



Barbara Sheridan

ALL or
NOTHING

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by Barbara Sheridan

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Chapter 1

Roberta Richardson left the big doors of her auto repair shop open so many times while working late that she hadn't given it a second thought tonight. It never occurred to her that some hairy beast might skulk out of the nearby woods and come inside, but one did. She could hear his footsteps on the concrete floor. A familiar growl announced his presence

"Hey, Bobbie, what's shaking?"

Justin Hastings' deep voice echoed through the quiet garage. Roberta lost her grip on the rusty bolt that had been getting the better of her for the last half hour

"Aren't you even going to say hello for old times' sake?"

Roberta ignored him. She was going to get this alternator out of there and the big ape trespassing on her property would just have to wait until she was done. Which at this rate would be sometime next Tuesday.

"I know it's you, Bobbie. I'd recognize that ass anywhere."

Roberta felt the large hand smack against her buttocks, but it took a few seconds for the action to register in her brain. When it did, she straightened up, striking her head on the truck's hood. She shrieked and jumped down from the tire, while the pain spreading across the back of her head added fuel to the fire that was igniting behind her hazel eyes.

"Want me to kiss it and make it better?" Justin teased. His topaz eyes shimmered with merriment in the glare of the shop light fastened to the sport utility vehicle's hood.

Resisting the urge to shove her wrench in a very private part of Justin Hastings' anatomy, Roberta dropped the tool.

Taking an orange rag from the rear pocket of her grimy twill work pants, she wiped the grease from her hands, studying the man before her.

He was only three inches taller than her five-foot-ten-inch frame, but gave the impression of being much larger. He carried himself with a commanding air of self-confidence that seemed to have increased with the passing years. Her gaze drifted from Justin's tanned face and sun streaked brown hair to his broad shoulders, which filled the black blazer. Without meaning to, she let her eyes slide down, taking in the stance that emphasized his powerful thighs and slim hips encased in black trousers. She returned her gaze to his face, not missing the few wisps of curling brown hair visible at the opened collar of his shirt.

"Still diggin' my package, huh?"

This was definitely the same Justin Hastings who'd ripped her heart to shreds seventeen years ago.

"So," Roberta said, tucking the rag back into her rear pocket. "The proverbial bad penny turns up again."

"Ha, ha," Justin said flatly, leaning against the Ramcharger's door. "Your jokes are as childish as ever, and so is your boyish figure," he added, looking Roberta over from head to toe.

"Jerk," Roberta grumbled, turning back to her truck's engine. He'd always been attracted to top-heavy airheads.

Justin chuckled and squeezed in beside her. "You're sure burning the midnight oil. What's the problem?"

"The alternator won't come out, and I need to replace it."

Justin removed his jacket and rolled up his sleeves as Roberta bent to pick up her wrench. He took the wrench from her and nudged her with his elbow. "Let a pro do it."

"I am a pro."

He laughed. Loudly. "Twenty bucks says I can have it fixed in half an hour, max."

It was Roberta's turn to laugh. "You're on." She grabbed Justin's arm, dropping her hand immediately. "Let me see your money first."

He pulled out his wallet and opened it. "Satisfied?" As she nodded, Justin returned his wallet to his rear pocket.

"Where's yours?"

"In my purse."

Justin laughed again. Roberta hated the way that sexy grin of his still tickled her insides.

"You carry a purse?"

Roberta grumbled, telling herself that she was no longer seventeen and he couldn't get to her unless she let him. "Yes, I carry a purse. I am a woman you know."

"Could've fooled me," Justin remarked, turning back towards the black and silver truck.

"Fix it in fifteen minutes or the bet's off."

Justin turned. "Fifteen minutes?"

"You chicken, Hastings?"

"Was I ever?" he asked. He set the alarm on his wristwatch, removed it, slipped it over the blade of the Ramcharger's windshield wiper, and then began.

Roberta smiled to herself as the garage filled with the sounds of clanking metal and frustrated grunts. Those rusty

bolts weren't coming loose, not even with the extra shot of spray lubricant Hastings gave them.

When the hand on the large round wall clock neared the ten minute mark, Roberta turned away, confident that Justin would soon return to the rock he'd crawled out from under.

She'd gotten as far as the office at the rear of the garage when Justin's deep voice boomed out to her.

"Done. Where's my money?"

Roberta spun around and stalked back to her truck, her hands on her slender hips, her face resentful. "You can't be done. I've been trying to get that thing out of there for almost an hour, and I couldn't do it."

"No, you couldn't," Justin said, extending his hand. "Pay up."

Roberta batted his hand away and looked for herself. He had gotten the new alternator installed and tightened both the radiator and power steering hoses in the bargain. He'd just put her to shame and she was the best auto mechanic in Centre County, Pennsylvania.

Justin cleared his throat. "I believe we had a bet."

Roberta silently called him a filthy name, reminding herself again that he couldn't get under her skin, unless she let him.

Justin followed her to the office, clucking his tongue at the clutter. He plopped down on the edge of her desk like he owned the place. Roberta wadded up a twenty dollar bill and threw it at him.

"You won. Now get lost," Roberta told him, slamming her desk drawer shut. "I'm closing up."

"Not so fast," Justin said, gesturing for her to sit in her chair. She remained standing, her arms crossed in front of her.

"I need a favor, Bobbie. I was supposed to stay at Dale Courtland's, but when I got there, Sharon said he'd been called away. I didn't feel right about being there alone with his wife and kids. I need a place to sleep until I can get to the realtor's office tomorrow morning to pick up the keys to my Aunt Maddie's house."

Roberta stared blankly. He wouldn't dare. Not after all this time. "If you think you're staying with me, you're crazy," she snapped. Justin frowned, his eyes darkened to sapphire, and she didn't know whether to be relieved or offended.

"I was thinking I could crash here on the couch. The couch is under all that crud, isn't it?" he asked, gesturing to the repair manuals and pizza boxes in danger of tumbling to the dirty floor.

Roberta rolled her eyes. Once a neat freak, always a neat freak. "Stay if you have to, but it's just one night."

"That's what I said." Justin stood. He followed her into the garage. "I don't know why you're still such a pain. You do owe me a favor as I recall."

Roberta made a dismissive gesture before pulling open the door of her truck. "Since when?"

Justin shut the door after she climbed in. "Since the night I saved you from being the laughing stock of Oak Mills High School."

"Yeah, right," Roberta mumbled, pretending that she didn't remember the incident. She turned the ignition key. Her old

truck roared to life instantly, and she forced herself to ignore Justin Hastings' self-satisfied grin and the physical effect it had on her. "Don't forget to lock the bay door."

"As soon as I bring my car in. Thanks, Bobbie."

She pulled out of the garage without replying.

Justin shook his head as he watched her speed down the dark street at the edge of town. She was the same old Bobbie Richardson he'd known since the day he'd discovered the garage owned by Bobbie's late father, Andy. Justin hadn't known his own father, who'd been killed in Vietnam. He'd begun hanging around the shop in grade school, straightening up, running errands and learning mechanics along the way.

He'd literally lived here at times during his turbulent teenaged years when his mother began dating an Army colonel. When they married and moved to Germany, Justin remained behind in Oak Mills, in the custody of his maternal aunt, Madeline Siebert.

And hovering in the background, always getting underfoot, was Roberta "Bobbie" Richardson.

Justin smiled to himself as he parked his restored Mercedes in the garage. Bobbie had been raised by her widowed father and spent all of her free time right here, learning the business from the ground up. To Justin, she was the stereotypical tomboy and annoying "little brother" rolled into one. She'd followed him around the garage like an adoring puppy, and when he reached adolescence and told her to find herself a real friend, she'd found Tony Rizzo, the younger brother of his own close friend, Dominic.

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Poor Dom had been saddled with Tony while their parents worked at the family restaurant, and Roberta was only too happy to tag along with the rest of the "gang". She'd even gone so far as to play high school sports, on the boys' teams. During the games was about the only time Justin could get away from the little hellion. Two years younger than him, she'd been picked for the junior varsity, although she'd done her damndest to make the varsity. She might have succeeded if he, Dom and Dale Courtland hadn't sabotaged her tryouts—to preserve their own privacy and sanity.

Yes, Bobbie Richardson was something, and as he pulled down and locked the overhead doors, Justin wondered if she would be willing to help him out of a jam. A very big jam. If anyone had the guts to hang tough against his she-dragon exmother-in-law, it was Bobbie Richardson. Of course, judging from Bobbie's icy reception, getting her to marry him would take some time.

Unfortunately, time was not on his side.

Chapter 2

Roberta drove out of Oak Mills and along the winding country roads, barely aware of the heavy metal music coming from her truck's cassette player. Why had Justin come back to town after all this time? To sell his aunt's house? The place wasn't actively on the market, but maybe he'd changed his mind and had found a buyer on his own.

Roberta's heart sank at the thought of strangers living there. That big Victorian house on Fairmont Street was like an extension of her own home. She'd spent many afternoons in the kitchen, eating homemade cookies. When she could get to them before Justin did.

Why had he come back?

To torment her? Not likely, though she felt tormented just the same. Simply hearing his voice and seeing his face made her feel like a love-struck teenager all over again. It was not a feeling she liked. Not only was it humiliating, but it reminded her of the biggest mistake she'd ever made—getting married.

Even more than Justin before him, Roger Clemments made Roberta feel special, totally feminine, something other than "one of the guys". The romantic fantasy hadn't lasted, although she'd hung on for five long years. She'd been willing to forgive his adultery, but when he'd stolen from her, nearly bankrupting the business her parents had sacrificed so much to maintain, she'd thrown him out, vowing never to be used again.

Clutching the steering wheel of her truck, Roberta let the anger dissipate, then drove back towards home, never expecting that more painful memories would arise in the ranch house where she'd grown up.

Getting ready for bed, she found an old silver framed photograph. It had been taken at her senior prom, the night Justin Hastings had indeed saved her from becoming the laughingstock of Oak Mills High School.

She hadn't been very keen on dressing up and fancy parties, but went along with the custom, although she hated the way her female classmates spent every spare moment planning for the prom and casting snide glances her way.

She wasn't dating, but neither was her friend, Tony Rizzo, so she'd naturally assumed that they'd attend this school function together as they'd done all the others. She wanted to die when he told her the day of the prom that he was going with the homecoming queen who'd gotten into a fight with her boyfriend the night before.

"It's not like we had a date or anything, right?" Tony said. "And it's not every day that Rhonda Flanagan asks a guy out."

Roberta had been crushed, knowing that Queen Rhonda and her friends would have a field day if she showed up at the prom alone. She was going to forget the whole thing, but to her surprise, her father insisted that she go.

"I advanced you that allowance money for that dress and those tickets, and I won't have it wasted. I'm working late, but I'm sure Justin can drive you to the gym."

When the doorbell rang at six o'clock, Roberta considered not answering. The prom wouldn't start for two hours, and

knowing Justin, he probably planned on dumping her on the school steps just so he could get to a hot date with whoever was this week's "babe du jour".

She pulled open the door. Her breath caught in her throat at the sight of Justin Hastings on her front porch dressed in a black tux and carrying a corsage that matched her yellow dress perfectly. "What are you doing here?"

He stepped inside, his eyes scanning her from head to toe. Twice "I know I'm early, but I thought we'd get something to eat. I made reservations at La Normand  over in Bellefont."

Roberta's spirit had soared, but then it began to fall. "You don't have to do this. I know my dad put you up to it."

"I haven't seen your dad. I didn't make it to work today because Aunt Maddie's arthritis was flaring up. I ran into Dom Rizzo when I took her to the doctor. He told me Tony brushed you off."

Roberta turned her back on him when he tried to give her the corsage. "Like I said, you don't have to do this."

"I know I don't have to. I want to."

She turned back, her hazel eyes narrowed. "Why?"

Justin shrugged his broad shoulders. "I just want to, okay?" He paused and ran his index finger around his tight collar. "You look really nice, Roberta."

"Thank you," she said, stepping forward so that he could pin on the corsage.

He fumbled at first, his cheeks blushing ever so slightly. "Sometimes I forget you're a girl."

"Me, too," she admitted, taking a half step closer, breathing in his spicy aftershave.

