

Brides and Bouquets

an Anthology of Novellas

by

Linda Lattimer,

Rebecca Goings

and

Laura Hamby

Dear Reader,

Thank you for purchasing *Brides and Bouquets*. This is By Grace Publishing's first anthology, and the first we plan in a yearly June Brides theme.

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We hope you enjoy these stories.

Sincerely,
Sheila Holloway
Publisher
By Grace Publishing

Brides and Boquets

a novella collection published by

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For Tammy and Randy Simpson, Sharon and Johnny Pennell, Linda and Robert Lattimer - For all the married couples who have lasted over 20 and 30 years or more. (In loving memory, Robert M. Lattimer)

About Linda Lattimer

I live in a small town in southern Georgia. Reading and writing are my passions because of the freedom of escape they allow. I have always loved reading and spent many days in the library. I loved writing when I was in school and would create many stories in my spare time. I enjoy traveling and seeing new places, including Raymond Gary Park, in Oklahoma. My favorite to frequent, the beauty and tranquil peacefulness of the park has much to offer. I am excited to be a part of the anthology with By Grace Publishing.

Crystal Can Break

a Novella by
Linda Lattimer

CRYSTAL CAN BREAK...

When a widowed mother finds love and plans to remarry, it disrupts, not only her family, but the soon-to-be groom's as well.

CHAPTER ONE

I looked at my watch, then closed the magazine. It was hard to believe that it had taken me almost four hours to scan through the pages. In any other situation I would have long been finished with all the articles. But not this time. Not since the phone call “How much longer, mom?” my daughter, Annie, asked.

“I’d say another hour or so. Are you getting tired?”

“More like restless. Virginia’s asleep.”

“And you can’t play any games alone?”

“I could but it would be better with a partner. I can play the Gameboy or read a book, but I would rather match wits and challenge Virginia.”

“That’s my Annie, always seeking competition. Want your dad to turn on the radio?”

“No, I’ll just use my Walkman.”

I shifted back in my seat, then turned and stared at Jeff for a brief moment. He caught my gaze and allowed one hand to free from the steering wheel to reach and grasp hold of mine. “Don’t worry. If anything was wrong, I’m sure she would have told you over the phone.”

“Like she did when Daddy became ill. Oh, we really were notified then.”

“Heather, he waited too late to have any tests done.

Even your mother didn’t know he was terminally ill until the last minute.”

“Still, Mother left us in the dark about the tests.”

“You know it could be good news. Think on

the positive side for a change.”

“I’m trying to, but that isn’t easy at times,” I emitted with a repressed sigh.

I released my hand from his hold then gazed out at the passing cars on the interstate. Perhaps it was good news and she wanted to tell us in person. No matter what the case, I still had this foreboding feeling that something was painfully wrong with Mother. Had she summoned everyone together for one last visit? Why else would she insist upon us taking two weeks to come to visit her? She never insisted that we spend two whole weeks with her during the Christmas holidays. The more I thought on the matter, I knew it couldn’t be good news. I shook my head then glanced at the time. In less than an hour we would all know.

Moments later, Jeff turned the heater on. “You can certainly tell we are no longer in sunny Florida.”

“I figured you would have turned on the heat when we crossed near the Blue Ridge Mountains.”

“Nobody mentioned they were cold.”

“Come on, Dad, didn’t you see the icicles hanging from my ears and nose.” It was Virginia speaking.

“I see you are back with the living,” I said, smiling.

“Do you think Daddy could pull over at a gas station before we reach Grandmother’s?”

“I thought you could hold it,” Jeff mentioned.

“*Daddy?*” Virginia moaned in her little whine.

“Don’t panic. I feel like I’m carrying a water bag myself. The first station I see, I’ll pull over.”

“Let’s just hope it’s not miles down the highway,” Virginia giggled. “I don’t think I can

wait too many miles.”

I listened to the two of them and couldn't help but feel the love that was blanketed inside the car. It was nice being with my family. I was sure the car ride hadn't been that enjoyable for everyone not able to really move about, but at least we were together in one place. With Jeff working long hours, not to mention my job, plus house chores, I'm surprised we all had the free time to take off. It seemed like Christmas was the only time any of us were able to have that complete closeness with each other. Whatever Mother had to tell us, I was just glad I had this time to be with my family.

Virginia was the first to make a dash for the bathroom.

Annie went next, then me. Of course Annie had to go back in to recheck her makeup, not to mention her hair. Still at seventeen, when it came to her hair, everything had to be right. There had been a lot of times she had hogged the mirror to adjust her appearance.

In a way, I was glad Virginia wasn't like that. She had only recently turned fifteen, but she didn't go in for excess glamour or trying to worry so much about the latest fashion trends. Virginia was the type that cared for her appearance, but hers was more or less the cut loose and go.

Jeff was standing with hands on his hips when we approached the Camry. “What, did we take too long?” I inquired with a smile.

“I guess not. But I really need to go. One of us had to stay behind and fill the tank. Besides, I wanted to make sure my lovely ladies were safe and inside the vehicle before I took my turn. Be right back.” he said, making a mad dash for the restrooms.

“Daddy is always such a nut,” Annie mentioned. “That’s what I love about him.”

“I do, too, sweetheart,” I expressed as we

climbed in the vehicle and snapped the seatbelts. "Can't find too many men so laid back like him in this world anymore."

"That's why I'm going to take my time finding a man before I even think about marrying. After graduation next year, I plan to go into the nursing field. Maybe I'll find someone like Dad with all the people I come in contact with daily."

"Perhaps you will, dear. Your dad is truly one of a kind. And I am glad you chose the nursing field. I think that you are going to make a great nurse. You really care a lot about people. You and Virginia both."

"Do you think that is why Grandmother never remarried?" Virginia asked. "She never found anyone like Granddad."

I thought about that for a moment. I never remotely considered my mother marrying after Daddy died. Mothers just didn't do that. Didn't they stay faithful even after death? Yet many women and men married after the spouse was deceased. No, not my mother. She had always been devoted to Daddy that she would never even go that route. Nope, I never saw that happening.

"Well, mom?" Virginia waited.

"Mother was so dedicated to Daddy. I don't think she would even consider finding someone else in her life. She has too many friends now and clubs she belongs to."

Jeff opened the door and slung himself in the car. "Okay everyone ready to finish this adventure?" he asked rubbing his hands together, then starting the engine. "What? Did something happen while I was away? Did we get an important call? Seems everyone's countenance is marked *serious*."

"Everything is great. Virginia and Annie were just making comments on how a great dad you

are. And we got on the subject of marriage.”

“Oh. Well, marriage is a serious subject,” he expressed as we eased back on the interstate. “I’m surprised your mother never remarried.”

“That’s what I asked Mother,” Virginia said. “I wondered why she never married.”

I palmed my hands in the air. “Wait a minute, Jeff. Why would you even make such a statement? Mother remarry? Please. She was devoted to my dad. Another man would never enter the picture.”

He gently freed his hand from the steering wheel for a moment to pat my knee. “Hey, if it happened to me, I would want you to find someone to spend time with. I wouldn’t want you to be lifeless the rest of your life.”

“I love you. I wouldn’t want another man, ever.”

“One must never say *ever*, Heather. Life is too short. We should seek every occasion to be happy.”

“So you intend to remarry when I pass away?”

“No. When they made you, they broke the mold. There won’t be another Heather in my life.”

I knitted my brows together, then folded my arms over my chest. “Oh, just Mary, Sue, Janice...” the girls interrupted me in laughter.

“Heather, dearest, all I’m saying is, I don’t want you to try to carry the burden that life drops in our laps at times. After I’m gone, I want you to know, it is all right with me, if someone were to come along in your life and put that radiant smile back on your face. You have my blessing to remarry.”

“Oh, Mother, that is so romantic,” Annie mentioned. “I really hope that there is another man out there with the traits of Dad.”

“Allan is. He is sweet and kind.” Virginia

threw in her two cents.

I noticed that Jeff cast an eye in the rear view mirror. "I hope you aren't getting too serious right now, young lady. You still have your schooling to finish."

"I know Dad. So does Allan. That is why we both have promised to wait to get serious until after we finish school. For now we are really good friends."

"So I don't have to worry about wedding bells in the near future, or even my baby girl running off to say 'I do'."

"Absolutely not."

"Whew, you had me worried there for a moment. I say we change the subject about marriage. This is something a father really doesn't want to hear right now when it's coming from his daughters."

I agreed. Not only that, how could Jeff even imply anything about my mother and remarriage? I immediately shook that notion from my head and reached for another magazine. At least that had occupied my mind, temporarily erasing any foreboding feelings that were still trying to inject into my system.

The rest of the trip we more or less spoke idle chat, listened to the radio and caught the lovely scenery that the mountains of Tennessee had to offer. No sooner had we passed through Nashville, I thought of the Grand Ole Opry.

As many times as we had traveled this road, not once had we even been there. I had often wondered what the inside really looked like.

My mind once again began to meander. I had tried every possible way to keep from worrying about the phone call from Mother, but neither the breathtaking scenery, nor the soft sounds of the girls in the car, as they softly spoke and played their games, were distracting my mind

from that phone call. It had been over a year since I had last seen Mother. We had spoken by phone, but that was about the significance of it.

I had one other sister. We were two years apart in age, like my two daughters. Mother had phoned her as well. Cathy, too, was curious as to the gathering. Her husband, Walter, kept insisting it was because it was the Christmas holidays and the woman probably just wanted her children all together this year.

“Get ready, girls,” Jeff said.

My thoughts ceased. Jeff was turning into the driveway.

Nothing was different from the last visit. The brick home looked the same. Mother still had the old mailbox. Daddy had bought it for her one Christmas, and she had always kept it. Even after a couple of drunks had backed into it one New Year's Eve, she straightened it out. She had informed Daddy that that was one gift she never wanted to part with. She would grin and say it stood out and expressed something in the small town of Windberg.

I released a small breath. Inside, my nerves were mixed. I so desperately wanted to see Mother, but I didn't know what to expect. Even though it had only been a year since we had last seen her, anything could happen in 365 days.

Virginia rang the doorbell, but there wasn't any answer.

“I knew it! She's in the hospital.” It was like somebody had a hammer and was trying to chisel another head onto Mount Rushmore. My family stared at me in wonder.

“Mom,” Annie spoke. “Maybe Grandma just went to the

store. She didn't know the exact time we would arrive. Use your house key.”

“Sorry, I just don't know what I'm up against.”

Jeff put his arms around me. "Don't worry. You'll get gray hair."

I wondered why he didn't appear even slightly bothered by this trip. In fact he had mentioned already it was probably nothing. Even the girls didn't appear overly bothered. Perhaps it was only the *daughter* concern for her dear mother. Yeah that had to be it. Besides, if my family started worrying as much as I did, I'm sure my whole insides would have been in a frenzy trying to calm each of them.

"I'm surprised the long ride didn't do that already."

I inserted the key then we stepped inside. Annie had been right. Mother had a note pinned to the refrigerator. Jeff and the girls unloaded the car. For me, I scanned the house like a private eye. There weren't any tell tale signs anywhere. Maybe all Mother really wanted was to spend this Christmas with her family.

The tree was already up, and there were presents underneath. Mother had the inside of the house very decorative. Everything looked so fresh and new that it was hard to imagine a downfall in the works. I cautioned myself to stop this nonsense or I would be a basket case before the holidays were even upon us.

I heard a car and ran to the door. Cathy, Walter and the girls had arrived. We all greeted each other. It felt good to be in the same home again. In minutes we broke down and cried.

Daddy had been dead for ten years, but still his memory was so much a part of our lives. Every place we turned in the house, it was like his presence was there with us. After a good cry, we laughed. It was as if a huge boulder had been released from our chests. Our daughters eyed us in wonder.

I looked at Cathy's daughters. They had grown so.

Bonnie was twelve and a beauty with her dark hair and brown

eyes. She was almost as tall as Cathy. Tess would be fourteen by the first of the year. She was a striking beauty, as well.

"Something tells me we are going to have to start watching these girls," Walter mentioned, nudging Jeff on the arm. "Before we know it, some man is going to sweep them off their feet. Then there will be a wedding to pay for. Guess we best be tucking extra away in our sock drawer now."

"As long as they have enough income not to have to run to me that is a-okay in my book," Jeff said, then laughed. "I have always wanted the girls to find a good man that can provide for them."

"You and me both. So how's the job?"

"Long and strenuous," Jeff told him.

"Want to switch places?"

"No. I think I would rather stick with being an architect than inserting my finger into other peoples' mouths."

Walter released a short laugh. The front door opened and Mother walked in. All of us looked but couldn't believe our eyes.

I was the first to greet her. "Look at you. When did this all happen?"

"Some greeting, Heather."

"Mother, it has been a year. I never expected such a change."

"That goes for me, too," Cathy mentioned. She wrapped her arms around Mother.

"You two sound disappointed," Mother told us.

Jeff and Walter embraced her, then gave her a kiss on the forehead.

"Mom, I think you look great," Jeff said.

"I'll second that," Walter added. "So who's the lucky beau?"

Cathy and I eyed each other stunned. Was this the reason Mother was glowing? Here I thought we were going to face someone with dark circled eyes and a head full of gray hair, but that was entirely different from my visions.

Even looking at her physical outside, she looked as if she were in the best of health.

“So Mom,” Cathy spoke, “when did you decide to color your hair?”

“It's only a light blonde. I was getting too many grays. I've got a few groceries in the car. Could my two handsome son-in-laws get them for me? I want to see my beautiful granddaughters.”

Jeff and Walter left the room. Mother walked over to the girls. Cathy gently bumped my arm. “What do you think?”

“I think she looks great. Here I was worried something was wrong.”

“Not that. Do you think she is seeing someone? I mean what other reason would she have for this makeover of hers?”

“I don't know. Maybe. Perhaps.” Couldn't she see that I didn't wish to discuss this?

Cathy instantly dragged me into the kitchen. “What do you mean, *maybe, perhaps*? We can't allow that.”

I studied her curiously. This was one conversation I didn't want to be pulled into.

“Maybe we shouldn't jump to conclusions right now. Just wait and see what happens. I'm sure Mom is only trying to get out of her shell. You know how she was afraid to try new things with Dad. Besides, Daddy wouldn't want her going around dressed in black and long veils.”

Cathy halfway bit at her nail. I knew she didn't like this change in Mother either. Why had I waited a whole year to visit Mother? Perhaps I could have seen the signs if I hadn't stayed away that long.

Cathy walked to the kitchen door and opened it. Jeff and Walter placed the bags on the table. Mother entered a few minutes later. Cathy and I observed her again.

"I can't tell you how good it is to have my children home for the holidays." She exhibited a huge smile. "Walter, would you and Jeff start a fire? The girls want to sit in front of the fireplace. The temperature is really beginning to drop. The weatherman predicts snow this week. I'll start dinner."

"Cathy and I can help," I suggested.

"No. You two have had a long trip. Why not relax with a hot bath before dinner?"

I looked at Cathy and shrugged. Sounded good to me.

"Oh, I've got the girls all in the far room to the south of the house. I have two daybeds in there now, so they won't be separated. They can pop the trundles up or leave them on the floor. This will give them time to catch up on everything that has been happening in their lives. You and your sister have your own rooms."

"Sure you don't want any help?" I asked.

"No, go ahead. Take your bath, unpack. Just relax."

As Cathy and I started to leave, I noticed Cathy was about to say something. I slightly pinched her arm. I wanted no argument. The last time I remember Mother ever looking this radiant was when Daddy was still living. I didn't want her holidays to be spoiled by my sister's selfishness. Cathy's expression quickly changed. She walked out into the living room. I followed.

"Honey, I'll be in there as soon as I go over something with Walter," Jeff called out.

"Take your time," I echoed back. I had more important things on my mind.

CHAPTER TWO

It didn't take us long to unpack and get ready for dinner. Walter and Jeff were scanning the channels in the living room for ball games when we came down the stairs.

Cathy walked over to Walter and whispered something in his ear. No doubt about Mother, I thought. I started to walk toward Jeff but was interrupted by the doorbell.

"I'll get it for you, Grandma," Annie said.

Mother walked toward the door as Annie opened it.

"Hello there, young lady. Is the lady of the house home?"

"Grandma, I think you have a salesman."

Mother patted Annie's shoulder. "It's all right, dear.

I know Mr. Thorpe. Please come in, that night air is brisk."

The tall gentleman entered the foyer, then removed his hat and coat.

"This is Annie, one of my granddaughters," Mother told the man.

"And a very pretty one, if I may say. How do you do, Annie? It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Fine, thank you. I can hang your coat and hat if you like." Annie extended her hands.

"Thank you."

Mother entered the living room. Cathy stood erect and eyed the tall man from head to toe. He was very slim built. I really couldn't tell how old he was - perhaps in his early sixties. He did appear to be in good shape. He had some hair left on top of his head. For a moment I sensed a

glow to his structure also. He had a certain charismatic air about him. Something told me whoever this man was, he was sure to be delightful. Someone who enjoyed being with people. My eyes trailed toward Cathy. Then again maybe not all people.

“Allow me to introduce my children. This is Cathy, her husband, Walter. Their girls Bonnie and Tess. Over here is Heather and Jeff, and Virginia. You've already met Annie.

Everyone, this is a dear friend of mine, Glenn Thorpe. I hope you don't mind, I've invited him to join us for dinner.”

“It's good to finally get to meet all of you. Mary has told me so much about you that I feel as if I already know you.”

At the time I wondered what was the expression on all of our faces. We seemed to be suspended in limbo. Annie was the first to break the ice. “Well, I say we should eat. I am hungry.”

Jeff tapped my arm but my senses still felt numb. It was as if I was running on a battery that needed recharged.

I wondered, did the others feel like zombies as we all entered the dining area. For a moment I felt a binge of jealousy ooze through my body. I was happy for Mother that she had found a companion, but I wondered, was that all that was involved. I had this strange feeling that Daddy was going to turn the corner any minute and ask just what was going on.

Jeff sat at the head of the table in Daddy's seat, while Mother sat at the other end with Glenn right next to her.

After we all took our seats, Mother asked Glenn to say a prayer of thanks. Afterward, we all began passing the food and dipping out our portions. There wasn't much talking at first. In fact, the atmosphere at the table was so thick you

could take a knife and cut it into slices. Jeff was the first to start the conversation.

“Glenn, are you retired?”

“No. I plan to in about two years. I've spent my life selling cars. I have to admit I've had my good days and bad ones.”

“I can imagine with the way the economy is anymore,” Walter threw in. “I'm a dentist and there are times that many of my patients have had to cancel out due to their income shifts and no insurance coverage. Even with my low cost. But I have to support my family, too.”

“That you do, Walter. I must say you have one fine family. Both of Mary's daughters have done very well.”

I smiled and eyed Cathy. She would continue to nibble at her food then cast a lingering eye at Glenn. It was as if she were at a tennis match.

There was a little more casual conversation, mostly between Jeff and Walter. I just kept hoping Cathy wouldn't make a scene. The granddaughters finished eating, thanked Mother for the delicious meal, then gave her a warm hug.

They even hugged Glenn, except Tess. Of course she was so much like Cathy. You never knew if you could expect any warmth from her.

“Glenn and I are going to take care of the dishes. You four go sit by the fire and relax,” Mother informed.

“I can't leave you with all this. You prepared the dinner, at least allow Cathy and me to do the dishes,” I offered.

“Nonsense, Glenn said. “Mary and I love doing the dishes together. Gives us time to catch up on things.”

“Oh. You do this often?” Cathy asked.

I could almost see the steam beginning to rise.

“I've had Glenn over occasionally, especially after church services. Is that a problem?” Mother

inquired, giving Cathy the eye.

Cathy allowed her tongue to wet her lips as she folded her napkin. "I was only curious. I am a bit tired. If you will excuse me. The meal was delicious, Mother. I've always

loved your pot roast and trimmings. Walter, are you coming?"

"Yeah, give me a couple. Jeff and I wanted to check on a ball game."

"Well, I'm going to go see about the girls. Good night, Mr. Thorpe."

"Please call me, Glenn."

Cathy nodded. "Mother, I'll see you before I turn in?"

Mother smiled. Jeff and Walter went into the living room as I pushed in my chair.

"Sure you two want to tackle this mess?" I asked again.

"Yes, but thank you," Mother said, still beaming.

"If I don't see you when you leave, Glenn, it was nice meeting you."

"It indeed has been a pleasure. I gather the whole night, though, has been somewhat uneasy for you and your sister."

"Maybe a tad. You will have to give us some time. It still is uncomfortable even though it has been ten years."

"Don't I know."

I eyed him strangely.

"I have a son. He's married with two teenage boys. He doesn't approve of our dating. You see, I've only been a widower for six years, but he can't understand how happy Mary has made me. He thinks I've forgotten all about his mother. I haven't. You never forget someone you were married to for almost thirty-seven years. I don't know how much time I have left on this earth, but I don't want to spend it alone anymore."

I called to mind what Jeff had mentioned to

me if he were to pass away. I noticed that Mother dropped her head.

“Mother, you aren't saying anything.”

“You might as well know. We planned to tell each of you tomorrow. But you Heather, I want to tell now. No, I need to tell you now. You have always been the daughter with a good head on her shoulders in any matter. Glenn has asked me to marry him. I told him yes. I, too, don't wish to be alone anymore. It has been ten years for me. Since I met Glenn, I don't have that empty void in my life. I can't explain exactly how I feel. Everyone has their family. I am alone. I need someone to fill my emptiness.”

I listened to Mother, and took in every word like a sponge. It was like she had to justify her actions to me - her daughter. She was a grown woman. She didn't need my permission. But I guess what she was looking for was a form of peace in the family, especially when the news was told. I could almost see Cathy's reaction now.

“Heather, now who's being quiet?”

“I'm sorry, Mother. This is just a surprise. When I received your phone call, I thought you were terminally ill. I never expected this. Have you set a date?”

“The day after Christmas.”

That soon. So quick. She might as well have said tomorrow, that was how close it was. I wondered how the others were going to react when they received the news.

“And you're planning to tell the others tomorrow?”

“I'm telling my son and his family later tonight,”

Glenn spoke.

“I'll tell the others tomorrow unless I get up the nerve to do so tonight. I really don't want a war, Heather.”

I sighed. "Neither do I, Mother. Neither do I."

I left them to do the dishes and went upstairs. I sat on the edge of the bed, for a long time, just staring blankly at the carpet.

I was so deep into thought that I was unaware that Cathy had entered the room and was nudging my arm. Finally, she shook my shoulders.

"W-What?"

"I see you have Mother on your mind, too," Cathy told me.

Could it be possible that Mother had already told Cathy? No, she was taking it too calm.

"I can't believe that they have been seeing each other and she couldn't even confide in us."

I got up and walked about the room as Cathy continued talking.

"Maybe she was afraid to say anything to us?"

Cathy rolled her eyes. "Afraid to tell her daughters. I just hope this isn't serious. I mean it's bad enough seeing someone behind Daddy's back."

I stopped my pacing and fanned my hands in the air. "Whoa, wait a minute. Cathy, Daddy is dead. It's not like she's cheating on him." *You had sort of thought that same thing driving up this way*, I thought to myself. Okay I tossed that statement aside.

"That's not how I see it. She promised she would never see anyone after he died."

"You can't expect her to keep her promise after ten years. And if you think about it, she really doesn't owe us that. She has her own life."

"You know something, don't you?"

I didn't say a word.

"You tell me now, older sister, or I'll go confront Mother this minute."

"All I know, *younger sister*, is that our

mother looks better than she has in a long time. I don't think Daddy would want her in sackcloth and ashes the remainder of her days. Let her have some enjoyment. She probably feels isolated in this big house with no one."

"There are always clubs she can join. And she still has her job, or have you forgotten that? Oh strike that, she might have met him at one of those clubs. That never came up in the conversation."

"Actually nothing came up in the conversation since it was only between Glenn, Jeff and Walter at the table. We more or less only leaned our ear into the conversation while we swept an eye over Glenn. And don't tell me otherwise. I am very observant, I saw you."

"Still Mother has things that can occupy her time. Like I said, there's her job."

"Like her job is going to keep her warm during the cold nights."

"She has an electric blanket for that."

"Cathy, be reasonable. We are living our lives. Why can't Mother? If you think about it, life does go on for the living after a loved one has passed on." I couldn't believe the words were coming out of my mouth. It was like someone was pushing a button saying to dispense.

"I knew it! They are already married. That is why she called us here. How could she?"

"Cathy, you're getting upset over nothing."

"Maybe so. But I know you're hiding something. When we were growing up, I could always tell. You seemed to want to avoid the issue."

Mother entered the room. "That was how I knew Heather

was hiding something, too. You know, I can't tell you how good it is to have you back home again. My granddaughters

are almost full grown. Both of you have

raised your children well.”

“We had a good teacher,” I told her.

Cathy sort of paced about the room. “So, did your gentleman friend leave?”

“Yes. Glenn said it was getting late.”

“How long have you and Glenn been seeing one another?” Cathy prodded.

“Off and on at times for the past eight months. We met at church.”

“I don't see why you didn't tell your own daughters.”

“Maybe because I knew what treatment to expect. I mean, take tonight, for example. The tension at the dinner table was very uncomfortable, to say the least.”

“Mother can you blame us? You did have us out on a limb. I'm wondering what else you have under your sleeve.”

“I have nothing under my sleeve, Cathy. But I know this much, your husbands really like Glenn.”

“They aren't your blood children. Of course they are going to like him.”

Mother stood speechless. She cast me a look, wondering if I was going to express anything.

Cathy observed her expression change. “No. Don't tell me. Not that. Mother tell me what I'm thinking isn't true.”

Mother inhaled a deep breath and swallowed.

“How could you do this? You promised Daddy.”

“Don't start throwing that in my face, young lady. You should have been in my shoes all these years. I'm lonely and I'm getting older. I don't plan to turn into a bitter old woman living the rest of my years alone just because my children disapprove of me remarrying!”

I kept silent as Mother and Cathy went back and forth

like cats and dogs. The whole matter was enough to want you to release echoes of screams, but I refrained. I had to keep my composure. I wasn't too keen on this marriage thing, but Mother had a good case. I had the feeling no matter what the outcome; I would be the one in the middle.

Mother finished her little speech with Cathy, gave us both a strained look, then stormed out of the door. I don't think I had ever seen her that mad. Then again I felt she was probably more hurt than mad. Even though Cathy and I had endured a loss when Daddy died, it had been nothing compared to what Mother had gone through.

Cathy started toward the door. "So when did she tell you?"

"After everyone left the dining room. I didn't know what to say."

"You should have stood your ground and told her you were against this. I know I am. So are Walter and the girls. I don't care if Walter does like Glenn, he will listen to me when it comes to anything concerning my mother."

"You're doing their talking now?"

"I will be after I go and talk to them."

I grasped hold of Cathy's hand. "Please. Don't make a scene. Not tonight. Haven't you put Mother through enough for one night?"

"What about what she has done to us? Doesn't that count? Or maybe we don't matter anymore, since *Glenn*."

Cathy snatched her hand from my hold. She slammed the door on her way out.

I sighed heavily and shook my head. Soon that chisel would be chopping at the Mount Rushmore heads.

CHAPTER THREE

Jeff came upstairs right after Cathy's abrupt departure.

"I see you and Cathy have heard the news."

"When did you find out?" I asked.

"Glenn informed us before he left."

"And you and Walter didn't bother to come and tell us until you retired for the night? I mean it was already uneasy at the dinner table with the three of you being the only ones sharing conversation."

"Hey, don't start scolding me. I didn't think it was my place. What about you? Your mother told you, am I right?" I nodded. He could always read me so well. "You could have come and expressed the same to me."

"I, too, didn't feel that it was my place."

"Well he makes your mother happy. I thought you and Cathy would be glad that your mother has finally found someone to fill her void."

"I wish it were that simple."

I left the room and went to the kitchen. I needed a glass of water. My throat was parched.

"Oh, Cathy. I only came down for some water. I didn't know you would be in here. I don't want to start anything again."

"Walter thinks I'm being childish," Cathy told me as she leaned against the refrigerator. "I mean what would he do if it were his mother?"

"What can one really do when anyone at any age is in love? Isn't that what Mother and Daddy told us when we said we were getting married?"

"This is a slight bit different, sister dear."

Mother was married to Daddy for all those years. We had never been married. Besides, she promised.”

“How many promises in your life time have you kept, Cathy?”

Cathy shook her head and moved from the refrigerator.

“Why are you putting this on me? I mean the woman is about to turn fifty-seven and she wants to remarry.”

I crossed my arms and set the glass on the cabinet.

“That *woman* is our mother. You act as if she's ready to be put into her grave. She still has some years left to live. And if you notice, many women her age are gracing magazines now supporting how to look young and fit at that age. Even finding love again. We aren't far behind, Cathy, if you think about it. The clock goes forward, not in reverse.”

“There you go. You always did this to me when we were growing up. Had to act like Miss Know-it-all and try to settle the matter the right way. Well, older sister, this time it doesn't work that way. I refuse to stand by and give Mother my blessing on this little event.”

“You know, since we are going over matters, I really grow weary all these years of you referring to me as the *older sister*. I already know that, so you don't have to keep pointing it out.”

“Well excuse me, *Heather*.”

I noticed one of Mother's crystal glasses in the dish strainer. I picked it up and held it to the light. “See this glass.”

“What has that got to do with anything?”

“If you break crystal or even glass, you can't always mend it back together. But if you take a life and break it, even someone's feelings, sometimes you can't mend or repair that

damage. The heart is very fragile. Once it is broken, there is no medicine on earth to cure it, Cathy."

"There you go with that philosophy mumbo jumbo again. I don't want to hear it."

"Cathy, don't push Mother. I don't want to see her life like shattered crystal."

"Are you through with your barking?"

I shrugged. "Is it doing any good?"

"No." Cathy left the kitchen filled with even more hostility.

I set the glass back in the dish drainer and looked out the kitchen window. Snow was beginning to lightly fall from the sky and paste to the ground. By morning I was sure we would have a winter wonderland in our midst. The temperature was dropping steadily outside, but inside no amount of heat could stop this freezing. This wasn't even the iceberg yet.

Mother had breakfast cooked when we all awoke. She asked could she take her granddaughters Christmas shopping.

She wanted Cathy and I to come, but she didn't know if we would accept. Walter informed Mother that Cathy would very much like to go. Cathy cast Walter a hateful stare. I got my coat and we all left for the mall.

I can't say the afternoon was enjoyable for Cathy, but she was making the best of everything. As for the girls, they were having a blast. Mother kept buying them swell outfits, they would say. Once in a while I caught a glimpse of Cathy emitting a half smile, but she tried her best not to let the others notice. She could be so stubborn at times.

After Mother finished shopping for the grandchildren, she took Cathy and me shopping. Cathy insisted Mother not spend her money, but I kept releasing a look of please let her do this, so

Cathy finally agreed to the gift. By three, we were done with the shopping. Mother stopped off at a grocery store. She wanted to pick up some food for dinner since she had failed to thaw anything to cook. I insisted we could have sandwiches, but she said Glenn and his family were coming over to meet us. She wanted to prepare a nice meal.

When we arrived at the house, Walter and Jeff helped unload the packages. The girls took their clothes and new CD's to their room. But not until they hugged their grandmother and told her what a great afternoon they had had. This time I told Mother I was helping her prepare dinner. She didn't argue. Even Cathy joined us. We didn't speak but a few words, but we were together like once before, not so long ago.

It wasn't a huge meal. Mother made beef stroganoff over buttered noodles and opened some vegetables. She even made fresh rolls, and baked a cake. Cathy and I set the table.

Mother told us to get the card table out for the girls. She still wasn't sure if Glenn's son would be bringing his two sons, but if so, they could sit at the table with them.

It was a little after six when everyone showed up. Glenn's son, Jason, his wife, Beverly, and their two sons,

Perry and Joseph greeted everyone. Perry was seventeen and Joseph nineteen. They both were very handsome young men. All four girls seemed to salivate when they saw the boys. Especially Tess and Virginia. I wondered what had happened to "dear Allan" that Virginia had spoken of in the car on the trip. In fact, Virginia told Annie and Bonnie to sit at the table with the grown-ups. Of course Annie and Bonnie wanted to sit by Perry and Joseph.

Glenn sat next to Mother again. Everyone appeared to be having a good time during

dinner. Something told me it was a big charade. Any other time I'm sure we all would have been at each other's throat. Especially Cathy, Mother, Glenn and Jason. I got the impression Beverly was stuck in the middle, the same as I.

Afterwards, the men retired to the living room. Cathy, Beverly, and I helped Mother with the dishes. The girls, well, they all chose to show Perry and Jason their new CD's and talk to them about school.

Beverly was such a nice person. You could tell she cared a lot about Mother. They lived only a couple miles away. Beverly told us she always checked on Mother to make sure she was all right and didn't need anything. Beverly had lost her Mother when she was a young child. Mother had been like the mother she had never had. She didn't comment too much on her father only to say he had left when she was small and never returned home. She didn't even think he knew of her mother's passing.

Cathy was absorbing everything. She studied Beverly with every word and every move. Annie came in every once in a while, shooting us on the camcorder. We would try to hide, but she continued capturing us in the picture.

I recalled when Annie first brought up having a camcorder. She had practically begged us to get the camera for all our family outings. She wanted to shoot live action whenever she could. Something told me if Annie stuck around, she would definitely find plenty of that around here.

We finished the dishes, and Mother left to spend some time with Glenn. Beverly, Cathy and I didn't get but a

couple of sentences out before Jason entered the kitchen.

"Beverly, would you go into the living room? I need to talk to Heather and Cathy."

"I would like to be a part of this too, Jason."

"We've been over this enough. Now please leave us alone. This is something I need to discuss with Heather and Cathy."

Beverly sighed, then left the room. I couldn't believe the nerve of Jason to run her off in that way. It made me feel blessed to have a loving man as Jeff.

"I thought what we had to discuss should be between the family members at this time," he politely spoke.

"Beverly could have stayed," I easily mentioned.

"If you don't mind, I know what is best for my family, Heather."

Well, excuse me. I just sweetly smiled.

"Does this concern our mother?" Cathy asked.

"And my father. I don't know how you feel about this charade, but frankly I don't approve of it." Jason hit the top of his head with his hand. "He's sixty-three. Soon he will be up for retirement and now this. I'm thinking of putting him in a nursing home. He has totally gone bonkers."

"He's not the only one. I told Heather I'm against this twosome."

