"Christ, tie the friggin' knot. We don't have all day... and don't break it."

Chris tied the knot. The suture broke.

"Shit," they said in unison.

"I don't have a light touch, Braeden—"

"I can see that. Do exactly as I say. Put the tip of your right index finger against my finger. We're changing places. You are going to plug the leak with your finger so I'll have both hands free to stitch the leaking vessels."

Chris took a deep breath. With Braeden's coaching, the mismatched pair accomplished the task. When it was over, Chris stretched out his hand toward Braeden.

"Braeden, I've just participated in a miracle."

~ \* ~

Andrea stared at the doorway of her room until her eyes felt ready to pop from their sockets. The hands of the silver-rimmed clock on the wall jumped in spurts, each move emphasizing the slow passage of forty minutes. Heaving a disgruntled sigh, she mustered what little strength she had and wormed her way to the edge of her bed. Checking that the back of her hospital gown was secure, she stepped onto the highly polished floor. Her bare feet cooled to the touch of the green tile, but this only sharpened her intent. She inhaled several panting breaths when her movement pulled on her stitches sending an excruciating spasm through her lower abdomen. As soon as it passed, she tiptoed to the doorway. Almost every muscle in her body screamed from her motion. A glance up and down the hall revealed no one about, not even at the nursing station. She tried to remember what she'd noticed when they'd whisked her off to birth Samantha. She hadn't gone in an elevator so that meant the operating room was on this floor.

As she braced one hand against the wall, her other hand pressed near the soreness in her belly. Whatever number of stitches she'd had, each shrieked in rebellion. Waves of dizziness threatened to send her crashing to the floor, but she gritted her teeth, stopped a moment or two, then forced one foot at a time to move ahead. With her effort, several loud moans escaped as she goaded her sweat-chilled body along the hall.

When she rounded a corner, muffled voices filtered from a room on her right. A few steps later, she peeked into an anteroom that held lockers and hand washing facilities. The door at the far end of the room boasted a window. Using caution and stealth, she made her way

to it. Through the glass, she had a clear view into the operating theatre where she recognized a masked and capped Braeden by his height. A nurse hovered near him. His concentration was solely on the tiny motionless form at his brown rubber-gloved fingertips.

Judging by the way the nurse patted his forehead and kept her eyes on him, Braeden was under pressure and using his skills to the max. She fought the onslaught of light-headedness that threatened her stability when he suddenly looked at the door and saw her watching. She smiled and blew him a kiss, hoping it carried a huge measure of support. He nodded and turned to his task.

As she watched, her thoughts tracked like a speeding locomotive over their history together. In her mind's eye she saw snippets of Braeden's impatience, then knowing intensity was part of his character, she felt relief, not anger. His penchant for perfection would be what saved their daughter. Her heart filled with love. This love carried her faith that he would succeed if anyone could. A sudden calm came over her when she realized she'd not had faith in anyone except herself for a very long time. He had drawn her trust from some secreted pocket deep inside her soul and given her hope.

The sudden hustle and bustle in the operating room brought her to the present and she stood absorbed in his advance toward her. Before he reached the door, he clawed off his mask. Her insides melted at the smile creased across his haggard face. With her last ounce of strength she flung her arms around his neck and melded into the warmth of his embrace. Her tears mixed with those flowing down his cheek.

"The little tyke made it, Andrea. Her vitals are stable. She came through with the same stubbornness her parents have." He carefully lifted Andrea up off her feet. "Let's get you back to bed. How do you feel?"

"Like a million dollars." Andrea reached up and feathered her fingertips down his cheek. His dark damp stubble felt rough and sexy. Only then did she realize the full force of what she'd been missing of late—the open tenderness that comes from a deep understanding of her needs. Braeden's face lit up in a wave of emotion she'd not seen for some time, hidden as it had been by a cloud of worry. At her touch, the piercing eyes that had followed her every movement the



last few weeks to the point she'd thought she'd explode from the restriction, softened.

Braeden settled on her bed and planted a number of quick kisses on her face, then zeroed in for a big one. He took her breath away as he'd always done in one way or another. She immersed herself in his outpouring of love aware that separately their personal lives lacked purpose, but with his heart pressed firmly against her own, the future promised fulfillment beyond what either of them ever thought possible.



## **Meet Carol McPhee**

Carol's writing began in 1997 when a story kept circulating in her head on a long drive from Nova Scotia, her home province, to Ottawa. She thought, if she wrote it down, it would disappear, little knowing it would become a fixation to not only finish it, but get it published on the internet.

Her husband encouraged her to write more stories and showed his support by teaching her what she needed to know—writing on computers. *Be Still, My Heart!* is the third of her novels to be published by Wings ePress.

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