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Their eyes met and it was as if they were seeing each other for the first time. Justin kissed her, his lips brushing hers ever so gently, as if hinting at things yet to come. Wrapping his arms around her, he kissed her again, deeply, coaxing her lips apart with his tongue until the blood roared in her ears and pounded through her body. He pulled away long before she was ready for it to end.

"I guess we'd better go," he whispered, smoothing back a wispy curl from Roberta's forehead.

"I don't think I want to," she sighed, lightheaded from her first real kiss.

"Which is exactly why we have to."

Roberta was barely aware of the regret in Justin's voice as she drifted out of the house, his arm lightly around her waist. It was a magical, perfect evening. Something clicked between them that night, and for the next month they were inseparable.

They left the gang behind and went their own way, going on picnics, to the movies, to amateur auto races all over the state. Justin had always been Roberta's hero, but in those weeks he became the center of her universe. She was completely in love, wanting him with a burning need that sent her temperature soaring the moment she set eyes on him.

It drove her crazy whenever he turned into the gallant gentleman and stopped their physical encounters just short of consummation. Roberta convinced herself that he was waiting until she graduated to take their relationship to the next level.

And on graduation day, when her father presented her with the keys to her shiny new Ramcharger she took it as a

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divine omen. She knew the perfect spot to make love to Justin. It was up in the mountains. They'd picnicked there, and Justin was so taken with the beauty of the place that he vowed to buy a parcel of the land and build a summer cabin.

Roberta dangled the keys under Justin's nose as she pulled off her cap and gown. She was wearing denim cut-offs and a T-shirt beneath. "Let's cruise!"

Justin looked at his watch. "I can't. My bus is leaving in an hour. You can drop me off at Aunt Maddie's, though. I have a couple things left to pack."

"Pack? You're going away? On vacation? To see your mom?"

Justin shook his head. "I'm going to boot camp. I enlisted in the Marines back in April, didn't I tell you? I like working with your dad and all, but I want more. Even though I never really got along with my stepfather, when I saw him and my mom at Christmas, we started talking and I think I want a career in the military. They have a lot to offer..."

"But I have a lot to offer, too," Roberta muttered, voicing the words she'd been too frightened to speak so long ago.

Roberta tossed the photo into the bathroom wastebasket, wondering why she'd even kept the stupid thing all these years.

She climbed into bed and turned off the light, burying the past once and for all.

Chapter 3

Roberta woke when a coarse tongue flicked across her neck and cheek. "Give me a break, Stanley," she mumbled before opening her eyes to look at the aging brown tabby perched atop her chest. She brushed Stanley's fluffy tail aside to see the alarm clock on the nightstand. It was five o'clock. "Learn to tell time," Roberta said, turning over. "I don't have to get up until seven."

Closing her eyes, Roberta felt herself drift back down into ... the arms of Justin Hastings?

She bolted upright, accidentally knocking a dozing Stanley to the floor. The cat cocked its head and stared at her. "I'm sorry, okay? I almost had a nightmare." Stanley made a quiet trilling sound and began to lick her paw.

Swinging her legs off the side of the bed, Roberta removed the old high school football jersey she used as a nightshirt and tossed it on top of the pile of dirty laundry next to the bathroom door. She gave Stanley a disparaging look when the cat stalked the pile and pounced. "I'll wash them later, if you don't mind." Stanley purred and began rolling in the laundry pile.

After a brisk shower, Roberta returned to the bedroom to put on her work clothes: blue twill pants and a matching shirt over a plain white T-shirt. She added heavy socks and her work boots, then retrieved Stanley from the pile of laundry, nuzzling the cat before setting her down.

Together they went through the living room where automotive magazines and books covered every available

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surface. Stanley crouched, then pounced on a stack of magazines, tumbling from the back of the blue velvet sofa to the floor. Roberta cast the cat a sideways glance. "I get the idea," she mumbled. They passed through the unaccountably clean dining room and into the tidy kitchen.

While Stanley devoured a hefty helping of specially blended tuna and cod paté, Roberta had blueberry yogurt and a cup of coffee. She tossed the plastic yogurt container and spoon in the trash, then set her cup in the sink where other cups and glasses had been rinsed, but awaited washing. She glanced at the clock on the microwave. There was time enough to wash these and get a start on the other housework. Or not. "Catch you later, cat."

It began to drizzle as Roberta locked her back door. She dashed to the end of the driveway, keys in hand, to find that the truck door wouldn't open. She jiggled the key without success, then ran around to the passenger side. That door opened, but not until Roberta was soaked. She cursed and kicked the Ramcharger's dashboard as she climbed over the console into the driver's seat. She'd get rid of this hunk of junk if it didn't hold such sentimental value. As she often did, Roberta wondered how the salesman had talked her usually sensible father into buying this prize-winning lemon as a high school graduation gift.

When she arrived at the garage, Roberta entered through the side door, getting even wetter as the rain turned into a torrent.

Justin was near one of the red metal tool cabinets, wiping grease from the handles and replacing them. "Why didn't you call? I would've opened one of the bay doors for you."

Glaring at him, Roberta brushed her damp hair out of her eyes. "Why aren't you gone yet?"

"I didn't want to leave the place unlocked. Besides, I called Tom and asked him to pick up some donuts on his way over. My treat."

Roberta twirled her finger in the air. "Whoop-de-do," she retorted, walking towards her office. Once Tom Haggerty arrived, she'd never get rid of Justin. Tom had been her dad's friend since childhood, and with six daughters, he'd welcomed Justin into the family with opened arms. And Justin, being the ladies' man that he was, had eaten it up.

Oh, well. At least she'd be able to get some paperwork done. She slowed her pace, not eager to face the stack of current bills that waited for her to divide what little profit she'd made this month. She had to find a way to bring in more business. Maybe she could call her friend Tony and get him to split a newspaper ad with her, or....

Roberta's thoughts skidded to a halt when she stepped through her office door. She scanned the room in disbelief. This wasn't her office, this was some strange land. An unsullied, fresh smelling land where her dingy filing cabinets returned to their original light gray, and the beige geometric design on the dark floor tiles appeared from under layers of grime. Why, even her magazines and repair manuals had arranged themselves in numerical sequence in the old pine bookcases.

Feeling faint from the alien cleanliness, Roberta hurried to her chair, a chair that no longer wobbled or squeaked. She leaned forward, looking at her reflection on the freshly polished desk top. This was weird. This was frightening. This was like that old story of the shoemaker and the elves.

Her eyes fell on the government-issue sleeping bag propped against the recently washed wall.

Some elf.

She stood, intending to toss Justin Hastings out on his GI rear, but stopped herself when Tom Haggerty's chipper voice echoed through the garage as he greeted Justin with a patented Tom Haggerty lame joke.

"Hey, Justin, why did the legless frog cross the road?"

"Why did the legless frog cross the road, Tom?"

"Because he was stapled to the chicken."

Shaking her head, Roberta sat back down and took the company checkbook from her lower desk drawer. She looked at the two neat piles on the left of the desk top. It figured. Justin had separated the current bills from the past dues, and had arranged them in order by date.

Picking one invoice at random, Roberta made out the first check. She hoped Justin's jaunt down memory lane with Tom would be a short one. The sooner he disappeared from her life again, the better.

"Want a donut?"

"No thank you," Roberta said without looking up, ignoring the rumbled protest of her stomach.

"Don't tell me you're watching your weight. You're scrawny as hell." Justin paused, then continued when Roberta did not

answer or glance up. "Come on. I saved you the best one. I even brought you a cup of coffee."

Roberta glanced up then, ordering her eyes not to notice how Justin's T-shirt molded itself to his well-developed pectoral muscles and biceps, and how the whiteness of the fabric contrasted with his sun-bronzed skin. He was sexy. He was gorgeous.

He was trouble!

Encouraging her resentment to grow into anger, Roberta stood and looked him straight in the eye. "You're too much, Hastings. You waltz in here, get yourself a free room for the night, you put those squeaky clean paws of yours all over my personal belongings, then you save me a crappy, peanut-covered donut, and top it off by drinking out of my favorite cup and giving me the one with the broken handle! Just who do you think you are?"

"Your new mechanic," he said calmly, taking a sip out of Roberta's Snoopy mug.

"What?"

"Your new mechanic," he repeated, sitting on the edge of the desk, straightening the three unpaid bills beside him.

Roberta flicked the bills to the floor, silently daring Justin to pick them up. He did, shaking his head at her childish display.

She pointed her finger at him. "I don't need a mechanic, and if I did, I certainly wouldn't hire you." She sat and stared down at the checkbook binder.

"You say you don't need a mechanic, but you have a *Help Wanted* sign in the front window and a stack of job application forms in your top desk drawer."

Roberta looked up, expecting Justin to flash her a smug smile. He didn't.

"I figured you've been having a rough time when I saw all the bills," he said quietly, his eyes locked onto hers. "Tom told me about that jerk you married. I'm sorry."

"I don't need your pity, and if I hire anyone it will be a part-timer. I can't afford to offer benefits or even job security. I just want someone on hand so I can bring in more business. I've been losing customers to that Quicky-lube place out by the mall."

He nodded and Roberta looked away. She hated her ex husband for putting her so far into debt that she had to scramble to make up for a few lost oil changes. But mostly, she hated herself for letting it happen.

She gasped when Justin curved his strong, callused fingers under her chin and turned her face back toward his.

"I want the job. I have a decent bit in savings and I might be getting a partial pension from the Marine Corps. That should hold me over. And if it doesn't, I can always moonlight at the Quicky-lube."

Roberta smiled though she tried to fight it. When Justin scraped the peanuts off her chocolate glazed donut and handed it to her, she took it. "You're sure?"

"Of course," Justin said with a smile. "Then again, if I take Dale Courtland up on his offer, I might put you out of business and have you work for me."

"In your dreams," Roberta said, taking a bite of the donut. "What did Courtland offer you?" she asked, wishing that she could get her hands on the contract to service the fleet of company cars and delivery trucks Dale Courtland owned.

"I ran into him a few months back when he took the family on vacation to LA. When I mentioned that I was going to be moving back here, he said I should start my own repair shop. His contract with Bradshaw and Hammill is up soon, and he offered to be my first steady customer."

She was doomed. If Justin opened his own garage, she really would be working at the Quicky-lube. Why, old girlfriends alone would keep Justin in a booming business until the end of time. Thankfully, his deep voice brought an end to her waking nightmare before she could picture herself begging for scraps at the back door of Rizzo's Restoriente.

"Am I hired, or what?"

Roberta looked at him. At that handsome chiseled face, at those big blue eyes, at that lock of brown hair that fell into his eyes. She watched him smooth it back with a fluid motion of his large hand and she remembered the feel of those hands snaking up under her T-shirt one sunny spring day.

She couldn't hire him. She'd never be able to concentrate on her work. She'd never be able to keep her distance. It would be Roger all over, and she didn't think she had the strength to survive that kind of ordeal again.

Justin tapped his index finger on Roberta's head. "Do I get the job, or do I become my own boss?"

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Her hazel eyes growing wide, her heart hammering like an engine in overdrive, Roberta racked her brain for a way out. There was none.

A car horn sounded out front.

"Get to work Hastings. There's our first customer," her mouth said without her consent.

Justin grinned and strolled to the door. He stopped and looked over his shoulder, humor in his eyes. "You feel okay, Bobbie? You look a little flushed, a little hot and bothered."

She felt her cheeks color further and he laughed. Loudly.

Roberta rested her forehead on the desk top. She was undeniably doomed.

Chapter 4

Roberta gave Tom Haggerty a bland smile when he came towards her beaming like a proud father. "Justin is just what we need around here, Bobbie."

"I'm doing it for old time's sake. Justin needs a job." She bent to retie her work boot when Tom gave her a knowing smile. She spoke without looking up. "Don't you have to get that Escort primed? The paint will be coming in later this morning."

"I thought you were going to hold off ordering it until the guy with the T-Bird paid for his brake job."

Roberta stood. "I changed my mind."

Tom took the hint. "Catch you on the flip side."

Roberta greeted the next two customers who dropped off their vehicles, and when three more phoned asking if she could squeeze them in for some minor repairs she told them to come right over. She gave Justin the cars needing the most time-consuming repairs and took the easier jobs for herself, finding great satisfaction in each angry grunt Justin uttered as he worked feverishly to get done.