I stood silent. The nerve of Jason wishing to place his father in a nursing home when there was nothing wrong with the man. He had only fallen in love with my mother. That didn't make him a candidate for being placed into a home. From the little time I had spent with him, I could tell he was capable of taking care of himself and matters. Jason was being absurd and unreasonable. He was only thinking of himself and not his father. I had to make them both see they were the ones making no sense.

"Well, what are we going to do about it? I can handle my father, but your mother is in your

hands. Heather, you haven't said anything."

"Don't you and Cathy realize that our parents are over the age of consent? Or do you think falling in love is only for the young? As for placing him in a nursing home, isn't that a bit steep? It's not like he's an endangerment to anyone."

"Wait a minute. I thought you were the older sister."

"What has that to do with anything?" I said shaking my head.

"You should be the wiser as to this situation."

"Excuse me, Jason, but I see no problem with any of this. They're in love. It is not just some passing fantasy for them. None of us really knows how many years we have on this earth, why shouldn't they spend their years together? Just because a person hits the fifty and sixty mark doesn't make them old and ready for the rocker. Besides, it is not up to us to say what they can or can't do."

"And who is going to care for them when they get older and unable to get about? We will have two to cater to."

"There are a lot of young who have to be catered to, also." I paced toward the dining table. Jason was striking chords in me that I didn't wish to be struck. "What kind of a person are you? All these years your parents care for you and here you are complaining that in their golden years, you've got to cater for them. What a selfish brat! So if your mother were still living, I gather you would have to choose which parent you would care for, or is it just because it is our mother?"

"Oh, you've got the room to talk, Sis. Are you going to stop what you're doing and run care for Mom and Glenn when they need you?" Cathy chimed in.

"If I have to. She put her life on hold for me

many times, why would I stop for her just because she is aging?"

"Well, if they plan to go through with this, I'm not going to be there. I refuse Mother to marry anyone other than Daddy."

"Cathy, get it through your head. Daddy isn't coming back. He is never going to return in this life."

"Still, neither my father nor your mother should be getting married at their ages," Jason interrupted.

"Why don't you go purchase their burial plots tomorrow, Jason? It's apparent to you and Cathy that they are ready for the cold earth. I sure do hate to see the two of you when you get older. If you two don't watch your steps, you

are going to turn two people who love each other into bitter old people before their time. Not only that, you and Cathy will regret what you have done to them on their death beds!"

Jason shook his head. "Maybe I went to the wrong source. I guess I should have gone to *your* husband. He seems the more wiser."

"Really. Well he's all for it. I believe Beverly is too."

"Oh, what does she know?"

"A lot more than you, it seems."

Cathy raised her arms. "Hold it! Hold it! You two are getting nowhere. Now Heather, the way I see it, you are out numbered. Jason and I are strictly against this ridiculous ceremony. What we say goes."

"How do you possibly figure that? Walter, Jeff and the girls, as well as Beverly and the boys are for it."

"They don't count!" Jason barked.

"They may not be flesh and blood, but they are family."

"Heather, if you go along with this, not only will I disown Mother, but I will you, too."

“And my family knows what side of the bread is buttered in our family. If they want to live with me, they’ll do as I say.” Jason slammed his hand down on the dining table.

“Why don’t the two of you get a little louder? I’m sure Mother and Glenn will enjoy hearing how loving the both of you are. I have never in my life seen such selfish brats.”

No sooner had I finished my sentence, a glass shattered against the kitchen wall. Mother had entered and thrown one of the crystal glasses. Glenn followed behind and stood a few feet by her.

“I think the whole neighborhood can hear our friendly home tonight. It’s a wonder they haven’t phoned the police.

I never knew that falling in love with Glenn could cause such an upheaval in our domestic home. I’m glad that I didn’t react this way when you and Heather wanted to get married. I put my career on hold to care for the both of you. Not only out of duty, but because I wanted to out of love. I wonder how you’ll feel, Cathy, if you live to be fifty-seven and one of your daughters want to put you in a nursing home, or better yet the dark, cold ground? What wrong have I done you to receive such treatment? When your Daddy died, did I ask you to leave your husband, your children and come stay with a lonely old woman?”

Nothing.

“Don’t cease your chattering just because I entered the room. ANSWER ME!”

Cathy swallowed. “No.”

“I don’t believe I asked you or Heather for anything. I went about my job, living my own life. I didn’t think I should interfere with anyone’s life. According to you, my job should keep me warm and full of life. Or maybe another garden club?”

Cathy eyed her stunned.

"I can hear you late at night talking to Walter. You've never been one to voice your opinions so low others can't hear. I doubt you know what an inaudible whisper even is. I don't wish any of what I've had to go through for the past ten years on anyone. If you think a job or a social activity can keep you warm in the cold or give you that security blanket or companionship that you have with a spouse, then let me set you straight - it doesn't! I think it's time you wake up and smell the roses, young lady. I'm truly appalled that me finding just a little bit of happiness has put a damper on your life. I had something else planned to give you for Christmas, but I've changed gifts. What I have to give you, I'll do so now. After Glenn and I, as well as the others, overheard the nice conversation that was going on in here, I told Glenn that I can't accept his proposal. I'm sure that this will make you more than happy to hear this news."

The silence was so dead it was almost like waiting for Wall Street to start bidding. Jason and Cathy eyed each other.

Glenn wiped his forehead. "As for you, Jason, I am deeply sorry that you never learned anything that your mother or I taught you. It's a wonder that Beverly and the boys haven't already left you."

"Dad, I don't think we should be discussing this here."

"You opened the door. I'm only adding another chapter.

You will never know how it felt to hear such words come from behind this door. Then to hear Mary tell me we should call it off. If I had my way, I'd take Mary away from here

tonight. Never would any of you have to see our faces again. As for you disowning me, how would you feel if I took you completely out of my

will? I'm capable of handling all my affairs. I've never asked you for a thing. And I sure don't need you threatening me with any nursing home! I have never run your life, you shouldn't try running mine."

Jason's expression dropped. I continued to stay silent.

All of this was unbelievable. Any minute I hoped to wake up and find it all to be a dream. But that wasn't about to happen.

Glenn took hold of Mother's hand. "Mary, I think enough has been said on this matter. I'm going home."

"I'll get the car ready," Jason said.

"That won't be necessary."

Jason frowned.

"I've already phoned a taxi. I don't need you to take me home. No. I change that. I don't want you taking me home. I've taken care of myself since your mother's passing. I don't plan to stop now. There is one more clause."

"Yes." Jason slowly drew off his lips.

"Christmas day, Mary has invited all of us over to open our gifts."

"You still want to come?"

"Let me put it this way, Jason. You show up with your family or you're automatically out of the will."

"Dad?"

"Seems apparent that is all you want from me. You don't want me to have any happiness. For some reason, you think I

don't even care for your departed mother. I loved her more than you will ever know. It killed me inside when she died. But you will never know that feeling until your spouse passes away. And that is one feeling I hate for anyone to have to go through. I think that your mother would want me to find someone in my old age, but you seem to think differently. Whether you believe

me or not, she'll always live in my heart. She was a part of me that never can be taken away."

"The same goes for your Daddy," Mother informed us.

Mother took the ring from her finger and handed it to Glenn. "I'm sorry it turned out this way, Glenn."

Glenn took the ring, then kissed her hand. "I'll always love you, Mary," he said as a tear fell from his eye. "I'll see you Christmas morning, then I'm leaving. Where I'm going I don't know. I just hope I can find a place that is peaceful and full of love. I thought I had found that place, but others are too judgmental. They take something beautiful and turn it into a rotten odor."

Glenn kissed Mother on her forehead, then quickly left the room. I felt the tears as they slowly rolled down my cheeks. I noticed that Cathy had a few tears misting in her eyes. Mother gave Cathy a quick stare that revealed deep hurt. I noticed that Walter, Jeff, Beverly and the children had entered through the other door and were standing in the far back.

"Heather, dear, I am so sorry this cost you a happy time during the holidays." Mother spotted Jeff and turned to face him. "I'm sorry, Jeff, what you have planned...well...I don't know if I can attend or even hold it here in the house anymore."

I noticed that Jeff leaned closer to mom lowering his words but I could still faintly hear.

"It's not your fault, Mom."

"It was a very nice gesture. One I know she didn't suspect."

"No, Mom. She was so concerned that something was wrong with you. I only hope she's not mad at me when she finds out that I was behind this whole trip."

"I thought it was going to be a great Christmas present for her, Jeff. I'm so glad you

thought of it. You are indeed a great romantic. You have made Heather very happy all these years.”

“She might not wish to remarry me once she finds out how I tricked her in coming out to spend two weeks with you.”

“Oh I think she will cherish the interruptions that sometimes home and job have to offer. And when she finds out about the honeymoon, she will be even more thrilled.”

“The girls even kept the secret safe too.”

“I knew they would. You’ve got beautiful daughters, Jeff. Of course all of my granddaughters are beautiful and smart.”

Mother cast each of us one more hurt look, then bolted out of the room.

I shrugged my shoulders and glanced at Jeff not understanding what all that was about.

Joseph walked over to his mother. “Come on, Mom. I’m going home, too. Dad, you are welcome to go with us or take a cab. It’s up to you, but I’m taking Mother home.”

Beverly took hold of Joseph’s hand and gave Cathy and I an apologetic frown. “I thank you for having us over tonight. And for sure, we will be here Christmas day.”

Beverly and the boys walked out of the room. Jason rubbed his eyes, gave us an uncertain look, then followed.

I stepped to the utility closet to get the broom and dustpan, then began sweeping up the broken pieces. Cathy came over to lend a helping hand.

“Haven’t you done enough?” I didn’t care. It had been one heartrending ordeal that I never wanted to go through ever again.

Cathy burst into tears and ran out of the room. Walter followed. The children thought it best to leave. Jeff came over and gently removed the broom from my hand. I doubled over and

released an outburst. I couldn't hold back any longer. It was like a forest that desperately needed rain.

Jeff swept up the broken crystal, then drew me in his arms. "I'm sorry you are faced with this."

I brushed the tears from my cheeks and gazed into his shining blue eyes. "Honey, what was Mother referring to about holding in her house? I don't understand."

He shrugged his shoulders. "It was nothing."

I tried to play dumb. "Must have been something. What's the surprise? Might as well tell me or I'll go to the girls. Since you and the girls were so calm on the ride up here, I would venture to say that you knew all about this beforehand." I inhaled a breath. "Come clean, Jeff. You know I have ears like a hawk. I heard practically every word you and Mother were just now relaying to each other."

Jeff leaned over, resting his forehead to mine. "I so wanted it to be a surprise. It was a Christmas present that you would never have guessed, my sweet Heather. One that you would have remembered always."

"Meaning Mother's marriage to Glenn?"

"No, my dearest. Our marriage, or I should say, our remarriage. It was all a surprise. In fact when I spoke to your mother, I told her not to tell you the reason we were coming up here."

I moved my forehead from his. "Wait a minute. This trip was for a second marriage between you and me?"

"Are you disappointed?"

"Heavens no. What a lovely gift. I would have never guessed."

"Exactly."

"I faintly heard the words you two were speaking but I thought it pertained to Mother."

"The girls thought it was a great idea, since

they weren't there for our first one. They even helped to choose the attire for the blessed event. I have never seen two girls so excited to help do something loving for their mother. They really worked hard at this to keep it a secret."

"And now?"

"Now it appears the best laid plans are not going as I thought they would. I wanted you to be happy."

"Oh Jeff, you silly, don't you know by now, I am always happy with you by my side? Even my mother knows how happy you have made me all these years."

"Well I intend to still make it happen. I don't know how, but I am. And I am going to make sure that your mother is present for this gathering too."

"Still, I was so concerned on the drive up here, worrying that something was wrong with Mother."

"I tried to assure you that nothing was amiss. Of course I didn't know anything about this new event."

"Yeah, it is something *new* all right." Some fresh tears sprung to my eyes.

"Sweetheart, don't be crying. Things will work out. I don't know how, but the others will come around. I don't believe you were too keen with the idea at first. I mean, I remember what you had mentioned in the car about marriage and your mother."

"I haven't been fair, Jeff. Why does life toss us so many obstacles?"

"Just the price we have to pay, dear, to be a part of a family."

"I mean, look at our two daughters. Here they went out of their way to do something nice for me. They wanted your gift to be super for me. Why can't Cathy and I work as a team on this deal with Mother? I hate seeing Mother in tears."

I hate seeing Cathy hurt. And then there's Glenn, not to mention Beverly."

"I believe that things will work out. We have to have faith and give it time."

"You believe so?"

"I do, sweetheart."

"I know you're right. It just seems like, for now, I am searching for something that will only take longer to get repaired around here. Mother has suffered so much sorrow with Daddy's passing these past ten years. All I want is her to be happy. In a couple of days Christmas Eve will be upon us then Christmas day and there's no telling what all we will have to face when everyone gets together again."

I threw myself in his arms and allowed the tears to flow. He circled his arm around my waist as we walked to the bedroom. I continued crying until sleep finally filled my eyelids.

CHAPTER FOUR

When Christmas Eve arrived, it promised more snow flurries and colder temperatures. The clouds were making sure that the sun wouldn't have a chance of breaking through today. When I finally did get out of bed, I was shocked to see my eyes. This was one time I had cried enough to create a river. I gazed at the woman in the mirror staring back at me. I couldn't believe the swollen bags beneath my eyes. How was I going to face people today? I looked for some Visine in the medicine cabinet then placed a few drops into my red eyes. I wondered if Mother had been crying during the night. Better yet, if she had received any sleep.

Everyone but Cathy and Mother was seated at the dining table when I went downstairs. The girls all studied me when I entered the room. Nothing was said about my appearance though.

Jeff pulled out the chair for me. "Your mother had breakfast cooked when we came down."

"Have you seen her this morning?" I asked, slumping into the chair.

Jeff took a sip of coffee. "None of us have. I told the girls that I expressed to you about the surprise."

I smiled at Annie and Virginia. "It was still a great surprise, my dears. And one that still can go on."

"It was planned for Christmas day mom," Annie said.

"We can always set it for another day," Virginia spoke, casting her eyes to Jeff. "That is if

it's okay with Dad."

Jeff took hold of my hand, gently gloving it. "We will see what the days hold and go from there."

Cathy entered and sat down at the table. Her face resembled a red, ripe tomato. Walter poured her a cup of hot coffee while she put a few scrambled eggs on her plate.

For the longest, Cathy sat and nursed her cup of coffee.

Mother entered. She walked over and poured a cup of coffee. She was still wearing her gown and robe. Her hair hadn't been brushed. She wasn't wearing any makeup. It was quite the opposite from the first day we arrived. In fact, Mother seemed to be so much older than her years this morning.

"I trust the breakfast was all right?" Mother asked all of us.

"Yes, Grandmother, it was great," Tess answered. "We love coming to your house. Your food always tastes the best, just like when we were little. Grandmother, the girls and I have been talking, and we would like to take you to the mall today."

"I don't really feel up to it. But thank you for the offer."

Tess got up from the table and put her arms around

Mother. "Sorry Grandma, but this is one offer you can't get out of. We insist. So go upstairs and fix yourself up. The stores won't be open late today, that's for sure. Everyone will want to hurry and get home to their families. Wait until you see what we've got planned. And bear in mind, you have four granddaughters who won't take no for an answer. In fact Joseph and Perry are meeting us at the mall. They want to be a part of this day, too."

Mother returned the hug. "Okay, Tess. I'm

not really hungry anyway. It will be good to be around young people today. I won't be long."

I started clearing the table after Mother exited the room. I didn't have much of an appetite either. I doubt any of us really did. Cathy got up and helped with the dishes, but we never spoke one word. Jeff and Walter decided to take a walk and check the snow-covered scenery.

By the time the girls and Mother left, Cathy and I were done with the dishes. Mother did look better than when we first saw her earlier.

Since I hadn't slept much during the night, for the exception of a few winks here and there mixed with tossing and turning, I decided to go back upstairs and stretched across the bed. If I was lucky I might get a few winks. I needed desperately to ease the burning in my eyes. Tomorrow was Christmas but it didn't feel like it. The whole atmosphere was dismal. It was like a war. Even though the initial shells had been fired, something told me the aftermath in the coming days, weeks and even years was something that could never be mended. But then again miracles were known to happen.

A smile crossed my lips when I thought of the surprise gift that my precious Jeff had planned for me. How could one woman get so lucky with this wonderful husband of mine? It was a moment that made me think of Mother. I am sure it wasn't fun spending lonely nights in a big room or a bed with no one to share time with. Mother had been so full of life when Glenn was around. How could I even go home now, knowing that she would never be happy again? How could Cathy or the others for that matter?

I rolled to my back and stared up at the ceiling as if expecting answers to float down to me. "Oh Daddy, what to do? I miss you so much. Everywhere I turn in this house, you are there.

But deep in my heart, I know that you would want Mother to be happy. You wouldn't want her just sitting around expecting your return. Why does life have to be so hard, Daddy? Is it any better for you? Listen to me. I am just so confused Daddy and need your guidance. Oh how I miss you." Tears sprinted from my eyes. I had no way of correcting any of this for Mother. I was at a loss.

That evening we fixed sandwiches. The girls had stopped at a grocery store and purchased a fresh turkey, with

all the trimmings. They had agreed upon being the ones to wake up early and prepare the Christmas feast. Cathy and I didn't argue.

After dinner, the girls sat around the tree feeling the warmth that the fire cast off into the room. I had always admired that fireplace ever since I was little growing up. And tonight watching my girls sit around the fireplace reminded me of the good times that Cathy and I had growing up together, despite our sibling arguments.

Occasionally, each of the girls would take turns starting a song as the others joined in. The fire blazed and crackled with a warm orange glow. It reminded me of those lovely drawings that were displayed on the holiday cards at Christmas.

Momentarily, Mother told us good night and went on to bed. Her words had been very limited. Of course Cathy and I had barely spoken to each other all day. I think it was best that way. I sure didn't wish any fighting. I had considered bringing up Jeff's surprise but it never touched my lips. I kept it a bay for the time being. Just his simple gesture was enough to make my holidays.

I decided that I would turn in for the night, but before doing so, I decided to phone Beverly

to reaffirm the time to show up for Christmas day. The girls agreed that eleven would be the best time. It was good to hear her voice, but I could tell that it carried much heartache as well. Beverly had really left a very good impression that first night that we met. It would have been good having her as a sister to our family. If only things could be reversed to make that dream happen.

The warm relaxing bath was exactly what I had needed.

Too bad that couldn't have solved all the world's problems,

I thought. Annie and Tess knocked at the door as Jeff and I were turning in.

"We don't mean to come in at this hour, but we have something to give you," Annie told us.

Tess handed us a VHS tape. "Annie thought you might want to see this tonight. It's our present for you and Mother. At times that camcorder can come in handy."

They turned to leave when Tess stopped. "Aunt Heather, I know I have behaved like Mother a lot of times in the past. There are just some things that you have to learn to

out grow with the passing of time. I'm not really a cold, callous person. Inside I am warm and loving. I guess I don't express it as much as others. After viewing this tape, I think it is something that I should strive to work on. Just watch the tape. I have a feeling you will know what to do about the situation. The other girls and I see you as the go-between. For what it's worth, I am really glad that all of us were able to visit with each other this year. We need to find a way to make these trips closer together. I miss not seeing my cousins as much as I would like. Good night, Aunt Heather, Uncle Jeff."

As the door closed, Jeff rubbed my shoulder.

“What are you waiting for? Watch the tape, then be the truce maker.”

“You sure do hold a lot of confidence in me. Not to mention those kids.”

“I always have, sweetheart,” he said breezing a kiss to my forehead. “I believe the kids see a good thing in you, too. I just wish I could have gone on with the plans tomorrow of renewing our marriage vows.”

“Jeff, I know that is important to you. Believe me, once all this is over, it will happen. I love you so much.”

“Not as much as I love you, Heather.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Jeff stretched across the bed as I stuck in the tape for viewing. Apparently Joseph and Perry also had a camcorder and had done some filming as well. I leaned against the bed, allowing my back to hug up against the headboard as I listened and watched with interest.

“Hello Virginia and Heather. This is Joseph reporting, with the help of my brother, Perry, what is happening in our household since we left your grandmother’s abode. Seems that it has been quite icy here. And I don’t mean because of the weather outside. To be honest I don’t see how our mother continues to put up with everything around here. I do have to tell you that she has talked nonstop of how loving your mother was to her, Miss Cathy as well. It has been good to be around real family. She has expressed that many times. Okay enough of that. Now to our footage. Somehow we have to make the adults see that this marriage is something that should, no, that needs to take place.”

“And Mom, Dad,” Perry said in the background as he held the camera, “we are not snooping. I guess you could say we are doing a documentary on the study of adults. Now we will begin our coverage. And even though you don’t realize we are taping, I do hope that you smile. We need more smiling faces displayed in our home. It is becoming too rare around here.”

I reached for Jeff’s hand as we waited for the next segment to appear.

Beverly sat in the living room chair

thumbing through a magazine while Jason flipped channels with the remote.

"Is that all you can find the time to do anymore?" Beverly inquired.

"What would you have me do, Beverly? I've had a hard day at the office. I'm tired."

"Who isn't?"

Immediately Jason turned off the television. "What gives? Ever since we left that home, you have done nothing but brood. It's not the end of the world. This is best."

"For whom, Jason? You or your dad?"

"You stay out of this. It doesn't involve you."

"Oh really?"

"Please let's don't rehash this anymore."

"I don't have a mother or father, have you forgotten? Mary has been so nice to me, and your dad, well, your dad has been like the father I never had. You should put yourself in his shoes. Tell me something Jason, when you turn sixty-three, that is if you are allowed longevity, do you want your sons to treat you the same way you treat your father?"

"Beverly this is entirely different. I will not be seeking marriage with another woman."

"But what if you did? I mean if something were to happen to me?"

I hit the pause button, allowing the tape to rest for a moment. I looked at Jeff. "Funny how we were having almost the same conversation in the car on the way here. Yet you saw things clearer than I did, Jeff. I feel like such a heel. Here I snapped at Cathy after that glass splattered, and as I sit and listen to this tape, all I can think about is how I could have been a hypocrite just like this."

"Sweetie, I think hypocrite is kind of a strong word, don't you?"

"Perhaps, but if you could have seen the look on Jason's face when we were discussing

matters. Not to mention the way he urged Beverly to leave so we could talk. Annie is right, I have such a great husband.”

He gently squeezed my hand. I hit the pause button again and continued with the tape.

Jason stood to his feet and paced the living room. “I will not be seeking marriage with another woman, Beverly, case closed.”

“I spoke to your dad today.”

“And?”

“Don’t you care how he is doing since the breakup with Mary? Doesn’t it bother you that he chose to live a *lifeless* life just to appease you?”

Jason’s expression turned cold. “Dad did the right thing, Beverly. See, that is why I didn’t want you in the kitchen the night I tried to talk to those sisters. Only Cathy understood my side of the story. You want me to just give in to Dad and let him live as if he were still in his twenties marrying for the first time?”

“I believe that people marry at any age, Jason. Don’t you understand? That’s what is so romantic about falling in love and seeking to marry that one person that holds the key to your heart. It comes in different packages, different ages. It works in a spontaneous way. If we stamped on our heart the right age to marry, or the right age a person should really fall in love, where would the spontaneity in all of it lie?”

Jason rested his hands on his hips. “I think you read too many romance books.”

“And what is wrong with that? I need to find it in books since I can’t find it with you anymore.”

Once again, I paused the tape. “I don’t know if I should be watching this, Jeff.”

“Apparently the children thought it would be helpful or they wouldn’t have been adamant about you being the truce maker.”

“I guess you’re right.” I hit the pause button

again.

“Do what you want, Beverly. I’m going to bed.”

Beverly watched as Jason marched out of the living room. She wiped a tear from her eye. Minutes later she stood to her feet and headed toward the bedroom.

Once again Joseph stood in front of the camera. “This is how it has been in our home lately. I really feel like Dad has forgotten what it’s like to be *in* love, if he ever was. I hope that I am wrong in thinking that because he has been a terrific dad. Of late, though, he seeks to run Grandpa’s life. Face it, Dad, Grandpa is a grown man, he raised you to be an honest, hard working son. So why don’t you allow Grandpa to live his life and be happy? He is happy with Grandma Mary. Don’t believe us. Allow me to show you a before and an after footage.”

Jeff and I leaned against the headboard as he snuggled me in his arms. There had been footage of Mother and Glenn taking long strolls in the park as they held hands. Going to the ice cream parlor and sharing an ice cream cone, not to mention even getting on one of the carousel horses in the park and enjoying a fun-filled afternoon.

It had been a moment that you didn’t find too often with couples. Moments in time that meant something to two people deeply in love. Lessons in love to share with others. I wiped a tear from my eye. The whole scenario was so touching. I almost wished that Cathy were in here watching it with me.

A few moments into the video, it jumped in to the scene at the house the night in the kitchen. Everything had been completely caught on tape. Even the next morning when Mother awoke with no makeup or anything until Tess and the girls took her out shopping. The transformation was

unbelievable, but no matter how Mother had managed to dress for the afternoon with the girls, the tape still revealed a broken heart. Eyes that had shed many tears since the breakup.

I recalled Mother's appearance when we arrived the first day. She had been so radiant that day. It was as if she had found the fountain of youth. Then when Glenn arrived for dinner, it was as if electricity was so widespread that night.

"Honey, what's wrong?" Jeff asked, interrupting the tape.

"Just recalling when I saw Mother after a year. Such a transformation. She's so in love, Jeff. I mean this isn't some passing fancy."

He gently rubbed the tips of my fingers. "I know, sweetheart. You have to admit, ten years is a long time to be without anyone in your life."

"I know. No matter how much Daddy loved Mother, I don't think he would have waited that long if someone had come along."

"They say it's harder on men than woman."

"You are right about one thing, Jeff, life does dish us many different obstacles to face daily."

I snuggled closer to him and finished watching the tape.

"As you can see," Joseph went on to narrate, "these two people are truly in love and should be together. We visited Grandpa after the breakup. He was so broken hearted, he wouldn't even go in to work. But Perry and I will allow the video to do the talking as we went to visit him."

Once again, I silently sat and viewed the events. Joseph was right. The expression on Glenn's face revealed it all. Heartache, sadness, complete emptiness. I wondered where the life had vanished. *With Mother*. It had vanished the night he broke up with her, just as hers had.

His hair had not been combed. He wasn't even wearing clothes that matched. It was as if he no longer cared. Two delicate flowers that had

been banished from any sunshine or water to help them to grow and be nurtured. His face even appeared to have been lightly red as if he, himself, had spilled some tears. The charisma was gone. My heart went out to him. Of the two, he appeared saddled more with heartache than Mother.

I stopped the tape. “Jeff, I can’t watch anymore of this tonight. This is a suffering that should have been spared from two loving people. I know what I have to do, but first I need to gain some sleep myself for it to work. Besides, I’ve seen enough to know that these two people belong together. It is like an angel or something pulling them closer together.” I leaned into him and kissed him firmly on the lips. “I love you, sweetheart, more than you will ever know.”

“I think I already know. As for working to make it right for everyone, I know you. If there is a will, you will come up with the answer. That is why the girls brought you the tape. And with the six children working to make this happen, I trust you will deliver the solution. Try to get some sleep.”

“You too.” I said as I hit the remote, turning off the television.

CHAPTER SIX

I tried to sleep but all I could do was toss and turn. Jeff was sleeping peacefully. I was glad one of us could get some rest. Quietly, I slipped from the bed so not to wake him. I had to think further on the situation, and I knew of only one place that really cleared my thoughts. Slipping on my bedroom slippers and robe, I headed toward the attic. To my surprise someone had already beat me there.

“Mother, sorry, I didn’t mean to sneak upon you.”

“I gather you couldn’t sleep either.”

“No, not really. I knew I could do my thinking better in this ole attic.”

“Yes, I remember that.”

She sat on an old bench while she skimmed through a big old trunk.

“I can leave if you want your privacy.”

“No, dear, you aren’t intruding on anything. You know I am really glad I saved my wedding dress after your father and I married. I recall Virginia stating she so wanted to wear it when she married.”

“She still does. You have certainly kept it, as well as everything in this attic, preserved. I’m sorry that I never wore it, but Cathy did look beautiful in it.”

“Yes, that she did. As for preserving everything up here, I’ve tried. Everything was so precious to me.”

There were footsteps approaching. “Mind if I join in?” Cathy asked.

“Of course not,” Mother expressed. “I always

have open arms for my two lovely daughters. You know, Beverly will stop by at times, and we will sit and share tea and cookies. She reminds me so of you two. I guess I miss not having you girls closer to me. But life changes with each of us. We marry and are transported to other places with our spouses. I did the same with my dear parents.”

“Sort of like in the book of Ruth, you would mention to us, Mother.” Cathy said as she looked about the room.

“Yes,” Mother said, then went about searching through the trunk. “Couldn’t you sleep, Cathy?”

“Not really. Walter is snoring again tonight. Sometimes he wakes me. I usually get up and read a book. Tonight something was drawing me to the attic. You always keep it spotless, Mother, just like the rest of the house.”

“I always took great pride in keeping things tidy. Of course you girls have followed my example.”

“We learned from the best,” I stated.

“Have you heard from Glenn since he left?” Cathy asked.

“No. Of course I didn’t expect too. He is too much of a gentleman to interfere where he isn’t wanted.”

“But he said he loved you.”

“Cathy, he won’t interfere if he believes it will cause a division in the family. Did you come up here to gloat or pry?”

“No, Mother. I had no idea you were even up here.”

“Hey, you two, can we call a truce tonight, please?” I asked, displaying a smile. “I believe that we gathered this year to finally see each other after a long year. Which reminds me, I am very sorry, Mother, that a year has passed since we last saw each other. I did invite you to our

home, too, but your job was always coming into the picture as well.”

“I know, Heather. I appreciate it. I guess as we get older, time slips by us so fast and we forget the importance in family. It’s such a shame.”

Cathy folded her arms over her chest. “Why didn’t you tell us sooner, Mother?”

“Excuse me?”

“About Glenn. Why did you have to wait until we arrived, then spring it on us the first night?”

“Cathy, it wasn’t intentional, honest.”

“Really, it appeared that way.”

I raised my hands to a truce. “Please, can we not argue?”

“We aren’t,” Cathy expounded. “I only think it unfair that Mother waits until we arrive.”

“She told you it wasn’t deliberate. What does it matter anyway? You and Jason are getting your way. She and Glenn are not marrying. I don’t know how the two of you can sleep at night.”

“If you notice, I’m not sleeping, *sister*.”

“You said it was due to Walter’s snoring.”

“Girls, can we have a time out? You would think you two were just teenagers again living under this roof, and your dad is getting ready to go into your room to calm you down.”

We all froze in our tracks. Those were times that we would never forget. He would storm in playfully telling us we best be quiet before he took the paddle to us, knowing full well that he wouldn’t. Then he would bestow on us a wink, whispering to pretend we were scared so Mother would think he was coming down hard on us. I glanced over at Cathy, exchanging a look. She cast a smile my way. I knew she was recalling the same events.

“Those were some good times,” Cathy

remarked.

I knelt down by Mother and threw my arms tightly around her. "Again, I am so glad you summoned us to come visit you this year. It meant a lot to me, even though I was so worried that something was terribly wrong with you. Life is too short, Mother, to worry over the tiny things that don't amount to a hill of beans."

"Well I know one thing, you girls have always made me proud. Never once have you disgraced or disappointed me."

"Until now, Mother?" Cathy asked.

I stood to my feet.

"No. I taught you to stand your ground, Cathy. That was what you did. Even though I don't agree with you, you voiced your opinion. I always told you girls to be honest."

"Then why are you calling off the wedding? If it is that important, just marry Glenn."

Mother stretched her arms. "My family still comes first, Cathy. I believe you are the same way, in your actions. I refuse to have a rift in my family."

Cathy noticed the wedding dress in the trunk. "I see you still have your wedding gown preserved. I was really glad that it fit me when I married Walter. I always did admire that lovely gown."

"It was one that my dear mother, bless her heart, made for me when I married your dad."

"Yes, I overheard Virginia say she wanted to wear it when she got married."

"I do hope that is a good many years from now," I lightly said, smiling.

"If Bonnie and Tess wish to wear it as well, they are most welcome."

"I am glad that you allowed me to wear it for my wedding. It meant so much to me, Mom. Family heirlooms are hard to come by anymore."

Cathy and I watched as mother's fingers

feathered the clear plastic wrapper covering the dress. A moment later I saw a tear pass from her eye, as she wiped her cheek.

"I often wonder why things happen to us in this lifetime. We're born into this world not knowing what is expected of us. Then we grow up, fall in love, and if we are lucky, blessed with children of our own. A cycle that just continues all through life." Mother continued to stare at the plastic covering, her words soft and solemn.

I exchanged a glance with Cathy, not knowing what to reflect on the situation.

Mother lifted her face toward us and smiled. "When I first saw your father, I thought he was a most handsome man. I don't recall ever seeing anyone as handsome. He was wearing his military greens. I always thought a man looked distinguished in a suit. Well, your dad was both, distinguished and handsome. His hair was a rich black and his eyes a soft brown. For some reason I sparked from my head to my toes."

I noticed the twinkle was appearing in Mother's eyes. It was so good hearing her tell us again about her first encounter with Daddy.

"I have to tell you I never regretted any day that I spent with that man. And when he asked me to marry him, I was in total heaven. I don't recall ever hearing a swear word fall off his lips or any arguments from him over anything. He always managed to get along with everyone. He was so proud when you girls were born. Said he wouldn't have it any other way."

I noticed Mother wipe a couple more tears. My eyes were misting as well. I think I saw Cathy's glimmer with a few tears.

"You know he didn't have to go overseas on the last mission that they sent him on. Of course, he said that it was his duty to his country. He was always thinking about the fellowman. That man fought in the war and came back in one piece. He

suffered through things that none of us will ever have to deal or cope with, and yet he rages a war with a disease with no cure and ends up six feet under.”

I wiped some loose tears falling down my cheeks. “Daddy was always the trooper, Mother. Even till the end he fought that battle, even though it was one that he couldn’t win, he still fought hard to stay around. He loved you so much and wanted to stay with you forever. You can’t find too many family men like that anymore.”

“It’s really been hard these past years on me. I thought that I would get accustomed to being alone and not having anyone around to communicate with. I have to tell you it hasn’t been easy. I miss him so much. Oh, you can sit and talk to an empty chair but believe me, it doesn’t answer back. He’s not here anymore for me to read a chapter to in the Bible every night. I think of everything, I miss that the most. I remember some nights I would start reading and be so tired from the day’s activities that I failed to mark what chapter I had read previously. He would say, Mary, you read that one last night. I would say, are you sure, and he would point out some little things, and as always, he was correct.”