When the delivery guy from the paint supplier arrived, Roberta beat a hasty retreat to the bathroom and began searching her purse and pants pockets for money. If she hadn't made that stupid bet with Hastings she would have had just enough to cover it. Damn.

She could hide out in here and hope he got tired of waiting, assuming he had a lot of other deliveries to make. She'd done it before and had always been lucky enough to

have the money when he returned for payment on his way back to the warehouse.

No, that wouldn't work. The two people scheduled to pick up their cars today always paid by check, and she'd never get to the bank in time. She hated asking Tom to lend her the extra twenty because it made her feel like a kid begging for an advance on her allowance, but what choice did she have?

Muttering to herself, Roberta left the bathroom.

The paint guy was gone, but the paint was sitting there. Tom was a sweetheart. She needed to thank him, especially since she had been snippy to him earlier.

"I paid for Tom's paint. You can owe it to me," Justin said as she passed by the pickup he was working on.

Roberta gave him a dirty look behind his back. "I was coming to pay him myself."

Justin remained bent over the pickup's engine but stuck out one grease-covered hand. "Then you can give it to me now."

"In a minute. I have to ask Tom something first." Roberta gritted her teeth as Justin's chuckle pricked her pride.

She avoided him for the rest of the morning, declining his and Tom's lunch invitation. She took advantage of their absence to look over the vehicle that had been intriguing her for hours. It was Justin's car, a gleaming silver 1957 Mercedes-Benz; a "gullwing" with doors opening from the bottom upward. Roberta ran her hand along the sleek, rounded fender and sighed.

This road version of the 300SL could do an easy 144 miles per hour. How great it would be to sit in the leather-lined compartment and cruise down a deserted highway...

"Nice, huh?"

Roberta jumped at the sound of Justin's voice. How could he sneak up on her wearing combat boots? She pretended she couldn't feel the heat of his breath beneath her ponytail or smell the tangy peppermint candy he was chewing.

She turned, regarding him coolly. "It's all right, I guess."

"All right?" Justin mimicked, clearly offended. "I rebuilt this baby from the ground up. It was a real piece of sh—junk when I found it."

Roberta suppressed a smile. He had never been able to curse around her, even on those occasions when she'd cussed him out to test his willpower. "How long did it take to rebuild?"

"About five years," he said, reaching around Roberta to wipe away a greasy smudge from the fender. "When I found her, she was just a rust heap with half an engine and four flat tires." He removed his wallet from his back pocket and showed Roberta a photograph of the Mercedes in its "before" state.

She couldn't believe her eyes. "Rust heap" was being generous. She would never attempt to rebuild anything in such horrible condition. She admired Justin's dedication and skill, and she was about to break down and admit it when the photo in the next plastic holder caught her eye. It was a photo of Justin in his Marine dress uniform standing beside a curly brown haired woman and a little girl.

"Your family?"she asked, refusing to acknowledge the lonely pang in her stomach.

"Yeah,"he said, slipping the wallet back into his pocket.
"I'm divorced, too."

Spit it out, Justin's inner voice urged him. Tell her the whole story. Ask her now.

"Bobbie..."

"We'd better get back to work or we'll never get those cars out on time,"she said quickly, walking away.

* * * *

Roberta managed to avoid Justin until later in the afternoon.

"The Chevy is done. Pull it outside for me while I use the phone,"Justin called, tossing Roberta the keys.

She parked the car out front and went to her office to make out the bill. She stopped dead in the door way. She was not seeing this. She could not be reliving this nightmare. Justin was going over her business checkbook. Pen in hand.

Roberta plunged into the office and seized the binder, nearly snapping his fingers off when she slammed the cover closed. She clutched the book to her chest, her face set and angry. "How dare you? How dare you steal from me?"

Justin held up his hands. "Hold your pants on, for a second. I'm doing you a favor."

Roberta laughed. "Some favor. I suppose you have a nice bridge in Brooklyn to sell me next."

Justin frowned and stood. "I was going to file away those bills you couldn't pay when I noticed you paid the parts store in full."

Roberta tightened her grip on her checkbook. "So you thought you'd rip me off and make me look bad?"

Justin's temper darkened his eyes. "No." He pointed to the pad of paper on the desk. "If you let the parts store slide, you can clear up those two past dues."

Shaking her head in disbelief, Roberta began to pace. "Sure. I'll refuse to pay the auto parts supplier, who gives me the credit I need to stay in business, just because you tell me to."

Justin came around the desk and grabbed her arms to hold her in place, letting go once she stopped. "Listen. Mike Wiggins owns the parts store, doesn't he?"

"So?"

"So, I looked through your cancelled checks. You pay him on the first of the month, but he holds your checks until the last business day of the month."

Roberta's brow crinkled. True, and there had been many times she'd benefited from Mike's procrastination, using the money to cover an unexpected supply here and there. "So?"

Justin shook his head. "So, if you're late just this once, Mike Wiggins is not going to revoke your line of credit."

Rolling her eyes, Roberta turned away and dropped onto the leather sofa behind Justin. "I suppose you developed psychic powers since the last time I saw you."

"No," Justin said, coming to sit beside her. "I just remember the crush Mike had on you in high school. If you ask me, he still has it."

Roberta looked at Justin as though he'd just sprouted purple wings. "You are so full of it."

Justin grinned. "When Tom and I saw him at the burger place this afternoon, the first words out of his mouth were, 'Where's Bobbie? How's Bobbie? Is she sick?'"

Roberta stared at him. It was crazy, but it did make sense. Justin was always right. She hated that. "Go home."

"I can't. The realtor couldn't get the utilities turned on at Aunt Maddie's. I need to stay here again." Justin smiled, and gently took the checkbook from Roberta's hands, setting it on the floor. "But this couch isn't really too comfortable, and unless I'm mistaken you have an extra bedroom."

Wanting to flee, but unable to move, Roberta sat stock still as Justin trailed his finger up her arm. His touch sent sparks through the long sleeve of her twill shirt. When he slid his other arm behind her and tickled the nape of her neck, she felt her insides melt and drip all the way down to the steel toes of her work boots.

She jerked away before Justin's lips touched hers, picking up the checkbook and holding it in front of her like a protective shield. "Since you'll be here tonight, I'll go."

Justin whispered a curse when Bobbie rushed out. How stupid he was. He should have been more subtle. He should have kept his mind on renewing the friendly bond they once shared instead of letting testosterone flood his brain. Taking his wallet from his rear pocket, Justin looked at the creased

black and white photo tucked behind the picture of his exwife and daughter.

It was a picture of Bobbie.

* * * *

Roberta's skin was still tingling by the time she made it to the drive-thru window of the local fast food place. She picked up her order, then headed home, telling herself for what seemed the thousandth time that she could not feel like some sex-starved schoolgirl around Justin Hastings. She hadn't been a girl for a very long time, and as far as the rest was concerned, well, the less she thought about that, the better off she'd be.

Pulling into her driveway, Roberta became trapped for a time until much kicking and unladylike language helped to free the jammed lock on the Ramcharger's door. She slammed the door shut and gave it an extra kick for good measure. She should look at the locks, but decided to put it off until morning. Right now she just wanted to eat her cheeseburger and fries, and get her housework done...

With an inward groan, she unlocked her front door. She'd never put housework before mechanics, never. Damn that Justin Hastings. He made her feel like a slob by the way he'd cleaned up the garage. And the way he managed to look so tidy and handsome, even with motor oil and grease on his clothes. Those clothes that fit him so well and showed off those big, firm muscles.

Roberta stuck her food in the refrigerator and dove into her household chores to rid herself of the memories of the

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times she'd spent in Justin's arms. When her home was as spotless as a furniture showroom, she went straight to bed, sleeping soundly until Stanley the cat woke her with an affectionate lick to the nose.

* * * *

Justin was in the office when Roberta arrived at the garage. He was in her office lifting weights and wearing next to nothing.

"You're early," he said, between deep breaths. "Do you mind if I finish? I always do twenty reps before I shower."

Roberta had to force her eyes away from his glistening bare chest. "Go ahead. I'll just make a pot of coffee."

"Sounds good, boss."

In the washroom, Roberta splashed cold water on her cheeks twice before filling the coffee pot. No way was she going back in there. Not with him wearing nothing but a pair of olive drab shorts. Very snug-fitting shorts. She splashed a few more drops of water on her face, then went back into the office and went through the motions of making the coffee as she'd done countless times before.

She found herself unable to leave the room. She simply hovered in the doorway as if some invisible barrier prevented her exit. She made a pretense of checking to see if she'd placed the ground coffee in the filter basket while her brain went numb.

Justin set down his weights long enough to wipe the sweat from his brow. "Do you need something?"

How Roberta managed to bite her tongue, she never knew. "No," she said, turning from the small table that held the coffee maker and cups. "There's not much to do until we open. I'll just sit here, okay?"

Justin smiled the sexiest smile she'd ever seen. "It is your office."

"That's what I thought," she mumbled, not believing this sudden lack of mental ability. Sitting on the worn leather couch, Roberta tried to concentrate on the old magazine in her hands, but her eyes kept straying to Justin. She watched the way his prominent muscles tensed and relaxed with each easy movement he made.

She was enthralled by the tiny perspiration beads shimmering upon miles of rippling muscles. She fought the urge to gawk until a breeze blew in through the window behind Justin and carried his musky male scent towards her.

It was intoxicating enough to make her set aside the unread magazine and watch openly as Justin finished his workout. As she studied him, she compared this adult body to the boyish one she remembered. To say he'd filled out was an understatement.

He no longer had the well-built adolescent frame that made cheerleaders swoon. He now possessed the kind of adult male body that could make grown women drool. Roberta unconsciously licked her lips and looked away, but just for a moment. High on his left bicep, Justin had a gruesome little tattoo of a skull with a blood red rose clenched between its teeth. A long, jagged scar on his right thigh went all the way up under his shorts. His tight, tight

shorts. Roberta shifted her gaze to the floor. There was no question as to what was in that vicinity.

"Aren't you going to turn it on?"

You already did, Roberta thought miserably, shifting as she felt a rush of heat deep inside. She looked up. "Huh?"

Justin inclined his head towards the coffeemaker. "Aren't you going to turn it on?" he asked again, placing his weights in the duffel bag behind him.

"I thought I did," Roberta said, rushing to do it. It took three tries before her fingers stopped trembling enough to move the small switch.

"I'm going to hit the shower," Justin said.

He was close enough that Roberta could feel the heat radiating from his skin. She swallowed hard.

"I usually take a cold shower," he teased, coming around her. "Care to join me?"

"In your dreams."

"And yours?" he asked, breaking into a wicked grin.

Roberta threw a stack of foam cups at him.

* * * *

Justin regretted teasing Bobbie, because she avoided speaking to him the entire day. Not an easy task in the confines of the garage. But she'd done it just the same, making frequent trips to the restroom, using the loud air-powered drill to tighten each and every lug nut on each and every tire of the cars in the shop. And when she'd run out of noisy tools, she pulled her old truck inside and blasted the

radio until he and Tom made a mad dash for the aspirin bottle.

Swallowing aspirin number three, Justin looked at his watch. Tomorrow was the first of the month. Time was going too fast. He'd never get things ready for the "big inspection" in time. Aunt Maddie's place still needed painting from top to bottom, and he had to replace the appliances and furnishings his greedy cousin had stolen when the old girl died.

But the house wasn't even half the problem. Dale Courtland could help him get everything he needed before the dragon lady came to check things out. Well, not everything. He couldn't supply a wife, the perfect little homebody to complete the picture Justin was determined to show his exmother-in-law and her high-priced attorney when they came to town in late June.

And the more he thought about it, the less confident he became that Roberta could fit the wifely bill. Of course, Bobbie could and had been able to do anything she'd set her mind to, but he had to ask her first. Judging from the way today had gone, she had a long way to go before willingly playing any wifely role, especially for him. He would have to bring things to a head. As soon as his head stopped aching.