“He enjoyed that,” Cathy mustered through some choking tears. “I know he told me often he enjoyed you reading to him at nights.”

“When I met Glenn eight months ago and he started showing an interest in me, I thought to myself, hey, I’m not dead. At first I didn’t want to even go out with him for an ice cream cone. I felt I was really cheating on your father. Then it struck a chord in me. I was just being human, just going through that cycle that we humans carry on life with each and every day while dwelling on this earth we call home. Just a home that we are passing through until we are called to

our other home.”

Mother paused for a moment and withdrew a picture frame from the old trunk. One that carried a wedding snapshot of her and Daddy. She eyed it lovingly, then allowed her finger to gently sketch the sides of the frame, then land on the center of the picture.

“Glenn observed that I didn’t wish to date. In a way he didn’t wish to really go out either. As the days passed by us, we discovered we were more at ease with each other. He was still carrying a torch for his deceased wife. He had loved her as much as I loved my precious, Bill. But in time, we discovered that there was enough love left inside our hearts to pass it on to another person. I was filling an empty void in his heart, and his life, and he was doing the same for me.”

Mother abruptly stopped and didn’t say anything for a few minutes. I started to say something but chose to stay silent. I was sure she was gathering her thoughts, remembering days with Daddy. I didn’t want to interrupt her precious memories. I looked over at Cathy, who had wiped more tears then folded her arms over her chest.

A few moments later, Mother placed the wedding dress and the picture frame back into the trunk then steered her eyes toward Cathy. “I don’t care what you really think about my actions in all this, Cathy. I haven’t done anything wrong. And don’t be holding anything against Glenn. He is a good man. He would give the shirt off his back to anyone in need. I can’t recall the last time I met such an honest man, other than your Dad. I always taught my children never to be judgmental. This is one of those times that I expect you to respect my wishes.”

“I know Mother. I do. Well, maybe I don’t since all this is a shock to me. It is hard understanding things in life. I never wanted to

see you with another man besides Daddy,” Cathy issued while wiping tears.

“Well, I guess you won’t be seeing me with one.”

“Mother, please don’t fork this on me, or even Jason for that matter.”

“Oh, I’m not placing the blame on anyone, dear. I just wanted you to know that to make everyone happy, none of you will have to see me on the arms of another man,” Mother said rising to her feet. “I will tell you this much, dear. I do hope that you never have to be lonely and all alone for ten years or beyond. It is something that I truly would never wish upon a person, especially my own daughters or grandchildren.”

“Why are you only directing this to me and not Heather?”

“It is intended for the both of you. The only thing is, you and Jason were the ones that were so adamant about us not getting married. It was as if I had been the biggest cheater in this whole world to your father.”

“Mother, please...”

“Please, what? Try to understand your side? Oh, I do. I’m sure Glenn does too. But seriously, Cathy, it doesn’t ease the pain in the heart right now. Nor does it bring your father back or make my days less lonely. I pray you never have to go through anything like this with your daughters. Then again, I know Bonnie and Tess. I believe they are much more understanding in a situation like this.”

“You are being unfair, Mother.”

“Say what you please, Cathy. I only call it as I see it. Well, I’m going to turn in. You and Heather can stay and reminisce if you wish. This attic holds too many memories. Sometimes it’s easier for me to rest when I come up here and look around. Other times it makes me sad and I have trouble sleeping. You know they say people

are lucky when they find love the first time. If it comes around the second time, they are even more blessed. Lord willing, I'll see you both in the morning."

I couldn't get over Mother's attitude when she left. It was like night and day. She was still soft and loving, but there was something missing. Almost as if she had raised a barrier that no one could enter.

"Heather, what's wrong? I don't like that look I'm reading on your face. Or are you just pleased that Mother didn't reprimand you on anything. Her little perfect daughter not voicing an opinion this time."

"Cathy, you can cut the sarcasm. Mother didn't express anything for us to start a sibling feud. There is too much heated atmosphere around here now. I was only trying to piece together what Mother said."

"That's not very hard to do since she more or less is happy with you now and disappointed in me."

"No, she's like in this invisible field now not knowing where to actually turn. In fact I think that Mother has placed a boundary around her. Can't you tell? It's like she doesn't want anyone to come close to her again. Cathy, doesn't it bother you that all this could cause repercussions for Mother? I mean she was so happy, so elated when we arrived. Now look at her. There's something missing, just like an ingredient from a recipe."

"So you are blaming me, too?"

"I never tossed those words from my lips. And if you listened carefully to Mother's words, she wasn't slapping you with any blame either."

"I can understand where Mother was sort of going with all this. As for you, Heather, you didn't have to toss any words. I can read you like a book."

“There you go again.”

“No, there you go, just behaving like the older sister again.”

“Would you stop that?”

A cool brisk air seemed to rush through the room. We both felt it. My eyes focused on her. It was as if Daddy was entering our room breaking up the disagreement.

“I think perhaps we need to turn in for the night,” I casually mentioned as I rubbed my arms.

“I agree.”

Just before we descended the stairs, our eyes searched the attic room once more. Would things ever be right with us anymore? Only time would tell. I had to be the one to bring us all back into that fold. It was something I had to do, not only for the children, but Mother and Glenn as well.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The sun freed itself from the dark patchy clouds for Christmas day. As it became more of a glow, the snowflakes began to be just a minimal of flurries. The girls were dashing back and forth trying to get everything ready. I heard Bonnie and Virginia saying that today everything had to be the best of all days. Something told me the girls had a plan in the works. No doubt Perry and Joseph were in on it too.

I knocked at Mother's door. "Merry Christmas to you this morning. Now that is the Mother I remember seeing.

One that is all glowing and full of life. Did you sleep well?" I have to admit she did look much better than the day before.

"Yes. The granddaughters bought me this dress yesterday. They insisted I wear it today."

"That color goes well with your complexion. It's almost a light bone, isn't it?"

"Either that or cream. They didn't even have the color on the label. I suppose the girls are busy preparing the dinner. They won't even allow me in the kitchen. In fact,

they brought my breakfast to me."

"Good. You don't need to be on your feet today. Let them pamper you for a while. This is something very rarely seen. So enjoy. The others will be here around eleven."

Mother stared into the mirror. She picked up the brush and slowly brushed her hair. I inhaled a short breath. I don't know what it was but there was something different about her today. It was almost like looking into the eyes of an angel. I

left her to finish dressing.

My feet padded down the stairs to the living room. The aroma of the food drifted through the house. I could hardly wait to taste all their fixings.

"Merry Christmas," Virginia said as I eyed the Christmas tree.

"Same to you, dear. How's everything coming along in the kitchen? Just from the aroma, it appears to be going heavenly."

"I think Tess said the turkey lacked another hour."

"You girls must have gotten up early."

"I don't think we slept but a couple of hours. We all wanted to wait until the others arrived to open our presents."

"I see."

Virginia turned to go back to the kitchen. "Oh, Mom," Virginia inhaled a short breath, "the girls and I would like for you to present your present first...to the whole group."

I released a frown, not understanding.

"I believe that Tess and Annie handed it to you last night."

"Oh that. I'm working on it now."

Virginia left to go back into the kitchen. I eased over to the living room window and looked out. The snow flurries had completely stopped. The brightness of the sun would soon be melting away any snow that had accumulated during the night. I kept hoping that today, of all days, would turn out to be a wonderful turn of events. A new beginning to an end. I couldn't return home to a safe haven unless Mother was happy.

A few minutes before eleven, everyone had arrived. The girls had the tables set beautifully. The grownups were standing around in the living room. Every once in a while I caught a glimpse of Glenn casually making eye contact with Mother.

Tess came up and put her arms around me. "Aunt Heather, shouldn't you give the gift before we all eat? We really poured our hearts into that meal. I'd hate for anything to spoil the festivities. Perry and Joseph have something planned for later. Besides, I think that your gift would be well worth it before the dinner. We do want Grandmother and Mr. Glenn to be happy on this special day as well." She gave me a kiss on the cheek then walked off smiling.

I looked at Jeff and sighed. There was no sense of putting the inevitable off any longer. I inhaled a breath.

"If I could possibly get everyone's attention, there is something that I would like to give to each of you before we sit down to our feast. I would like for all of you to gather around the television. There is a Christmas tape I have for your viewing."

"If it's *A CHRISTMAS STORY*, I see that one every year," Jason cracked.

"No. This one hasn't been witnessed by the public."

I stuck the tape into the VCR and turned on the TV. Jeff walked over to my side.

"You okay with all this?"

I gently patted his hand. "I believe so."

I caught everyone's eyes in the room on me, waiting. For a moment I felt like Daniel in the lion's den. The way Jason and Cathy were sending daggers, I do believe the lions would have been safer at that point to be around.

"I do want to say something before I hit the play button. When we first arrived for the holidays, I had no idea what lay in store for any of us. I never imagined we all would be fighting like cats and dogs during this special time. Then when Glenn was introduced to us for the first time, I thought no, what is going on. I mean this was my dad's house and another man was

entering his domain. But after seeing how ecstatic Mother was, I didn't want to argue. I mean it wasn't like Mother was having an affair behind our backs or being dishonest with the living. I guess what I'm trying to say is, this is Christmas. After we see the tape, I don't wish any sparing of words. The girls have gone out of their way to prepare a very special meal. Even people at war have an occasional truce at times. Today, could we adults please wave that white flag?"

A pause. Seconds later, everyone signaled a nod.

"Last night Annie and Tess presented me with this tape.

It seems that since we all first arrived, Annie and Tess have been video taping us. Joseph and Perry have had their share of taping, too. Some of it will surprise you and bring a warm glow to your heart. Other parts will make you wonder how any of us, as mature adults, could have acted that way. It won't take up much of the hour. The girls, with the help of Perry and Joseph, have put the parts into perspective."

Jason jumped up from the chair. "I don't have time for this nonsense!" He cast his eyes toward his sons. "I can't believe you two going around still video taping when I demanded that nonsense stop."

"Dad, I really think this time you should watch and actually listen to your words," Perry remarked.

"Jason, if you leave this room, our marriage is over," Beverly vowed. "You just agreed to a truce."

"Beverly, you don't mean that. You would never leave me."

"Yes she does," Perry said. "And Joseph and I go with her."

"You wouldn't do that to your dad."

Perry and Joseph crossed their arms and cast

him a serious look. Jason eyed everyone, then sat back down.

“There’s no need to pout, Jason,” I expressed. “Remember life is too short. Must I remind you this is Christmas? Even Scrooge learned a lesson.”

I hit the play button and started the tape from the beginning. When I first started watching it last night, it really wasn’t at the beginning of the tape, and I more or less had not captured the entirety of the tape in its perspective. It began with an introduction from Annie, followed by the other girls, then Joseph and Perry. Annie and Tess had captured all of our expressions from day one. Even across from the dinner table when none of us was looking. Every scene was enough to warm the heart. Especially when Cathy, Beverly and I washed dishes one evening.

I watched the others’ expression as they viewed the tape. It was indeed a rare moment of silence. What came right after the kitchen scene was enough to freeze anyone’s bones. I recalled how it had hit me like a speeding bullet when the girls presented me the tape and urged me to watch it. Annie had captured the whole incident Cathy and I had encountered with Jason. She had even recorded Mother’s clash with the broken crystal to include the following day with everyone’s deep depression. Watching it over again from beginning to end made me even see things in a better light.

When the added coverage of Glenn’s depressed days played out, as well as the moments with Jason and Beverly, I noticed that Jason was beside himself.

To say the least, the children had indeed seized all the adults’ behavior very well. It was enough to make you laugh. Make you cry. Make you bitter and make you want to really set new

goals to be a better human for the coming New Year. Out of the mouths of babes, so to speak, or the innocent, the children had captured a wonderful presentation for the grownups.

Bonnie noticed a few tears falling from her mother's eyes. She handed her a box of tissues.

Jason even pulled a handkerchief from his shirt pocket as the tape drew to an end. He stood to his feet and padded over to Beverly. He gently took hold of her hand. "I'm sorry I've been such a terrible person to live with lately. I've really lost perspective in life. I never meant to say things that would break your heart. Will you forgive me?"

"Don't I always?"

"Yes. But this time I mean it. I won't let you down anymore." Jason kissed her softly on the lips.

Joseph cleared his throat. "If I may add a word or two.

It just so happens that the girls, Perry, and I have decided that no matter what the outcome of this tape, we wish Granddad to marry Grandmother Mary. He has been alone for too long. We have already made the arrangements for the preacher and everything. It goes as scheduled tomorrow. The girls have a dress for their grandmother, and we have a suit for you, Granddad."

"In addition to what Joseph said," Perry spoke, "the six of us have voted and it is unanimous. We want this marriage to take place. Those of you who don't wish it to happen don't have to attend. Everyone has to live out their lives in a way that makes them happy. The way I see it, none of us have any right to interfere."

Glenn walked over and took hold of Mother's hand. "The children make a good point, Mary. Will you marry me?"

Mother studied everyone's expression. "I

want nothing more but to marry you, Glenn.”

“But?”

“I don't want to disappoint my loved ones, or yours for that matter. I can't be happy in my years if others disapprove of our relationship.”

“Grandmother,” Tess whimpered.

“I appreciate everything that you granddaughters have done, as well as Joseph and Perry, but it won't work. You can't live in a house divided.”

“But you said you loved Granddad Glenn.”

“Tess, I do. But sometimes if you love someone, you are willing to let them go for the sake of others.”

Annie sobbed. “Grandmother, please don't do this. At the expense of others' foolishness, you are allowing your happiness to go down the tube. Didn't you see the tape?”

“Yes indeed, but—”

“There are no buts. Now I know the way adults see us; we are all still just growing teenagers. That we really don't understand because we haven't reached that maturity. Well, we know when two people are in love they should be together. We see it in your eyes. We feel it in our hearts.”

I exchanged a look with Jeff.

“Just stop it!” Cathy bellowed. She got up from the couch and walked toward Mother. “I've heard enough. I think the tape was plenty to show all of us what perfect jerks we have turned out to be. I'm sorry. I hate what I said to everybody. To Glenn, to Heather, and especially to you, Mother. I can't erase the painful things I said. All I can do now is try to better things. I agree with the children. You love Glenn and he loves you. If you allow this relationship to dissolve, it will make us bitter and torn from one another. My conscience can't handle that. I

will not go home thinking that you are sitting

home, alone and needle pointing. I love you, Mother. Whatever you think of me, please believe me when I say that.”

Mother embraced Cathy warmly. “Sweetheart, I have never doubted your love for me.”

“Glenn, will you forgive me?” Cathy asked.

“Young lady there is nothing to forgive.”

Cathy burst into tears. “No one has called me that in a long time.”

“Well I guess I will have to do something about that, won't I?” Glenn leaned over and gave Cathy a hug.

Jason walked to Mother and Glenn. “All right, you two.

I'm still a part of this family. I would like to have a say.”

Glenn raised his eyebrows. “Yes, Son.”

“I say we eat that dinner before it gets cold. We've got a lot of preparations to make for this wedding.”

I wiped the tears from my eyes, as Jeff came over and took my hand.

Jason turned to me. “You know Heather, you made a good point on that tape about the mending of crystal and a person's life. I would like to do something for Beverly.”

“What's that?” Beverly asked.

“After Dad and Mary finish their ceremony tomorrow, I want us to renew ours.”

Beverly's eyes lit brighter than the lights on the tree as a few tears misted in her eyes. “You really mean this?”

“You bet your life, sweetheart. I want us to have a new start. A fresh beginning. To add to it, I'm taking you on

that honeymoon cruise you never got.” Jason said. “Hey now. We all better stop this crying or we're going to need a rowboat in here. I love you, Beverly.”

"I love you, too, Jason. I am at a loss for words over this."

Jason lifted his eyes to Jeff. "Well I heard, through the grapevine, that another lucky fellow had planned the perfect wedding for his lovely wife. I thought, *why not*. That sounds like a winner. Now hearing all this from six very intelligent children, I should say the idea does grab at the heart. You wouldn't mind me stealing your idea, would you Jeff?"

"I say the more the merrier," Jeff responded.

"Well if that is the case, Cathy, you and I might as well tie that knot again. I can't think of a better way to share Christmas than to have a wedding ceremony. Cathy, are you up to remarrying this ole man again? I always said you made me a better man," Walter said smiling.

"You still want me after all this fiasco that I caused?"

"I think it's called being human and learning from our mistakes, dear." He stepped to Cathy and blanketed his arms around her.

"I think we are going to make one preacher extremely happy to perform this ceremony," Glenn remarked.

Jason took Beverly by the hand. "Allow me to escort you to the kitchen, my lovely."

"*Oh Jason.*" Beverly grinned as she and the boys walked off toward the kitchen with Jason.

The girls followed with Mother, Glenn, and Walter.

"Jeff, you go on. I want to speak to Cathy first."

"Tell me sweetheart, do you mind waiting until tomorrow to renew our marriage vows?"

"Never."

"I had planned on it Christmas Eve, then after everyone opened their gifts today, we were heading for a romantic honeymoon while the girls stayed with your mother. Of course now,

she and Glenn will be on their honeymoon. Not to mention your sister. I guess..."

"That our children and Cathy's are old enough, or should I say mature enough, to stay right here and enjoy the rest of the holidays while each of us are away enjoying free time together? Need I remind you that I was only a year older than Annie when I married you?"

"No, you don't. And I agree with you. They will be fine while we are away for a few days. I'll leave you alone to speak with Cathy. Don't be long. We all want to share that great meal together."

"We won't," I said, brushing a kiss to his lips.

I waited until Jeff had left the room then crept over to the fireplace. "You know, at first I didn't know if I could really come to terms with all this. I really miss Daddy. It has been ten years but memories are one thing that never die."

"I know what you mean. But you know, Heather, I have a feeling he's watching us now. Something tells me that he's the one that brought that warm sunshine, not only outside, but in our lives today."

"Funny, I felt the same way. I'm happy everything worked out for the best. I know that tonight I can finally get some sleep with no tears stinging my eyes either."

"Me too. My actions were so selfish. I brought half of this on myself."

"Well, they say one learns from his mistakes."

"Heather, I hope that you aren't disappointed about the ceremonies. I heard the girls talking about how Jeff had planned a surprise wedding for you. And now it appears that it will be a quadruple ceremony."

"Nonsense. I say the more the merrier. With Tess and Annie working the camcorder, we will have some treasured memories to look back on. I

think it will be a new one for this little town when they word it in the newspaper. I heard Perry and Jason are going to be the photographers.”

“And Virginia and Bonnie are working on the cake as well as the little finger foods. I may not have a camcorder, but I caught little bits and pieces too of things going on in this house. Of course I’m sure all four of the girls will have this house loaded in decorations that would fit right out of a wedding ensemble for *Instyle* or one of those glamorous magazines.”

I exhaled a breath. “Hard to believe about our dear mother.”

“What about her?”

We turned to see Mother approaching.

“We were wondering when you two were going to present yourselves. The men are growing hungry.”

“We were about to make our entrance,” I remarked.

“Now what about me, Heather?”

“You are having a ceremony where we can be present, the same way we are with our children. Generations in this loving household having a huge wedding ceremony. If only...” I paused thinking of how I wished it could be Daddy. But that would never happen. People never returned from the dead.

Mother pulled me into her arms. “Honey, no matter what happens, your father’s presence will always show, not only in this home, but through you and Cathy. Every time I see you, I see his shining eyes from the both of you. Your sweet smiles make me think of him. But when I say “I do” to Glenn, I will be making new memories that will go with me until my Maker calls me. He has his memories and I have mine, but this is a new beginning for the both of us. What makes this so special is that we can share it with our

children. This means so much to us.”

“I’m glad, Mother.”

“Me, too,” Cathy said.

“Now, you two finish your sisterly chat and come help us finish the trimmings on the table. Then we have some wedding plans to discuss before tomorrow morning.” Mother rubbed her hands together. “This is so exciting. I feel like a young girl again. And don’t you think it’s nice having Beverly in this family? She is such a nice woman.”

We both agreed. Beverly was going to make a great addition to the family.

“We’re right behind you, Mother,” I said as she stepped off.

“You know that was quite an impressive tape. I enjoyed the episodes of Mother and Glenn sharing walks and holding hands.”

“It did have its moments, didn’t it?”

“I do hope that Walter took some pointers.”

“Oh, I’m sure he did. If not, you can easily encourage him.”

“You think?”

“I believe that Walter loves you so much that there is nothing that he wouldn’t do for you.”

“You think Mother would allow me to wear her wedding dress once more? I do believe that it will still fit me.”

“I think she would be honored. And with your figure, I know it will still fit.”

Cathy took hold of my arm. “Merry Christmas, older sister.”

This time it didn’t bother me. “Same to you, younger sister.”

“Tess was right, making sure you got that tape. You are indeed the truce maker of this family. That’s one quality you got from Dad.”

I released a sob. “And what did you get?”

“Why his smartness, of course,” Cathy elated with a huge grin.

I playfully popped her on the arm. "Come on before they eat everything."

"They aren't supposed to start until we arrive."

"When men get hungry, they eat. You heard Mother."

"Oh yeah, you're right. We best step in there. And Mother is right; we are going to have fun discussing the weddings tonight. It will be good having another sister in this family."

"Yes, three will be even more fun together."

"Maybe I can persuade Beverly to lean toward my side and agree with me more."

"I don't know about that, Cathy. Word is I'm a good persuader when it comes to people."

"Word would be right."

Hand in hand we walked into the kitchen to see what else had to be done. Something told me that our bright smiles were outdoing Mr. Sun outside. This was one Christmas that none of us would ever forget.

The Best Man for Kristie

a novella by
Rebecca Goings

To all the women who've dared to take a chance
on love.....

This one's for you.

About Rebecca Goings

Rebecca Goings has been writing for as long as she can remember. From poems, to fantasy stories, to love stories, she still has most of her old handwritten gems from childhood. As a young girl she read her first romance and knew she was hooked. She decided then that romance is what she wanted to write.

It wasn't until recent years that Rebecca even took her own writing seriously and decided to pursue her lifelong dream. After a stack of rejection letters, she is proud that her work has finally been recognized.

Rebecca lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband Jim and their four beautiful children.

CHAPTER ONE

Kristie Carter glared at the shrieking alarm clock before she smacked it mercilessly with the palm of her hand. After a few good whacks, she smiled in triumph when it finally stopped its maddening wail. Rolling over with a sigh, Kristie promptly fell back to sleep.

It wasn't until a few of hours later that her phone rang and rang, breaking unsympathetically into her peaceful slumber.

"Hello?" Her voice sounded gritty to her ears.

"Where are you?" her friend Sophie shouted on the other end of the line. "You were supposed to be here over an hour ago!"

Kristie sat up with a start, her hair falling in her eyes. She glanced at the clock and groaned. It was almost eleven a.m. Eleven a.m?

"Oh no, Sophie, I overslept! Can you hang tight for another half an hour?"

"Fifteen minutes."

"Would you settle for twenty?" Kristie pleaded, as she sprang off the bed with her portable phone to grab some clothes.

Sophie sighed before a long pause of silence. "OK, Kristie, but if you're not here in twenty minutes, I'm leaving."

"Thanks! Thanks, Sophie! I'll be there in a flash!"

Tossing the phone on the bed, Kristie ran to the bathroom and turned on the shower. She stepped in before the water was completely warm, and a loud yelp suddenly echoed through the house. As always, her ornery yellow tabby

cat padded into the room and began yowling just outside the shower door.

“Be quiet, Bernard!” she yelled as the shampoo stung her eyes. “Why do you always bawl when I get in here?”

The cat answered her with another loud wail, making Kristie sigh and grin. The old boy had been her cat for almost fourteen years now, and ever since she was a teenager he’d had this weird habit.

It didn’t take long before Kristie turned off the shower, only to trip over the howling cat that was sitting right in front of the stall door. Regardless of the fact that it was a daily ritual for them, Kristie always managed to forget that he was there, stumbling her way to the towel rack.

“Oh! You silly cat! Get out of here! Shoo! Shoo!” Snapping at him with her towel, Kristie had to laugh when he glanced back at her with a ‘how dare you’ look on his wizened old face.

The clock on the wall in the bathroom said she had only taken five minutes in the shower. “Must be some kind of miracle,” Kristie mumbled to herself as she began to dress and brush her honey-blond hair. Blue eyes stared back at her in the mirror as she hurriedly rummaged through her make-up bag, but then she thought better of it.

“No time for make-up. I’ll just have to ‘fresh-face’ it today.”

As she ran a comb through her shoulder-length tresses, she mourned the lack of her hair dryer. The clock was ticking, and she had to move if she was going to get to Betsy’s Bridal Boutique in time.

Kristie couldn’t believe she had overslept! She hadn’t slept in to eleven a.m. since she was in high school! Not even Bernard had woken her for his breakfast, which was very unlike that crotchety old feline.

Sophie was getting married in just a few weeks to her boyfriend of two years, Tyler Bainbridge, and Kristie was her Maid of Honor. They'd agreed a few weeks ago that they would meet at the boutique for their fittings this morning. Thankfully, Sophie had chosen a bridesmaid's dress that wasn't going to make Kristie look like a beached whale wrapped in taffeta. It was a dark blue, sleeveless, off-the-shoulder gown that flared out at the waist and fell gracefully to the floor. It matched the white wedding gown almost exactly, aside from the pearls and sequins Sophie's dress had embroidered on it. It was simple and elegant, something that Kristie was thankful for.

She hated having her wet hair simply hanging on her shoulders, so she quickly twisted it into a hasty pony tail and grabbed her purse from the kitchen counter. Digging through it for her car keys, she spared a glance at the clock and saw she had ten more minutes.

Just as she was about to fly out the door, she heard the mournful yowl of her cat.

"Oh, Bernard!" she huffed as she flew back into the kitchen. Grabbing the bag of cat food off the top of the refrigerator, she hastily scooped out his breakfast spilling it all over the floor in the process.

"Dang it!" she yelled in frustration as she slammed the bag back on top of the fridge. "You'll just have to clean that up for me, kitty!" she groaned as she finally ran out the door and down to her car.

The engine of her blue Geo Metro sprang to life as she put it in drive and raced down the road. The mall wasn't more than five minutes away, and Kristie smiled as she finally took a deep breath and relaxed her hands on the steering wheel. Steven Curtis Chapman was playing in her stereo and she sang along, her

windows rolled down in an attempt to dry her hair somewhat before she reached the shop.

As she pulled into the mall parking lot, the clock on her dash told her she had minutes to spare. She smiled and waved at Sophie who was waiting on the sidewalk. Parking her car, Kristie climbed out, jogged over to her friend, and gave her a hug.

“Wow, you made it!” Sophie said, tapping her watch in disbelief.

Kristie gave her a triumphant smile. “I even showered!”

“Well, I thank you for that,” Sophie grinned as she opened the front door to the mall and walked inside. The women strolled past the stores until they came to the bridal boutique. Stepping inside, one of the women behind the counter recognized Sophie immediately. With the amount of money she slapped down on the wedding dress, it came as no surprise to Kristie.

“Ah, Miss Martin! Have you come for your fitting?” the employee smiled and slid out from behind the counter.

“Yes, Maggie, I’ve come with my Maid of Honor, Kristie Carter.”

“Of course,” Maggie grinned as she ushered the ladies farther into the shop. “Let me just go get your dresses for you, and we can get started.”

As soon as the woman was out of sight, Kristie let her gaze drift longingly to the hundreds of bridal gowns hanging all over the store. She was twenty-five with no boyfriend and no prospects of one either. It sometimes seemed to her as if Mr. Right would never walk into her life, and that thought brought a dull ache to her heart. She was very happy for her best friend, but she was jealous of her as well, and that made her feel guilty. Kristie wanted a husband, she wanted a family, and she even prayed frequently

about it. But it seemed as if the Good Lord was silent on the matter. She tried telling herself that God works on His own timetable, and that He would send her someone who was perfect for her in every way. But she just wished that the Almighty would hurry things along.

"Guess who Ty chose for his Best Man?" Sophie asked as Kristie longingly smoothed her hand over the rich, white fabric of the gowns hanging on the racks.

"Who?"

"Nick."

Kristie's head suddenly whipped around as she gazed at her friend in shock. "Really?"

Sophie chuckled. "Really. He was trying to decide between his friend Ryan or his brother, and his brother won out."

Turning back to the dresses, Kristie tried her hardest not to let her trembling hands show. Nick. Nicholas Bainbridge. The man was perfection. He was everything she had ever wished for. He was tall, handsome, and suddenly standing right in front of her!

With a cry of alarm, Kristie backed away from him warily and glared at Sophie as if she had set her up. Knowing her friend, that probably wasn't too far from the truth.

"Hello, ladies," his strong, deep voice washed over her. "I saw you walking into the mall and I thought I would see how things were going."

"Things are fine! We're fine! Aren't we fine, Sophie?" Kristie stammered, suddenly closing her eyes and smacking her own thigh with a closed fist. Why did she always sound like an idiot around this man?

"What brings you to the mall, Nick?" Sophie was asking, stepping away from Kristie when she tried to hide herself behind her friend.

"Oh, I had to go to the Mr. Formal down

the way to get fitted for my tux,” he answered, sounding amused. Kristie finally had the courage to look at the man, and just as always, Nicholas Bainbridge never ceased to take her breath away. Thick, sandy blond hair was combed back neatly, looking as if he had just had a haircut. A white t-shirt was tucked into snug blue jeans, and even such simple attire made him look like a hunky male model. His eyes were a strange color of aquamarine, a bluish green that had always amazed her. And now those eyes were perusing her right back.

A flush came to her cheeks then, knowing she didn’t look her best with her still-wet hair pulled back and her face . . . Oh no! She wasn’t wearing any make up! Kristie wanted to melt into the floor as she looked away again, walking a little bit away from both of them to regain her bearings. She tried to seem interested in the dresses, but she just couldn’t concentrate on a single one. All she saw were a pair of aquamarine eyes smiling at her and saying, “Howdy.”

“Here we are, ladies!” Maggie said in a sing-song voice as she emerged from the back, holding two dresses in their bags over her arm.

“Oh, thank you. Yes, bring the dresses into the fitting room, please,” Sophie told her, accepting her dress and scurrying away with Maggie, suddenly leaving Kristie alone with Nick.

“Looks like you’re here for a fitting too,” he said, looking in the direction the two women had taken.

“Yes,” Kristie said froggily, suddenly realizing with horror there was something in her throat. She began coughing, which prompted Nick to step closer and pat her back a few times. With each tap of his warm hand, Kristie could feel her knees go weak. She had to get away from him!

“Are you all right?” he asked, concerned.

Holding up a hand, Kristie took a step back and nodded. “I’m fine, Nick, really.”

“I haven’t seen you for awhile, Kristie. You look good.”

She almost laughed at that, knowing she looked as ratty as she felt in her stained t-shirt and old shorts. She silently chastised herself at that moment for forsaking her laundry the day before.

“So do you.” Boy did he ever. Kristie could look at him all day long and never get bored.

“I guess we’ll be seeing a lot of each other now, what with the wedding coming up soon.”

Kristie trembled at the thought of spending a lot of time with Nick. How would she be able to keep it a secret that she adored this man? She had known Nick for as long as Sophie had been dating his older brother Tyler, and she often daydreamed with her friend about him. Sophie urged her to approach him, but she never did, thinking Nick couldn’t possibly look twice at her, overweight as she was. Kristie wasn’t too overweight, but she was chubby, something Sophie liked to call her ‘cushioning’.

She’d seen the pictures of Nick and his former girlfriends, all of them looking like supermodels themselves, and her heart sank, knowing that her daydreams about him were just pipe dreams.

“It would seem that we’ll be together . . . a lot.” Kristie licked her lips and looked nervously back toward the dressing rooms. She was afraid that Nick could see right through her. That scared her more than anything. If this man ever found out about her feelings for him, he’d probably laugh in her face.

“Hey, you think maybe we should exchange phone numbers? I mean for the

wedding and all. We might need to get in touch with each other, since I'm the Best Man and you're the Maid of Honor."

Kristie's heart suddenly sprang into her throat. Did he just ask for her phone number? She silently hoped that he couldn't tell her pulse had suddenly skyrocketed through the roof.

"My phone number?" she said lamely.

"Yeah, for the wedding."

For the wedding, she repeated silently to herself. Nick wanted to call her for Sophie's and Tyler's wedding plans, nothing more.

"Sure, sure," she said, feeling flustered as she dug through her purse for a pen. "I don't have any paper," she confessed.

"Here," Nick said, stepping to the front counter and coming back with two business cards for the boutique. "We'll write our numbers on the backs of these."

"OK," Kristie said, trying to hide the fact that her hand was trembling as she took the card from his hand. She deftly scrawled her number on the back of one card and handed it back to him. As he reached for her pen to write his number down, their fingers brushed each other making Kristie quickly suck in her breath. Nick's eyes flew to hers, and she blushed, knowing full well that he'd heard her sudden reaction to their touch.

With a grin, Nick quickly wrote his number down and handed her back her pen along with the card. Kristie took pains not to touch him again. She wasn't sure if she could survive another jolt like that.

"I can see that you're busy now, so I'm going to take off," he said. "I'll be sure to call you if I need you."

If I need you. Those words slammed through her with such force that she wondered how her legs still managed to hold her weight.

She nodded and squeaked, "All right."

"See ya, Kris," he smiled as he winked at her and turned to walk away.

Kristie was left to stare after him, rooted to the spot until she could no longer see him in the throngs of people wandering the mall. Closing her eyes, Kristie took a deep breath to steady herself before walking back to the fitting rooms. Her legs felt like spaghetti noodles.

CHAPTER TWO

Kristie stabbed at the ice in the bottom of her empty soda glass with her straw. She sat across from Sophie in the booth of a restaurant they had stopped at for lunch. It had taken forever for her hands to cease their trembling, and much to her horror, Sophie had noticed in the dressing room of the boutique. She said nothing then, thankfully, sparing Kristie the embarrassment of having to explain herself about Nick in front of the boutique employee. But now that they'd been served lunch, Kristie knew what Sophie was going to ask.

"Is something wrong, Kris?"

"No, I'm perfectly fine," Kristie said with a sarcastic grin. "Did you set me up?"

"Me?" Sophie asked innocently.

"Yes you. Did you? You know how I feel about Nick!"

"No, I did not set anything up with Nick. But I did run into him while I was waiting for you. We talked for a little while before he went inside for his own fitting, and I can only assume he spotted us on his way out."

Kristie groaned. "I wish you would have mentioned that when you called me! I raced over here without any decent clothing! My hair was a damp mess, and I had no make up on! I was mortified!"