* * * *

That evening, Roberta's restlessness prompted her to go for a drive. She had a difficult time starting the Ramcharger and knew she should take some time to pinpoint the current problem, but she simply wasn't in the mood. Mechanics made

her think of work, and work made her think of Justin, and Justin made her think of....

Roberta took the loudest rock and roll tape she had and inserted it into the truck's cassette player, then cranked up the volume to divert her thoughts before driving off with no particular destination in mind.

She was on the outskirts of town when the Ramcharger stalled on the railroad tracks.

"Oh, come on," Roberta muttered as she turned the key in the ignition for the fifth time. She received only a jarring grinding noise in response. It was probably the starter this time. She reached for the door handle to get out and look under the hood, but the lock was stuck.

Roberta silently cursed Justin as she crawled over to the passenger side. If it wasn't for him distracting her, she'd have remembered to work on the locking mechanism this afternoon. When the passenger door wouldn't open either, she cursed Justin a second time, shoving her shoulder against the door. She fiddled with the locking button on the door, then tried the driver's side again with no results.

Roberta let out a cry of frustration and pounded the steering wheel with her fist. She sat there, drumming her fingers on the vinyl covered console between the two front seats while she called her truck and Justin every name she could think of. This continued until a disturbing possibility entered her mind.

She looked at her watch. A nine o'clock freight passed through here. It was eight-thirty now.

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Roberta's heart thudded and she tried the door locks again and again, until the warning signals clanged and the gates on either side of the Ramcharger blocked access to the tracks. With an anguished groan, Roberta kicked at the door with both feet, wishing that she'd kept on her heavy work boots instead of changing into sneakers. She climbed over and kicked at the passenger door to no avail.

Fear turned to panic when the tracks beneath the Ramcharger began to vibrate. Beads of cold sweat erupted on Roberta's forehead as she looked over her shoulder at her last means of escape. The tailgate behind the rear seat.

It was no use. She'd bolted the tailgate shut last month, unable to afford the new latch after one of her creditors demanded that she pay her long overdue balance in full.

Shaking with terror, Roberta gripped the steering wheel for support as tears welled up in her eyes, clouding her vision.

A whistle like the shriek of a banshee broke through the night air.

The train was closing in.

Chapter 5

A strange uneasiness caused Justin to neglect some of the much-needed repair work on his house. That and the fact Roberta kept intruding upon his thoughts. Putting away the bag of patching plaster and tools, he decided to go for a run.

He jogged from his house to work then back toward Roberta's with the intention of paying a visit to gauge the current climate of her emotions. Finding her truck gone and the house dark, he helped himself to a sip of water from her garden hose, debating between heading home to a hot shower and jogging another two miles. He decided to run.

Justin came to a dead stop when he saw Roberta's Ramcharger stranded on the railroad tracks. He scanned the surrounding area hoping to see her beside the tracks. When he didn't, he jogged closer, his heart leaping into his throat at the sight of her inside the truck. The distant shriek of a train's whistle broke his trance.

"Bobbie!" he shouted as his legs made quick work of the hundred yards separating them. He jumped the striped crossing barrier like an Olympic hurdler. "Open the door!"

Roberta didn't seem to hear. She simply continued to stare at the approaching light. Tears coursed down her cheeks.

Justin banged his fist on the window and called her name again, but she failed to respond. She was in shock. He grabbed the door handle and placed his foot against the side of the truck and pulled. Nothing.

She would not die. He had seen too many people he cared for die before their time, and she would not be another. He

took a final deep breath, then pulled with every ounce of strength he possessed.

The lock sprung. Justin yanked Roberta out of the driver's seat, throwing them both clear of the tracks precious seconds before the freight crashed into the truck, smashing it into an unrecognizable lump of twisted steel and shattered glass.

Bone jarring sounds of squealing brakes and scraping metal filled the night air. Justin covered Roberta's body with his as sparks ignited the spilled gasoline. Justin shuddered. The explosion and squealing train echoed through his mind, conjuring memories of similar sounds and smells in battles long past.

"H-hey, mister. You okay?"

Justin looked up to see the fear-stricken faces of three teenaged boys who had come upon the scene.

"Stay put. The paramedics are on the way," the tallest boy said.

Justin moved off Roberta. "Bobbie?" His voice faltered. She was face down, lying still. He reached out to feel the pulse point in her neck. She was alive. "Bobbie?"

Roberta began to shake and then cry as she pulled herself to a sitting position. She threw her arms around Justin's neck and clung to him.

Enfolding her in his arms, Justin gently stroked her hair. "It's all right," he murmured. "You're safe now. It's all over."

Roberta managed to regain her composure by the time the paramedics and police arrived on the scene. The medics treated them for minor cuts and bruises, and suggested that she and Justin both go to the hospital. They both refused.

"You have quite a bruise there, ma'am. You may have a concussion."

"I'm all right." She placed her arms around Justin's waist. "I want to go home," she told him.

He tightened his grip on her trembling shoulders and assured the paramedic that he would see that she received treatment if necessary.

After taking a statement, one of the police officers drove them back to Roberta's house.

"I think that we could both use a drink," Justin said when they entered the living room of the ranch house. "Do you have anything?"

Roberta started to shake her head but remembered the bottle she had been given as a Christmas gift. She pointed toward the dining room. "There's some in the china cabinet," she mumbled as she went towards her bedroom.

The scrapes and brush burns on her face and arms stung like mad as she washed and changed into her old football jersey and denim shorts. She returned to the living room, and sat next to Justin on the blue velvet sofa. He handed her a glass of aged bourbon. She gulped it, unaware of the burning path it left as it slid down her throat. Although she never drank, she poured and gulped another shot like a seasoned barroom veteran.

Justin sipped his own drink and studied Roberta. She was calm, too calm. He'd witnessed this type of reaction before, and knew that before long the initial shock would wear off. His blue eyes were sharp and assessing as he watched and waited for Roberta's unnatural composure to shatter and fall

away like broken glass. Gazing at her delicate profile, he also thanked God for giving him the strength to free her from the disabled truck.

With a shaking hand, Roberta set her glass down on one of the automotive magazines stacked in the center of the coffee table, then hugged her arms across her chest. Justin set down his own drink, his eyes glued to Roberta. The lines on his face tensed when the silence of the room was broken by the sound of Roberta's harsh breathing. The first crack in her crystalline composure began to form, causing her slender body to quake.

It came as no surprise when she flung herself into his arms, clinging so tightly that he had to loosen her arms from his neck to breathe. She immediately tightened them again.

"Make love to me. Please make love to me," she begged before showering his face and neck with kisses.

Justin groaned when Roberta took hold of his hand and placed it on her breast, naked beneath the old red jersey she wore. He clenched his teeth as she moved his palm back and forth across her hardening nipple. The feel of her hot skin drawing into a tight bud aroused him, but he fought his own urges with all his might. Although he wanted her, he knew it couldn't happen now, not like this. Roberta had faced death, and now sought comfort in the essence of life. As difficult as it was, he gently pushed her away and sat up.

"Please," she said, her voice low, insistent. She edged closer and reached out, trying to cup his groin.

Justin slid his fingers around her wrist, knowing that if she touched him he'd be lost. "No. I can't, and you shouldn't."

It pained him to see the hurt and shame in Roberta's large hazel eyes as reality regained control of her senses. She trembled, then wept; the sobs rocking her body. Justin cradled her in his arms, tenderly stroking her curly brown hair. "Sssh, you're safe now," he whispered. He continued to hold Roberta long after she'd cried herself to sleep in his arms.

He felt her breath, as soft as a baby's touch on his chest, and he wished they could remain like this forever. He rested his cheek on the top of her head, breathing a quiet sigh before carrying her in the bedroom. Setting her down in the center of the bed, he drew the light blanket up over her long legs, then planted a feather light kiss upon her bruised forehead.

Although tempted to lie down next to her, he went across to the spare bedroom and stretched out on the bed, his forearm across his face. He knew that sleep would be a long time in coming. He'd spent many wakeful nights during military campaigns, and his nervous system was in the same high gear. But without actual sleep, a part of Justin was restful and contented to be near Bobbie Richardson.

* * * *

The next morning, Stanley woke her owner with the customary face licking. Roberta petted the purring tabby perched regally on her chest, then sat up, taking several deep breaths to calm her still shaken nerves.

Suddenly, Stanley leapt off the bed, arched her back and hissed. Justin walked into the room carrying two steaming

mugs of coffee. The cat advanced, stopped, and hissed at him again before darting out the door.

Justin chuckled and shook his head. "That is one strange animal."

Roberta barely heard the comment. Her full attention was on Justin and her sea green bath towel wrapped snugly around his hips. He came forward and sat at the foot of the bed, handing one of the cups to her.

Justin sipped his coffee. "I hope you don't mind that I took a shower and put my clothes in the wash. They were pretty grungy."

"It's okay," Roberta said, glancing up. She hoped his clothes would be dry soon. Very soon. True, she'd come on to him last night because of the combination of shock and alcohol, but she really had wanted to make love to him, and was painfully aware that she still did. Luckily, the ringing of the front doorbell prevented her from taking leave of her senses once more.

Justin stood. "I'll get it."

"Not dressed like that, you won't," Roberta said as she exited the bed from the other side. The bell continued to ring until she opened the door to find a slight young man with blond hair and a thin mustache standing on her porch.

"I'm Bill Kurzy with the Daily Times. I'd like to interview you about your accident."

"I don't think so."

"It will only take a few minutes," he said, trying to enter the house. He stopped short as Justin appeared behind Roberta.

"Didn't I tell you on the phone not to bother Miss Richardson?" It was as much a command as a question.

The reporter's upper lip quivered. "Everyone in town is curious to know what happened." He took a portable tape recorder from his jacket pocket and shoved it at Roberta.

Justin stepped in front of her, flexing his biceps, his features hardening as he looked down at the smaller man. "If you don't get out of here, I'll take that tape recorder and shove it up your—"

"Justin!"

When Justin looked over his shoulder, the reporter backed away, tripping down the porch steps. "I'll be back!" he called, once safely out of Justin's reach.

"I'll be waiting."

Roberta covered her mouth with one hand and pulled Justin inside with the other. She leaned against the closed door and laughed until tears formed in her eyes. "Did you see the look on his face? I'll bet he peed his pants."

Justin smirked. "That sissy—" He stopped short, cutting off the obscenity he was thinking. He reminded himself that he was back in the civilian world and not in a Marine barracks.

Roberta wiped a tear from her eye. She hadn't laughed this hard in months, and it felt especially refreshing after the terror of last night. "I owe you one. A very big one," she said quietly looking up into those sparkling blue eyes.

Justin placed his hands on either side of her, pinning her between himself and the door. "Be careful about the kind of offers you make, boss."

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As he leaned closer, Roberta felt the sexual magnetism draw her forward. His steady gaze bored into her in silent expectation and her heart pounded in response. Of their own accord, her hands rested against the towel covering his hips, then drifted up to knead his thick muscles. Part of her wanted to put a stop to this, but she felt powerless against the dizzying current of attraction.

The scratchiness of Justin's beard stubble sent a delicious chill through her as he brushed his lips against hers in a prelude to his kiss. His mouth devoured hers, and she pressed closer, aching for more. She felt him grow hard through the terry cloth of the towel and shivered as much from fear as from anticipation.

Raising his mouth from hers, Justin gazed deeply into her eyes. "Are you cold, Bobbie?" he whispered, bending to nuzzle her neck. "I'll warm you."

A searing need poured through Roberta until the buzzer on the clothes dryer sounded. It broke the spell long enough for her practical side to take control. He would have his fun, then leave her just like the last time. She slipped under Justin's arm, relieved at her narrow escape. "I'll grab your clothes. You should get dressed."

"I might as well," Justin mumbled, as Roberta disappeared into the kitchen like a frightened rabbit into its hole. She didn't even meet his gaze when she handed him his clean clothing.

"Did you mean what you said about owing me one?" Justin asked when he came back to the living room. "I hope you did, because I need a favor. A major favor."

All or Nothing
by Barbara Sheridan

Something in his eyes unnerved Roberta, but before she could ask what the favor was, the doorbell rang again.

Chapter 6

Roberta peered through the lace curtains. "Tom's at the door, but there's a mob in my front yard," she said, opening the door enough to allow Tom in, then closing it, ignoring the calls for her to come outside.