"I didn't know he would seek us out," Sophie said in her defense. "Honestly, I didn't. Besides, if you want him to fall for you, he's going to see this side of you sooner or later."

"He'll never fall for me," Kristie said as

she laid her head dejectedly on the table.

“Why do you say that?”

“Look at me! I’ve never had a steady boyfriend! I was mooed at in the hallways at school! What makes you think that a man as gorgeous as Nicholas Bainbridge would even look twice? He’d look once and then wish he hadn’t.”

“Well, he was smiling at you earlier,” Sophie pointed out.

“So he’s a nice guy! So what? Just because he smiled at me doesn’t mean a thing! He smiled at you too!”

“I’m going to be his sister-in-law.”

“My point is that a simple smile means nothing.”

“But he asked for your phone number.”

Kristie sighed. “For the wedding plans, nothing more. I just don’t want to get my hopes up, Sophie! I’m not a school girl any more. I don’t want to have a useless crush. I want a man who will stand by me for the rest of my life. I want a husband. I want forever. I doubt Nick will ever offer that to me.”

“Well, we’ll just have to ask him then, won’t we?” Sophie said, squaring her shoulders.

“What?!” Kristie yelled, staring aghast at her friend. “No! We don’t ask him a thing! We leave him alone and let him go his own way!”

“You’re no fun! I’m marrying his *brother*. I’m sure we’ll be able to find out something juicy. Ty’s been wanting his baby brother to settle down for some time now. I’m sure he’d help us out.”

“Oh no you don’t!” Kristie whispered furiously, trying hard to keep her voice from rising an octave. “What if he says he doesn’t think about me at all? How am I supposed to live down that humiliation? And what if he finds out?”

“He won’t find out! Honestly, you worry too much, Kris.”

“Do not get Tyler involved, Sophie. I mean it.”

Sophie pouted. “Fine then. Become an old maid for all I care. But don’t say I didn’t try to help you.”

“I just don’t want you to play matchmaker when there was never a match to be had between us.”

“But how do you know that?”

“I just do. Call it life experience,” Kristie sighed.

“How are you ever going to meet a man, sweetie, with an attitude like that?”

Bernard yowled a greeting as soon as Kristie walked through her front door. Thankfully the old cat had indeed eaten all the nuggets of food she’d spilled a few hours before. She reached down to give him a scratch behind his ears.

Thoughts of Nick continued to swirl in her head. He’d given her plenty of smiles, and he even winked at her, but Kristie knew better than to get her hopes up. She’d been burned too much in the past for her to believe in something that just wasn’t there. If Nicholas wanted anything more from her than friendship, he was just going to have to prove it to her beyond a shadow of a doubt. But Kristie laughed at herself for even having that thought. He probably already had a girlfriend.

Glancing over at her phone, she noticed a flashing light on her answering machine. She had one new message apparently. Clicking the play button, she heard Tyler’s voice coming out of the speaker.

“Hi, Kristie, it’s Ty. Hey listen, Nick told me he ran into you and Sophie down at the bridal

shop, and I had an idea. Sophie, Nick and I are all going out to dinner tomorrow night. I think you should come along. We were going to do something else afterward like go to a movie or go bowling or something. Give us a call! See ya!”

When the machine beeped to tell her the message was over, Kristie was finally able to close her gaping mouth. Go out to dinner with Nick? Well, with Sophie and Ty, too. She couldn’t possibly! She had to think of a way out of this. There was no way she’d be able to sit through an entire meal with Sophie kicking her under the table. She wouldn’t be able to survive the embarrassment.

It was at that moment the phone rang again. Kristie checked the caller ID and groaned. It was Sophie. She decided it was safer for the time being to let her machine take the call. As she stood at the counter, she heard Sophie’s voice loud and clear.

“Kristie? Kristie, are you there? If you are, pick up. OK, look. I know you’re standing in your kitchen staring at your answering machine right now. I’m calling because I know what you’re thinking. And if you cancel on dinner, all bets are off.”

A click and a dial tone told Kristie that Sophie hung up. She swallowed hard. She knew that was no empty threat. If she canceled, Sophie would tell Tyler and Tyler would tell Nick all about her feelings for him. Stomping her feet a few times as she growled in agitation, Kristie wondered if it could get any worse. Feeling defeated, she marched into the laundry room and started the washer.

If she was going out tomorrow, she’d wear something better than an old, stained t-shirt.

CHAPTER THREE

Kristie couldn't believe she'd agreed to this. At least she was thankful Sophie and Tyler hadn't picked anything too fancy for dinner. Jan's Pizzeria was a great place to eat, filled with all sorts of mouthwatering aromas. But as she opened the door and saw Sophie waving at her, Kristie felt like she was going to be sick. They were all sitting at a square table with room enough for one chair on each side, and Kristie's chair was right between the Bainbridge brothers.

Tyler and Nicholas Bainbridge were as different as night and day. Where Nick had sandy blond hair, Tyler's was a deep chocolate brown, and his eyes were a hazel color, not similar at all to Nick's aquamarine ones. But one look at their faces, and you could tell they were brothers, despite the differences in appearance. They had the same exact smile, something Kristie learned the hard way one evening. Tyler and Sophie had come over to her house to watch movies a few weeks ago. He'd smiled and suddenly her stomach did flip-flops.

But now everyone at the table was grinning at her, and she felt the blood rushing to her face. Kristie was wearing her favorite outfit, her black dressy slacks along with her black sweater embroidered with colorful flowers along the cuffs and the dipping neckline. She'd chosen to wear her hair up in a French twist to show off her little silver cross necklace. Soft make-up ringed her eyes, enhancing their color.

It seemed to take forever to get ready,

wanting her hair to be just right, and the fact that Bernard kept rubbing against her black clothes didn't help matters any. More than once that evening she'd taken a wad of tape to her pants to remove any excess cat hair, and she'd even done it in the parking lot one last time, just to make sure there was no trace of that good-for-nothing kitty.

"Hi guys," Kristie breathed with a smile, trying her hardest to keep her eyes from Nick's piercing gaze. She didn't want to be rude, however, so she briefly made eye contact with everyone.

"Hey there!" Tyler grinned.

"Yay, you're on time!" Sophie smiled sweetly as Kristie blushed and threw her a scowl.

"Hi Kris," Nick said, once again his voice flowing over her like a caress. "You look really nice."

For whatever reason, that compliment flustered her as she sat down. She fumbled with her purse as she hung it on the back of the chair. "Oh, thank you, Nick," she said, managing to keep her eyes away from his.

"Well, now that Kristie has joined us, what do we want to order?" Tyler asked.

After they decided on their pizza, Tyler went up to the counter to place their order. It was then that Sophie started on her mission.

"So Nick, Ty tells me you don't have a girlfriend."

Nick smiled as he played with the edges of his napkin. "No, I don't. Haven't had one in a while."

"Really? Kristie hasn't dated in a while either. OW!" Sophie suddenly yelped, glaring at Kristie across from her. Kristie gave her a slight shake of the head to tell her to change the subject.

"Are you all right, Soph?" Nick asked,

concern written on his face.

“Yes, I’m fine. I must have just . . . kicked myself.”

Pouring a glass of water from the carafe on the table, Kristie tried to hide her embarrassment by gulping it down. But she hadn’t been prepared for how cold it was and once again, she began to cough uncontrollably.

“Are you coming down with something?” Nick asked as he patted her back, just as he did before.

“No,” she managed to choke out. “I think I just swallowed a piece of ice.”

At that moment, Tyler sat back down and laced Sophie’s hand with his. “Well, what’d I miss?” he asked mischievously.

“Nothing, dear,” Sophie said happily. “We were just discussing Nick and Kristie’s lack of love lives.”

Kristie groaned and she knew Nick heard her as he turned his head to catch her gaze and smiled. It was almost as if he was telling her silently that he, too, was onto his brother and his fiancée. That seemed to bolster her courage with him for the time being as she managed to flash him a shy smile. As soon as he saw it, his grin widened, and ripping her eyes away from him had to be the hardest thing she’d ever done.

It was suddenly hot in the pizzeria and Kristie found herself wishing she hadn’t worn her sweater. She wanted to roll that glass of ice water on her cheeks for the cool condensation, but she knew that wouldn’t go over well with a man she was trying to impress. So instead she spotted a jukebox on the other side of the room and stood clutching her purse.

“I think I’m going to go play some songs. I’ll be right back.”

Kristie felt as if the weight of the world had been lifted off her shoulders when she

walked over to it. Never before had she been grilled like that in front of a man she adored, and by her own supposed best friend at that! As she was searching through the song list, she suddenly heard a deep, familiar voice resonate behind her.

“Find anything good?”

Nick startled her and she squealed. Jumping as she turned around to face him, she almost fell over in the process. In one swift motion, he moved to grab her shoulders to steady her.

“Whoa now, I’ve been known to make a lady swoon, but don’t fall over on account of me!” he teased, his eyes twinkling.

“I’m so sorry!” Kristie apologized as she stared at his wide chest that completely filled her field of vision. “You startled me!”

“I think that’s obvious!” he chuckled.

“I . . . I startle easily, so I didn’t hear you and . . .”

“It’s all right, Kris,” he said, still grinning as he let go of her, seemingly satisfied that she wasn’t going to crash to the floor. “Did you find anything good?” he asked once again.

“There’s a lot of good songs here, but I haven’t finished going through the song list.”

“Here, let me have a look.”

Nick moved in closer to her, propping one hand on the jukebox behind her head to look over her shoulder. She didn’t have a means to escape him. She was trapped between the jukebox and his big body, and she could feel his heat. His aftershave was spicy, one of her favorite scents. She wasn’t sure if it was the aftershave alone that she loved, or if it was simply because Nick was wearing it.

Her heart began to hammer in her rib cage, and she suddenly found herself praying fervently that he couldn’t hear it rattling around

in her chest.

"I know what Sophie's up to," he said softly, still reading the song list.

Kristie felt her mouth go dry. "You do?"

"Yeah. She's so transparent!"

Giggling a little, she nodded her head.

"Ty is too, for that matter," he continued.

"The entire ride over here, they were singing your praises."

Kristie felt as if her face were on fire. Could she be any more mortified? "Oh, well, I do have flaws," she managed to say.

"Name one," he said, still perusing the song list.

Was he actually going to make her list them off? Just when she thought this evening couldn't get any worse . . .

"I, um," she began, swallowing hard. Breathe, Kristie. Breathe. "I've never had a long term boyfriend." Now what had made her say that?

"Why not?" Nick asked, finally choosing a song.

"You've gotta ask the men I've dated, which haven't been many. But I've been on two blind dates that Sophie set up, and I had a really good friend once that I wanted more from, but he found someone better looking, I guess."

"What happened with the blind dates?"

"They took one look at me and ran the other way," she said with a hollow chuckle. "Said I wasn't their type."

"Is that it?" he asked as he finally looked at her.

Kristie averted her eyes. He was still too close for comfort and she didn't think she could gaze into those beautiful blue-green eyes for too long.

"Well, there is Tyler's friend Ryan. He always seems to be flirting with me, but he's been

flirting for two years. I think that's just the way he is."

"Do you like him?" he asked, his voice dropping lower.

Kristie wished he would give her some room to collect her thoughts, but at the same time, she was rejoicing to be this close to him.

"He's a nice enough guy, but I don't put any meaning into his flirting. If he was interested, he would have said something by now." Kristie couldn't believe she was standing at the jukebox with Nick telling him about her love life letdowns.

Nick was quiet for so long that she started to squirm. She couldn't stand it any more, being so close to him. She finally lifted her eyes to meet his. Once she did, she knew she was trapped. She couldn't look away.

"So you've had two failed blind dates, a nice friend, and a man who flirts with you?"

"Yeah, that's about the extent of it."

"Have you ever been kissed?" he suddenly asked, making Kristie's heart stop for an instant and then slam back to life with a vengeance.

Stuttering, she said, "Well . . . I . . . I was . . . I mean . . . I have been . . ."

"I'm sorry," he said, finally standing back allowing her to step away. "It's none of my business."

"Yes, well, I think our pizza is ready," she murmured as she moved past him back toward the table. Now that Nick knew of her failed boyfriends, she suddenly felt like crying a river.

Sitting back in her chair, she grabbed a slice of hot pizza and tried to paste on a smile. She noticed a few times during their meal, Nick gave her a few sidelong glances, but she was determined not to look at him again. The conversation was light, yet Kristie could feel a dark cloud over her. She just wanted to go home.

When the meal was finished, Tyler and Nick walked out to the parking lot while Sophie and Kristie held back by the front door.

“What’s wrong?” Sophie asked.

“I’m just not feeling good,” Kristie answered, her belly churning. She really shouldn’t have had that second slice of pizza. “I don’t think I want to go out now. I’m going home.”

“Remember what I said on the answering machine?” Sophie said mischievously, her eyes twinkling.

Smiling, Kristie said, “You can’t hold that over me anymore, Soph. Nick knows you and Ty are matchmaking.”

Sophie gasped. “Are we really that obvious?”

“Yes, you are!” Kristie grinned.

“Is that what you talked about over by the jukebox?”

“Among other things.”

“Why you want to leave?”

Kristie sighed. “I’m just not comfortable right now. He knows too much. I told him too much.”

“Relationships are built on friendships. And friends tell each other things.”

“Stop, Sophie. Just stop. Nick thinks it’s funny what you’re doing, but he . . . Nothing is going to come of it. Please, let him be!”

Sophie looked hurt. “I’m just trying to see you with someone. You deserve to be happy, Kristie. Maybe he can make you happy.”

“Yeah, and maybe I can pull a rabbit out of my purse.” Kristie stood with her arms crossed, glaring at her friend.

“Why are you fighting it so much?”

“I don’t want to get hurt again, Sophie. Not with him. It would devastate me.”

“But you don’t know he will hurt you,

sweetie. It could be the best thing that ever happened to you. How are you going to know if you never give him a chance?”

CHAPTER FOUR

As soon as Kristie opened the front door, she could hear Bernard's welcoming yowl from somewhere in the house. He came running from the bedroom and began rubbing himself on her legs once more. She didn't care. Leaning over to pick him up, Bernard began purring loudly once she had him cradled in her arms.

"Are you the only man who will ever love me?" she asked him as she kissed the top of his furry head. He answered her with a meow. "Ah, Bernard, I don't know what to do. Should I take a chance on Nick?" The cat wiggled to angle his head for better scratchings. Kristie giggled when she looked down at her sweater only to find it hopelessly covered in cat hair. "You're lucky I love you, cat," she said dryly.

It was nine o'clock when the phone rang. By then, Kristie had decided get dressed in her nightshirt and watch depressing love stories on TV. She managed to shoo Bernard off her lap and dragged herself to the kitchen phone. Picking up the receiver, she answered tonelessly. "Hello?"

"Hey Kris," came the voice at the other end.

"Oh hey, Tyler. What's going on?"

There was a brief pause. "This isn't Tyler. This is Nick."

Why-oh-why did her heart always start beating double time whenever she heard his name?

"Hi, Nick!" she exclaimed, suddenly

flustered, looking around the room as if she might find him standing behind her.

“Look, I wanted to apologize for what I said tonight. I know you were uncomfortable.”

“Don’t apologize, Nick. I . . . I just . . . you just caught me off guard, that’s all.”

“It really is none of my business, you know.”

“No, it isn’t,” Kristie smiled. “But you still wanted to know.”

She heard him chuckle. “I guess I did.”

“Why?” she found the courage to ask him and then began kicking herself. She should be friendly with him, making jokes with him, not grilling the man about why he wanted to know if she’d ever been kissed!

“It just seemed odd to me that a woman as pretty as you never had a steady boyfriend. And one thought led to another . . . I’m sorry I got too personal.”

Kristie’s head was reeling. Did he just call her pretty? He called her pretty! She could have sworn she heard the angels in Heaven rejoicing.

“No man has ever said that to me before,” she breathed.

“Said what?”

“That . . . that I was pretty.”

“Really? No one?”

“Well, my dad was always fond of telling me so,” she chuckled. “Coming from you, that means a lot to me.”

“Oh? Why is that?”

Kristie swallowed. “Because I’ve seen the women you date. They are very beautiful.”

She could have sworn she heard him snort on the other end. “Beautiful and full of themselves, you mean. Not a single one of them is what I’m looking for in a woman.”

Closing her eyes, Kristie leaned against the countertop for support, wondering what he

did look for in a woman. The conversation was getting too personal again, and she needed to steer it in another direction.

"Well thank you for calling, Nick. I don't want you to feel bad. I wasn't offended."

"I want to make it up to you," he said quickly. "Let me take you out."

Was Nicholas Bainbridge seriously asking her on a date?

"Hello?"

She was silent for too long. Clearing her throat, she breathed, "Where to?"

"Wherever you want. I'm game for anything you'd like to do."

She'd like to kiss him senseless, that's what she'd like to do. "Really, you don't have to," she told him, giving him a way out.

"I want to, Kris," he said in a quiet voice. "Look, I'll make it a surprise. I'll pick you up at six tomorrow, how's that?"

Kristie's head was swimming. "Sure," she said lamely.

"Great! I'll see you then. Oh, and Kristie?"

"Yeah?"

"Wear something comfortable."

Wear something comfortable. Those words haunted Kristie most of the next day. It'd been hard enough trying to fall asleep the night before with those words ringing in her ears, but upon waking, she realized she'd be spending all day long in her closet trying to find the perfect mix of 'comfortable and cute.' What she finally settled on was an old pair of blue jeans and nice coral colored blouse.

Kristie wondered more than once where Nick was planning on taking her, but she didn't dwell too long on it. *Does it really matter anyhow?* she thought to herself. The man could

take her fly fishing in hip boots and she'd be the first one in the river.

Bernard sat calmly on the edge of the bathroom counter and watched her as she brushed her hair, debating on whether she should put it up or let it hang down. She used her blow dryer today, giving her hair an appealing bounce to it. She decided to wear it down.

With a spritz of perfume and some soft make-up, she was finally ready for Nick to arrive. But as the top of the six o'clock hour approached, her stomach bottomed out and her breathing quickened. Kristie prayed that Nick wouldn't be able to tell how nervous she was.

She was in the kitchen pouring Bernard's dinner into his dish when the doorbell rang. Her eyes flew to the clock. Nick was ten minutes early! Running to the door, she stopped herself first to look at her reflection in the darkened television tube. Satisfied with her appearance, Kristie opened the door with a smile.

Her smile slowly faded as she drank him in. Nick stood before her in a pair of faded black jeans and a dark blue button-up shirt with the first two buttons undone. What little chest it revealed to her had her blushing as she found herself staring helplessly at him. He was a magnet for her eyes, and she slowly brought her gaze up to his, sucking in her breath at the look he was giving her.

Was that appreciation she saw there? He lowered his eyes up and down her frame, finally being the first to break their silence.

"You look nice, Kris. Nice and comfortable. Comfortable and nice."

Kristie tried to hide a smile, but failed miserably. He sounded nervous himself. She wasn't going to read things into it. She just wasn't. He was probably still embarrassed by

their last conversation.

"Thank you, Nick. You look . . ." *like an Adonis*, she thought. "You look very nice yourself." Suddenly a loud purr could be heard and Kristie felt something soft brush against her legs.

"Well what do we have here?" Nick asked as he hunkered down to give the orange cat a scratch behind the ears.

"This is Bernard. Bernard, this is Nicholas Bainbridge."

The cat yowled in greeting and arched his back asking for more stroking in that familiar feline way.

"How old is he?"

"He's an old man," she told him, feeling her apprehension begin to melt away. Nick was safe to be around if she didn't talk about personal things. "He's fourteen. He's definitely a 'Mommy's cat.' Very ornery."

Nick chuckled. "Yeah, Ty and I had an old cat when we were kids. He lived to be about fifteen, I think. Loved to eat popcorn of all things!"

Kristie found herself giggling as she watched the man of her dreams scratch her cat. "Yeah, Bernard does some crazy things too, but I love him. I just hope he doesn't get too jealous."

"Of what?"

"Of you!" Kristie teased. "He's very possessive, you know."

"Is he now?" Nick asked as he looked up at her, his amazing eyes twinkling. "Well, Mr. Bernard, I'll be sure and take good care of your mistress here tonight." The cat bawled and rubbed against Kristie one last time before he walked away, back into the kitchen, seemingly satisfied with Nick.

Standing up, Nick ran his fingers through his blond hair. "You ready to go?"

“Sure. Just let me grab my purse!”

As soon as she locked her door, Nick led her to his huge, black Dodge Ram pick-up. It dwarfed her Geo in the driveway and Kristie wondered if she would even be able to climb up into it. Like a gentleman, Nick opened the passenger door for her and told her to grab the hand hold on the inside of the cab to help pull herself up. Stepping on the little chrome stair underneath the door, Kristie managed to pull herself in, but she knew she must have looked comical. Sneaking a peek at Nick, however, revealed that his smile was not mocking her as he closed the door and walked around to the driver’s door.

Clicking the seat belt, Nick turned the key in the ignition and his truck sprang to life. “You cozy?” he asked her with a sidelong glance.

“Yes,” she answered. “This is a nice truck.”

“Thanks. I just bought it.”

“Mmm, I love the smell of a new car. It smells good.”

“So do you,” he breathed as he looked at her. Kristie’s skin was crawling as she looked away. She didn’t know what else to do other than fidget with her hands and gaze out the window.

“Thanks,” she murmured as Nick began driving down the road. “So where are we going?”

“I’m taking you miniature golfing,” he said simply.

“Really?” Kristie asked, her eyes lighting up. “I haven’t done that since . . . well, I can’t even remember when!” The smile he gave her took her breath away. Did he even know what a handsome man he was?

“Good! I was a little nervous that you’d think it was stupid.”

“Stupid? No way! I love it! The big gaudy

buildings and cute little painted golf balls. It's nostalgia!"

Nick flashed his white teeth at her. "Mind if I play some music?"

"Go right ahead."

Pulling out a CD, he popped it in the player and Kristie gasped as she recognized the song. "This is Steven Curtis Chapman!"

"You like him?" he asked.

"He's one of my favorites!" she exclaimed as she began clapping along to a fast paced tune.

"He's one of mine too!" Nick confessed, tapping the steering wheel to the beat.

Kristie couldn't help it, the song on the stereo was one of her favorites, and she began singing quietly as she looked out the window.

"You have a nice singing voice," she heard him say.

"You haven't heard me really sing," she smiled at him. "When I was a kid, I used to dream of singing on a stage."

"You'd be wonderful!"

Kristie looked down at her hands. "I'm just not confident in front of a lot of people. I have these horrid thoughts of people lobbing rotten fruit at me or something."

"You're good! Maybe you could be in the church choir."

"I don't think so."

"Oh, come on! Everyone would love you!" he urged as he nudged her shoulder. "Besides, if anyone threw rotten fruit at you, they'd have to deal with me."

That comment warmed her insides. Her bones suddenly felt like gelatin. Having Nick talking about defending her to others touched her heart more than she thought possible.

"Well, thank you, Nick. That's really kind of you. But I think you'd only just get yourself hopelessly soiled," she grinned.

“I’d make sure I took a few of them with me,” he smiled mischievously.

“I can see it now. Me crowing some cheesy love song, all the while the crowd booing and rushing the stage . . .”

Nick chuckled. “Hey, if you want, I’ll be your guinea pig. You can sing for me and I’ll tell you if you’re any good or not,” he suggested. Was he mad? Did he honestly think she could sing for him? Just the thought sent her blood pressure sky high.

“We’ll see.” Shutting her eyes tight, Kristie hoped Nick wouldn’t bring it up again.

CHAPTER FIVE

The first few holes on the miniature golf range were pretty easy. Kristie chose a pink ball, and although she hit it with her club, it never seemed to go where she wanted. After a few hits, she finally plunked it in the hole and moved on. Nick, on the other hand, with his bright blue golf ball, managed to hit the hole just about every time.

“What am I doing wrong?” Kristie pouted as she watched him sink another ball with ease.

“You’re not aiming right, honey,” he told her.

Kristie’s body stiffened instantly. She tried not to think about what he’d just called her, but it was impossible. Honey. He had called her honey! Of course it was probably just a harmless nickname, something he called all his female friends. But that didn’t stop her body from reacting to it. She began trembling.

“Come here and I’ll show you,” he beckoned.

“Oh no, that’s all right,” she said rubbing her arms and looking away. Deep breaths, Kristie. Calm down.

“Come on, it’s not hard.” Her mistake was looking back at him. The moment her eyes touched his, he lifted the side of his mouth in a grin so alluring, that Kristie felt as if she were being pulled toward him.

“OK, put your ball on the ground,” he instructed. “Now hold your club next to it. No, you have to spread your legs a little bit. Like this.”

Kristie's intake of breath could have woken the dead. Nick wrapped his long arms around her from behind and grabbed her hands on the club, showing her how to properly hold it. "You OK?" he asked.

Not trusting her voice, she nodded her head and closed her eyes, trying desperately to ignore the heat warming her back. His face was so close, that his breath tickled her ear.

"All right. Now you swing your club like this." With his words, he swung the club a few times while still holding onto her hands with his. Kristie thought she was going to spontaneously combust right there on the spot. He was swaying back and forth with her as the club swung like a pendulum.

When he ended his tutorial, he didn't immediately let go of her. "You're trembling."

"I know," she whispered, amazed that she could even say that much.

"Are you cold?" Nick's voice thrummed through her, making her want to turn her face to his.

With small jerky movements, Kristie shook her head. "No."

"Do you like steak?" he was suddenly asking her.

"Steak?" she squawked, her brain clouding in confusion.

"Yeah, steak. You like it?"

"Ye . . . yes, I do."

"Great!" he exclaimed, suddenly letting her go. "Hurry up and hit that ball, Kris, and I'll take you to my favorite steakhouse. I'm hungry!"

Now she was convinced the man was insane. He expected her to hit the ball after she had just been wrapped in the warmth of his arms? She swung the club all right. Whether or not she actually hit the ball was another matter.

The Cowboy Grille was a dimly lit restaurant. *Dark and romantic*, Kristie thought. The server led them to a darkened booth and handed them their menus.

"I feel like I could eat a whole side of beef!" Nick joked as he looked through their selection. Kristie, on the other hand, wasn't sure if she would be able to keep anything down. The shock of his embrace earlier played out again and again in her head, and she couldn't help but blush every time Nick looked at her.

She told herself that it'd been the easiest way for him to show her how to hold the club, but that didn't stop her wild imagination from wondering why he did it. And why hadn't he let go of her after he finished his instructions?

"You see anything you like?" he asked, suddenly breaking into her thoughts.

Kristie mentally shook herself and realized she hadn't even read a word of the menu. "Um, yeah, looks like everything is good!"

"I know what you mean! I can't decide."

Kristie finally settled on the t-bone. Nick decided on the London Broil. After a few minutes, the waitress appeared and took their order.

"You like your meat cooked medium rare," he smiled, his bluish-green eyes sparkling in the muted light. "I like that in a woman."

Blushing furiously, Kristie was thankful that he wouldn't be able to see it too clearly. "Yes, well, my dad likes his meat rare, and so I guess I got into the habit from him."

"I'm surprised you didn't order the most expensive thing on the menu." He was teasing her and she knew it. She suddenly found herself grinning.

"Don't think I didn't consider it, Mr. Bainbridge. I don't want you thinking I'm a cheap date."

“Oh, I’m not thinking that,” he winked at her. “I’m definitely not thinking that.”

“Kristie? Kristie Carter? Is that you?”

Turning in the direction of the voice, Kristie saw Ryan Cartwright walking toward them. She groaned and glanced back at Nick with a look she hoped he could read. Ryan was handsome in his own way, but he was a shameless flirter, and Kristie had told herself long ago that she wanted nothing to do with him. She didn’t have the heart to tell him where to go, however, so she silently asked Nick for his help.

He held her gaze for a long moment before looking up at Ryan who was now standing at their booth. “Hey there, beautiful!” Ryan exclaimed. “How are you?”

“I’m good,” she managed to smile at him. “I’m just having some dinner with Nick.”

“Oh, hi, Nick! Didn’t see you sitting there. I guess you were outshined by Kristie’s radiance.”

“Hello Ryan,” he said in a clipped voice.

“You guys talking about the wedding? Mind if I sit down?” With that, Ryan sat next to Kristie without waiting for an answer. His arm curled up and around her, resting innocently on the back of the booth.

Biting her lower lip, Kristie glanced at Nick. His face seemed to be set in stone as he glared at Ryan, looking for all the world like his hackles were raised.

“No, we’re on a date, Ryan,” he growled. “And I do mind if you sit down.”

“Ah. So ol’ Nick Bainbridge has his sights set on you, huh, sweetheart?” Ryan grinned, ignoring Nick’s comment. His hand suddenly dropped down to rest on Kristie’s shoulder and he began tracing circles on her blouse with his finger. “You should go out with me sometime. I would give you a good time.” Kristie gasped as

her face flamed red.

"Leave, Ryan. Now." Nick's voice sounded strained, as if he were fighting himself not to dive over the table. Kristie glanced at him worriedly, and then looked back at Ryan.

"OK, OK, I can take a hint," he told Nick, looking wounded. Leaning closer to Kristie, Ryan whispered, "I'll call you, sweetheart."

As soon as he was gone, Kristie breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm sorry you had to see that, Nick."

"Is he always so . . . pushy?"

"Yes. Ty has told me he's harmless, that he flirts with every woman he sees. But I never thought he would do it in front of . . . you."

"He won't do it again if the man knows what's good for him. Are you all right?" Kristie suddenly felt her hand engulfed in his on the table.

A jolt of electricity raced through her skin. "I'm just a little embarrassed by it, that's all. Sometimes I wonder . . . Well, never mind."

"No, tell me. What do you wonder?" he asked, squeezing her hand a little.

Kristie looked down at the table. "I wonder if he's the best I can do. I wonder if I should go out with him. I wonder if I should just . . ."

"Just what?"

"Just settle for him."

"Absolutely not!" Nick exclaimed. "Don't you dare 'settle' for anyone!"

"Well it's not like I have men lined up around the block, Nick. I'm twenty-five. I want a family. I want a husband. Right now, the only man who ever loved me unconditionally is Bernard! Who would have thought that the anchor in my life was a crotchety old cat?" Pulling her hand from his, Kristie rubbed her eyes and sighed. "I'm sorry, Nick. I'm sorry for

unloading on you.”

“Don’t apologize,” he said gently. “I think everyone wants a little stability in their lives. But take it from me, honey, Ryan is not the man for you.”

Their meals were served then, and Kristie was thankful for the distraction. They were getting too personal again, and the food gave her an excuse to change the subject back to calm waters.

The rest of the meal passed uneventfully as they talked about mundane things. Kristie told him all about the drama at her office job while he told her the ins and outs of ranching. She knew Nick and Tyler owned a ranch together. She’d been there herself many times with Sophie. But hearing him talk so passionately about what he did for a living made funny things happen to her insides.

“The best part I love about the ranch is riding around the property on Patriot. It’s very gratifying. I can just ride and ride and think about things. It’s wonderful.”

“Patriot is your horse?”

Nick nodded. “You like horses?”

“I love horses. When I was a little girl, I used to pretend I was a horse, and that my dogs were my ‘herd.’ It’s kind of embarrassing to talk about now,” she said through her giggles, “but I’ve always thought that horses are some of the most majestic creatures God ever made.”

“I’ve got to agree with you there. You ever ride?”

“Not since I was a kid. I think I’ve ridden a few ponies at the state fair. You know, the poor horses that are tied to those merry-go-round looking things? I always felt sorry for them walking round and round in circles all day long. I’m not sure if I’d be able to get on a horse now.”

“Awe, it’s easy. There’s nothing to it.”

“Well you’re a rancher! Of course you’d say it was easy!”

“No, I mean it! I’ll take you out sometime and show you.”

“You’d take me riding?” Kristie gasped, unable to hide the excitement in her voice.

“Sure!” he smiled. “I’ve got a timid mare that you’d really love. She’d be great for a first timer like yourself.”

Kristie’s heart soared at the thought of spending another day with Nick. He was the perfect man, everything she ever dreamed of, and she knew as she looked into his glittering aquamarine eyes that she was falling for him and falling hard. *Who am I kidding?* Kristie laughed at herself. She already knew for a fact that she’d fallen head over heels in love with Nicholas Bainbridge.

CHAPTER SIX

By the time they pulled up in Kristie's driveway, it was past ten o'clock. Kristie smiled when Nick told her to stay put. He jumped out of the cab only to jog around the truck and open her door. He held out his hand for her, presumably so she wouldn't make such a comical scene trying to hop down. Kristie smiled, suddenly feeling like a princess who'd just met her Prince Charming.

The warmth of his hand contrasted with the cool evening as they walked up to her front porch. He hadn't let her go. Could it be that Nick felt something for her? Or did he always make it a habit to hold hands with his women friends? Once Kristie had the thought, she smiled and laughed to herself.

"What's so funny?" he asked as they stopped at the door.

"I was . . . I was just wondering if you . . . if you held hands with all of your women friends," she told him, blushing to her roots. Sophie was right. If she wanted a relationship with Nick, she had to be honest and forthcoming with him.

"Nope, can't say that I do," he said, giving her hand a squeeze. "It just seems that your hand and mine are a perfect fit. It would be a shame to separate them." As soon as he said that, he turned his hand and laced his fingers through hers. "There. I think that's a little better," he breathed.

Kristie's heart sounded like a jackhammer in her chest. He was hovering above her, the warm glow of her porch light bathing his face on one side, leaving the other side in shadow.

“Close your eyes, honey,” he said gently.

“Why?”

“Because I have one more thing to give you, and I want it to be a surprise.”

“You’ve already given me a wonderful evening, Nick.”

A slow smile curved his lips. “Close your eyes,” he implored again.

Feeling unbelievably nervous, she didn’t want to close her eyes to him and miss gazing at his beauty, but then again, she trusted him. Without another word she did as he said.

“Now don’t open them until I say,” he told her, his voice closer.

“OK.”

“Back up a bit,” he said, pushing her gently against the door. “There, that’s better.”

Kristie was suddenly wondering if closing her eyes to him was such a good idea. Why did he want her to stand against the door?

“No peeking?” he asked, sounding amused.

“No peeking.”

“Good.” Without warning, she felt his hand stroke her cheek and she jumped at the contact. He then curled his fingers under her chin and tilted her head up. Her breath was coming in short labored gasps, and she knew Nick could hear it. “Are you nervous?” he whispered. He was close. His breath scorched her cheek.

“Yes,” she admitted, the butterflies in her belly swirling unmercifully.

“Do you know what I’m going to do?”

“I have a good idea,” Kristie chuckled anxiously.

“Do you want me to?”

Kristie licked her lips then and heard him groan. He didn’t wait for her reply. Suddenly she felt his warm mouth on hers, soft and gentle,

sending a coil of heat throughout her body. The shock of it was overwhelming, and Kristie felt as if she were having an out-of-body experience. Was Nick actually kissing her? Her? Kristie Carter?

At that moment, she didn't care anymore. Nick was kissing her! She decided to take advantage of it. For all she knew, it might never happen again. Surrendering herself to him, she tilted her head to give him better access to her lips. Her hands crept up his arms to circle his neck, and she stood on her tiptoes in an effort to get closer to him.

She felt Nick's hand threading through her hair, holding her to him while his other arm circled her waist to pull her closer. He smelled so good, he felt so good, and Kristie found herself praying to the Almighty that she could stay in his arms forever. Never had a man kissed her like this before, so thoroughly, so possessively, and the fact that it was Nick made the moment all the more wonderful.

But all good things must come to an end, Kristie thought mournfully, as Nick finally pulled back. "Open your eyes, sweetheart," he breathed.

She did without hesitation. What she saw were banked fires in his blue-green depths, fires that spoke of promises and commitment. Her hands were still in his hair as he held her close.

"Wow, Kris," he said, his voice unsteady. "Wow."

"Yeah," she agreed, just to have something to say.

Resting his forehead on hers, he said, "I think we need to talk."

"Yeah," Kristie said again, running her fingers through his hair, finding it hard to believe that she was actually doing it.

"Can I come in?"

"Yeah," she grinned, reluctantly trying to

pull away from him. But he wasn't having it.

"One more?" he was asking, his fingers massaging the back of her neck.

It was all Kristie could do to hold back tears of joy. She nodded slowly, and found his lips on hers again. She was flying, soaring through the sky with him, never knowing it could be so beautiful, kissing the man that she loved. It was a dream come true. And he was such a good kisser that she knew she could stay like this with him for the rest of her life.

Long moments later, he released her and she shivered from the chill. "We need to talk," he said again.

"As long as talking is all we do, Nick," Kristie told him, trying to sound stern but failing miserably.

"I would never take advantage of you, Kris."

The sincere look on his face told her the truth of it. Nick wouldn't force himself on her. Besides, she knew he was a good, strong, Christian man. His morals wouldn't allow him to go farther than simply kissing her. That was one of the reasons she was so attracted to him. He believed in the same things she did, and she knew he wouldn't balk for wanting to save herself for her future husband, if her future husband even existed.

Turning the key in her lock, Kristie opened the door and ushered him in. She flipped on a light and looked around for Bernard. "Hmm, that's weird."

"What?" Nick asked, looking around the quaint living room.

"My cat usually runs out to greet me every time I come home. I wonder where he is?"

"Maybe he's sleeping," Nick suggested.

"Maybe, but not likely. He's greeted me every time for years. Bernard?" she said, raising

her voice. Looking in the kitchen, Kristie stopped in her tracks. "Bernard!" she screeched.

There was her cat, lying in the middle of the floor, lifeless. Instantly there were tears in her eyes as she ran to him and dropped to her knees, desperately trying to find some sign of life. He was barely breathing.

"Bernard? *BERNARD!* Kitty, can you hear me?"

Nick knelt down beside her and checked the cat's pupils. "We need to get him to the vet."

"Is he . . . is he . . ." Kristie wailed, her tears falling freely.

"Honey, I don't know. Where are your towels? Let's wrap him in one and I'll take you to the twenty-four-hour emergency clinic."

"OK, OK," Kristie moaned, trying hard not to hyperventilate. "They are in the linen closet in the hallway. Hurry! Nick, please hurry!"

In no time at all, Nick returned with a dark green towel. He wrapped the cat in it and handed him to Kristie, who cradled him like a baby to her chest.

"Come on," he said, leading her to the door.

"Please don't let him die, Nick! Please!" Kristie could hear the panic in her own voice and wondered if Nick would think any less of her for loving a cat so much. But Bernard had to live. He had to! If he died, she honestly didn't know what she would do.

A few hours later, Kristie sat with Nick in the waiting room of the twenty-four-hour veterinary clinic. It hadn't taken them long to get there, but the vet on duty told them he wouldn't know for sure what was wrong with the cat until he had some blood tests done. And Kristie wanted to wait for the results.

Finally after a few hours of worried

pacing, the doctor came out into the waiting room to tell them what was wrong. "Looks like old Bernard has liver failure, Miss Carter," he told her sadly. "There's nothing more we can do for him but keep him comfortable until he passes."

Kristie felt as if her entire world was falling away. "There's nothing you can do?" she whispered.

The doctor shook his head. "I'm sorry. It's common in older cats. The most humane thing to do is to put them down. Otherwise, they will waste away."

As Kristie's eyes filled with tears, she could feel Nick's arm around her shoulders. This wasn't happening. This wasn't happening to her!

Through her sobs, she asked, "Can I be with him . . . when you . . ."

"Of course," the doctor nodded. "Right this way."

"You want me to come, honey?" Nick asked, his big hand stroking her wet cheek.

"Please don't leave me, Nick. I don't want to be alone," she cried.

His gaze softened at her words. "You got it."

They followed the doctor into a back room where a nurse was holding Kristie's old orange tabby cat. With tears in her eyes, Kristie gently lifted him into her arms and gave him a kiss and a hug. "I love you, old man," she whispered to him. "We had some good times."

Nick's eyes were glassy as Kristie glanced at him, holding her cat's head up to her cheek. He gave the cat one last scratch and said, "I'm sorry, Kris."

"Are you ready?" the vet asked softly. Nodding, Kristie laid Bernard on a table. "He'll go peacefully. He won't feel a thing," the vet assured her.

Kristie was trembling as the doctor began the procedure, tears falling freely down her face. When Bernard finally closed his eyes, she felt as if someone had stabbed her in the heart. Deep, wrenching sobs escaped her then, and she was dimly aware of Nick's arms around her. Clutching onto him for dear life, she buried her face into his neck and cried.

"He can't be dead, Nick! Not Bernard! Not my Bernard!"

"Shh, sweetheart," he crooned in her ear. "Shh. I'm not going to leave you. I promise you that. I'm here for you."

"I don't know what to do! He was my anchor! What am I going to do? I feel like . . . like I'm floating away. Bernard was my one constant, Nick! Now I'm alone! I don't want to be alone!"

"You're not alone, Kris. You're not alone."

Kristie stayed within the shelter of Nick's arms, even after she had finally calmed down. He was swaying with her gently back and forth, and she felt that if she let him go, then her world would spin out of control.

"I don't want to let you go," she whispered to him.

"Then don't," he said simply.

She pulled back just enough to look him in the eye. She knew she looked a fright, her eyes red and puffy, her skin patched with red blotches, and yet he smiled at her, pushing a few stray hairs from her face. She felt as if more was said between them in those two sentences than there had been throughout the entire evening.

"Come on, honey. I need to get you home. You need to rest."

"I don't think I can," she told him even though she rubbed her eyes. "Do you still want to talk?"

"Not tonight."

“Yeah, not tonight,” she agreed. Kristie gave one final scratch to her faithful cat and whispered, “Goodbye, Bernard. I love you.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Kristie called into work sick the next day, knowing full well she wouldn't be able to answer the phones in her office. Despite the fact that she had already taken a day off on Friday to go to her fitting with Sophie, Kristie didn't much care what the office manager might think of her taking a sick day today. She felt as if she had been hit by a train. Her house was so quiet. Gone were the familiar caterwauls of her crotchety kitty. Gone were his rough but loving kisses on her cheeks. Kristie surmised that she couldn't possibly feel any worse than if a family member had died. Bernard *was* her family.

She spent the day in her pajamas, not wanting to take a shower for fear of breaking down when Bernard wasn't there to howl mournfully outside the stall door. So instead she concentrated on emptying his food dish and throwing away the bag of food on top of the refrigerator. She did the same for the litter box, all the while simply going through the motions without thinking about them. Dwelling on her feelings just made the tears return, and she didn't want to feel anything. It was better to be numb.

Around noon, a knock sounded at the front door. Kristie answered it, uncaring as to who would see, even if it was Nick. He'd seen her looking much worse and he hadn't flinched then, she suspected he could take her in sweatpants. But it wasn't Nick at the door.

"Delivery for Miss Carter," said a man who was hidden behind a huge bouquet of red

roses. "Sign here, please."

"What's this?" Kristie asked.

"Someone sent you flowers, miss."

Taking the clipboard from his hand, she signed on the line and accepted the vase. "Thank you."

Kristie closed the door and walked to the kitchen table, setting the vase down. She saw the card stuck into the bouquet and pulled it out to read it.

"These roses are red, but my lady is blue, cheer up, honey, I'm thinking of you. Love, N"

Kristie's eyes filled instantly with tears. She wished Nick were there so she could thank him. No, she wished he were there so she could jump into his arms was more like it. She flew to her purse and fished out the business card with his phone number on it. Hesitating for just a moment, she picked up the phone and dialed his number.

First one ring, then two. By the third ring, she was tempted to hang up when she heard someone on the other line pick up. "Hello?" It was Nick, sounding out of breath.

"Hi. Hi, Nick."

"Kris!" he sounded genuinely happy to hear her voice.

"Am I bothering you?"

"Not at all."

"You sound winded," she told him as she moved to sit at the table and smell the roses.

"Well, honey, you caught me coming out of the shower. I had to run to the phone."

Kristie almost dropped her cordless phone into her lap. Her imagination was doing double time and she silently groaned to herself. "I'll let you go, then. Maybe . . . maybe I'll call you later."

"No!" he yelped. "No, don't hang up. Please don't."

Swallowing hard, Kristie tried to remember why she'd called him. Oh yes, the roses. "I got your flowers. I wanted to say thank you. They're beautiful."

"I know a better way you can thank me," he said, a hint of mischief in his voice. "Come riding with me."

"Today?"

"Why not? You're not going to stay in that house and mope around all day long, are you?"

She sighed. That was exactly what she had been planning. "Well, as a matter of fact . . ."

"Oh no you don't," he told her. "You're coming out with me if I have to drag you. It will be fun! I'll take you to places you've never been."

"You already have," she said softly. There was a long pause on the other end before Nick continued.

"Kris. Honey, please? You've got a man begging, here."

She finally cracked a smile. "Oh, all right," she sighed, trying to sound put out. Teasing wasn't her strong suit.

"I promise you, sweetheart, it will just be you and me, and we'll have that talk."

That sounded ominous. Her stomach began twisting in knots. "I'd like that," she said.

"Come on over any time. I'll be waiting."

As soon as she hung up the phone, she breathed a sigh of relief. She was still reserved about giving him a chance, and she was scared to death about what he was going to say to her, but that didn't stop her from finally hopping into the shower and dressing as fast as she could.

But before she bounded out the door, she knelt and prayed to God.

"Lord God, please show me Your plan for my life. Please let me know today if Nick is the one you've chosen for me. I love him with all of my heart, Lord, but I just don't know if he feels

the same. I know he feels something, or else he wouldn't have kissed me, he wouldn't have sent me flowers, he wouldn't have done a lot of things. But is it love? Is he willing to give me my dreams? I don't want a fling, Lord, I want it all. I want forever. But is that what Nick wants?"

The Bainbridge ranch was a huge, sprawling ranch. It never ceased to take Kristie's breath away as she took it all in. There were two large, two story houses a few acres apart, one belonging to Nick, the other to Tyler. A big red barn sat a little ways off, as well as a stable and a corral that housed the horses. A few cows and steers gazed at her curiously as she drove up the dirt road. Pulling her Geo right next to Nick's black truck, she sat there gripping the wheel of her car for a few minutes after she turned off the engine.

Kristie tried to get a rein on her emotions, but they were raging inside of her. Sorrow and elation were two emotions that didn't mix well. Whenever she smiled as she thought of Nick, she would feel guilty for not mourning the passing of her beloved Bernard. But if she shed a tear for the cat, thoughts of Nick would cheer her up, and again, she would feel guilty. She hoped that Nick would be able to help her sort through her feelings. And she also hoped she wouldn't cry in front of him again.

She realized that she was afraid. She was afraid of what Nick was going to say, afraid of what they were going to talk about. The excitement of riding on a horse seemed overshadowed by the oppressive thoughts she was having. What if Nick told her he liked her only as a friend? The 'friend talk' was the dreaded death knell of any budding relationship. What if he told her the kiss they had shared was a mistake? Kristie wasn't sure if she would be

able to survive the disappointment. She would run away and never come back, of that she was sure.

But what if he told her he really liked her? What if he admitted to having feelings for her? That scared her as well. How could she possibly live up to the gorgeous women he'd dated in the past? And what if he wanted just to have a girlfriend and not a wife? Would she have the courage to tell him she wasn't interested in a half-hearted commitment from him? Would she forget her dreams of having a family in order to have Nick in her arms?

Suddenly, a sharp knock on her window made her shriek and look up, only to see Nick's handsome face beaming at her. "You going to come out of there?" he was asking, his voice muffled through the glass.

Unbuckling her seatbelt, Kristie felt about three feet tall as she clamored out of the car and shut the door behind her. "I'm sorry," she said, her face flushing. "I was just thinking."

"About what?"

"About you. Life. Everything, I guess," she shrugged. "I don't know what I'm doing anymore." A slight breeze played with her hair, pulling honey-blonde tendrils across her face. Nick reached up and tucked a few wisps of hair behind her ear and smiled gently at her.

"Not everything in life is a sure thing, honey. Sometimes you have to trudge ahead and feel your way along."

Tears were stinging the back of her eyes again, and she tried desperately to stop them. She didn't want to be weak, she didn't want to seem like a woman who cried all the time, but yet that was exactly what she was turning out to be. Closing her eyes tight, Kristie turned around and faced her car, resting her head on her arms. She couldn't face him like this, she just couldn't.

His boots crunched on the gravel of the road, and she knew he had taken a step toward her. His warm hands were suddenly on her shoulders and his heat radiated from him, warming her back. "Kristie, don't shut me out," he whispered in her ear. "Turn around."

"I . . . I don't want . . . you to see me . . . cry anymore," she sniffled against the roof of her car.

"Why not?"

"Because . . . because . . . I don't know!"

"If you don't know, honey, then turn around."

Kristie made a sound in the back of her throat that was halfway between a sob and a cry of desperation. She couldn't resist his magnetic pull any longer. Turning to him, she shuddered when he framed her face in his hands. His thumbs were gentle as he wiped away her tears, never once breaking eye contact.

"There now," he said in a soft voice. "Grief is easier to bear when you have someone to share it with."

Without warning, she jumped into his embrace and hugged him fiercely, rejoicing in the feeling of his strong arms pulling her closer. Once again his spicy aftershave assaulted her nostrils, and she turned her head a bit to smell more of him. His hair was soft as her hand held the back of his head, and she trembled with contentment. Kristie knew then exactly what Heaven was like.

"Is that better?" he asked.

She did nothing more than to nod her head a few times, not yet releasing the hold she had on him. She wanted so desperately to tell him that she was in love with him, that she wanted him to hug her like this for the rest of her life, but her fear silenced her.

"You still want to go riding?"

Taking a deep breath, she raked her cheek against his as she finally pulled away. "Yes."

Nick's mouth pulled up into a lopsided grin. "Come on, then, sweetheart. Patriot awaits." Holding his hand out to her, he didn't move until she shyly accepted it with her own. Once again, Nick laced his fingers with hers, making it seem a little more intimate.

"What . . . what about your timid mare? Isn't she waiting too?" she asked him as they strolled up the drive toward the stables.

Nick turned and gave her a wicked grin. She felt her stomach do flip flops just looking at that grin. Her face blushed and her eyes dropped to the ground under his scrutiny. Kristie suspected Nick had other plans.

"No, honey, just Patriot," he said, confirming her thoughts.

"Then how are we going to go riding?"

"I'm sure we'll think of something," he told her with a wink as they entered the stables.

Patriot was a beautiful grey stallion with a flowing white mane and tail. He was already saddled and set to go as they walked up to him. The horse nickered and tossed his head a few times making Kristie smile and scratch his soft nose.

"He's beautiful," she breathed.

"So are you," Nick's deep voice resonated behind her. A thrill shot through her as she turned to look at him, but Nick was already mounting the horse. Once he was astride, he leaned down low in the saddle and offered her his hand. "Come on, honey, take my hand."

"Are you crazy?" she practically shrieked.

"I'll pull you up."

"But . . . but I'm . . . I'm too heavy, Nick," she complained.

"No, you're not," he said, his face set. "Give me your hand."

“But . . . Are you sure?”

He wiggled his fingers in response. “Come on, sweetheart.” It took a few more seconds as Kristie thought it over, but she finally reached up a shaking hand to his, deciding to trust him.

Before she knew it, she’d been hauled effortlessly up into the saddle in front of him across his lap. “There. Was that so bad?” she heard him breathe into her ear as his arm curled around her waist. He silently urged her to lean into him. “Are you comfortable?”

Was she comfortable? She smiled at the silly question. Kristie realized that if she died now, she would die a happy woman. At that moment she decided to stop fighting her feelings. She would offer her heart to Nick and let him decide if he wanted it. Leaning back, she laid her head on his shoulder, turning her face toward his neck.

“I am very comfortable,” she purred, running her hand along his arm that was holding her securely. Her palm slid along the back of his hand and she threaded her fingers through his. She could see him smile at the innocent gesture and he squeezed her tighter.

“You ready?” he asked.

“Yes!” she breathed excitedly.

With that, Nick urged the horse forward and walked him out of the stables.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Kristie was amazed at how large the Bainbridge ranch really was. It seemed to go on forever as they rode through huge fields and weaved around scattered trees. She noticed a few head of cattle grazing here and there, not really paying them any attention as they rode past.

"There's a large boulder nearby that I often go to pray. I thought we could go there to talk," she suddenly heard his voice rumble through her.

"OK," she said, her fear leaping to the fore once again.

"Are you all right?" he asked in her ear. "You're tense all of a sudden."

"Oh, I uh . . . I'm just nervous, I guess."

"Yeah, me too." he chuckled, making Kristie wonder what exactly he was nervous about.

After a few more minutes of riding, she saw the boulder sitting at the bottom of a hill with other rocks of various sizes strewn about.

"There must have been a landslide here ages ago," Nick explained. "All of these rocks came from high on that hill." Weaving Patriot in and around the rocks, Nick finally reined him in near the largest one. Getting off the horse wasn't as hard as Kristie thought as Nick simply lowered her on top of the boulder. He didn't waste any time in joining her there, content to let the horse roam free.

"He won't go far," he said, answering the question Kristie was going to ask. She smiled at him then and the grin he gave her in return twisted her insides. "Come sit with me," he told

her as he sat down, patting the rock next to him.

Kristie got comfortable and then felt his arm around her as he laid back. She giggled at him, but laid back as well, feeling the warmth of the rock seep in through her clothes.

“How long has it been since you watched the clouds floating by?” he asked, his arm still around her shoulder.

Snuggling next to him, she closed her eyes and sighed. “Not since I was a kid,” she confessed.

“Sometimes I come out here to talk to God about things, to ask Him what His plans are for my life. It gets so hectic around here at times, that I don’t know whether I’m coming or going.”

“I feel the same way,” Kristie told him as she watched a white puffy cloud. “But I don’t have a nice rock to come out and lay on.”

“You do now.”

“But this is your rock on your ranch. I can’t just come out here any old time I feel like it.”

She felt Nick take a deep breath as she held her own. She had a feeling he was going to start their ‘talk.’

“Kristie, about last night . . .”

Here it comes, she thought. Here comes the ‘let’s be friends’ routine. She could feel herself steeling her emotions, hoping against hope that she wouldn’t scream and cry and make herself a fool when he let her down easy.

“Last night was amazing. I’ve never felt this way before, Kristie. You are an amazing woman.”

Kristie couldn’t believe her ears. What did he just say?

“I can’t believe I never saw it before. All this time I was wasting my life chasing women that never cared about me, that never made me feel good about myself. I thought they were what I wanted, Kris. But I didn’t know what I wanted

until I saw you, really saw you for the first time.”

Kristie’s heart was racing a mile a minute. She sat up to take a few deep breaths and clear her head. Her heart rejoiced at Nick’s words, yet her mind was still trying to make sense of it all.

“Am I moving too fast for you, Kris? Do you even want me at all?” She couldn’t see him behind her, but she heard the tremor in his voice, and wondered just how nervous he really was. Oddly enough, his unease bolstered her courage.

Turning to face him, she noticed he sat up as well, but moved to put some space between them. She realized he must not want to seem too pushy, like he was forcing himself on her. The look on his face almost broke her heart. He was gazing at her as if the entire world rested on what she would answer.

“Kris, honey,” he continued, “you told me that your cat Bernard was your anchor, that he was your one constant.” At the mention of Bernard, she dropped her gaze. He must have thought she was going to refuse him, because he pressed on before she could say a word. “Well, honey . . . I . . . I want to be your anchor. I want to be your one constant if you’ll have me. You’re all I think about, all I care about, all I pray about . . .”

Tears filled her eyes then, just as she had feared, but these tears were of joy. Then a thought struck her, threatening to tear down her dreams. “You’re not just settling for me, are you, Nick?”

“What?”

“You told me not to settle for anyone. I don’t want you to do the same. I . . . I’m overweight, I’m not a supermodel, I’ve never even been kissed. Well, except for last night,” she blushed furiously.

“Do you think any of that matters to me? Do you think I would be sitting here pouring my

heart out to you if it did? Honey, I prayed to God to tell me who His choice was for me, who He wanted me to spend the rest of my life with, and He practically hit me over the head with you. I don't care that you're not perfect. None of us are perfect. But you are perfect for me, Kris."

"Nick . . ." she began, but couldn't finish her thoughts through her sniffles. Squaring her shoulders, she took a deep breath and tried again. "Nick, I told you that I don't want a fling. I don't want to be your girlfriend."

His face suddenly fell, and Kristie felt as if she'd been punched in the stomach. She had to talk quick to get him to realize that she wasn't completely refusing him, not if he was willing to offer her the dream.

"I want to be your wife," she whispered, her heart in her eyes. It took Nick a few moments to process her words, but once he did, the smile he gave her took her breath away. She even saw tears shimmering in his eyes. Moving closer to him, she reached a shaking hand up to his cheek and touched him softly. "I want forever. I want it all. Can you give that to me?"

His gaze pierced her, and he said nothing for long seconds but she did not look away. She felt his arms circle her waist and she had to hold onto his shoulders to steady herself as he lifted her gently into his lap.

"Kris, honey, I would give you the moon if you asked me." He closed his eyes then as Kristie ran her fingers through his hair, feeling its softness. She continued her caresses as she thought about all he just confessed to her, and suddenly, she wasn't afraid anymore. Nicholas Bainbridge wanted to be her anchor, and she wanted to let him.

"I love you, Nick," she confessed in a small voice. She smiled as she saw his eyes snap open. "I've loved you for about two years now. I was

hoping and praying that God would give you to me, but I gave up on my dreams long ago.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” he asked her, running his own hands through her hair.

“Are you kidding?” she laughed. “Every time I went over to Ty’s house with Sophie, I would see pictures of you with a new woman, all of them beautiful, all of them so much more than I could ever offer you. How could I have possibly competed with them?”

“Because you’re genuine, Kris. Because you’re a real woman with real dreams, and you don’t want me just to have a boy-toy on your arm. Every time you look at me, I feel special. I feel like I could conquer the world, like I could do anything. Kristie, honey,” he breathed as he traced her lips with his fingers, “I’m hopelessly in love with you.”

Kristie’s heart soared. She felt as if her entire life had been preparing her for this one moment in time. Tears streamed from her eyes as she laughed and cried at the same time. Without another word, she pressed her lips to his. She kissed him as thoroughly and possessively as he had kissed her the night before. She opened her heart to this man and he welcomed it without question. As she kissed him, she began silently praying to God, thanking Him for answering her prayer.

Nick suddenly turned her in his arms, pushing her back down against the rock as he hovered over her. He succeeded in not breaking the kiss and Kristie knew then that Nick did love her. He told her again and again with his lips.

“I’m glad you’ve never kissed anyone else, Kris,” he breathed as he nuzzled her ear. “It means you’re mine, all mine, honey.”

She couldn’t answer him. His mouth was on hers again, and she lost herself in the feelings he was stirring inside of her. Without warning, he

lifted his head and grinned down at her.

“Marry me, Kristie Carter. Be my wife.” Her breath caught then as she stared at him. “Now. Marry me now.”

“Now?” she gasped.

“Why not?” he said as he kissed her cheek, her forehead, her eyes and her nose.

“Well, what about your family? What about my family? What about dresses and tuxedos and . . . and . . .”

“That will all be for later, Kris,” he told her. “I just want to promise my life to you, before God, right here and now on this rock, sweetheart. That’s all I want.”

Kristie didn’t think it was possible to love Nick more than she did at that moment, but her heart suddenly burst at his words.

Nodding, Kristie grinned herself. “All right. I’ll marry you now.”

Nick gave her a swift hug, but didn’t let her up. He simply looked down at her and began. “I, Nicholas Bainbridge, take you, Kristie Carter, as my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health for as long as we both shall live.”

Kristie couldn’t believe how many tears she had shed today, but more were coming as she gazed into his blue-green eyes. Nick loved her! He wanted to marry her on a rock! It was all too surreal!

Sniffing, she framed his face in her trembling hands as she said her own vows. “I, Kristie Carter, take you, Nicholas Bainbridge, as my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better of for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health for as long as we both shall live.”

“AMEN!” Nick suddenly shouted as he laughed out loud.

“Amen!” Kristie laughed with him, feeling as if she were floating on a cloud.

“May I kiss my bride?” he teased happily.

“Yes, you may,” she told him as she pulled him down once again.

“How does it feel, sweetheart?” he asked her.

“How does what feel?”

“Being Mrs. Kristie Bainbridge?” he winked at her.

“Nicholas,” she breathed, “it’s the most wonderful, beautiful, glorious feeling in all the world.”

CHAPTER NINE

The day finally came for Tyler and Sophie's wedding, and Kristie knew it wouldn't be too much longer before she and Nick would be doing the same, walking down the aisle and pledging their lives to each other. Again.

She'd invited Tyler and Sophie over for a barbeque the evening after she and Nick had had their impromptu 'wedding' at the ranch. She felt apprehensive telling her friend that she and Nick were now fiancées, knowing that Sophie would try and take some credit for them being together. And Kristie supposed she would be right. If she hadn't insisted that Kristie go with them to the pizza parlor, Nick would have never asked her if she'd been kissed, and he would never have asked her out on their wonderful date to make it up to her.

Kristie knew that Tyler and Sophie suspected something was going on when they saw Nick standing in her kitchen admiring a vase filled full of red roses. "What are you doing here, Nick?" Tyler's voice carried throughout Kristie's small house. "Did Kristie actually invite you?"

Kristie smiled as Nick grinned at her over his brother's shoulder. "Yes, Tyler. Yes she did."

"Well that's wonderful!" Sophie exclaimed. Kristie rolled her eyes when she whispered loudly, "So did you call him or did he call you?"

"Sophie, Tyler," Kristie began. "Nick and I wanted to have you guys over tonight as a celebration."

"A celebration of what?" Tyler asked.

"Of our engagement," Nick finished for her.

“Engagement of what?” Kristie and Nick both laughed as she moved to hug him in the kitchen.

“Uh oh,” Sophie breathed as she stared at them. “You don’t mean to tell me, Kristie, that you and Nick . . .”

She didn’t bother with words, Kristie merely nodded and smiled grandly.

“AAAHHH!!!” Sophie screamed as she ran into the kitchen to hug her. Kristie shrieked too as her best friend practically flung her around the room in her joy. “Have you set a date? I knew he’d make you happy, sweetie. I just knew it! You better make her happy, Nick, or you’ll be dealing with me!”

“Yes ma’am. We wouldn’t want that now,” Nick teased.

“No you wouldn’t, believe me!” Tyler grinned as he hugged his brother. “Congratulations.”

“Have you set a date?” Sophie asked again as she dabbed at her eyes with a paper towel.

“Soon,” Nick said. “I already have plane tickets for our honeymoon.”

“Oh? Where?”

“Somewhere in Alaska.”

“Alaska?” Ty asked, making a face. “You’re supposed to go to Fiji or the Bahamas or somewhere warm like that! Why Alaska?”

“Because I want to be snowed in at a warm, cozy cabin in the woods with my wife. Just her, me, and the bed.”

“Nicholas Bainbridge!” Kristie suddenly gasped, feeling the familiar heat of her blush rising.

“The man asked, honey, I’m just telling him why.”

Kristie buried her face into his soft ivory-colored sweater to hide her embarrassment as he chuckled at her and kissed the top of her head.

“Get used to it, sweetie,” Sophie was saying.

“The Bainbridge brothers are nothing if they’re not crass.”

Now Kristie smiled as she walked up the aisle with Nick as the Best Man and she the Maid of Honor at Sophie’s wedding. Her joy was complete. Nick was not only Tyler’s Best Man, but he was also the best man for Kristie. And God had known that beyond the shadow of a doubt.

She had to laugh at him after the ceremony, however, as everyone was getting ready for the reception. Ryan Cartwright was also one of Tyler’s groomsmen and he’d already caught Kristie unawares without Nick by her side. Thankfully, she’d been able to avoid him. She was on her way to the sanctuary of the church, getting ready to walk down the aisle for the wedding. But once Nick got wind that Ryan was poking around her again, he hadn’t let her out of his sight since.

It wasn’t too long after the cake cutting ceremony when Nick went to get Kristie a glass of punch. That was when Ryan tried his charms again. He swaggered up to her and gave her a rakish grin. “You look stunning, Kristie. Almost good enough to eat.”

“Thank you, Ryan. I thought the same thing about Nicholas. Don’t you think he looks absolutely gorgeous in his tux?”

“I hadn’t noticed,” he said dryly. “Would you like to take a walk with me to get some fresh air? Maybe a dance or two?”

“I’d rather not if it’s all the same to you.”

“Awe, come on, sweetheart! I don’t bite! Well, I don’t bite hard!” He laughed at his pathetic joke.

Kristie almost laughed in his face. Ryan’s joke wasn’t pathetic, he was.

“Is there any specific reason why you’re bothering my fiancée, Ryan?” Nick asked calmly

as Kristie watched him walk up from the refreshments table. Moving around him, Nick handed Kristie her punch and wrapped his arm around her, pulling her close. Kristie giggled when he planted a kiss on her cheek, as if to show the other man that Kristie was not available.

“You two are engaged?” Ryan asked, his eyes wide.

Kristie nodded and was about to answer him when Nick simply held up her hand to show off the enormous sparkling diamond he’d bought her a few days before.

“Well, it seems as if congratulations are in order,” Ryan said stiffly, offering his hand to Nick.

“Thank you, Ryan,” Nick smiled, looking to Kristie like he had just won a prize at the county fair.

As soon as Ryan moved away, presumably setting his sights on another hapless victim, Kristie poked Nick in the ribs. “You enjoyed that, Nicholas.”

“Of course I did, honey,” he whispered in her ear as he grabbed her in a loving hug. “I’ve been itching to stake a claim on you since our run-in with Ryan at The Cowboy Grille.”

“I think you just did a mighty fine job of that,” she chuckled.

“Before we leave here, everyone will know that you are mine.”

“Who would have thought Nicholas Bainbridge was so possessive?” she teased.

Nick leaned back and framed her face with his hands. “Only when it comes to you, honey. You’re my lady, and I don’t intend on sharing you. Did I tell you today how ravishing you look?”

“No, I don’t think you did.”

“Let me remedy that then, wife of mine.”

With that, he leaned down and brushed his lips against hers, kissing her in front of everyone present. But Kristie didn't care. At that moment, it seemed as if they were the only two people in the world.

"Hey, you two," Kristie suddenly heard Tyler's voice chuckling behind them. "I think the preacher is still here if you want to make it official!"

Nick pulled back and grinned mischievously. Reaching into the jacket of his tux, he withdrew a folded piece of paper and handed it to Kristie. She opened it and gasped as tears filled her eyes.

"A marriage license?" she breathed.

"You want to, honey?" Kristie couldn't do much more than stare at him with watery eyes. "Will you marry me? Right now?"

Without a word, Kristie jumped into his arms. Her mind was racing. Both his family and hers were present to see Sophie married to Tyler, as she and Sophie had practically grown up together. Kristie's family was almost like Sophie's extended family, and always joked that they were as close as sisters. It really was the perfect time to marry him when everyone was already gathered.

"Did you plan this, Nick?" she cried in his ear.

"I might have," he teased as he stroked her hair. "I can't wait another minute to make you mine in truth, Kristie. Say yes, honey. Marry me now."

"Yes!" she shouted, her tears falling freely.

Tyler patted his brother on the back and strode over to the microphone where he announced a surprise for the crowd. Kristie smiled as everyone clapped happily at the news that Nick and Kristie were getting married that day as well. The amazing thing Kristie noticed was that no one seemed shocked as they all

moved back into the sanctuary of the church. Nick really did plan it all!

“Nicholas!” she cried into his shoulder. “I love you! I love you so much!”

He squeezed her so hard that she forgot to breathe. “I love you too.”

Before she knew it, she was walking down the aisle with him again, crying and clutching on to him for dear life. It wasn’t long before Kristie heard everyone in the chapel cheer as soon as the last vow was said. Nick wasted no time as he scooped Kristie into a soul-searing kiss.

“You’re mine forever now, honey,” he whispered in her ear, his voice cracking.

Kissing him one more time, Kristie smiled as she gazed into his amazing blue-green eyes, the same eyes she would now see every day for the rest of her life. He was her husband! She could hardly contain her bliss.

“Nicholas,” she whispered to him through her tears, “take me to Alaska.”

Nick threw back his head and laughed as his own tears fell down his face. “On one condition,” he told her then.

“Anything,” she said with stars in her eyes.

“I’ll take you to Alaska only if you promise to sing to me in our warm, cozy cabin in the woods.”

Kristie grinned as she stroked his cheek. “You got it, honey,” she told him without hesitation.

Nick’s face lit up with a wide grin and Kristie sighed happily. Her pipe dreams became reality after all.

Sukie's Dance

a Novella
by
Laura Hamby

Grandma...the first dedication always had your name on it. I love you.

Mom and Dad (Carol and Vern); and my sisters, Lisa and Margie... for your years of love and support and encouragement in chasing my dream.

Jack. Always my Hero.

I'd like to thank my critiquing partner, Alli (Gator), for all her invaluable help--in all its forms. Also, thanks to everyone else who helped me polish Sukie's Dance (Jaq, the C-bee's....).