Tom hugged her, then pulled back and lightly touched her bruised forehead. "Are you all right, Bobbie? The Miller boy came over this morning and told me and Peggy about the accident. He said the Ramcharger was totaled. Worse than totaled."

She smiled at the old mechanic who had been a second father to her. "I stalled on the tracks. The locks jammed. If it wasn't for Justin, I would be dead." She looked over towards the recliner where he sat, her eyes filled with gratitude.

Justin stood. "All I did was open the door."

Roberta could only gawk in disbelief. How could he be so low-keyed about risking his life? What he'd done for her was nothing short of miraculous.

The doorbell rang again.

"Do you want me to get it?" Tom asked. "A TV crew pulled up the same time I got here. They probably want to talk to you."

"I guess we should," she said to Justin who'd come up beside her.

"Count me out, boss."

She reached out, quickly jerking her hand back. "You're the hero, Hastings."

Justin's expression was skeptical. "I'll give them one minute."

"Let me change first."

Roberta dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt. She sat on the bed to put on her socks and sneakers, and looked at the impression left on the chenille spread from where Justin had been earlier. It took a conscious effort to banish the feelings of guilt and longing. She told herself she'd been fortunate the dryer buzzed when it had. Her frustrated body tried to protest, but she shook her head to clear her thoughts before returning to the living room.

Outside, the neighbors gathered on the lawn and cheered as Roberta came out of the house. They cheered louder when Justin, scowling to show his opinion of the hoopla, appeared beside her.

The newswoman who'd rung the bell introduced herself. "I'm Kelly Cruz from WTIP. It's good to see you looking so fit, Ms. Richardson. From the condition of your truck, I'm surprised you didn't suffer any major injuries."

Justin glared at the skinny guy from the newspaper. He didn't trust that sneaky little—His attention was caught by the sound of Roberta speaking his name.

"It's Justin you should interview. He saved my life." She smiled over at him and took a step back.

The newswoman turned, thrusting her microphone in Justin's face. Justin however, continued to scowl without offering comment.

"Come now, Mr. Hastings, there's no need to be the strong, silent type."

A muscle flicked angrily at his jaw. His eyes darkened with displeasure, and he moved the microphone aside. "The door was stuck. I opened it." His voice was like an echo in a deserted building. He looked to Roberta. "I'm out of here."

Her heart sank as Justin vaulted over the porch railing and jogged out of sight.

Determined to get her sound byte for the evening news, the newswoman stepped in front of Roberta. "Ms. Richardson, won't you give us the details of the accident, and tell us how Mr. Hastings rescued you?"

* * * *

By six that evening, Roberta was firmly convinced it was the slowest news day Pennsylvania had ever seen. The WTIP report about her "narrow escape from a grisly death" had been everyone's lead story, thanks to some amateur video footage of the inferno that had once been her truck and the twisted wreckage left after the flames had been doused.

The sight of what might have been her coffin made Roberta queasy, and she thanked the lucky stars which sent Justin to her aid. She wished there was some way to express her gratitude, but when the obvious physical means presented itself to her mind's eye (in graphic detail), she decided to simply let matters rest where they stood.

But then she remembered his strange comment about the "major favor". Wheels turned in her brain, but try as she might Roberta couldn't imagine what the favor might be.

There's only one way to find out, her curiosity prodded. Go ask him.

All or Nothing
by Barbara Sheridan

Roberta's determination to solve Justin's riddle wavered during the short walk to Fairmont Street, but she told herself that she had to find out. The look in his eyes had been so serious; it worried her. He might be in some kind of trouble. If she could help him, she would. Besides, he'd saved her life. No favor was too big to ask.

She quickened her pace when the house came into view, and trotted up the wide porch steps, pleased to see Justin had taken the time to polish the silver cat's head doorknocker that his aunt had had specially made. Roberta turned the old-fashioned doorbell key and waited. She heard an upstairs window slide open followed by Justin's curt voice.

"Who the hell is it?"

Roberta went down to the red brick walkway and gazed up at Justin's annoyed face. "I can go home if you're busy."

"Stay put. I'll be right down."

His sexy smile quickened her heartbeat, and she had the urge to hurry home, but once the front door opened, Roberta's feet led her inside.

She almost didn't recognize the wide entrance hall without the profusion of dark botanical prints she remembered from years past. Gone, too, were the antique side tables and towering hall stand with the sterling silver hat hooks.

Glancing into the parlor, she was crushed to see the Victorian furniture and assorted curios missing. At least the upright piano was there and the dining room seemed to be intact, albeit minus the fine china, crystal and sterling hollowware.

She looked at Justin, seeing her sadness reflected in his eyes. "I heard your cousin Carl cleaned the place out, but..."

Justin shrugged. "The house is still in the family. That's what really matters." Roberta nodded. He gestured toward the upper floor. "Carl couldn't get Aunt Maddie's pride and joy."

Roberta's expression brightened. "I'm glad," she said, picturing the ornate bedroom set that she especially loved.

"I was just polishing it. Do you want to see it?"

Roberta's smile fell. "Maybe later." She walked down the hall towards the kitchen. "How's the yard? Are the rose bushes still alive?"

"Alive and blooming," Justin answered, following her. He cautioned himself to choose his words carefully from here on. He'd been afraid Bobbie would bolt out the door a minute ago when he mentioned the master bedroom.

In the kitchen, Justin pointed out the new refrigerator, range, and washer and dryer. "Courtland dropped them off yesterday when the utilities were turned on. He even gave me a discount. It pays to have friends who own department stores and appliance outlet franchises."

Roberta agreed, looking out the window above the sink. In the backyard, the trees, hedges, and rose bushes had been pruned and the lawn cut and weeded. There were four Oriental rugs spread out on the ground. She pointed. "I like what you've done to the yard, but most people are satisfied with plain old grass."

Chuckling softly, Justin came up behind Roberta. Her sweetly scented perfume drifted towards him, and he wished she would wear it to work. She trembled when he wrapped

his arms around her midriff, and again when he brushed his cheek against the softness of her hair. "The rugs were too valuable to throw out, but they smelled musty from the cellar. I thought airing them would help."

"It can't hurt," Roberta said, reveling in the feel of being in Justin's arms.

"Neither can this," Justin murmured.

Roberta moaned softly while Justin ran his tongue along the side of her neck and reached up under her sweater to cup and stroke her breasts through the lacy fabric of her bra.

"You shouldn't," she whispered.

"Why not?" he asked, slipping his hand beneath the elastic waistband of her knit slacks and inside her panties. She whimpered and squirmed against him when he caressed her intimately. "It's been a long time for you, hasn't it?" he asked before letting his lips blaze a new path along her neck.

Roberta's reply was lost in a sigh. She leaned her weight back against him, gripping his arms for support, too caught up in the moment to question his motives.

Justin held her fast when she cried out and shook as her climax peaked. He turned her to face him, pleased to see the sweet smile of satisfaction curving her mouth. Giving without taking had never felt so good. He hugged her close, then kissed her deeply, his own desire building with a pleasurable ache.

Pulling back, he smoothed his thumbs across her scarlet cheeks. She was warm. He was lightheaded.

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Smiling, Justin slipped his arm around Roberta's waist and led her towards the hall. She caught him by surprise when she stopped short. "What's wrong?"

"Everything," she said quietly, pulling away. She went out onto the back porch. She couldn't do this. She wouldn't do this. It would end in disaster.

"I'm sorry," Justin said from the doorway. "I was out of line."

Roberta took a calming breath before facing him, giving him a forced smile. "It's okay. I could have stopped you. I should have." She turned her attention to a blue jay perched on the hedge, and tried to think of a way out of this awkward situation. She should just leave, but that seemed childish. Instead, she decided to divert the course of their thoughts. "What did you want to ask me this morning? You know, the favor I owe you."

Justin hesitated, watching the jay as it flew off. He looked back to Roberta, his palms growing sweaty. "I want you to marry me."

Chapter 7

The silence was absolute. They stood stock still, barely breathing.

Suddenly Roberta laughed. Of course. He was trying to lighten the mood, trying to ease the awkwardness of their brief encounter. "Why? Did you get yourself pregnant?"

The bemused expression Roberta wore slipped away when she realized Justin was not smiling. "This is a joke. Please tell me this is a joke."

Justin slipped his hands into his jean pockets. "It's no joke. I have to get married, and I'm asking you."

Falling back against the porch railing in a pretend swoon, Roberta fanned her cheeks. "I'm overwhelmed. I've never been swept off my feet so romantically before—"She broke off when Justin gripped her by the shoulders and made her face him.

"Dammit, Bobbie. This is important."

She moved away and sat on the porch steps, her eyes scanning the yard. The gate was concealed within the hedges and she struggled to remember on which side it was located. Justin grabbed her again.

"Listen to me."

She swallowed. She hadn't seen him this agitated since the day of his aunt's funeral when his cousin Carl began talking to an acquaintance about the value of Maddie's antiques as her casket was being lowered into the ground.

Leaning back against the porch support, Roberta sat with her arms around her bent knees. "What's going on?"

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Justin ran his hand through his sun-streaked hair, then across the back of his neck. "It's my daughter, Annie," he began. "My wife split when I was in the Persian Gulf. She went to New York, and her mother ... Jan's mother is a real piece of work," he said, his eyes taking on a cold sheen.

He got up and took a few steps from the porch, his hands shoved deep in his jean pockets. He turned back. "I met Jan when I was on a weekend pass. She was on vacation with some other girls. It was their last big fling before heading off to college. Things moved fast. Too fast. And the next thing you know, we're married with a baby on the way."

He paused and Roberta waited, sensing things got painful from here.

Justin rubbed the back of his neck again. "I didn't know it, but Jan came from a wealthy family. A very wealthy family. The kind of family with connections to the White House and cousins married to European royalty."

Roberta winced.

"Exactly," Justin said. "Jan said she wanted me to meet her folks, so I said 'no problem.' We hit the road from the base in a second-hand pickup truck, me dressed in my fatigues, her in an old flannel shirt and baggy overalls." He shook his head as if still unable to believe it. "The security guard at her parents' estate wouldn't let us in until Jan showed him her driver's license. He almost didn't let me in because I had no proof that I was her husband."

Justin came forward and sat next to Roberta. "After the first visit, Jan's mother—Gwyneth Kelly-Whitcomb—was like a fly in Jan's ear, buzzing around every chance she could,

calling, sending these long letters with details of all the things Jan was missing. You know, the house, the trips, the clothes, the classy friends. For that first Christmas she sent Jan a full length sable coat and a certificate for the baby. It was a certificate stating that our daughter's tuition to Vassar was already paid in full."

"No wonder you got divorced," Roberta said.

Justin shook his head. "That was only part of the reason. A lot of it was my own fault. I lived on base and moved Jan into a tiny apartment in town. I didn't cheat on her; I just chose not to be there very often. When things in the Mid-East began heating up, I volunteered to go over the first chance I got. Jan went home to New York during Desert Storm. I sent her money for Annie, but she returned the checks uncashed. She'd send pictures once in a while, but then they stopped. I let it go. We shouldn't have gotten married, but it seemed like the right thing to do."

He stopped, and Roberta could tell from the look in his eyes that he was wishing for a chance to go back and make things right. She placed her hand on his and he grasped it immediately, his expression brightening just a little.

"What's the rest of the story?" Roberta asked. "Why do you need to get married now?"

"Jan passed away two years ago. I found out when one of the guys at the base turned on the TV and I caught a report on one of those tabloid shows." His eyes darkened. "Jan's mother didn't even have the courtesy to tell me. I had to stand there and watch my daughter walking all alone out of the church." His grip on Roberta's hand tightened. "I should

have been there for Annie. I should have been there from day one."

Dropping Roberta's hand, Justin got up and paced in front of the steps. "I got an emergency leave and went to get my daughter. I was thrown into jail for trespassing and making terroristic threats. I've been battling the dragon lady ever since. Her latest tactic is the money angle. Annie is in boarding school. I've written to her and we talk on the phone. She wants to see me, but her grandmother has the legal department tying this up, too." He paused and sat back down.