About Laura Hamby

It seems like I've been writing forever. My first attempt was the journal we were to write in every day when I was in 6th grade. Thus bitten by the Writing Bug, I've been writing ever since. I can't really remember a time that I didn't have a notebook and pen with me--back in the day before computer notebooks. I've yet to find the cure for the Writing Bug except to write, write, write. Three years ago, I decided it was time to pursue writing with a serious eye on the prize: publication.

I live on the East Coast of the USA with my wonderfully supportive hubby, three sons, a black cat, and a teddy bear hamster. We enjoy taking in the history of the area and taking road trips as a family (sans cat and hamster). The men in my life love fishing season, which gives me loads of time to write on the weekends.

CHAPTER ONE

“...And because you introduced us, Sukie, we want you to be the maid of honor at our wedding. I’m going to be an autumn bride.”

Sukie Adams stared at her youngest sister, dumbfounded. Why on earth would Zandra and Tom think she’d like to be in their wedding? Tom Perkins had been *her* boyfriend until she’d brought him home to meet the family. This wasn’t something to be that excited about. Silence reigned in the family room while everyone digested Zandra’s news.

“We have a tradition in this family,” Dad said sternly. “It’s up to you whether you want to ask me in private or with an audience.” From the set of his mouth, Sukie could tell how torn he was about the situation. Bless his heart, all Dad ever wanted was for all his girls to be happy. All five of them, plus Mom. Sukie’d never seen him as angry as he’d been on the night she’d brought Tom home. The night Tom and Zandra had taken one look at each other and excused themselves from the dinner table.

Sukie edged her way toward the kitchen. She didn’t want to hear her former boyfriend ask her father if he could marry her sister. Pain overwhelmed her as she watched her vibrant sister lean forward, scooting to the edge of the couch as they waited for Tom to do the expected honorable thing.

“Mr. Adams.” The tremble in Tom’s voice echoed for the entire family to hear. Sukie felt a bit better hearing that. It showed he at least had

the sense to be nervous, which in turn illustrated his brain functioned on at least a minimal level.

"I'd like permission, sir, to marry your daughter, Zandra," Tom stated.

Sukie leaned against the open arch that separated the kitchen from the family room. Her father gazed across the room at her, his expression compassionate, before he answered Tom's request.

"You make Zandra happy, Tom. That's important to us, just as love and fidelity are. You are both very sure about this step? This has all happened rather quickly, and not under the best of circumstances."

Tom cleared this throat. His hand trembled ever so slightly when he ran it through his well-cut blond hair. "Yes, sir. We're sorry about that. We didn't intend to hurt anyone."

Sukie slapped a hand over her mouth to stifle the sound of disbelief gathering in her throat. Dad continued his speech.

"Marriage isn't something to be entered into lightly. The wife and I raised our girls to know that divorce is not an option. Marriage is forever."

Sukie wanted to gag at the goo-goo eyes Zandra and Tom made at each other. She couldn't take another minute of this. Why she subjected herself to it, she had no real idea, other than it was Sunday and she was expected home for the family's traditional after-church supper.

Oh, how she'd fancied herself in love with Tom Perkins; that he returned the sentiment. Had she been able to predict the disaster the meet-the-family night would turn into, perhaps things would have ended differently. Like with her doing the breaking up instead of him. It would have left her heart intact that way. Alone, true, but with her dignity in place.

Not the object of pity. She didn't enjoy the

limelight, nor did she want all the attention this lurid affair brought. No one would think anything of her disappearance from this celebration. She slipped through the large country kitchen and out the front door.

Twilight in the summertime was her favorite time all year. Unless it was winter, and the first snow swirled from the sky. Or autumn, when the scent of woodstoves filled the crisp air. Of course, the first blossoms of spring held a certain appeal as well. She sighed, allowing calmness to infuse her being while she focused on the pink sunset. Regret and bitterness held no place in her life.

Perhaps the time had come to take stock of her hopes and dreams. Maybe even take a good hard look at herself and make some improvements. Accept the reason Tom had ditched her for her youngest, more vital sister.

Sukie didn't consider herself to be all that exciting; she preferred a simple, quiet life and solitary pursuits. She always had. Sure, she'd had boyfriends, but none that lasted very long. None serious, either. Sooner or later, they'd all deserted her for one of her more adventurous friends, or just simply dropped off the face of the earth, never to be heard from again.

"Sukie? Are you out here?"

Mom had noticed her absence, but then, she noticed everything. "The sunset is beautiful tonight," Sukie answered.

"I brought you a brownie." Mom held out the offering. "You know your sister didn't do this on purpose, don't you?"

"Intellectually, yes, I do." Sukie took the dessert, her mouth watering in anticipation of tasting Mom's famous double chocolate brownies.

"But your heart doesn't. Oh, honey. I'm so sorry."

Sukie cuddled into her mother's embrace when Mom encircled her shoulders with one plump arm. "I really thought Tom was Mr. Right."

"The right man for you is out there somewhere, Sukie Rose. Don't give up hope. Remain steadfast in your faith."

Sukie managed a smile. It hurt. Tom had been hers. Oooo, just like her mother's possessive little poodle with a bone. Why couldn't she get past that issue? How maddening.

"Don't padlock your heart like you did your closet to keep your sisters out of your clothes. Men are like sweaters in many ways. You just have to keep looking until you find the one that fits you best."

Sukie giggled. Mom's analogies were always on target and often humorous. "Don't forget that special color."

Mom nodded. "Color is very important. Look for the deep abiding color of love and mutual respect. Are you coming back inside or shall I say your goodbyes for you?"

"I can't face them right now," Sukie confessed. Truth of the matter was she hadn't been able to even look at Zandra after Tom had broken up with her. And men thought women fickle? She knew differently.

"Understandable. I love you, honey."

"At least somebody does." The quip fell much like a kid trying out ice skates for the first time, but Mom still smiled at her attempt at levity. Sukie headed for her silver Honda.

"Call me tomorrow."

"G'night. And thanks, Mom."

"You'll dance, Sukie. I know you'll dance."

With Mom's reference to her favorite song by Leanne Womack, a true feeling of peace settled over Sukie. She didn't quite believe her mother,

but at least a seed of hope had been planted. The difficult part would be nurturing that seed, and allowing it to grow. Heaven knew she didn't want to become like Great-Aunt Mildred who spent family reunions whining about lost loves, overcome with bitterness.

* * *

"You didn't answer," Zandra complained. "Is it too much to ask you to be happy for us?"

Sukie glanced up from cashing out the register. At day's end, the cash drawer confirmed what her aching feet attested to; it had been a very busy Monday. Two years of hard work at last paid off and her Cozy Corner bookstore now turned a good profit.

"I didn't hear you come in," Sukie replied. "Turn the lock, would you please?"

Just what she needed to end her hectic day. Little sister Zandra and her *it's all about me* attitude. After all these years, it had worn as thin as Sukie's favorite multi-colored sweater. The same sweater Zandra had stolen to wear to her first high school dance, and spilled red juice upon. The yarn still bore the pale pink stain.

Zandra clicked the lock over. "Well? Tom and I were disappointed when you didn't come back last night."

Sukie regarded her sister through narrowed eyes. Eight years separated them, in addition to Zandra's engagement to her former Mr. Right. All five Adams sisters looked remarkably alike, right down to the golden and red streaks that graced their chestnut brown hair. At thirty-three and twenty-five, they could pass for twins. Almost. Perhaps their close physical similarity had drawn Tom from Sukie to Zandra.

"I don't know what you expect me to say," Sukie answered at last. Caution made her hold her tongue. Zandra could crumble a building with one temper tantrum. Sukie didn't have the

energy or desire to expose herself to a full-blown Hurricane Zandra.

"That you're happy for us and that you'll be my maid of honor."

Oh, the self-centered attitude caused Sukie to grind her teeth. Sure, the sisters had always joked that it really was all about me, but Zandra truly believed it really was all about Zandra.

"It's a bit too soon for that, Zandie."

The younger woman pouted. "I have three other sisters who would *leap* at the chance."

"Those sisters didn't introduce you to their boyfriend. The boyfriend you're engaged to now. Do you expect me to be jumping up and down with joy?"

Zandra sighed. "I didn't mean to like Tom. And he didn't mean to like me either. I just, ...There were sparks between us when you introduced us, Suke. We couldn't help falling in love. I am sorry. Tom is too."

"Whatever." Sukie didn't believe it for a minute. Zandra's history of boyfriend stealing went back to junior high school. She was amazed her sister had any girlfriends at all.

"Will you at least think about it? My wedding won't be the same without you," Zandra wheedled.

"I'll think about it," Sukie agreed. When Zandra screeched, jumping up and down in glee, Sukie knew she'd say yes. Eventually. After all, the bonds of sisterhood held tighter than the bonds of disappointment. There was no law in existence that required her to like her sisters all the time. Besides, keeping peace within the family was the right thing to do.

"Tom will be so happy," Zandra chirped. She blew several kisses as she unlocked the door and danced out of the store.

Sukie came around the counter to relock the door. Through the glass she watched her sister

climb into Tom's sports car. She pressed her forehead against the glass for a moment, savoring the coolness of the smooth surface against her heated skin. Why did it feel like someone jammed red hot needles into her heart? Being the eldest sister came with obligations, but knowing that did nothing to lessen her pain.

In fact, it magnified her distress. She couldn't live with herself if she wasn't true to herself. Which meant, yeah, she'd hold her chin high and show the entire world she could surmount this devastating obstacle. Enough time had passed between being dumped for her sister and the engagement. Time enough for the thoughtless speculation about her humiliation to have died down.

Still, heartache overwhelmed her. She momentarily pressed the back of her hand against her mouth to keep from crying out loud. People still passed by on the sidewalk outside. Fat, hot tears coursed down her cheeks. The hurt and anger she couldn't verbalize manifested as she clenched her hands into fists. Fists which she used to scrub the tears away. She drew several ragged breaths, fighting for a control beyond her reach.

The only thing she could do was to guard her heart against further trampling. She couldn't let herself be the fool again. A greater understanding for Great-Aunt Mildred's stance on love blossomed.

Sukie squared her shoulders, her resolve shuttering over her and forming a protective bubble. Never again would she extend unconditional trust. No. Her trust would have to be earned.

CHAPTER TWO

David Ballard stuck his finger between the collar of the monkey suit and his neck. The bride had insisted all the groomsmen wear formal tuxedos. Right down to the blasted shoes. The perfume from the fussy white rose on his lapel made his nose itch. By the end of the elaborate wedding ceremony, he'd been dizzy from holding his breath as a preventative measure against sneezing.

The fiasco of wedding picture taking strained David's patience with his cousin and his new wife. The only bright spot of that wasted hour was Sukie Adams. Maid of honor. The eldest Adams sister, if David remembered correctly.

"Sue-key! You have to pose with the best man for a por-trait."

"Just do it Suke. You know Zandie won't shut up until you do," another sister urged. David didn't know which one.

"Language," Mrs. Adams remonstrated, her expression strained.

"Day-vid," Zandra caroled.

He pressed his lips together and shook his head. He didn't envy Tom his bride in the least. In fact, he thought Tom had lost his ever-lovin' mind.

"C'mon, Cuz," Tom chivvied. "It'll make my missus happy."

"Making the missus happy is your job," David replied. "Not mine." He jammed his hands into his pockets, which caused Zandra to screech.

"You'll wrinkle your pants! It will show in

the pictures!” Zandra pointed at the altar. “There, in front of the altar. The sooner you two co-op-er-ate, the sooner we all can dive into the champagne and seafood at the re-cep-tion.”

David wondered if Zandra knew she talked in hyphens as the mother of the groom, his aunt, joined the nagging. “David, please. You promised to be nice,” Helen Perkins said. “We all know you don’t like these types of events.”

“Oh, alright. But only if you ladies stop fussing at me.” He shrugged, amused to see Sukie doing the same. It wasn’t so much that he didn’t like these events as it was he didn’t particularly like the hassle that accompanied them. Sukie’s sisters surrounded her and edged her towards him. Throwing a pointed glare at Zandra, Sukie sidled to the altar, her arm draped over her stomach.

“I’m here. One picture. That’s it.” She slashed the air with her hands, making her condition clear.

“Sue-key,” Zandra whined. “Day-vid. Don’t ruin my wed-ding day.”

He joined his reluctant partner. “Hi there.”
“Hi.”

Sukie’s soft voice tickled his ears. Her annoyed expression didn’t translate to her voice. Classy lady. How she managed to be pleasant to him while upset with her sister he couldn’t guess.

The photographer arranged them and rearranged them before he pointed his enormous camera at them. “Smile!”

A long pause. No flash or clicking sound. “They aren’t smiling.”

“Just take the picture,” Mrs. Adams advised. “I think you’re lucky to have them up there to begin with. Don’t press your luck.”

“Good advice,” David muttered. He alone heard Sukie’s almost inaudible answering harrumph.

A blinding flash, the whirl of film advancing, and David found himself standing alone before the spots cleared from his vision. Despite all the dramatics that went into getting the photograph taken, he knew it was one picture he wanted a copy of for sure—it had been the single-most pleasant moment of the entire day. Besides, he suspected they'd be wearing identical irritated expressions.

* * *

David searched the reception hall with his eyes, listening with only one ear as his aunt prattled.

"Sukie and Tom dated for almost a year, you know. I'll bet your mother kept you abreast of all the family news while you lived halfway across the country," Aunt Helen confided. "Sukie's a lovely woman, but she has the most atrocious luck. Tom fell for Zandra when Sukie took him to meet her parents. Seems she has an unlucky streak that goes back to college, when it comes to men."

David didn't like what he heard. No wonder the woman had the look of a deer caught in the headlights. His aunt's gossip cleared up several questions. Like why Sukie kept her distance from him. From all available men attending the reception. She'd been scarce since they'd arrived, after the photograph session.

"I can't imagine being so unlucky in love, can you?" Aunt Helen asked.

He took her hand into his to stop her tugging on his tuxedo lapel. "Yes, I can."

Aunt Helen shook her silvery head. "I'm ashamed to admit this, but I have a hard time liking my new daughter-in-law. She took Tom away from her very own sister."

The DJ intruded into their conversation. "Attention ladies and gentlemen. Please clear the dance floor for Tom and Zandra's first dance,

to be followed with the rest of the wedding party joining them center-stage during the next song.”

“Excuse me, please, Auntie,” David requested. “My dance partner is headed for the exit.”

“Oh dear. I hope she doesn’t ruin the reception.”

David drew his eyebrows together at his aunt’s fret. “I don’t think she’ll ruin it. This must be very hard for her. Oh, look, there’s Mother back at your table.”

Successfully diverted, his aunt stopped fussing at him, which allowed him to intercept Sukie before she escaped. “Hi. Sukie? Trying to run away?”

Her shoulders drooped. David regretted the position she was in at the moment. Her eyes sparkled, but the moisture gathering in the corners betrayed her. No joy radiated from her. Only resignation.

“David. Yep, I’m Sukie. It’s hard to tell the Adams girls apart. Or so I’ve been told. Did you need something? I was on my way to the restroom.”

“Only a dance partner.”

Chestnut hair rich with golden red tones whispered across her high cheekbones as she shook her head slowly. David resisted the urge to reach over to smooth an errant lock of hair away from her crystal blue eyes.

“Don’t say no, please,” he requested.

Sukie nibbled on her lower lip as indecision flickered over her face. David held his hand out to her. “Hold your head high, Sukie. You’re stronger than you realize. When the last of the bubbly is consumed, you’ll have impressed everyone with your inner strength and dignity.”

“I don’t think so, even though you’re very kind to say so.”

“Would you repeat that in front of my

mother? She doesn't think I have a kind bone in my body."

Sukie's gaze flickered away. Overhead, the final strands of the song played over the speakers. The DJ crooned, "Luuuuhhhhvvvllllyyy. This is the wedding party's cue."

"It's only for three or four minutes. After that, I'll walk you outside."

Her hand heated his the instant she took it, allowing him to lead her to the dance floor. She fit into his arms like she'd been made to order just for him. Used to fighting his dance partner for the lead, Sukie surprised him when she followed him with graceful ease.

"You like to dance," David said, his mouth inches away from her ear.

"Guilty as charged."

"You haven't done anything to be ashamed of." He thought to reassure her, but knew he failed when she found a sudden interest in their feet.

"You're wearing sandals." Amusement colored her words.

"Nice change of subject."

"We met for the first time last night, David. We're strangers."

"You'd like to keep it that way, wouldn't you."

She brought her head up, her face pale beneath the artfully applied cosmetics she wore. Again her eyes shimmered with moisture. No tears fell, not even when she blinked up at him.

"Can you blame me? My experience with men is less than stellar."

* * *

Sukie stepped out of David's embrace when the song ended. She tried not to notice the puzzlement etched around his warm hazel eyes. Genuine concern radiated from him, and would

envelop her if she allowed it to happen. But she wouldn't. Couldn't.

"Don't give up on all of us because you found more than your fair share of flakes." He led her off the hardwood dance floor.

Another song began, giving her just the excuse she needed not to answer David's claim. Dating flakes? Perhaps she should go on dates armed with dandruff shampoo.

Her head began to throb, keeping tempo with the pains lancing through her abdomen. Somewhere in his statement, David had left something unsaid. She could feel it as much as she'd felt the quiet strength in the arm he'd wrapped around her when they'd danced.

One of Sukie's sisters sashayed over, her face and eyes glowing brightly in the artificial light. "My turn to dance with our gorgeous best man."

"Not this time, Whitney. You are Whitney, aren't you?"

A giggle. Sukie gagged, and not entirely from reflex. Her stomach flopped upside down and did the Mambo. She pressed her hand against her tummy, willing the discomfort and nausea away.

"Of course I'm Whitney! I'm certainly not Sukie! I know how to keep hold of a man who interests me."

Sukie flinched. Prepared to make her getaway, David's cold words stopped her retreat, even though her need to be elsewhere right now was desperate.

"I think you need a few cups of coffee, Whitney. Perhaps a plate heaped with food. Give the champagne a rest. It doesn't make you say very nice things. Sukie, are you still leaving? I'll walk you to your car."

Had she been a cartoon character, her eyes would have bulged right out of her head. She steeled herself to not jump if David touched her.

He did. His hand settled over the small of her back.

"You leaving so soon, Suke?" Whitney asked, following them. "Zandie hasn't even thrown the bouquet yet. We're the only unmarried bridesmaids."

"Hope you catch it then, Whit," Sukie answered over her shoulder. "I have no use for the bridal bouquet."

"Spoilsport."

Sukie ignored the retort. Mercy! Exasperated, she wondered if any of her sisters had grown past the neener-neener stage they'd gone through in childhood. She disliked the game then, had no use for it now.

The crisp autumn air held a faint scent of wood-burning stoves. It was refreshing after the closeness of the reception hall. Redolent with the seafood buffet and the perfume of many women, the air inside had been almost too thick to breathe.

"Thanks for walking me out, David. I can make it to my car from here."

"Releasing me so I can race back to your sister?" David's tone held a mocking note that brought her up short.

"It's the MO I'm most familiar with at the moment," she confessed.

"I have no desire whatsoever to spend any time with Whitney. She's had too much to drink. You're much nicer than she is. In fact, I'd bet you're sweeter than any of your sisters."

Sukie couldn't help the rueful chuckle that escaped her throat. "Lovely thing to say. You just about sounded sincere."

David grasped her elbow, halting her. Surprised, she made eye contact with him. The intensity of his gaze swallowed her as he spoke.

"I'm sorry you're so hurt, Sukie. You can choose to wallow in your self-pity, or you can live

your life to the fullest. You can't do both."

"How would you know?" What nerve this man had, lecturing her. Anger filled the empty void within.

"I've donated a couple of girlfriends in my day."

She licked her dry lips. "Then you know it's not an overnight process."

"No, it's not. But neither should it be a lifetime event." David held a small rectangular card out to her. "Hey, I can understand you might not be ready to give out your phone number to a guy just yet. Here's mine. When you're ready, and if you're interested."

Sukie didn't look at the card until David disappeared into the building. It read: *Dr. David Ballard, Psychologist*. His phone number followed. A row of tidy hand-printed numbers had been printed beside the engraved number.

Perfect. He wanted her to call him for therapy to help her get on with her life. Not a date. Fine. She didn't date anymore, so it didn't matter. Nope. Not one tiny little bit. Her stomach lurched again, seizing her with indescribable pain.

It had to be indigestion. Nothing more than one of those creamed seafood blobs on a cracker she'd eaten, causing her heartburn.

Another fiery stab traveled from her left side to her right. She bent over double, her arms wrapped around her middle. As she stumbled back against her car, she heard a scream, and briefly wondered who was being mugged before someone turned out the lights.

CHAPTER THREE

“How’s your recovery going? Your appendix burst?”

Great. Just her luck. Sukie couldn’t avoid the big to-do over opening the wedding presents as Mom had insisted she take her post-surgical convalescence at home. Not at her apartment, as she’d wanted. And joy of joys, here was the best man. David Ballard. Psychologist. Yeah. She needed to be *shrunked* alright. If only because she kept coming back to have her intestines knotted again and again.

“Almost. I’ll survive. Or so I’ve been told.”

“But how are you feeling?”

“Like you’re attempting to shrink me, Dr. Ballard.”

Instead of appearing uncomfortable or making a protest, he looked intrigued. He perched on the arm of the plaid sofa. Sukie drew the patchwork quilt up over her chest. Not that he could possibly be looking at what passed as cleavage for her. When he continued to stare down at her, she crossed her arms.

“You’re mighty defensive this evening,” he said. He shifted so that his long legs were stretched out, crossed at the ankles.

“It’s for your own good. If you display too much interest in me, Whitney will come after you. Before you know it, you’ll be a member of the family too.”

David laughed. “Whitney’s not my type. Too young. I make it a strict policy not to date women who are in a different decade than me.”

“Sure. That’s what all you trophy-wife

seeking men say.”

“Why don’t you stop holding back on me? Tell me how you really feel.”

Sukie opened her mouth to deny his accusation, then reconsidered. It wasn’t often that anyone threw her sarcasm back at her. “Well, Dr. Ballard, I feel that the world should revolve around me. I want everyone to dance attendance on me, bend over backwards to keep me from whining about meaningless incidentals, and I want every man on the earth to be so attracted to me and me alone that they can’t see other women.”

A delighted smile illuminated his face. Gone was the counselor countenance. “Is that all?”

“No, as a matter of fact, it’s not. I have a list.”

“Zandra and Tom are about to start opening their gifts.” Mom strode through the family room, making her announcement. “In the living room.”

David crooked an eyebrow. Sukie shook her head. “Absolutely no chance. A snowball stands a better chance in the Bahamas.”

“I’ll keep you company. But you’ll have to share the couch. My butt’s gone numb.”

“The end down there is free. Just don’t sit on my feet.” Sukie drew her legs up in a precautionary move.

She tried to not think about his numb anatomy. The dark blue jeans he wore provided an excellent showcase for his rear, and she’d been hard pressed not to stare. And drool. She’d sworn off men for good. No sense torturing herself. Well, maybe just a moment of admiration wouldn’t hurt. He turned to give her a good view before he sat.

“Aren’t you coming?” Mom reappeared in the doorway.

“No. I’m tired,” Sukie answered. She fanned

her face.

"I'll keep her company, Mrs. Adams," David added.

"Alright. We wouldn't want your recovery to be compromised, Sukie. You're healing beautifully. I'll bring you both some cake after a while."

"Thanks, Mom."

Zandra's petulant voice floated to them from the other room. "She's trying to ruin this like she ruined my reception."

David's eyes danced as he chuckled. His body shook with mirth. Sukie rolled her eyes.

"You want the world to revolve around you just like that?" he asked, jerking his head toward the living room.

"Oh, yeah. Just like that. Let's watch TV. Noise. Something to counter all the squealing in there."

David grabbed the remote off the coffee table. They agreed on a show and watched in silence until the first commercial.

"You're staring at me," David said without shifting his attention from the screen to her.

"Why aren't you changing the channel? It's a commercial."

"Yes, it is. The show will be back in a few minutes," he explained in a patient tone one usually would use to explain a complicated matter to a small child.

"I thought it was a genetic impossibility for a man to not surf the channels during commercials." Sukie blinked. Her father and brothers-in-law couldn't sit still through an ad if their lives depended upon it.

"I don't want to miss the next segment."

"Wow." Sukie whistled. "You're enlightened."

"Thank you."

"For a man."

"You have issues."

"Very good. Good pee-sychologist. You recognize issues when you see them."

"And baggage."

"I have a matched set," she admitted. "You gonna try to fix me?"

"I might give it a try. But not in the way you think."

"And how might I think you'd fix me?"

"To use your own word—shrink."

"You have another method in mind?" Sukie couldn't resist. Sparring with David turned out to be very pleasant. Men didn't seem able to keep up with her, but David had met her barb for barb.

David's eyes fixed to her, taking in every last inch, even through the quilt she huddled beneath. Sukie squirmed as his eyes roved over her and her cheeks heated. She pulled the quilt up over her shoulders, just up under her chin. The quilt jerked down to her waist, causing her to jump at the unexpected tug.

"I promise not to shrink you if you promise to quit hiding behind things," David offered.

"Easier said than done."

"Unh-uh." He shook a finger at her. "Just do it, Sukie. It's that simple. Just do it. Forget how hard it is. Forget the possible pain you're exposing yourself to and *live*."

"You like to lecture me," she accused.

David held his hands up, palms out, towards her. "End of lecturing."

"Yeah, and I'm the Queen of Sheba." She sniffed.

"Your majesty." David waved his hand as he pretended to bow. "Mind if I call you Sheba?"

"Shush. The show is back on." She put a finger to her lips. David reached over to smack her knee. Sukie pushed his hand away, choking on a giggle.

"Sheba," he drawled.

* * *

Sitting in the family room watching a silly sitcom on the television with Sukie was by far a more pleasurable pursuit than oohing and aahing over small kitchen appliances. Just listening to the rustling of wrapping paper and the ensuing comments as the bride verbally dissected the gifts made David want to cross his eyes.

A sideways glance at his companion turned into a good long stare. Her wide eyes focused on the TV; a low laugh escaped between her parted lips. David shifted his weight when the tip of her pink tongue moistened her lips.

He'd been behaving since she'd shushed him, biding his time until the next commercial before teasing her again.

"So, you're the Queen of Kitty Food?" A commercial for cat food ended, giving him more material than he could use in one sitting.

"Meow," Sukie answered.

"So, what kind of kitty are you?"

"Calico."

"Long hair or short?"

"Long, of course. All the better to shed all over you."

"Declawed?"

"Is that a trick question?" Sukie held her hands out, her fingers curled. "That would be no fun."

"You're tellin' me," David replied. "So, are you a lovey kitty or an aloof kitty?"

"Depends on what time of day it is. If I'm hungry, I'm very lovey," she purred.

"Sounds like you need a piece of cake." He listened for a moment. "They're still going at the gifts in there."

"A person could die of starvation," Sukie complained.

David arose. "I'll go on a fact finding mission."

"Bring any facts you find back to share, please," Sukie requested.

Five minutes later, David returned bearing a tray. "Your mom found me and took pity upon us. But shhh, don't tell your sister."

"I wouldn't dream of it." She sat up a bit. "Wouldn't want to give her something else to moan about."

"Are you allowed to eat solids yet?" David asked, suspicion dawning at her over-eager anticipation of the sweet treat.

"It's been two weeks. I can eat solids."

"You sure?"

"Mom wouldn't have given you a plate of cake for me if I couldn't eat it," she pointed out, her tone reasonable.

David drew back a bit, balancing the tray with ease. "Sheathe those claws, Sheba."

"Meow."

David set the tray on the coffee table, laughing. "Translation into English—give me my cake or die, human."

"Yep. I didn't realize you were bilingual."

"It's one of my many talents." His lips twitched.

"You could psycho-analyze animals. A regular Rex Harrison."

"That's Dr. Doolittle."

"Played by...?"

"You have too much time on your hands," David announced. He sat beside her and reached for the tray. "There is a cure for that, however."

"Sounds serious and expensive." Sukie took the plate he offered.

Still pale and pinched from her recent surgery, David nonetheless found her beautiful. No. Enchanting. Her skin had a pearlescent

tone that lent her a fresh-as-morning-dew-quality that made him want to caress her face. He clenched one hand around the fork, the other around his plate to keep himself from doing just that.

"You're far away," Sukie accused. Her plate held nothing but crumbs. "I'm sorry, but I can't reach the table from here. Would you mind?"

David placed her plate on top of his before he set them on the tray. "Anything else I can do for you?"

Sukie's face flamed. "Yes, actually. I can't get off of this sofa. Mom insists on settling me in the person-eating piece of furniture, but I can't get up by myself. I have no problems sitting elsewhere. Mom's just way into this nursing her sick chickling back to health."

David gained his feet, mindful to push the coffee table out a ways from the sofa. When he turned to face her, Sukie had already swung her legs down. He offered his hands, which she took. Her grip surprised him. She had such slender hands, he hadn't expected her clasp to be so strong.

"Upsy-daisy." A wry grin etched about her mouth.

"Careful," he cautioned when she stumbled at bit.

"I'm fine. I haven't been up for a few hours. I should take a stroll."

"I'll go with you," he offered.

Sukie's grin widened into a genuine smile. Light blue twinkles in her eyes danced. David felt himself responding to her good humor with grin of his own.

"You can't go with me where I'm headed. But as soon as I get back, I'll give you the grand tour of the house. A strategic tour. One that skips the party."

"I'll wait right here." He crossed his heart as

he made his promise.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ten minutes later, they stood together on the back deck, looking at the stars. "This is the best part of the entire house," Sukie said. She stood with her arms stacked on the top of the wooden railing that ran around the deck. Just beyond her arms a wooden flower box hung, filled with fall-blooming plants.

"It's quiet. My sisters never really liked to spend much time out here after dark."

"But you do," David guessed. He mimicked her pose. Light from the porch lamp surrounded them from behind, giving them both a surreal glow.

She took a deep breath. "I like the crisp air of fall. I can feel the Creator on nights like this."

"God."

"Yes. God," she paused as if looking for just the right words. "I find great solace in being in the thick of all that He has created. Makes everything else seem trivial in comparison, ya know?"

"So that's how you do it."

"Do what?" Sukie's eyebrows creased together.

"You're always gracious," he replied.

Her throaty laughter drifted away on a whisper of a breeze. "Oh, I wish that were true. It's the ideal I strive for, but as a human being, I find myself often falling short."

"I think you're shrinking me now," David said. "I envy your..."

"Sure. You feel well enough to stand out on the patio with a man, but not well enough to

watch Tom and me open our wedding presents.” Zandra’s voice rang out with a piercing quality that could shatter glass.

“Falling short now,” Sukie murmured.

“So, how many toasters did we miss, Zandra?” David asked. “I know I gave you one.”

“So did I,” Sukie added.

“I noticed,” Zandra answered. “Sukie’s is a bagel toaster, so we’re keeping them both. At least come inside and share some of the wedding cake with the rest of the family. It’s the least you two hermits could do.”

“I’d love another piece of wedding cake,” David admitted, gratified when Zandra started howling.

“Oh, you’re not nice at all,” Sukie rebuked him. She grinned broadly.

“It might do you a world of good to try it some time,” he suggested. “Rather than repressing your hurt.”

“And it might do you some good to try my method,” Sukie countered.

“Nah. I’m a trained psychologist, and I can assure you. Repression can lead to explosions. Brains are much more useful when they haven’t blown up.”

“You may have a point.”

“Right on the top of my head, or so I’ve been told on numerous occasions. Getting angry isn’t a bad thing. In your case, it might even be helpful,” David told her.

“You’re shrinking me,” Sukie huffed.

“Not so. Have I asked you for your insurance information?”

“Are you coming inside?” Zandra asked, tapping her fork against the edge of her plate.

“Funny thing,” Sukie whispered to David. “I forgot she was there for a moment.”

* * *

“You’re joking,” Sukie accused her mother.

"I'm not. Zandra and Tom are having a one month anniversary celebration this Saturday."

Sukie held the phone out, staring at the device in disbelief. Closing her eyes in supplication, she put the phone back to her ear. "I'm not coming. This is ridiculous. She just wants more presents. The world stopped revolving around her after the gift-opening thing and she can't stand not being the center of attention."

"Sukie," Mom cajoled.

"No."

"David will be there."

"Poor David. I'll send him a sympathy card."

"It means a lot to your sister."

Sukie groaned when Mom played her trump card. "I'm sure it does. Tom meant a lot to me, too. Don't ask me to do this. I just can't."

"Honey, you have to face this head on. You can't hide from them forever. Your father and I didn't raise you to ignore your problems and hope they'll go away. The best way to deal with this is to confront it. You don't want to become a bitter, angry old woman."

"The answer is no. N, o; *no*."

"Grudges cause canyons. Canyons that can't be bridged. It would be an admirable step in beginning to heal this family."

"So would their moving to Timbuktu, never to be seen again," Sukie replied. Typical. She was always expected to be the one to make the first conciliatory gesture. But not this time, by golly.

"Sukie, we raised you better than that," Mom chided.

"Sorry, Mom. Not this time. Sukie hung up, unable to continue arguing the point.

* * *

The phone rang for the millionth time. Sukie let the machine take the call.

“Sue-key! I know you’re listening. Tom and I want you *therrrrre* for us. It won’t be the same without you. You owe us. You ended our reception early, you know.”

“Unbelievable,” Sukie muttered. She folded another shirt. “Like I planned on having a strategically timed appendix attack.” At least she now had a complete collection of her sisters doing what she called the Little Sister Whine.

Tarah called shortly after Mom, with Vickie calling almost before she’d hung up on Tarah. Whitney called a few hours after Vickie, giggling something about the bridal bouquet.

“Day-vid said he won’t come unless you do. So go ahead. Be a selfish, pouty witch. I don’t care. I’m tired of always making the effort to make amends with you.” Zandra’s voice filled the tiny apartment. “It’s your turn to be the magnanimous one.”

Sukie snorted. This just kept getting better and better all the time. Sad thing was, Zandie really believed what she said. Good thing her sister had called, though. It reminded Sukie that she needed to clean the toilet.

The phone rang yet again while she was in the bathroom cleaning. Big surprise. She opened the bathroom door all the way when she heard David leaving a message.

“...Home? Zandra just called to wail about your selfish tendencies. She gave me your number so I could call and talk you into going. I thought I’d call to cheer you on instead. And to ask if you’d like to be the previous engagement I told her I had, to get out of this latest party.”

Sukie lifted the handset. “Yes.” This didn’t count as a date. No, this was subterfuge at it’s finest.

“You’re there.” He sounded pleased.

Sukie shouldered the phone so she could wipe her hands on her sweat pants. “I’m in the

middle of housework.”

“So, what time shall I pick you up?”

“The sooner the better.” Sukie bit her lip, wanting to take her words back. They were so forward. So un-Sukie like.

“I’ll come pick you up now if it would help.”

Sukie choked on her words, stumbling over them like a teenaged girl shocked that the Coolest Guy in School had asked her out on a date.

“I-I think that’s overdoing it, don’t you?”

David’s laughter made her heart beat faster. Her cheeks felt hot against her cold fingers when she clamped her hand over her mouth, mortified.

“There’s an antique show that weekend. An all day event. Nine in the morning too early?”

“The party is at five in the evening.”

“Well, after dragging you around old furniture all day, I thought I’d take you out to a nice dinner.”

Sukie hesitated. Dinner made it sound more date like. But that was only a small portion of the day. Negligible. Meaningless. It would be alright. Just this once. Because this really didn’t count as a capital D-Date. It was more like a... meeting.

“Then I’ll see you at nine Saturday morning.”

Empowered by her acceptance, she believed she controlled the situation. The situation wouldn’t control her.

“Wear comfortable shoes.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Saturday brought with it the first hint of the winter to come. The cold air held more than a mere suggestion of it; frost decorated the windshields. A perfect day for wrapping up in a warm coat and fuzzy scarf to venture outside.

Sukie kept her plans for the day a secret from her family. Her half-bloodhound sisters would track her down if they had a reason to think they should. She knew they'd all descend upon her apartment around two or three in the afternoon. For that reason, she'd packed a duffle bag, so she wouldn't have to return home for any reason.

"Running away from home?" David asked. He leaned against a large extended-cab truck.

"In a way. I wanted to be prepared, so I wouldn't have to come back until much later. I'm sure my sisters will stop by this afternoon to escort me to the gala event."

"Sneaky girl. I like the way you think." He opened the passenger door for her and relieved her of her bag.

Unused to such courtesy, Sukie flashed him an uncertain smile as she clambered up into the truck. He winked.

The convention center parking lot was half full with plenty of parking still available up front. David parked in the back.

"Out of sight," he explained.

"I feel like a secret double agent."

David waggled his eyebrows, answering in a bad Russian accent. "We wheel get your secrets, of that you can be wery sure."

"Oh! Help! Save me from the phony

accent!”

“A damsel in distress. How shall I save her? I know. Let’s go inside. Less danger of becoming popsicles in there,” David suggested, deepening in his voice.

Sukie huddled inside her coat as a particularly frigid breeze whipped around them. They hurried across the parking lot and up the steps into the ticket office. With tickets in hand, they finally made it inside. The rush of warm air against wind-chafed cheeks tingled.

Furniture of all shapes and sizes filled the auditorium. The humid air held a scent of age, dust and lemon oil. At one end of the large room, Oriental and Persian rugs hung, looking like they were suspended in mid-air. The circular one caught Sukie’s attention. David followed in her wake.

Reverently, she fingered the fringe around the edge while David walked around to check the backing. “It’s a fake,” David told her when he rejoined her, his voice low.

“How can you tell?” Sukie demanded.

David crooked his finger at her as he disappeared behind it again. Sukie followed him, frowning. He pointed at the tag on the back.

“That can’t be right,” she protested. “It’s a beautiful rug.”

“Made in Taiwan. Two hundred dollars.” David read the sales tag.

“Sold,” Sukie replied. “People will only know it’s a fake if I tell them.”

They found the person selling the rugs. Their luck ended with that accomplishment.

“It’s two *thousand* dollars,” the vendor protested. “It’s a genuine Persian rug.”

“If that’s true, then why does the tag clearly say two hundred and made in Taiwan?” Sukie argued. She may as well have been invisible. The vendor refused to look at her. He kept his

dark eyes on David.

"You're dealing with the lady," David said. He stabbed a finger in Sukie's direction. "But for what it's worth, I'd say there's a zero missing if the rug is for sale for that ridiculous amount. You might want to take off the Taiwan tag, too."

"Two thousand. Non-negotiable."

"No sale. I'm going to tell everyone I see that you're cheating your customers," Sukie said. "Right after I inform the organizers of this event."

"You can't do that," the little man protested.

Sukie lifted one eyebrow. "I have an obligation to let the organizers know they've allowed a dishonest vendor into their showing. I can't in good conscience let you cheat others."

The man glared at her, his moustache working up and down as he chewed on his next words. "Two hundred dollars."

"Good. I assume you take cash?"

"Cash? Yes. Leave rug here, you can pick it up when you're ready to leave."

"Oh, I don't think so. There's an area for sold items across the hall."

The vendor stomped and snapped while Sukie and David waited for movers hired by the event organizers to arrive. They followed the men who carried the now rolled up rug to the sold area. Satisfied it was clearly marked, and her sales slip validated, they moved along.

"I didn't know you had it in you," Dave said. The lines around his eyes crinkled with amused amazement.

"I hate being taken advantage of," she answered.

"I'd have never guessed it," David replied.

Sukie ignored his comment. She wasn't so stupid she couldn't detect his double entendre. So she lacked a certain amount of backbone when it came to dealing with her sisters. So

what? You had to live with the results of forcing a not-so-pleasant family confrontation.

"Let's find the head of this show."

"You're tattling? I'm shocked," David declared. He placed his hand over his heart.

"Just when you had me all figured out, huh?" Sukie couldn't keep the smugness out of her voice. He'd pigeon-holed her based on a couple of meetings and the interaction with her sisters that he'd witnessed. She found a certain amount of pleasure in giving him something to think about. Really think about.

"Oh, I don't know if I'd say I had you figured out, but I will admit I was comfortable with the conclusions I'd made about you."

"Hah!"

"C'mon. We've only just begun to terrorize the place."

"Nice change of subject," she teased.

In response, he took her by the hand to pull her along behind him.

* * *

David set a fast pace. In just one short half an hour, Sukie gave him plenty to ponder. He did have a tendency to make assumptions about people, and in his work, he'd very rarely been proven wrong. But Sukie wasn't his patient. He didn't think of her in those terms at all.

By late afternoon, she'd caused him to question everything he thought he'd figured out about her. In the usual course of events, this should bother him more than it did, but he discovered he rather liked that she kept him guessing. In his experience, he'd found women to be predictable. Sukie radiated a freshness like no woman he knew.

With the antique show ten minutes from being closed for the night, they stood together arranging to have their purchases delivered to their respective homes the following day.

"I'm starved," he announced as they left the convention center.

"Me too." Sukie peered at her watch, angling her arm so the street light could illuminate the face enough for her to read the time. "It's almost nine."

David exhaled. "It's getting frosty out already. Why don't we grab a quick bite to eat somewhere nearby?"

"Nothing too fancy," Sukie agreed.

Despite the lateness of the hour, the restaurant was packed. Sukie all but stood on David's feet as they waited for a table.

"Don't these people know it's about to snow? They should go home," he murmured in her ear.

Sukie nodded. "Make a general announcement why don't ya?"

"Isn't that like yelling fire in a crowded theater? We'll be stomped to death," he predicted.

Sukie flexed her shoulders, rubbing her back against his arm in the process. "You may be right. Guess we'll just have to wait our turn."

"Ballard, table for two!"

"You were saying?" David asked. He propelled her forward, resting his hand on her left shoulder. He kept his touch light in the hopes she wouldn't shrug him away.

They were shown to a cozy table in a corner. A potted fake palm loomed over them. It didn't matter how he shifted; one of the heavy plastic leaves insisted on resting on top of his head.

Sukie giggled when he batted at the offending leaf repeatedly. After a few minutes of waging his losing battle, David stood.

"We're trading seats. You're shorter than I am."

"I imagine just about everyone is shorter than you," Sukie observed. "It's a good thing you have dark hair. It's the only way I can tell where

you top off.”

“Very funny. At least you didn’t comment on the silver in my hair.” He groaned with another leaf tapped his head.

“The tree is stalking you.” Sukie grinned.

“Lucky me. I’ll sue.”

“I’ll be a witness for you. I won’t tell the judge how you beat up the poor defenseless fake tree.”

David raised his right eyebrow and narrowed his left eye. When Sukie spewed water into her napkin, he sat back in his chair. Arms folded over his chest, he considered her.

“Having fun yet?” he drawled.

* * *

Sukie thought about the question for a moment. “I’ve had fun all day.”

Now why had she said that? At her confession, David’s wicked little boy grin turned smug. *This is not a date.* Best she remember that, too.

But by the time dessert arrived, Sukie knew the truth.

This was a capital D-Date. It must never happen again. She could picture herself falling for David hard.

“I feel I still owe you dinner on the Bay,” David said.

Uh oh. He was going to ask her for another capital D-Date. She hid behind her menu. That didn’t stop him, however.

“How about next weekend? Friday or Saturday night?”

“I’m busy,” she mumbled.

“I’ll call you later. When you have your social calendar in front of you,” David replied.

Sukie bristled at his light mocking of her. Her enjoyment of their nice relaxed day evaporated. Boy, had she deluded herself big time by thinking she could control this situation.

She'd forgotten to hold herself aloof from him, keeping him at a good arm's length distance.

She should have remained on her guard and presented her carefully constructed date mask rather her lame attempt at fooling herself that going out with him was no big deal.

Surprise of surprises, David still liked her, even after she'd allowed him to see the real Sukie. Liked her enough to ask her out again.

Oh, mercy. Was she in trouble. Big trouble.

CHAPTER SIX

Sukie wished she could stay in bed rather than face her family at the obligatory Sunday dinner. This tradition went as far back as she could remember. The only acceptable excuse for missing it was death.

She knew she'd already be in the doghouse for missing church, but she was in no hurry to subject herself to the questions her sisters would heap upon her for skipping the anniversary celebration. As insane as she thought the entire party was, now she had to face the music for being absent on purpose. Joy of joys.

Mom answered the door. Her face brightened with pleasure. "Sukie. You came."

"You didn't think I would?" She stepped past her mother into the entry. She took her jacket off and hung it up on the coat tree.

"Didn't know what to expect since you didn't show up yesterday."

"I told you I wouldn't come. And I won't attend any future Zandra-in-the-center-of-the-universe type parties." There. She said it; made her position plain.

Mom's eyes flickered away, then back to Sukie. "I'm sorry, honey. I had no right to try to pressure you into attending. I just thought perhaps you girls could work it out, if given the opportunity."

"I don't think that will happen any time soon."

Mom looked troubled. Sukie held up a hand, forestalling anything Mom might want to say. "It's the same old story with Zandie. I'm tired of

it, that's all."

"Look who decided to rejoin the family," Zandra's snide voice interrupted. Her heels clicked on the tiles of the large entry way as she joined them.

"Zandra, that's enough from you," Mom said sharply.

Zandra turned on her heel and left. An annoyed "humph" floated from her direction. Mom managed a small smile at Sukie, but the sparkle had left her eyes.

"I hope we don't have to live with this for the next forty or fifty years. It would be nice to enjoy our time together rather than tap dance around you girls and your feud." Mom led the way to the family room.

Sukie bit her tongue. Might as well get a head start on turning the other cheek. Doubtless her other sisters would have plenty to say. When she sauntered into the family room, they didn't disappoint her.

"Hey! Who's that?" Whitney chirped. She dug her elbow into Tarah's side.

"I think I've seen her somewhere before," Vickie added.

"It's been a while though," Tarah said. She grinned at Sukie.

Sukie sat in the chair near the fireplace, away from where the others gathered. A pile of fashion magazines lay opened on the coffee table and her sisters went back to thumbing through them together. Dad appeared to offer her a soda.

"Hi honey. We missed you yesterday. Glad to see you today." Dad dropped a kiss on the top of her head before he wandered over to his favorite chair. After ousting Tom from his recliner, Dad sat down and opened his newspaper.

"Really, Daddy. You could sit somewhere else," Zandra whined.

Dad's paper lowered. His bespectacled eyes appeared over the top; his eyebrows disappeared into his receding hairline. "I beg your pardon, young lady?"

Zandra flushed. Angry sparks shot from her pale blue eyes. "You're so proprietary about that silly chair. What would it hurt you to sit somewhere else?"

"I've held my tongue for several months, Missy Zandra," Dad said. "Your attitude of entitlement is so old it's moldy. Your behavior leaves a great deal to be desired."

Sukie recognized this as Dad at his most paternal. Two steadfast family rules were that you didn't sit in Dad's recliner, and you didn't sass him. As children, all the sisters had experienced Dad's hand against their bottoms at one time or another when they'd been mouthy. Zandra's mutinous expression, not a new look for her by any stretch of the imagination, deepened the lines around her mouth.

"Who's up for a game?" Mom asked. An obvious diversionary tactic, but an effective one.

The tense atmosphere eased a bit, but Zandra refused to play. Sukie put her back towards her youngest sister when she joined the group around the coffee table.

"So, where were you yesterday?" Tarah asked.

"I was out. A previous engagement."

"Doing what?" Vickie prompted.

"All by yourself?" Whitney demanded, seconds after Vickie's question.

"I went to the antique show. Bought a rug and an end table. Had a bite to eat and then home."

"Sounds boring," Whitney dismissed. She rolled the dice for her turn.

"I don't think Sukie was alone," Tarah guessed. She groaned as Whitney sent her game

piece back home.

Sister radar. Almost as good as Mom's radar. "I wasn't," Sukie admitted.

"Who were you with? A man?" Whitney handed the die to Vickie.

"A friend." Very good. Excellent way to classify her relationship with David. It sounded generic. Safe. Non-threatening.

"You were out with a man!" Vickie hooted. The die sat on the game board, momentarily forgotten. "She's turning bright red. Look!"

"Men aren't friends," Whitney stated. "Men are men."

"That's enough," Mom interrupted. "Or we won't be able to finish the game before dinner."

Sukie heaved a sigh of relief when her sisters settled down and dropped the subject. The look of interest Whitney shot at her disturbed her, however. Sukie only resumed normal breathing when she drove away from her parent's home three hours later.

* * *

"Don't you have a day job?" Sukie asked when Whitney showed no sign of leaving the book store. This early Monday afternoon moved with the alacrity of frozen molasses.

"I get an hour for lunch," her sister answered. She cradled three books in her arm.

"That was up two hours ago," Sukie pointed out, straining to keep her disgruntlement to herself.

"You're cranky."

So much for that. "You've been following me non-stop. I'm entitled."

"Just tell what I want to know."

"And that would be what, exactly?" Sukie perched on the stool she kept behind the counter.

"Who did you go out with on Saturday?" Whitney stacked her books by the cash register

and leaned forward. She placed her elbows on the surface of the counter top and rested her chin on her palms.

“None of your business. Now go away. I answered your question.”

Whitney looked thoughtful. “I know you were out with a man. Why are you keeping it a secret?”

“There’s no secret to be kept. It’s not like I have a relationship going on. It was a one time event.” Sukie punched the keys of the register with a stiff finger. “Twenty-two-oh-one.”

“Don’t you have a family rate?” Whitney grumbled as she handed over exact change.

Sukie gave her sister a look of disbelief. “If I did that you people would run me out of business in no time.”

Whitney laughed. “Fine. Be that way. Well, as long as you’re sure it was a one time event, I suppose there’s no more dirt I can dig through.”

“Bingo. Toddle on back to work now, Whit. Before you lose your job,” Sukie suggested.

A burst of cool air flooded the front of the store when the door opened as Whitney reached out to push it open. The man wore a scarf wrapped around his neck, with his collar upturned against the chill. His sunglasses disguised him well enough against Whitney’s quick interested gaze, but Sukie recognized him immediately.

David.

In her store.

Thank goodness he waited to approach her until after her sister was well out of the shop.

“It’s cold out there,” David said.

Weather talk was good. Acceptable between casual friends. “Snowfall tonight to reach at least three inches. What can I do for you?”

“Dinner. Friday. On the Bay. No isn’t the answer, either.”

Sukie bit her tongue, to keep from calling him a barbarian to his face. How dare he come in here and assume she'd go out with him again? Besides, he'd said he would call. Not visit her in person.

"I know you want to call me an unpleasant name, Sukie. It's written all over your face. So say it and let's move along."

"No."

Twin dark eyebrows arched in perfect unison over his twinkling hazel eyes. "Don't keep the poison inside. Let it out."

"Quit shrinking me."

"That's it. But I know there's more. I'm not going to fall apart because you call me a name, you know. I've heard them all."

Sukie chewed her lower lip. Indecision manifested through her tapping fingers as she waged an inner battle against her natural tendency towards being nice and her need to give David a well-stated piece of her mind. In the end, she forced herself to look away from his mesmerizing gaze.

"Dinner, Sukie. Seven o'clock on Friday. I promise you won't regret it," David said, his head cocked to one side and his arms spread wide.

She nodded slowly. After all, she did need to prove to herself the attraction she felt growing between them last Saturday was nothing more than gratitude for his providing her the out she needed to avoid a family gathering she couldn't stomach.

"Seven-thirty," she negotiated. "So I have time to get ready."

David nodded once, his face a study of pleased male who'd just scored a major victory for the home team.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A large window overlooked the surface of the Bay. By the light of the full moon, the docked boats took on a ghostly air. The dim lighting inside the restaurant lent the old seafood restaurant a romantic vintage atmosphere.

Sukie hated it with a passion. This was a big D-Date place. Most of the cozy tables were only for two. Orchestra music played in the background and blended so well with the ambiance that you almost didn't hear it whispering overhead.

"Have you ever been here before?" David asked. He folded his menu and set it between his silverware.

"No."

"You must not date the right kind of guys," David said, a study of sheer casualness.

Sukie narrowed her eyes and folded her arms across her chest. "We're not on a date, David."

Mock surprise colored his words. "We aren't? What do you call this then?"

"A mistake," Sukie muttered. She gathered her coat and purse, preparing to stand. What had she been thinking to go out with him again?

David's light applause stopped her in her tracks. A flood of irritation coursed through her veins. Still, she did what came naturally. She held her tongue.

"That's progress," David said. He leaned back in his chair, his hands cupped behind his head. Obviously comfortable with himself. "Surprise! I didn't burst into flames or get angry."

"When will you quit shrinking me?" Her demand rasped through taut lips. "If this is a date, this is hardly the time for that nonsense."

David sat up straight. A beaming smile transformed his bored psychologist expression.

"So you admit this is a date?"

"You're impossible," she fumed.

"So I've been told. You know, if I was really *shrinking* you, we'd be in my office and I'd be charging you my difficult patient rate." He said this in a matter-of-fact tone. "I most certainly wouldn't want to kiss you."

Sukie folded her coat over her arm and continued to glare at the insufferable man. Sure, he could go and make a quip like he wanted to kiss. Like she'd believe that!

Oh, why did his eyes glint golden when he was happy? The curve of his lips didn't extend into a full smile, but the expression radiated from his eyes like a beacon.

"It's a long way home. Cab fair would be astronomical," David told her.

"You won't take me home?" She couldn't believe what she heard.

"I came here to eat dinner with a lovely woman." He craned his head around the room, as if looking for a suitable replacement for her.

"You're a pig." Hurt and angry, she lashed out, determined to injure him.

"Oink."

"I don't like you very much right now." Irritated because she hadn't bloodied him with her words, she almost missed what he said next.

"Most people don't like me at all."

"I can understand why." So there.

"Can you? 'Cause I think you're so hung up on being liked that you're too scared to do or say anything when you're being taken advantage of," David said. He reached for his wineglass. "Right now you're reacting, but I still don't think you're

showing me how mad I've made you."

Sukie sank back into her chair. "If I demanded you take me home right now, would you?" She could see the wheels turning inside his head as he considered his answer.

"Yes, I would. Are you making that demand?"

"No. I came here to eat as well. With a handsome companion. Oh, look there. At the piano bar. A single man. He's attractive enough from this distance."

"Finally," David grumbled. "She's learned."

"Hush," Sukie admonished as she reached for her menu, satisfied he'd honor her wishes rather than expect her to accede to his. "I need to decide what to eat."

"Are you on a date now?"

Sukie nodded. She couldn't admit it out loud just yet, but she could be silently honest with herself and with David.

"It's about time. I've wanted to go on a date with you since we first met," he confided.

"Why? If you wanted to be introduced to Whitney, all you had to do was say so."

"Whitney? Why would I want to date her? She's, what...twenty six or seven? That's ten years younger than me. Had I been interested in her, I'd have asked her."

Great. First she'd made him angry, now she'd exasperated him. His left eyelid twitched. Sukie fixed her gaze on the seafood combination section of the menu. She'd better quit while she was behind.

"Hey," David said softly. "Is it that hard to decide what to order?"

"Not really," she admitted. "I thought I'd quit while I could still see out of the hole I was digging. Before you stopped talking to me altogether because I'm aggravating."

David shrugged one shoulder. "Aggravating

you aren't. Insecure, yeah. But we all are in one way or another."

About to take offense at his words, she realized he was simply commenting. She rotated her shoulders, forcing herself to relax. "So, what are you ordering?"

"You do have a way with changing the subject," David said with a laugh. "Steak and lobster tail. My favorite combo. With a caesar salad."

"Sounds good to me," she agreed.

"Mind if I ask you a question?" David asked after the waiter had been and gone.

"Is it a hard question?"

"Nope. I just wondered why the non-traditional names in your family."

Sukie rolled her eyes, shaking her head. "Dad's name is Malachi. Seems his great-grandparents started with the odd names. Mom told me once that Dad wanted to name us astrological names. Had she not put her foot down, I'd be saddled with the name of Andromeda or Celestia. I think he wanted to name Zandie Neutrino. Not sure what other names he wanted to inflict upon us."

"Sounds like your Mom saved you from a horrible fate. I like the name you wound up with," David said. He idly rolled his napkin ring between his hands.

"Thank you. It's still unusual, though."

"Yes, but would a Sukie by another name still be the Sukie with me tonight?"

She laughed. "That made no sense."

David winked at her. "Sukie suits you. It's warm and fuzzy like you."

"You make me sound like a worn out sweater," Sukie protested.

"But those are the best ones, don't you know. The most beloved." He reached across the table to cover her hand with his. The heat of his

hand traveled up her arm, flashing throughout her entire body. Somehow what seemed to be an uncomplimentary comment took on the seductiveness of intimate sweet talk. And more genuine than all the earnest compliments of her previous boyfriends.

Dinner arrived and they ate in relative silence. This suited Sukie, as she disliked the small talk her previous boyfriends insisted upon. Usually, they'd pose a question just when she'd stuffed a large forkful of food into her mouth.

"Dessert?" David asked while they waited for their empty dinner plates to be cleared.

"There's dessert?"

"Pies. Of every description. I can't decide between the chocolate silk and the coconut creme, so I order a slice of each."

"Mercy," Sukie whispered. Never had she let any of her dates see her eat more than the simplest of desserts, and certainly never two.

"Make up your mind fast. The waiter is on his way over."

In the end, she decided on Dutch apple and chocolate silk. With a scoop of french vanilla ice cream.

"Just roll me out to the car please," she requested. David settled the bill and was now holding her coat for her.

"I'm impressed. You're the first woman I've corrupted to my way of thinking."

His words rang with his approval, which washed over her like high tide coming to the shore. Odd how this affected her. It wasn't like it had been missing in her other boyfriends. Except, as she thought hard about it, she knew David accepted her as she was.

He cleared his throat. "You look happier than I've ever seen you."

"I'm happier than I've been in a long time," she admitted. "Thank you."

David held his hand out to her. She took it and they strolled out of the restaurant together, to his car.

"Same time tomorrow night?" He held the car door open for her.

"Italian perhaps?" she suggested, holding her breath.

"Perfect."

* * *

What good was having employees if you didn't take advantage of your position as boss once in a while? Sukie swallowed her grin as Molly stared in shock at her.

"You want me to close the shop?" Molly's voice squeaked. Her face showed every sixty-one of her years; she'd led a hard life.

"Yes. I'm leaving early."

"You've never left early before," Molly said.

"I know. There's a first time for everything. You did very well on your own while I was out sick."

The long over-due compliment brought a smile to the older woman's face. "You have a hot date, boss?"

"Well, a date. Don't know about hot."

"Must be hot if you're takin' off early," Molly reasoned.

"Behave yourself," Sukie admonished. They burst into laughter at the same time.

"Honey, you take off right now. Everything will be fine here. Treat yourself to a nice long bath. He must be special."

"Why do you say that?"

You've never done this before. Go. Don't worry about a thing," Molly urged. She made shooing gestures with her pudgy hands.

"Business might pick up mid-afternoon," Sukie protested. She glanced out the window. The gently falling snowflakes gave lie to her words.

“Not if it keeps snowing.”

Well, don’t stay until five if the store has been empty all afternoon. In fact, close shop at four and have yourself a nice evening too.”

“Yes, boss. Now skedaddle.”

Sukie skedaddled.

Oh, how refreshing the crisp snowy air felt against her cheeks. She slowed her pace so she could enjoy the weather. Snow somehow made the world quieter. Sound became muffled against the accumulated snow, even the sounds of downtown traffic.

A little car slowed to a crawl in the street, to her left. The passenger window went down and a familiar voice came from the car.

“I was on my way to see you at the shop. You leaving early today? You aren’t having a relapse, are you? Get in the car, and I’ll take you directly to Mom,” Whitney called.

“I’m fine. Yes, I’m leaving early.”

“Why? You sure you aren’t sick? Mom’ll skin me alive if...”

“Mercy, Whitney.”

“What’s up? If you’re not sick, there must be another reason.”

“You’re blocking traffic. I’ll talk to you later,” Sukie said.

“Uh-huh. There’s a man involved. I know it. I just know it. I can smell these sorts of things with my nosy little sister honker.”

“Buh-bye, Whit.”

“Have fun, Suke.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

For the second night in a row, Sukie ate until she could eat no more. Not once did David make a caustic comment about *once on the lips, forever on the hips*. Unlike some boyfriends she could think of; one now married to her youngest sister.

Her stomach hurt from all the food and laughter. On a whim, they decided to go to the old theater after dinner. The one that screened the classics.

"You have room for popcorn?" Sukie patted her middle. Her eyes bugged at the monster bucket of buttery kernels.

"Sure. Don't you? It's a movie. Ya gotta snack. It's all part of the entire entertainment package. Are you the Raisinettes-type of gal?"

"You must have a hyper metabolism," Sukie said, thinking of how large her backside was becoming. Why, she'd already gained three pounds. "And no. Blechy on the Raisinettes. I like gummy worms."

David's lips puckered in disgust, and he pulled a painful grimace. "Ugh. I'm not paying for those. If you want 'em, you fork out the dough."

"Some date you are." Sukie sniffed and stuck her nose into the air.

"A man has to have his standards."

"Would you kiss me after I ate some?" Sukie prodded.

"Only after you've brushed and gargled." David wrapped a defensive arm around his popcorn. "And no touching my popcorn with gummy worm fingers, either."

Sukie sighed in mock disbelief. "Oh, very well. Lucky for you I'm too stuffed from dinner to bother with the worms."

"Thank heavens for small mercies." He nudged her with his elbow.

"Well? Are we going to actually go watch a movie or just stand about here in the lobby, trading sarcasms?"

David paused to scratch his chin with his free hand. "Hmmm...a battle of the wits with you sounds...stimulating. But I paid six whole bucks so we could see Bogart on the big screen. Let's go."

"Where do you think we should sit? It's so crowded in here," Sukie stage-whispered as they entered the theater. Her eyes swept across the badly-lit room filled with mostly empty seats.

"I don't know. We may not be able to sit together," David returned. The lights dimmed and a flickering image filled the screen, prompting them to sit hastily.

* * *

A light snow fell from the sky. The lights of town reflected against the white clouds, which in turn brightened the darkness to late twilight. The glare of the red marquee bulbs cast a pink glow on everything.

"Did you enjoy the movie?" David asked. He didn't really need an answer. The stars in Sukie's eyes told him she was still somewhere on the *African Queen* with Bogey.

"Yes." She sighed. "I love old movies. Tom only liked action films. The kind where there are just two people left alive at the end."

"Acting is optional, as the real star of the flick is the action-slash-adventure," David replied. "I don't much care for the blood and guts type movies. Don't like the so-called chick flicks, either. The classics were another story altogether. They had style, substance. Good

acting. Too bad that era of cinematography had gone the way of the carrier pigeon.”

“I thought the star of action movies were the muscles,” Sukie said. “I love the classics and chick flicks. I want to know why these so-called chick flicks get such a derogatory term, while the male equivalent of chick flicks get to be called action-adventure movies.”

“Because we live in a sexist society. What else are we supposed to call that sappy goo-goo love story stuff you women like to watch?” David took her arm and tucked it into his elbow. This forced her closer to him. It felt good to stroll arm in arm with her. It exuded a sense of rightness.

“Entertainment at it’s best,” Sukie replied. “At least there is an actual plot with true-to-life human characters who learn and grow through the movie.”

They walked half a block in silence before Sukie spoke again. “I hate for this evening to end.”

“I can fix that. There’s a diner just a couple blocks down,” he answered. His breath made wispy white fog when he spoke.

“I think there’s room in there now for some hot chocolate.”

“With or without gummy worms?”

Sukie batted her eyelashes at him. “Do you think they have some?”

“I hope not. I’d have to stop eating there.”

They continued down the sidewalk in companionable silence until they reached the diner. Several tables were filled, but they didn’t have to wait. In short order, they each had a mug of steaming hot chocolate before them.

“Oooo...” Sukie licked the white cream from her lips.

He couldn’t watch. A man had limits of what he could take, and Sukie pushed those limits without realizing what she did.

“Real whipped cream,” she cooed.

“It doesn’t take much to please you,” David observed. She was a welcome change from the high-maintenance types he’d dated.

Sukie’s eyebrows drew together. Her lips formed a small pout. It couldn’t be more clear that she didn’t like what he’d said.

“What I mean is, you take pleasure in the simple things. I don’t have to hire a circus to keep you entertained.”

“I’m not exciting.” She nodded, like she’d heard it before.

“No, that’s not it at all.” How to make her understand he liked her the way she was?

“Tom always urged me to take more chances. Spread my wings, as it were. Run in the race rather than watch it. The sort of thing.”

David frowned as he idly stirred his hot drink. “I don’t understand.”

Sukie sipped her drink before she answered. “He was irritated with me the evening I took him home to meet my folks. The night he and Zandie...” She paused to take a deep, shaky breath.

“Anyhow, he’d been trying to talk me into a rock climbing trip. Half Dome. I wanted no part of hanging off the side of a rock, and I didn’t feel comfortable going on a trip with a man I wasn’t married to. He told me I was old-fashioned and out of touch.”

“I can’t see Zandra hanging off Half Dome either.” David dismissed the absurd picture that came to mind.

Sukie shook her head, bemusement flashed across her face. “She’d chip a fingernail or some-such, and the world would come to screeching halt.”

“And that’s what I find so attractive about you.” He lifted her hand, peering at her plain, short fingernails. “Your life doesn’t revolve

around your claws, hair or make-up. You have depth. Serenity. Conviction.”

A small smile played around her lips. His point made, he kissed her fingers and let go of her hand.

“You’re bound and determined, aren’t you?”

“To do what?” He sat back in his chair, cupping his mug with both hands.

She shook her head.

“Not answering, huh?” David grinned at her. “Well, my sweet, I’ll turn that back around at ya. You’re bound and determined to do to me what you’re accusing me of doing to you.”

Hope shone in the depths of her blue eyes, but only for a moment. He saw her cheeks turn pink before she turned her head away from him.

“So the question is, what do we do now that this has turned into a relationship?” he asked.

CHAPTER NINE

Do now? Sukie dreamt those words. In vivid color, in clear bell tones, and all larger than life. She thought she'd loved Tom. But she knew better after her second...*second!* official date with David.

Yes, at first she'd found him irritating. Especially with his tendency to lecture her. She realized he wasn't shrinking her, as she'd so disdainfully phrased it. He hadn't said anything to her that she hadn't heard from her mother about crawling out of her pit of despair.

The wee hours of the morning held more promise than darkness. With only a couple hours of sleep, she lay in her bed wide awake, staring up through the inky blackness at her ceiling. At some point, a previous tenant had painted glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling. They glowed faintly now, offering the comfort of constancy.

What a wonderful word. Constancy. And continuance. Life went on—the passage from summer when she'd felt her heart shattered into pieces, to autumn with her grudging agreement to be in a wedding she'd still thought should have been hers, to winter.

Despite the cold, crisp briskness of the short days, Sukie felt the revival spring brings. Christmas loomed ever closer. The knowledge she'd be subjected to more Zandra and Tom didn't sting much anymore, thanks to David's presence in her life.

She rolled onto her side in order to reach over and click on the beside lamp. The phone sat

on her nightstand, awash in the yellowish tint of the lamplight. As she stared at the phone, it rang.

“Hello?”

“It didn’t even ring once.”

“That’s ridiculous. Of course it rang. Why else would I have answered it?”

“Getting ready to make a call,” David answered.

“Who would I call at four in the morning?”

“Me?”

He sounded hopeful to her. Cautious, yes, that too.

“Maybe,” she admitted.

“I couldn’t sleep. You didn’t answer my question.”

Sukie laughed. “No, I didn’t, did I? What do you want to do?”

“Didn’t your mother ever teach you it’s impolite to answer a question with another question?”

She dismissed the testy edge to his voice. She recognized that trick for what it was: David putting up his own barrier.

“You don’t want to stop seeing me, do you?” Sukie asked. She held her breath, waiting for his answer.

“Now who’s being ridiculous? I want to see more of you. Every day. Every night. You make me crazy, you know. In more ways than one.”

She gulped air, relieved. “You should see a good shrink for that.”

“And?”

“I want to see more of you too, David.”

She heard a whooshing noise over the phone line, like he’d just expelled breath he’d been holding while waiting for her answer. The thought that he might be as insecure as she knew herself to be made him all the more appealing.

“Good. Well then. What are you doing,

calling people at four in the morning?"

Sukie giggled. "Alright. I'll never again call you at four in the morning."

"Get some sleep. There's a John Wayne movie festival at the theater this afternoon. I might even buy you some nasty gummy worms."

"Can I get that in writing?"

"Smarty pants. I'll pick you up at noon. We'll grab a bite of lunch before the movies start."

"I'll be ready," she agreed.

"G'night, Sukie."

"Good night, David."

She pressed the disconnect button with her thumb, but kept hold of the handset. No way would she ever get back to sleep; not with dawn only a few hours away.