"When I met Courtland out in LA, he put me in touch with his lawyers and we had a hearing. The judge agreed to a trial visitation for the summer. Annie is coming here when school gets out, and her grandmother is paying a call with a lawyer and court appointed social worker to see if I can provide for my daughter."

Roberta stood. She looked down at Justin. "So you told the court you were providing Annie with a new mother."

Justin stood and looked at her. "Sort of. My lawyer said if I had a traditional environment to raise Annie in, he'd be in a better position to end the legal nightmare Gwyenth has been creating."

The sounds of chirping birds broke the heavy silence.

Justin shoved his hands into his pockets. "Well? Will you help me out?"

"This is the '90's," Roberta pointed out. "The world is filled with single parents. Get a better lawyer."

Justin stared, never expecting her to refuse. "You don't understand."

"I understand perfectly," Roberta said in a cold tone. She walked back into the house, going directly to the front door.

Justin followed.

"I need you, Bobbie. Your dad raised you. You can tell me what to do, how to raise a girl."

Roberta stepped out of the front door and looked back at him. "Here's the crash course—feed her, clothe her, educate her, then push her out of the nest."

Justin followed her to the sidewalk, grabbing hold of her arm. "You owe me one. A very big one. You said that yourself."

Roberta yanked her arm away. "I lied."

Justin stepped in front of her, continuing to block her path with his big body when she tried to maneuver around him.

"Help me. Marry me. Please."

"I'll think about it."

"I don't have much time."

Roberta gave him a smug smile. "I, on the other hand, have all the time in the world."

When he cursed out loud, Roberta scored a point in the mental win column. She strolled jauntily down the block, her smile dissolving the second she rounded the corner of Fairmont and Oak.

How dare he think he could use her, however noble the cause? There was no way she would get him out of this jam of his. No way in hell.

Justin Hastings had made his messy bed when he'd hit on the poor little rich girl, and now he would have to smooth out the wrinkles all by his lonesome.

Marry him? Why, she wouldn't marry him if she was dying of starvation and he was a twenty ounce sirloin steak.

A bumper sticker caught Roberta's attention.

"Pedestrians—Run 'em down. It'll teach 'em a lesson." Roberta stood and stared long after the car pulled past the stop sign. Maybe she should marry Justin to teach him a lesson, to score a symbolic point for women everywhere. Women like herself who had foolishly let themselves be used in the name of blind love.

A wicked smile curved Roberta's mouth as she strolled home. It served him right, the big oaf. He'd broken her heart seventeen years ago, and now it was payback time. If he wanted a wife, he'd get one.

"Be careful what you wish for, Justin ... " Roberta said to herself as she unlocked her front door. "You're about to get the wife from hell."

However, Roberta's plan for revenge hit a snag later that night as she watched an old TV show about a widower struggling to raise six children alone.

If she agreed to this quickie marriage, she knew she would have to do it right when his daughter and her grandmother came to visit. If she could help him get custody of his daughter, she would, because Roberta knew in her heart that Justin would be a great father.

He didn't have an ivy league education or a mansion on a hill, but he had a big heart. The best ever created. He was loving and unselfish with himself and his possessions, she'd seen that first hand when his Aunt Maddie had a stroke. Maddie hadn't had any type of insurance, and Justin had

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gotten a special leave from the military to nurse her at home so she could spend her final days in the house where she was born.

Roberta clicked off the television. She gathered Stanley into her arms when the cat jumped up on the couch. "I'll help Justin when the time comes," she said. "But that doesn't mean I can't have a little fun first."

Stanley purred.

Chapter 8

Monday morning Stanley looked up from her cat food long enough to arch her back and hiss when Justin knocked on Roberta's kitchen door. Roberta motioned for Justin to come in.

"I thought you might want a ride to work," he said as he went to the counter and poured himself a cup of coffee.

Roberta watched his broad back. He was taking an awfully long time stirring in one spoon of sugar. She finished her yogurt, licking the last bit of strawberry from her plastic spoon. The garage was a twenty minute walk, tops. He'd come to see if she was going to marry him.

She assumed a serious expression when he came to the table to set down his cup. She turned yesterday's newspaper towards him. "We made the front page. My truck did, anyway."

Justin said nothing. He went to the refrigerator. "Mother Hubbard's cupboard was stocked compared to this. Are you allergic to the grocery store or something?" He took out the half gallon of milk and brought it to the table.

"If it doesn't come canned, boxed, or bottled, I don't buy it," Roberta answered. She drank her coffee, observing Justin as he took a bowl and spoon from the dish rack on the sink as casually as he had when he was a kid, inviting himself over to watch the stock car races on television with her dad.

He looked around the kitchen, his brow knit with annoyance. "Didn't you have a couple boxes of sugar-powered cereal the other day?"

"Amazingly enough, I put them where they belong." Roberta pointed behind him to the wall mounted cabinets. She got up for more coffee.

Justin poured himself a generous helping of sugar-coated flakes, dousing them with milk. "I should teach you to cook."

"You'll have to, if you expect me to impress, what did you call her? The dragon lady?"

Justin choked and Roberta ran around behind him, thumping him on the back.

"Okay, okay!" he yelled. "Geez." He sipped his coffee then swiveled in his chair. "You'll do it? You'll marry me?"

Roberta playfully ruffled his hair. "How can I resist when you're such a romantic?" She returned to her seat, amused by his irritation. "Shall I swoon now, or should I save it for later?"

Justin's reply was the look that had once caused a raw recruit to cry.

Roberta smiled and finished her coffee, letting Justin stew for a few more minutes. "I can do this, you know. Maybe not the cooking part, but I think I can hold my own with your dragon lady." She was not surprised to see Justin's open skepticism.

"I can," she said, placing her empty cup in the sink. "My former in-laws were from Charleston. They were old money Southern aristocrats. You want to talk about culture shock, you should have seen them when they came up for the wedding. I got into a soccer game with the Rizzo boys, while in my wedding dress, and my dad broke out a bottle of Irish whiskey for the toast."

Justin smiled. It sent a bolt of lightning through her.

"That would have been something to see,"he said, getting up to wash out his bowl and cup. "I had some culture shock myself when I met Jan's folks. We arrived the same day as some swanky dinner party."He shook his head. "It was unreal."

"I hear you,"Roberta agreed, getting her purse from the counter. "Rog took me to Charleston when we got engaged. They dressed for breakfast. They dressed for lunch. They dressed for dinner. I'll bet they even dressed up to use the bathroom,"she said as they left her house.

Justin laughed as he opened the Mercedes' door for her. "Luckily, I had the foresight to take my uniforms along."He continued when he got into the car. "Jan once said she wanted to hide in her parents' closet just to see if Gwyneth kept a hairdresser standing by the bed whenever she and her husband made love."

Roberta had forgotten something. A very big something.

She reminded herself to look amused, glancing over as Justin pulled out of the driveway, bracing herself against the physical reaction to the erotic scene her mind was running.

"You feeling okay?"Justin asked when he noticed her shiver.

"Fine,"she mumbled, looking out the Mercedes' window.

Saturday's playful fantasy of championing womankind burst into flames like an Indy car hitting the wall. There would be no childish baiting. There would be no symbolic point scoring. There might be sex. Sex with Justin Hastings.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Justin asked, turning towards her when he came to a stop sign. He swiped his index finger across the bridge of her nose. "You're breaking out in a cold sweat.

"I'm fine," Roberta answered in a clipped tone, scrunching as close to the door as she could. "I'm fine," she repeated, trying to convince herself of the fact.

When they reached the garage, Justin opened the car door for her. Her knees still shaking from the sexual images flooding her mind, Roberta tripped getting out of the Mercedes. Justin caught her.

Without warning, he covered her mouth with his. His kiss was deep, hard, almost as hard as his body. Though she tried to fight it, Roberta succumbed, kissing him back, kneading the thick muscles of his shoulders with quaking fingers. She was breathing heavily when they parted. He grinned.

"I guess you are all right."

Nodding weakly, she handed him the garage keys, too shaken to remember how they worked.

She was doomed.

* * * *

Fortunately, Roberta was very busy during the day. The first of Justin's old girlfriends called the instant the clock hit eight a.m.. The phone rang constantly after that. By noon Roberta's appointment calendar was booked solid for two weeks.

Justin came into the office as she was switching on the answering machine she'd run home to get. "Does that mean

you'll actually do some work this afternoon?"he teased, putting on a clean T-shirt so he could go out to lunch.

Roberta fidgeted in her chair when his muscles rippled. "Playing twenty questions with your former love interests is work. How is he? Is he involved with anyone? I heard he was married. I heard he's divorced. Can he come out to the house and fix my car tonight? Ugh!"

Justin leaned against the doorframe. "Did you tell them I'm spoken for? We are engaged, you know."

"I forgot,"she said, looking in her desk drawer just to keep her eyes off him. What was she going to do? She'd offered to help him, but how could she? If they were alone in his house, at night, with that big, soft bed, there was no telling what would happen. And it would kill her.

He cared for her, sure, but not in the way she needed him to care. She was his buddy. Having sex would be a recreational activity. It would mean nothing to him.

"You're going to go through with it, aren't you?"

Roberta looked up. "I told you I would, didn't I?"she said sharply, suddenly hating herself for agreeing to this farce.

"You don't have to."He came towards the desk and looked down at her.

"I've talked to a lot of potential candidates today. If you have someone else lined up, then go for it,"she snapped, getting up to look in the filing cabinet. "I have better things to do anyway."

Justin's eyes grew sad. He covered it by looking at the appointment calendar. "Ten tune-ups, a transmission, four

paint jobs. If this keeps up, you'll be out of debt in no time. I guess I won't have to ask Courtland to give us his contract."

Roberta seized his comment and clung to it like a life preserver. She would treat this marriage thing like any business transaction. She would be a user for a change. She wouldn't be hurt again.

She slammed the file drawer shut. "I want that contract," she told Justin, in the same voice she'd used the night she ended her marriage. "I'll help you get custody of your daughter, but I want something in return."

Justin's harsh expression mirrored Roberta's. "You were Miss Sweetness and Light this morning. What gives?"

She walked away, pretending to check the coffee canister. Marshaling her strength, she faced him again. "Let's not play games. You need something. I need something. We can help each other. We get married, we get the job done, we end it. Everyone comes out ahead."

Justin thought it over. She was right. He had no one but himself to blame for the ache he was feeling in the pit of his stomach. This "relationship" they were building had never been a real relationship. They were just friends. It was a trade-off. He'd get his daughter, Roberta would get out of debt. He approached her, his hand extended.

"It's a deal."

Roberta shook his hand, her steely resolve cracking around the edges when his skin touched hers. "It's a deal," she repeated, partially to remind her throbbing body, her longing heart.

Justin dropped her hand then looked at his watch. "I'll be back at one-thirty."

Justin barely touched the plate of ravioli he'd ordered at Rizzo's Restoriente. He left the money on the table then went to the bar ordering a gingerale from Roberta's best friend, Tony Rizzo. Justin sat gazing down at the carbonated bubbles breaking the surface of the drink while the lunch crowd thinned.

Tony waited on his last customer, then came over to where Justin sat. "I talked to Dom last night. He might drive down this weekend. You want to get the rest of the guys together? We'll have a blast. Invite Bobbie. She always liked a good poker game." Tony excused himself to fill a waitress's order.

"What was Bobbie's ex like?" Justin asked when Tony returned. "How could she marry such a jerk?"

Tony wiped the bar with a white towel. "She didn't know. When they first got together he was good to her. She'd bring him over to Mama's on Sundays for dinner, and they'd play with my nieces and nephews, and talk about starting their own family once he signed with the NFL. When the career fell through, he changed." He excused himself to wait on another customer.

The veins on Justin's neck stood out as he pushed his ice cube with the tip of his index finger. He'd like to strangle that college boy for hurting Bobbie. No wonder she was so cold-blooded now. He couldn't blame her, though.

Breathing a quiet sigh, Justin remembered the Bobbie he'd known in high school. She had been hell on wheels, full of surprises. Glancing at Tony at the end of the bar, Justin

couldn't help but remember how pretty Bobbie had looked the night of her senior prom. She'd been a real lady, and he'd been proud as hell to be her escort.