When the phone began to buzz, she startled, unaware her thumb had slipped. She replaced the receiver and climbed out of bed. Might as well get the coffee percolating now. She would need a barrel of the rich brew to get her going.

* * *

The discount store teemed with people. Aisles overflowed with Christmas items from gifts to decorations. Sukie pushed her cart around a cardboard display. Her sisters and mother followed.

"What's the big hurry? It's Sunday. We're playing hooky from church for our annual Christmas shopping expedition. We have all day. You act like you have to leave soon," Tarah teased.

"I do." Oh, how she didn't want to get into this with them.

"Why? It's not like you have a social life," Zandra snarked.

"Don't be so sure about that." Whitney tapped the corner of her wide mouth with a finger, framing her chin with her hand. "I caught

her leaving her store early on Friday.”

“No!” Vickie’s eyes bugged out with feigned shock.

“Our Sukie? Left her store early?” Tarah asked.

“You weren’t feeling ill were you?” Mom asked, concerned frowns gathering at her brow and around her mouth.

Whitney laughed. “I told you Mom would say that.”

“If it’s a man, we want to meet him,” Tarah said.

“Like she’d ever be able to hold onto a man.” Zandra examined her flawless manicure in what looked to be boredom at it’s peak.

“Why don’t you just shut up?” Sukie burst out, unable to take any more of Zandra’s sniping.

“Mo-ther!” Zandra whined.

“Give it a rest, why don’t you? You may be the youngest, but you don’t have to act like a spoiled brat. We all know you aren’t spoiled. Just witchy,” Sukie said.

“I don’t have to stand here and take this from you, you know.” Zandra gave a smug sneer. “I can go home to Tom.”

“Why don’t you?” Sukie demanded. “Then perhaps the rest of us can enjoy the time we have left together.”

“Mo-ther!”

Mom shrugged. “It’s your choice, Zandie. You do what you feel you must.”

Zandra’s face went slack with disbelief. Sukie wanted to applaud her mother, but didn’t dare. Like an unstable chemical, Zandra could blow at the tiniest provocation. With a loud snort, Zandra turned on her spiky heel and retreated.

“When do you have to leave, Sukie?” Mom asked.

“Eleven thirty.”

“We have two hours.” Mom glanced at her watch.

The remaining sisters huddled behind Sukie as Mom took the lead. Two aisles later, the confrontation was forgotten, as Mom modeled an antler headband. The tips twinkled with flashing red and green lights.

“Dad will love ‘em!” The sisters chorused.

The shopping continued, but Sukie withdrew from the revelry. She knew she’d ruined everyone’s fun by jumping on Zandra.

“Hey.” Tarah nudged her as they picked through a rack of Christmas shirts and sweaters. “She had it coming to her. Mom didn’t say anything. You know she would have had she thought you were out of line. And she all but told Zandra to take a hike.”

“Zandie’s been nothing but mean to you,” Vickie added. She held a turtleneck covered with tiny snowmen next to a festive sweater. She plucked her sizes in both and added them to the cart. “You like snowmen or Santie Claus, Sukie? I’m getting you holiday wear whether you want it or not.”

“Santa,” Sukie replied. Better to cave than argue with Vickie when she was determined to buy everyone holiday clothes.

“And you’ll wear them this year.” Vickie shook a finger at Sukie.

Mom carried bright red sweatshirts, from across the walkway. “Sukie, it’s almost time for you to go. We’ll drop your things by later.”

“Let me give you a check.” Sukie reached into her purse.

“No, honey. We’ll settle up later. You don’t want to be late,” Mom refused.

Sukie hugged her mother and her sisters in good-bye.

“Have *fun*,” the sisters called amid giggles.

CHAPTER TEN

Sukie opened her front door, surprised to see Tom standing there in the hall. He wore the collar of his coat flipped up, as usual. A trait she now found pretentious, where before she'd thought it cool. Oh, she didn't have time for Tom right now. David was due to show up at any moment.

"Tom. I wasn't expecting you."

"You were expecting someone?" The glance he leveled at her spoke volumes. He didn't think she'd be entertaining anyone. Boy, was he in for a shocker when David arrived.

"As a matter of fact, I am." She kept her tone frosty even though her heart raced, pounding a tattoo that could keep time for a heavy metal band.

Tom scowled at her, his puzzlement palpable. So much so, in fact, that it would take a butcher knife to cut through the thickness of unresolved issues between them.

"I need to talk to you. I figured you'd understand." Tom shrugged out of his coat and held it out to her.

Sukie ignored it. "Where's Zandie?" Not that she cared. Much.

"At home, I assume. Or perhaps on one of her infernal shopping expeditions. You have the time."

Not a question. A statement of fact. With a jolt, Sukie recognized the pattern they'd fallen into. It was the same as when they'd dated. He was more important than anything she had going on, at least in his own mind. Two peas in a pod,

he and her sister. She thought, briefly, about telling him Zandra had left the family shopping trip in a huff.

"She's driving me nuts! She thinks she's the center of the universe," Tom told her. His coat hung over his forearm, but that didn't stop him from folding his arms across his chest. His sage nod had Sukie pressing her lips together to keep in a bark of derisive laughter.

Priceless. When Tom stared at her, clearly expecting her instant commiseration, she gulped. Hard.

"I recall you think the same way about yourself, Tom. So. You having trouble competing with Queen Zandra?"

"She hates me. She does nothing for me unless it benefits her."

Sukie sighed. "I have no intention of allowing you to pull me into the middle of your marriage."

"You loved me."

"Emphasis on the past tense." Once upon a time, she'd hoped this would happen. Tom. Crawling back to her. Daydreaming this exact scenario had eaten the minutes and hours of her days.

"You have to help me." His too-handsome face held the look of a two-year-old about to let loose with a squall of temper.

"I have to do no such thing. You left me, remember? I wasn't exciting enough for you, but I was always there. You're remembering that now, aren't you?" The weight she'd carried around lifted when she decided to hold nothing back. Tom deserved no loyalty or sympathy from her.

"I was a fool." He tossed his coat over the back of a dining room chair and advanced towards her.

Sukie backed away. She raised her hands to

ward him off. Last thing she wanted was for him to touch her. The expectant glimmer on his face told her more than she wanted to know.

Tom thought she'd been pining all this time for him. He thought she'd welcome his return.

He'd thought wrong.

And she was about to let him know that. She couldn't be with any man who'd scorned her in favor of one of her sisters. Not now, not ever.

"I know he's here. Don't think I don't!" Zandra barreled into Sukie's apartment, leaving the door wide open. Her body quivered with rage. "He's mine."

"Yes. He is," Sukie agreed.

"Sukie," Tom moaned. "I made a mistake."

"You bet you did, Bub. Your *wife* is here."

"She's your sister." Confused, Tom took another step towards Sukie. He ignored his bristling wife.

"True enough. But my sister is married to you. A fact we both have to accept. Stealing you back from her is not an option. Will never be an option."

"You wouldn't be stealing me. I'm coming willingly," Tom argued. Desperation twisted his features, colored his words. For the first time, Sukie saw him for what he was—a weak, morally corrupted little boy with an expensive hair cut.

"Jerk," Zandra snapped at her husband. She fixed a fulminating glare on Sukie. "I can't believe you'd go running to Sukie, of all people."

"I didn't know how good I had it when I was with her. I felt like the center of her universe," Tom told Zandra. "You don't even give me the time of day."

Sukie needed a score card to keep up the complaints flying through the air.

"So you know how it feels to be ignored. Just like you've ignored me since we got back from the honeymoon," Zandra responded.

"Please, Sukie. You have to take me back." Tom put his back to his wife as he resumed his pleading.

"I. Don't. Want. You. You chose my sister. Your decision binds me, whether you stay married to Zandra or not. I don't want you back, Tom. Ever. I deserve better than you."

"Tom may not be perfect, but I doubt you'll find anyone better." Zandra's face reflected the sneer in her voice.

"Hey, Cuz," David spoke from the open front door. "Don't forget to turn out the lights when you leave with your lovely wife."

Zandra's eyes narrowed, her mouth pursed in sour regard for the new arrival. "This is interesting. A psychologist who makes house calls."

Sukie didn't bother to correct her sister's mistaken impression. It didn't matter. She just wanted Tom and Zandra to go.

"You're not over Tom, no matter what you say. But be clear on this: he's mine." Zandra tapped her chest with scarlet-tipped fingers.

"Yep. You stole him fair and square." Sukie pointed to the door. "Please take him now and go."

"You can't mean it," Tom said. "Was your love for me so shallow you can dismiss what we had so easily?"

Sukie gaped at him. "I think you're projecting your shortcomings on me, Tom. You left me with the ease one would use to change a lightbulb."

Tom's mouth worked like a fish breathes on land.

"I'm sorry you're both so unhappy," Sukie offered. She meant it too. "Perhaps you have a better understanding for my insistence on slow and steady, Tom."

"We'd be dead, Suke, before you committed

to anything,” Tom lashed. He pushed Zandra out the door, snatching his coat with his free hand. “At least you know how to have fun, Zan.”

“You’re still a jerk.” Zandra’s angry voice echoed in the corridor.

“What’s that old wheeze? The more things change, the more they don’t?” David queried.

“At least they’re well-suited in the selfish department.” The chances those two would ever take ownership of their shortcomings rivaled the possibility of Sukie being able to swim to China. The realization she’d been infatuated with the idea of love, rather than being in love with Tom freed her from the bonds of betrayal she’d labored with all these months.

The import of what had just happened hit her, leaving her shell-shocked.

“You really don’t want Tom back?” David asked. He watched her through hooded eyes.

“No. I don’t. I’m wondering if I ever did.” She collapsed on her couch.

“But you’re still not ready to tell people we’re seeing each other.”

Sukie rubbed her forehead, her eyes squished shut. “Oh, David. It’s not that. Tom caught me off-guard. All other rational thought fled.”

“How much longer are you going to keep me a secret?” He sat at the opposite end of the sofa.

Sukie scooted across the cushions to sit right next to him. “Slow and steady. Remember?”

David’s response came in the form of an unconvinced grunt. Stung, Sukie inched away. David’s arm snaked out to halt her retreat.

“Slow and steady, but not a complete halt,” he requested.

Sukie nodded. She doubted she’d ever be as ready as she’d like to be before she announced the fact she had a boyfriend. But she couldn’t stay in the relationship closet for the rest of her

life, either.

Sooner or later she had to admit out loud that she had feelings for David. Deep ones that had encircled her heart, effectively entangling every ounce of her being.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Sukie sipped from a Styrofoam cup. The coffee still steamed, but not hot enough to burn. Just right. She hadn't been to a social hour after church services since Tom left her. Didn't want to be bothered by any well-meaning but nosy questions. Thankfully enough time had passed and another gossipy tidbit was making the rounds.

"Have a donut," Dad suggested, holding a sugared pastry nestled in a napkin. "Tide you over until dinner."

"Thanks, Dad."

"It's nice to see new people attending services, isn't it?" Dad asked. "Isn't that Tom's cousin? The best man at the wedding?"

Sukie did a double take. Sure enough, David stood by the coffee station, surrounded by a bevy of little old white-haired ladies. The Welcoming Committee, if Sukie didn't miss her guess. Had he come to church because that's where she'd told him she'd be this morning when he'd suggested a wonderful Sunday brunch yesterday?

"David."

Dad smiled down at her. "You remember his name?"

Sukie coughed.

"You'll never guess who's here," Mom said, bustling up behind them. "David Ballard."

"We just saw him, Tildie," Dad said. "Sukie remembered his name."

Mom's eyebrows arched, matched with a speculative gleam in her blue eyes. "Did she? Well, Malachi, I think I'll invite him home for

Sunday supper.”

Sukie’s expression must have reflected how appalled she was by the idea, for Dad reassured, “Honey, I doubt David’s anything like Tom.”

“Nobody is quite like Tom,” Mom asserted.

“Except Zandie,” Whitney joined the conversation.

Sukie groaned inwardly. Just what she needed. A reminder that Whit had come on to David during the reception. So bogged down in her miserable thoughts, she almost missed her sister’s pained comment.

“I think I owe him an apology for being rude to him at the reception. You too, Suke. I haven’t apologized to you yet either. I’m sorry. I was awful.”

David joined them, his face lighting up when he looked at Sukie. She felt warmed by his presence, and a tad scared. Her family didn’t know she dated him.

“How nice to see you again, David,” Mom said. “I just told Malachi, we should invite you over for Sunday supper.”

“Thank you. I accept,” David said. “Sukie, we could have come together.”

Dad’s glasses slipped down his nose. “Together?”

David eyed Sukie suspiciously. “Yes, sir. Hasn’t Sukie told you? We’ve been dating.”

“She did not tell us this,” Dad replied, turning to pierce her with an astonished gaze.

Whitney clapped her hands. “Wonderful!”

“Sukie Rose?” Dad prompted.

Great. Just how she didn’t want to tell her family she was dating him. Sukie cleared her throat. “It’s happened so suddenly, Dad. Nothing serious, you know.”

The thought that David had come to her church just to corner her into confessing their burgeoning relationship made her

uncomfortable.

Silence fell over the awkwardness. Sukie couldn't look at David. She could feel his disappointment rolling off him in waves.

"Were you going to tell us anytime soon?" Dad asked.

"I don't know." She fidgeted with the half-eaten donut she still held.

Dad sighed. "Honey, these things are important."

"Look at what happened the last time I brought someone home with me," Sukie murmured. Coffee sloshed over the edges of the cup as she stuffed the wad of napkin and pastry into it.

"You think I'm like Tom?" David demanded in disbelief.

Sukie forced herself to look at him directly. He'd crossed his arms over his chest; his disgusted expression slammed into her with a force that was almost physical. She took a step back.

"If that's what you think after the time we've spent together, then I don't know what to tell you, Sukie. Perhaps I should have taken you on as a patient, rather than as a..." His voice hardened, and his eyes became steely slits.

His words reduced her to a two-inch stature, while her shame took gigantic proportions, effectively ripping her in two. Nausea roiled in her middle and a buzzing noise filled her ears when David strode away from her.

* * *

If misery loved company, then Sukie had come to the right place. Tarah, Vickie and Whitney flanked her on the sofa, speaking to each other in muted tones.

Speaking to each other about her while their husbands immersed themselves in watching Sunday football.

Nice.

Only one thing could make her more miserable than she already was, and lo and behold, Tom and Zandra walked into the family room.

“So, you’ve been dating a psychologist, because you couldn’t get over Tom leaving you for me all by your little self.” Zandra perched on the arm of the chair Tom sat in, on the opposite side of the room. “Tom’s cousin, no less. This is just a scream. Tom’s going to turn David into the board for dating a patient. Unethical, you know.”

“Zandra, why don’t you just shut that sorry excuse of a mouth,” Tarah flared. “You two are the reason Sukie kept David a secret from us. Thanks to you, our big sis doesn’t trust us. If you really think she had to seek professional help because of you two idiots, I’d say you need a different hobby. Surely it gets tiring thinking about yourself so much.”

“And so often,” Vickie snapped. “For Pete’s sake, Zandie, grow up. Get over yourself.”

“Watch how you speak to my wife,” Tom said.

“This is hysterical.” Sukie framed her throbbing forehead with her hands. “So, now she’s your wife again? After you slithered to my apartment last week, begging me to help you out of your marriage?”

“Holy moley, Zan,” Whitney said softly. “Don’t you have any pride at all?”

Zandra’s chin jutted into the air. “Sure, we have problems. All married couples do.”

Tarah and Vickie shook their heads simultaneously. “Not like yours,” Tarah replied.

“If you two can’t contribute anything positive to this situation, why don’t you just go home,” Vickie suggested. “You’ve both wreaked enough havoc on Sukie.”

Tom rose. "Sukie, don't blame me for your failures as a woman."

Whitney flew off the sofa, screeching at Tom and flapping her arms. "Oooooo! Go away! Get out. You're horrible. Just...horrible!"

"Quit yelling at my husband!" Zandra shouted. She put herself between Whitney and Tom. "If Sukie is so wonderful, why did Tom leave her?"

Sukie shrank into the couch cushions in an attempt to make herself invisible as the shouting escalated. A sharp whistle rent through the cacophony of voices. The arguing stopped so abruptly that the silence vibrated on the air. She jerked her head up to find the source of the ear-splitting sound.

"David?" Sukie whispered, wondering who'd let him in without giving her a heads up.

"Yeah," came David's impatient answer. He continued, "Zandra, in answer to your question...Tom left Sukie because he's a fool. One whose head is easily turned, as I'm sure you've discovered."

"What's going on in here?" Mom demanded. Her hasty entrance from the kitchen momentarily stopped the conversation. "Dad I and could hear you in the garage."

No one replied.

"David, you found Sukie alright. Thanks for helping me get this wreath out of the rafters." Dad said as he entered the crowded room. He carried an enormous wreath.

"You here for dinner?" Mom asked, her hopeful voice strained.

"I came to ask Sukie a question. I wasn't fair to her at church." David stood with his legs braced apart. Tall and austere, he held his ground.

Hope bloomed for Sukie, much as the first flower of spring responds to the warmth of the

sun. He'd come after her. Scary? Absolutely. No man had ever come back for her after he'd walked away. Except for Tom, and he didn't count.

She grabbed a throw pillow to hug. In three steps, David stood before her. The pillow he'd snatched from her dangled from his hand.

"I need to know, Sukie, how serious our relationship is to you, because it's pretty serious for me."

"I..." she gulped. Her heart thrashed in her chest. The blood pounded through her head. Her body felt like a battleground between the warring factions of her emotions and her brain. David asked for something she didn't know whether she could extend, even in these extraordinary circumstances. Trust. Trust and love. The love part was easy.

It mattered little that this confrontation happened before witnesses. The edges of the room faded into the background, leaving only Sukie and David facing each other. Both of them yearned for the same outcome, yet the sting of past experience had taught her caution.

Oh, how she wanted to tell him the truth—that he owned her heart. But by verbalizing that, she would be opening herself up to a hurt she couldn't bear to experience again.

Time stretched between them. After what felt like an eternity, David dropped the pillow. "I see. There's nothing left for us to say, is there? Goodbye, Sukie."

Sukie buried her face in her hands in the wake of his leaving. She couldn't face her family right now. Mercy. She couldn't even face herself.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Blessed solitude. It came into Sukie's life in tiny snatches these days. Her sisters had taken it into their heads that she needed company. Lots and lots of company.

It was the last thing she needed. Or wanted. At least Zandra stayed away. A small boon, but a welcome one.

A hollow feeling unlike anything she'd ever felt before overwhelmed her to the point where she stopped thinking.

It hurt less that way.

So she told herself.

Pining for Tom now seemed like child's play. She didn't pine for David. She mourned his absence. Amazing how little time it took her to come to rely on him. She thought about calling, but couldn't make herself pick up the phone.

Sukie pressed the play button on her answering machine again, replaying the last message David had left. His mellow voice flowed out of the tiny speaker, distorted by the machine. But oh, how she hung on to every word he said.

"I'm pathetic," she muttered. She sat on her hands to keep herself from pressing the play button again. "All I need is a cat or ten, and that eau de cat smell, and I'll really be set for life. Just like Aunt Mildred. Worse. I'm talking to myself."

She couldn't deny the sorry fact that she'd messed up this relationship all by herself. The humiliation of Tom's defection couldn't begin to compare to the horror of David's second walk-out with most of her family as witnesses. She

couldn't decide which had been worse: Tom and Zandra's smirks, or the sympathy from her parents and Whitney.

All her anguish stemmed from the fact that she'd allowed herself to wallow in her sorrow and anger, blaming Tom and Zandra for her problems. The problem didn't rest with them. It was within her. Her instinctive need to protect herself turned into an effective man repellent. Mosquito spray for humans. Perhaps she could bottle it and market it to the divorced crowd.

* * *

Sukie wondered what David was doing at that very moment. Midmorning. He probably had a patient in his office. Heaven knew she had little time to mope, but for such a worthy cause, she found the time. With a silent sigh, she asked her customer to repeat her request.

"I'm taking the afternoon off," Sukie told Molly.

Her assistant nodded.

"You aren't surprised, are you?"

Molly's answering low chuckle accompanied a slight shrug. "Nope. You didn't act this way after Tom. It's obvious to me that you feel more deeply for David. Just stop being a scaredy-cat, honey. Take the chance. Tom isn't fit to hold David's shoes, much less fill them."

"I miss David."

"Then do something about it. Stop it already with that long face. It'll freeze that way."

Freeze. Yeah. Good word. It was what Sukie was doing now, standing outside the high-rise that housed David's practice. She felt like a stalker. Briskly, she rubbed her arms, then crossed them over her chest.

He emerged from the building. Sukie ducked behind a small leafless tree. She didn't want him to catch her stalking him. Getting caught would only heap more humiliation on top

of the load she already carried.

“Dr. Ballard!”

Sukie sucked in a sharp breath at the shrill female voice. David halted a few yards from where she hid, his back to her. A tall blonde woman joined him. David’s hands disappeared into the deep recesses of his coat pockets when the woman tried to hook her arm through his.

“Aren’t you going to lunch, Miss Long?”

“We’re out of the office, surely you could be less formal,” Miss Long chided. “I just wanted you to know, I’m here if you need a shoulder.”

“Thanks. I’m fine.”

“She has no idea what she’s missing, Dr. Ballard. You deserve a woman who will appreciate you properly.”

“Your lunch hour is wasting,” David said, turning away from Miss Long.

“I’d be happy to be more than just your secretary,” Miss Long sounded desperate.

“I need a secretary, not an office romance.”

“Your loss.” Miss Long tossed this over her shoulder as she walked away.

“You gonna hide behind that tree all afternoon, Sukie?”

She closed her eyes for a moment before leaving her inadequate hiding place. “You saw me?” Unnecessary, but she could think of nothing else to say to cover her embarrassment.

“I could pick you out of a crowd of Sukie clones.”

His rough voice sparked a cascade of tingles that ran through her. He didn’t smile, but his eyebrow quirked just so. The possibility that he had missed her occurred, giving her a ray of hope to hold onto.

“I’ve missed you,” Sukie offered, her earlier chill forgotten. The warmth of the sun over Bermuda couldn’t in any way compare to the heat his presence caused.

His face melted into a smile. "Have you? How much?"

"More than I ever missed Tom. One hundred years could pass, and I'd still miss you very much."

"You willing to back those words with action?"

"Action?"

"I don't want to be the secret you keep. Been there, done that, bought the baseball cap," David told her. "I want to share every moment of your every day, out in the open."

Sukie remained silent, thinking over his words. She heard the words, and instinctively felt what he left unsaid. Between them, they carried quite a load of baggage, yet he never let his past come between them.

"You don't trust yourself any more than I trust myself," Sukie said, wondrous realization dawning. "But you haven't let that stop you from getting close to me."

"Love's worth the agony that often accompanies it. The greater the pain, the greater the love."

"Ask me again," Sukie requested.

A half smile lifted one corner of David's mouth. "Where is this relationship headed?"

Sukie took a step, close enough to touch, but still not actually touching him. She stood on her tiptoes and gave him a chaste kiss.

"Oh. That way." He captured her, pulling her tight to him and showed her how to really kiss.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A small table-top Christmas tree twinkled in the bay window in David's den. On the other side of the room, a fire crackled in the stone hearth. The coffee table in front of them had disappeared under a load of popcorn, soda cans and pizza boxes.

The original *Miracle on 34th Street* played on the wide screen TV set. Sukie and David reposed in the dark green leather sofa with an almost empty box of pizza between them as they watched the movie.

"What are you doing for Christmas?" Sukie sank her teeth into a slice of sausage-pineapple pizza. She wanted to sound off-hand in her question, not give too much away, but the truth of the matter was she couldn't envision spending the holiday without him.

He reached over to tweak her nose. "Are you taking me home for the holidays?"

"I don't know. Can you behave yourself?"

David harrumphed. "If you're gonna be that way about it, I'll just lock you up in here with me. I have no intention of behaving myself when you're around."

To prove his point, he grabbed her hand and rubbed circles into her palm with his thumb.

The hot flash that coursed from her toes to the ends of her freshly trimmed hair would have set off a smoke detector, had she been standing near one. Open affection from a man thrilled her, but still astonished her. She struggled against her instinctive urge to shove him away. Protecting herself, her heart, as always.

“Hey, you’re so quiet.” David nudged the cardboard box to the floor when he slid closer to her.

Sukie let him trap her, tucking herself into his embrace. She made a mental note to find out which aftershave he wore, to make sure he never ran out.

“This is all new for me, David. I’ve never let a romance progress this far.”

His hand tangled the strands of her hair as he cupped her face. “I won’t hurt you.”

She sighed into his shirt. “I know. You really want to experience an Adams’ Family Christmas? We’re just about as odd as our television counterparts.”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” he answered.

* * *

Tarah and her husband Avery hosted the family Christmas in their new home. When Sukie and David arrived, the scent of roasting turkey and ham greeted them. Candles clustered throughout the house gave an undertone of spicy-sugar cinnamon, bringing back memories of childhood holidays.

The tree stood at one end of the mostly empty living room. Brightly wrapped and beribboned gifts piled in joyous abundance under the pine Christmas tree. Holiday music played from one of the bedrooms so as not to overpower the conversations.

A subdued Tom and Zandra kept to themselves, apparently preferring their own company. Sukie waited for her youngest sister to make some sort of caustic comment, but Zandra remained silent. No one dared get too close to Tom, for Zandie blocked their access.

“She’s insecure about him,” Tarah confided to Sukie when they stood together admiring the tree.

“So much for love at first sight,” Sukie

whispered.

“She’ll make it work because she can’t stand to fail at anything.” Tarah moved to the side, so Mom and Vickie could join them. The men congregated around the food in the kitchen.

“It’s hard for Zandra to admit her mistakes,” Mom said. “So we’ll have to be loving and supportive. I’m sure, Sukie, that once she works through her problems, she’ll apologize for her dreadful behavior.”

“It sure explains a lot of her ‘tude for the past few months,” Sukie said.

“Hey!” Dad called. “The buffet is getting lonely!”

The women bee-lined for the food, stampeding past Dad.

“Cattle crossing,” he announced with the timing of a comic.

A breakfast buffet ranged over the counters in the kitchen. Only when everyone had a plate piled high with goodies did they all congregate around the tree.

Dad put on his Christmas Eve gift: a pair of reindeer antlers. “I call Santa!”

They laughed. Dad always called Santa. His joy of the holiday was contagious. The chant began.

“Presents! Presents!”

Dad picked up a big box wrapped in snowman paper and topped with a giant green bow.

“To Mom, from Dad. It’s big,” he bellowed.

It happened that way every year. The first gift delivered always went to Mom, and it was from Dad. He always proclaimed it’s size.

“You wore the Santa sweater,” Vickie said when she passed Sukie on her way to find a place to sit. “You’re so festive this year.”

“A gift for Vickie from Phil, her spouse. Lucky for him he’s not a louse,” Dad yelled. “To

Avery from Tarah, your wife. I wonder if you got a fife.”

Groans met Dad’s last rhyme. He affected a hurt expression, which fooled no one from the giggles Sukie heard being stifled behind hands and napkins.

When the presents had at long last been distributed, Dad gave his yearly admonition. “Presents are great, but let’s remember the real reason we’re celebrating this day. A prayer first, then we’ll open our gifts.”

Several minutes later, Dad said, “Amen. You may rip and tear.”

It took only an hour to open everything; it would take the rest of the day to tour one another’s loot. Sukie hovered while her sisters looked at the clothing she’d received.

“Oh, you forgot one. It must have fallen in with the sweater,” Tarah said. She pulled a small wrapped boxed from the folds of a fleecy sweater. “There’s no tag.”

Sukie took it, balancing it in her hand before she unwrapped it with delicate fingers. Nestled inside sat a velvet jeweler’s box.

“Oh my. Somebody got jewelry,” Vickie said.

“Who got jewelry?” Zandra demanded, her mouth turned down as she peered over Vickie’s shoulder.

“Open it,” Whitney urged.

Sukie lifted the hinged lid, revealing a pear-cut clear diamond set on a wide gold band. She stopped breathing.

“You like it?” David whispered into her ear. How he’d gotten around the sister cluster, Sukie had no clue. He wrapped his arms around her waist.

Tears pricked her eyelids. “It’s gorgeous.”

“Well, you can’t have it,” David announced. “At least, not until you give me the answer I’m looking for.”

"You and your questions," Sukie replied. Her hands shook as she cradled the box in her hands.

"You gonna make me ask?" he wanted to know.

"You gonna make me answer?" she countered.

"Are you capable of putting it on your own finger or do you need help?" The smile David wore belied the gruff tone of his queries.

"There's a tradition in this family," Dad interrupted. "There will be no wearing of rings until this tradition has been observed."

David turned to face Dad, bringing Sukie around with him. "Mr. Adams, you must be thinking how sudden this is," he said respectfully. "However, I'm not one to waste time. I love Sukie. I want to spend the rest of my life with her, if she can abide me that long. With your permission, sir, I'd like to marry her."

"That must be the most original request I've heard," Dad replied. "I have to think about this." He scratched his chin, his lips puckered in apparent deep thought.

"Dad!" the girls shouted.

"Malachi," Mom warned.

The protest echoed off the bare walls. Dad grinned. Mom scolded him again. "That's just terrible. You should be ashamed of yourself. For heaven's sakes, give them your blessing. Avery's already getting the Christmas champagne. Much nicer to have it for an engagement."

"Very well, young man," Dad agreed. "As long as you understand..."

"We believe marriage is forever," Sukie's sisters finished for him.

Dad nodded. "That's right."

David took the ring from the box, lifting Sukie's left hand with his. "Sukie, wanna make it official? Wanna be an old married lady?"

“I’ll go for the married, but I’m not sure of that old part,” she answered. Filled with happiness, she half expected to burst with her joy at any minute.

“You’re only as old as you feel,” David told her.

“Then you better hide from the police. I feel like a sixteen year old,” Sukie quipped.

Avery appeared, carrying a tray filled with an assortment of glasses filled with golden, bubbly liquid. “A toast,” he proclaimed while he distributed the champagne.

“Someone make a note,” Dad said as he took a plastic cup. “Tarah and Avery need a real, matched set of champagne glasses for Christmas next year.”

“Oh, you!” Mom flapped a hand at Dad. In return, he winked and waggled his eyebrows at her. Mom turned pink.

“Given that it’s David, a roast might be better,” Whitney suggested, cupping her holiday paper cup.

Over the laughter Dad said, “To Sukie and David. A lifetime of happiness to you both.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“There’s nothing more traditional than a June bride,” Mom said. She clasped her hands together as moisture gathered in her eyes. A gentle breeze rustled the curtains over the open window. A welcome breath of fresh air in the stuffy anteroom.

Sukie wore an off-the-shoulder satin gown, with a lace overlay. The full skirt cascaded into a short train; long enough to be noticeable.

“You have his ring?” Sukie asked Whitney.

“For the ten bazillionth time, yep. Haven’t flushed it down the toilet, thrown it into the garbage disposal or tried to melt it down for the gold,” Whitney reassured her.

“Don’t get cheeky,” Sukie answered. Her nerves couldn’t take much more. She knew David would be out there, waiting for her. She was just anxious to be married to him already and on her honeymoon.

Whitney produced the simple gold band Sukie’d bought for David. It gleamed in her hand. “See? I told you I still had it.”

“The mother of the groom is being seated,” Tarah reported from her spying position at the doorway. “The best man is looking for you, Mom.”

“Have your hanky, Mom?” Vickie asked. “We know how you like to cry at our weddings.”

Mom sniffled. “Tears of joy, I assure you.”

“I thought they were tears of relief,” Tarah quipped.

“Sukie, you’re gorgeous,” Mom said, wrapping her in a lingering hug. Mom left,

passing Dad as he came inside the small room.

“Line up girls,” Dad suggested.

Sukie watched her sisters jockey for position. Whitney, as maid of honor, knew where her place was, and the other three squabbled as to where in line they would be. All in good-nature. Dad strode into the melee, a man on a mission.

“Zandra, you go first. Vickie, then Tarah, and Whitney,” Dad ordered. He joined Sukie at the back of the room. “Ready honey?”

She nodded. Of course she was ready for this. Zandra left the room. In the six months since Christmas, Zandra’s attitude slowly changed. She still had her fierce temper, but she’d become a great deal nicer as she grew more secure in her own hastily-made marriage.

“Don’t forget your bouquet,” Whitney said over her shoulder as she stepped out the room.

The red and burgundy mini-rose bouquet sat on the table just beside the door. Baby’s breath and greenery completed the simple arrangement. Sparkling golden ribbons trailed from the hand piece, making a striking contrast against the soft snow white of Sukie’s gown.

Organ music swelled in the sanctuary. The final strains of the prelude signaled Whitney to begin her solitary stroll. The opening chords of the bridal march sounded after Whitney took her place.

Dad clasped Sukie’s hand before he settled it in the crook of his elbow. “Shall we?”

Sukie caught sight of David. He stood opposite her sisters, with the minister centered on the step above him. The wait finally ended. In a few moments, all her dreams would come true. She’d be married to the man who sent her heart into raptures at just an idle thought about him. Her breath caught in her throat as her march down the aisle brought her ever closer to her destiny. Boy, did that destiny look g-o-o-d--

good.

David wore a formal black tuxedo, complete with a cummerbund that matched her burgundy roses. She let her gaze slide down him, taking in every square inch of him, from his head to his toes. She grinned, seeing he wore his sandals. The rest of the world receded for her when she was close enough to make eye contact with him.

The music thundered into silence when she stood next to him at last, with only her Dad separating them.

"We are gathered here today, in the sight of God and these witnesses to celebrate the marriage of Sukie Rose Adams and David Stephan Ballard. Who gives this woman in holy matrimony?"

"Her mother and I do," Dad replied. He placed Sukie's right hand into David's left, and pressed them together before he let go to take his seat next to Mom.

All Sukie knew for certain was that at some point she said, "I do" and that David said it as well. Their eyes never wavered in their mutual regard for each other during the entire ceremony. Aglow in the heat of his undivided attention, a tender warmth spread through and around Sukie when he slid a smooth gold wedding ring onto her finger.

"With this ring, I thee wed," David murmured. Moments later, she echoed those very words when it came her turn to put his wedding ring on his finger.

"I now pronounce you man and wife. David, you may kiss your bride."

David tilted her chin so her face angled up towards his. Sukie closed her eyes in anticipation. She melted against him when his lips brushed hers, claiming their first married kiss.

"Do that again," she requested when they

finished.

The grooves around his mouth deepened with a smile meant for her and her alone. “Your wish is my command.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the minister said. “Dr. and Mrs. Ballard.”

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