And now, as he did every so often, Justin wondered what might have happened had he not enlisted in the Marine Corps, if he'd kept in touch with her.

Justin's watch alarm sounded and he put his memories aside. He finished his gingerale, then returned to work.

Roberta's head and heart waged a fierce battle that afternoon. Her head told her to be practical. She did not need a husband. She did not need to raise someone else's child, even for a little while. She'd never liked being tied down.

Justin wouldn't tie you down, her heart countered. He'd take care of you the way he took care of Maddie. He'd be there when you needed him. He'd work by your side, the way he's doing now. He'd help you build a happy life.

She handed Justin the last engine part he needed even before he asked for it, then picked up the tools while he finished the job. He handed her the wrench he'd been using, his fingers lingering on hers. Their eyes met. Her heart begged her to listen.

Roberta took her hand away and placed the wrench in the tool cabinet. "I'm going to get cleaned up."

"Do you need a ride home?"

Roberta shrugged. "It's up to you."

"It's on my way."

They drove the short distance in silence, though Roberta's heart and mind did battle again. Justin walked her to her front door.

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"Do you have anything for heartburn? Tony's mom used too much garlic in the sauce today."

"Sure. Follow me."

She gave Justin the bottle of antacid tablets and walked him back to the door, feeling the cozy house she'd grown up in become too large and empty. She called to Justin when he stepped off the porch, longing to tell him that she would gladly be his wife in every way; however, the chilly hue of his eyes stopped her. "Open up tomorrow. I need to look for another car."

He caught the keys in mid air. "Catch you on the flip side, boss."

Chapter 9

After a restless night Roberta dragged herself out of bed and dressed in her work clothes before going to Oak Mills' single car dealership. The owner greeted her at the door with a smile. "What will it be, Bobbie, new or used?"

Roberta gazed out the showroom window, taking stock of the used vehicles. She recognized many of the cars and trucks, having inspected or repaired them over the years.

She turned her attention to the new cars in the showroom and the signs near them promising special financing for first-time buyers. She turned back to the dealer, a bittersweet expression on her face. "I think it's about time I bought my first new car, Mr. Miller."

Jake Miller's round face lit up. "I was hoping you'd say that, Bobbie." He gestured to his left. "Let me show you what just came in. We haven't even pulled them off the trailer yet..."

Roberta's mood was upbeat until she entered her garage two hours later and saw her least favorite resident of Oak Mills making goo-goo eyes at Justin. Rhonda Flanagan bent at the waist as Justin examined the engine of her Honda, giving him an up close and personal view of her silicone-injected attributes. His attention was riveted to Roberta as she passed by.

Justin followed her into the office. He was limping.

"Did you hurt yourself?"

"No," he said, taking a set of car keys from the pegboard near the appointment calendar. "I'll pull that minivan in so you can inspect it." He left without further comment.

They barely spoke for the rest of the day, their subsequent conversations similar to the first.

After the last car was picked up, Roberta made out the day's bank deposit. Justin came in, naked from the waist up. Her temperature climbed as her eyes roved across his rippling muscles while he donned a clean shirt. He stepped closer to the desk. He smelled of soap, with his own masculine scent adding a touch of spice. "Did you find a car?"

She nodded. "A shiny new Chevy Malibu. Mr. Miller has to prep it and get the paperwork ready. I'll have it in a couple of days."

Justin rubbed his left thigh and sat on the edge of the desk, straightening the invoices she'd set aside. "A Malibu? That's awfully feminine compared to that tank you had forever. I thought you'd go for an eighteen-wheeler."

Roberta rolled her eyes. "Even Tom's lame jokes are better than that. If you'll excuse me, I have work to do."

"Do you want me to wait? It's going to rain."

Roberta looked out the small office window. The sun wasn't shining, but the sky was bright. "Buzz off," she muttered, looking back at her checkbook.

Justin stood and snapped her a salute. "Yes, ma'am. Buzzing off, ma'am."

"Goof ball."

* * * *

The sky was darkening when Roberta finished her paperwork thirty minutes later. She cast an accusing glance at the forming clouds. "Don't do it," she warned. Nature responded with a distant rumble.

She quickened her pace as the wind blew around her, rustling the tree leaves and pushing in heavier clouds. It began to drizzle and Roberta broke into a run, confident that she could make it the final two blocks before the downpour hit. She didn't.

The telephone rang as she stepped through her front door. "Hello?" she said miserably, shoving strands of wet hair from her eyes.

A deep, triumphant laugh came through the receiver. "I told you so," Justin taunted in a sing-song tone.

When Roberta swore at him, he laughed louder.

"Talk dirty to me. I like it," he teased.

"Aaargh!"

She slammed down the receiver, then went to her bedroom, leaving a trail of wet spots on the forest green carpet.

She was curled up on the sofa with Stanley, watching a rerun of the Adams Family when the doorbell rang. She assumed it was her insurance agent, dropping off the check to settle her claim on the Ramcharger.

The visitor was Justin.

"You got soaked, didn't you?"

Roberta tried to slam the door in his face, but he wedged himself inside before she could. "Get lost, Hastings."

"No," he said calmly, closing the door. He followed her into the living room, giving the cat a disparaging look when it hissed and darted past him.

Roberta felt Justin's eyes upon her, but she refused to acknowledge him or the thrill his presence created. She sat down on the couch, kept her attention on the television.

"You kind of look like Cousin It with wet hair. I hope you aren't covered with hair under that robe," he teased, reaching towards her.

She pulled the edges of her robe together tightly. "What do you want?"

Justin jingled the spare garage keys. "I forgot to give you these." He set the keys on the coffee table, then sat next to her, sliding his arm along the back of the sofa.

Roberta gritted her teeth and pressed herself against the sofa's padded arm when she felt him toy with her damp curls. She pulled her knees up and stared at the TV, determined not to look into his gorgeous eyes, lest she do something stupid like throw herself at him. He was buttering her up because he needed her cooperation.

"Don't you have to get the house in shape?" she asked sharply.

"I really don't feel like it," Justin answered, running his index finger along the side of her bare foot.

Roberta trembled. He was another Roger Clemments, right down to the foot tickling that used to get her so hot and bothered. She shot him a nasty look and put her feet on the floor. "Don't."

Justin opened his mouth to speak, but was cut off by the ringing of the doorbell.

Roberta greeted her insurance agent. "Thanks, Ben," she said brightly as he handed over her check. "This will make a nice down payment on the shiny new Malibu I picked out at Miller's. Do you want to come in for a minute?" She gestured towards the sofa, not realizing that Justin was giving the man a stern look behind her back.

"No thanks, Bobbie. I have to head home."

She shut the door.

"Leave it open," Justin called. "I might as well hit the road, too, unless you changed your mind and want some company."

Roberta's naked body tingled beneath the terry cloth of her robe, but she fought her physical urges. "Not especially," she said calmly, opening the door again.

"That's what I thought," Justin muttered. He stopped before stepping out onto the porch. "I almost forgot to tell you that I asked Courtland to let us shop after hours this Sunday."

"Why?"

"I need some furniture for the house. Chairs, a couch, a bedroom set for Annie."

"What does that have to do with me?" she asked, shifting her focus away from his handsome face.

"It would look weird if you didn't come with me." He took a half step to the side, so that Roberta was looking directly at him again. "I told Court about us getting married."

"What did he say?"

"Wow. You and Bobbie? Bobbie Richardson? Those were his exact words, by the way."

Roberta could only stare as Justin went to his car. Her trance was broken when Stanley rubbed against her ankle. She picked the cat up. "This is a match made in heaven all right."

* * * *

The customers Justin's presence brought, kept Richardson's Auto Repair humming for the rest of the week. They put in a full day on Saturday, instead of the customary half, and that was fine with Roberta. The busier they were, the less time she had to think erotic thoughts about Justin.

To her chagrin, he'd been telling everyone that they were engaged, leaving it to her to field so many questions about the when and where that Roberta felt like wearing a sign stating, *We haven't decided yet, but it will be soon.*

When Sunday afternoon came, Dale Courtland asked "When's the big day?"

This time, Roberta deferred to Justin with a theatrical sweep of her hand. "Tell the man, honey."

Justin cleared his throat and looked to her for help. She offered none. "We'll probably elope."

Dale chuckled. "Elopements are usually kept secret by teenage lovers, but who am I to judge?" He held the glass entrance door open. "Come on in and see what you can find to furnish the love nest."

Justin and Roberta groaned in unison.

As they crossed the ground floor of the department store, Justin stopped short, grabbing the back of Roberta's flannel shirt. "What are you doing?" she demanded in a rough whisper.

He pointed to the glass display case containing engagement and wedding rings. "We have to get one of these."

Roberta reacted with disgust. "I can't wear a ring with the work I do. I'd lose a finger."

Justin dismissed that fact with a simple, "I want you to have one."

"Then surprise me."

Justin looked at the rings a moment while Roberta walked to where Dale was waiting.

"Did you decide?" Roberta asked sweetly when Justin joined them by the elevators. "I hope it's big and shiny."

His reply was a stern look.

When they reached the sixth floor, Dale took a portable television from the small appliance section and sat in a comfortable leather recliner. "You two lovebirds take your time."

Justin's pained expression brought a smile to Roberta's face, which lasted until they reached the display of window treatments and she got down to business.

"The ruffled yellow tiers will be cute in the kitchen, and the white Priscillas and sheer panels should be good in the bedrooms," Roberta said, piling the packages into Justin's arms. "You might as well go with the antique satin in the

dining room and parlor. What's your color scheme going to be?"

"How should I know? I'm worried about the cracked plaster and ancient plumbing, not matching the paint and curtains."

Roberta let out an exasperated sigh. "We'll go with the eggshell color. It should blend in." She dragged Justin over to the sheets and towels. Deeply into the shopping spirit now, she increased the unwieldy burden in Justin's arms in record time.

He deposited the load in the vacant chair next to Dale and attempted to take a seat himself, but Roberta grabbed his arm with both hands and pulled him up before his rear could connect with the chair.

"Break time after we check out the big stuff."

Justin scowled.

Dale Courtland snickered. "Get used to it, Just. Shopping with the little woman is one of the many joys of married life—or so Sharon tells me."

Trapped, Justin followed Roberta toward the furniture section. He deferred to her judgment mainly to get the ordeal over with, although he couldn't help but be impressed by her taste. For Annie's room she chose a chaise lounge upholstered in a deep rose chintz along with a canopied cherry bed and matching nightstand, a desk and five drawer chest. She picked a less elaborate set for the guest bedroom then strolled over to the living room section.

Justin's admiration and patience ran out after her fifth lap of the sales floor. He grabbed her by the hand and gave her the same type of look an exasperated father would give a

child who'd been wandering aimlessly through a toy store. "Enough. We have been here for over two hours. Pick a couch and get it over with."

Roberta jerked free, mostly to stop the heat flaring through her when her skin touched his. She had a good mind to get something really tacky just to spite him, but she couldn't. That big old house was too beautiful to have anything less than the best. Without a word, she went back to where Dale Courtland sat, engrossed in a syndicated show famous for its bikini clad female cast.

She handed him the list she compiled of furniture stock numbers. "I'm afraid none of your living room things quite fits the spirit of the monstrosity Justin calls a house." She ignored Justin's affronted expression and returned her pen and note pad to her purse.

"We might as well go then," he said. "Do you want to ring it up, Court, or deliver it and bill me?"

Dale clicked off the TV. "I can't let my favorite customers go away disappointed. Come down to the basement. I have something you might be interested in. I think I know what you have in mind, Bobbie."

"Should we?" Roberta asked Justin.

"We might as well."

In the cavernous basement, Dale led the way through a maze of cartons, crates, wheeled bins, and a macabre assortment of dismembered mannequins until they reached a far corner. He'd picked up two crowbars along the way, and now handed one to Justin, then motioned to three of the largest wooden crates lined up against the wall.

Roberta watched curiously while the crate fronts were pried loose and the packing material was removed from the items. She squealed with girlish delight when the furniture inside was revealed. It was perfect, absolutely perfect. There was an enormous Empire Revival sofa with thick rolled arms, plump seat cushions, and hand carved mahogany details. The next packing crate contained a wing chair upholstered in matching cream brocade fabric, while the last crate housed a wide lyre-based coffee table with a solid marble top.

While Roberta traced the elaborate carving on the table base, Dale smiled over at Justin and held his thumbs up. Justin's smile was faltering as he tried to calculate the cost, but his practicality flew out the window the instant Roberta came over and took his right hand in both of hers.

"I know it has to be expensive, but please say yes, Justin. Please. It's just like Maddie's furniture."

Justin's conservative side screamed internally, even as he turned to Dale. "Write it up, Court."

Dale wiped imaginary perspiration from his forehead with an exaggerated swipe of his hand. "Thank you kindly. I thought I'd have to take a big loss on this stuff. It was a custom order for a professor from Penn State whose wife decided she'd rather have a divorce than a restored townhouse. There are a few other pieces—two end tables, a console table, a Lincoln rocker and two velvet side chairs."

"We'll take it!" Roberta said excitedly as she stepped into the elevator. "Will we take it?" she asked Justin, realizing that the decision was his.

"Might as well. I can cash in the bonds Maddie left me. I think she'd want me to."

Back upstairs, Dale boxed the linens as he totaled the purchases. The grand total made Justin wince, but he handed over his store credit card.

On the way back to Oak Mills, Justin stopped for dinner at a small roadside restaurant. He listened as Roberta talked excitedly about her ideas for decorating the house. She was happier and more animated than he'd ever seen her. He knew that this was the real Bobbie Richardson—the one who had hidden behind a tom-boy facade for most of her life and then inside an emotionless vacuum since her divorce. The ice around her heart was finally melting. If only his leg wasn't beginning to ache.

The sharp twinge Justin felt in the restaurant lingered. He asked her to drive back to town, hoping a rest would help. She didn't question his decision when he handed her the keys, and he saw no reason to explain. He sank into the passenger seat, closed his eyes, and practiced the mental pain-relieving techniques he'd learned from a Chinese doctor in San Francisco. The pain from his old injury could still become unbearable, but living with it was better than coping with the aid of pills. He had seen his share of men ruin their lives that way, and he'd vowed early on not to be among their ranks.

Roberta glanced over at Justin and smiled. The poor baby was tired from all that shopping. She remembered Dale Courtland's sarcastic remark about the "joys of married life" and found herself wishing this so-called relationship

wasn't a sham. Maybe it could become more of what she'd hoped it would be when they were teenagers, what her parents shared before her mother's untimely death. What a kick it would be to have her own children hanging around the garage after school as she and Justin had done; absorbing bits and pieces of the family business until it became a part of them. She scanned Justin's tranquil face before turning onto the road leading back into Oak Mills, and wondered if she could turn things to her advantage.

Justin was pleasantly surprised to feel Roberta caressing his cheek after she stopped the car in her driveway. He opened his eyes.

"Time to get up."

She started to lower her hand, but he lightly locked his fingers around her wrist and pressed a kiss in the center of her palm. Encouraged by her gentle sigh, he kissed her fingers, then playfully sucked them each in turn, delighting in the way she shivered. There was no mistaking the deeper meaning when she asked if he wanted to go into the house with her.

Pain cut through Justin's leg the minute he stepped out of the Mercedes.

"Bobbie," he said in a dull voice.

"What is it?" she asked as she came around the car.

"What's wrong?"

Justin took a moment to respond as the pain flared then ebbed. This was no passing spasm, and he knew the next several hours would be hellish. "On second thought, I think

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I'll head home."He paused and took a deep breath. "My leg is acting up. I hope you understand."

"No problem,"Roberta said flatly. She shoved the car keys into his hand and walked to the porch, turning when she reached her front door. With a cheerless expression she watched Justin turn left at the end of the block.

She understood. She and Justin had a business deal, nothing more. She was a fool if she thought he might care. Letting her take charge at the store this evening had been a show for Dale Courtland's benefit, and the seductive little kisses just now were probably her "reward"for a good performance. She understood perfectly.

* * * *

Wednesday afternoon, while staring at the steady black stream of used motor oil pour out of the van she was repairing, Roberta realized that she and Justin now had the impersonal, employer/employee relationship that marked the typical business deal. Unfortunately, she regretted ever wanting such an arrangement.

As the last drops of dirty oil hit the drain pan at her feet, she wished she could travel back and order him from the garage the minute he walked in. But most of all, she wished she had never set eyes on Justin Hastings. The longing that filled her every time she looked at him was worse than the torturous chasm she'd fallen into the last time he'd walked out of her life.

Thursday after work, Roberta ordered a pizza for dinner and sat on the steps of her front porch to wait for its delivery.

She indulged in the beauty of the brand new car in her driveway, its white surface gleaming in the waning sunlight. She went to it and opened the hood to gaze at the engine, as pristine as the day it rolled off the assembly line.

"Don't tell me it broke down already."

Justin's mocking voice startled Roberta and she straightened, forgetting about the car's hood. She yelled and stepped back, slamming the hood closed. "No, it did not break down. I was just looking," she said between clenched teeth. She rubbed her head, then pointed to the pizza box Justin was holding. "What's that?"

"I was at Rizzo's when you called in your order, so I told Tony to make it an extra large with mushrooms."

"I hate mushrooms."

"I know." He lifted the lid of the box to show her half the pizza topped with extra cheese and pepperoni, the way she liked it.

She gave Justin a grudging smile. "Come on inside."

As they ate, Justin told Roberta he was nearly finished with the house for now. "Eventually I'd like to really restore it. You know, replace the broken crown molding I took down, maybe do the downstairs walls in some of that fancy embossed wallpaper I saw at Courtland's. Last night I finished patching the plaster in the dining room and living room. The only big thing left to do is paint."

He ate his last piece of pizza, then took a slice from Roberta's half. "Do you want to help?"

Roberta gave him a warm smile. "I'd like that."

Chapter 10

The following week was an exhausting one. At the garage the work was constant. Roberta was tempted to turn away the few minor emergencies which cropped up, but Justin stepped in assuring her that he could handle the overload.

"Be my guest," she said around noon on Wednesday, certain that he was willing to skip lunch because the Mustang's owner was a woman they'd gone to school with. Once a plain Jane, she had blossomed into a leggy blond. A leggy blond with a 36DD bra size.

Looking down at her own B cups, Roberta slid back under Tony Rizzo's delivery van. Justin had always been basically sensible. How could he be so taken in by pretty faces and silicone injected bodies?

You answered your own question, Einstein, Roberta's bruised pride told her. Ignoring the simpering laugh drifting toward her, Roberta finished making the repairs, then went to lunch. When she returned a half hour later, Justin was still working on "Plain Jane's" car.

Roberta scowled. Only Justin Hastings, in his eternal quest to conquer the world, one woman at a time, could stretch a ten minute fan belt replacement into an hour. The new fan belt was sitting on the Mustang's roof, and worse, Roberta didn't even see the old belt in sight. He hadn't even removed the darn thing!

He glanced her way when she walked in the bay door. She gave him a frown, then went to see how Tom's fender replacement was going.

"Got a new joke for you," Tom said brightly, checking the alignment of the right fender. "How do you keep a dodo in suspense?"

"How?" Roberta mumbled, helping him close the gap by lifting the fender's front end.

"I'll tell you later," he said, using the air drill to secure the fender bolts from the inside.

Roberta gave him a weak grin before taking a quick look over her shoulder. Justin still hadn't gotten that new fan belt on, although he had managed to get the old one off. The big goof was twirling the new rubber belt around his index finger and grinning to beat the band. She was positive she saw the heat rise off Plain Jane's skin.

"All I have to do is touch up the hood," Tom said. He tapped Roberta's shoulder to get her attention. "How's it look?"

She tore her gaze from Casanova Hastings. "You'll have to touch up the hood. The color's a little off."

"Now why didn't I think of that?" Tom tugged on her shirttail when she turned to leave. "Why was the video of the orchestra member's honeymoon rated XXX?"

Roberta gave the gray-haired mechanic a weary sigh. "Why was it rated XXX?"

"Because of all the sex and violins."

Tom's deadpan delivery of the stupid line made Roberta laugh. She grabbed Tom's hand. "Tell it to Justin. Now."

Tom did. Justin laughed. Plain Jane looked bewildered until Justin explained the violins/violence angle. She giggled.

Roberta made herself busy by straightening her tool cabinet. When Justin finished replacing the belt and waved to his customer as she left, Roberta went to him. "What is it with you and the airheads?"

His reply was a shrug and a tired, "I didn't know any better."

He walked towards the office to file the copy of the paid invoice, while Roberta stared after him.

A terrifying question hit her as she walked toward a motorcycle. Had the women flocking around for Justin's mechanical services been lining up for "services" after hours?

She called Justin over when he came out of the office. "Are we going to start painting tonight?"

"I thought you didn't feel like it."

"I changed my mind. I'll drop my car off when we're done here and ride the rest of the way with you."

* * * *

He walked away without comment. Roberta made it a point to shadow him over the course of the next few days, just the way she'd done when they were kids. To her surprise, he didn't seem to mind.

They'd painted the downstairs walls of Justin's house in neutral tones, except for the kitchen, which they gave a fresh coat of Maddie's favorite sunshine yellow.

Roberta was helping Justin cover the furniture in the master bedroom. He had perched small framed photographs on the tiny shelves of the marble topped dresser. Roberta looked at each one as she set them in a box. There was

Justin's dad, Bob, standing next to his fighter jet. A picture of Justin's mom, his mom and step-father; Aunt Maddie, and—

"Why'd you keep this thing?" Roberta asked, holding out the framed prom picture of the two of them. It was identical to the picture she had.

Justin placed the photo in the box, brushing her fingers with his. "I guess I wanted to remember the sight of you in a dress."

"A dress?" Roberta asked, furrowing her brow. "Oh, you mean one of those long shirty things with the hole where the legs stick out."

Justin forced a smile. "Sorry. Sex and violins can't be beat."

"How true." Roberta took the last two photos. One was of a thin, curly haired brunette holding a chubby toddler. Both were waving American flags. "I have a Snoopy T-shirt just like that," she said, pointing at the brunette. She handed Justin the picture. "What's that say on the bottom, those squiggly things?"

Justin studied the picture, intent on the woman's face, on the similarity he was just seeing. "It says 'Joe Cool' in Arabic."

"I want one."

"Join the Army, you can go to Iraq and buy your own."

"Ha ha," Bobbie answered dryly, looking at the last picture. It was of Justin's daughter. She reminded Roberta of the children she'd once imagined having. "She's cute. She's got your blue eyes, and the same sun streaks in her hair. I guess she gets that crooked smile from her mom."

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"I guess," Justin answered, looking in the dresser mirror at the reflection of an identical smile. He took the box to the closet then unfurled the drop cloth. "Let's get a move on. We can get this room done tonight."

"I'm sorry if I brought up the past. With your wife, I mean," Roberta said, adjusting the cloth.

"It's old business," Justin said, going into the hall for the ladder. And this is new business. Just business, he reminded himself, trying desperately not to ogle Bobbie's behind when she bent to stir the paint.

* * * *

Two days later, Justin and Roberta took a long lunch break to await the delivery of the furniture. When all was in place, they toured the house, ending in the parlor.

Roberta didn't react when Justin slid his arm around her waist, despite the rapid idling of her pulse.

"It looks good, boss."

"It was awfully expensive though. Can you really afford it?"

"Barely," Justin admitted, grinning. He placed his fingertip on Roberta's lip when she tried to speak. "It's not going back. It belongs here."

"And my dad used to lecture me on being practical like you."

Justin rested his hands on her shoulders, drinking in the beauty of her oval face, her fiery hazel eyes, her inviting lips. "Everyone is entitled to a splurge now and then."

"I guess so," she said, barely aware that she'd answered.

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His kiss was long and slow, and she felt like she was seventeen again; an innocent virgin, afraid to go further yet anxious to experience more.

He pulled away, her hand grasped firmly in his and led her to the large floral sofa. He kissed her again, but this kiss was different. This was the kiss of a man with a mission.

Roberta's head spun when he eased her back, his large hands adjusting her hips beneath him. He was aroused, and growing more so as the kiss continued. Bobbie writhed when he cupped her breast, moaned when he lifted the edge of her T-shirt and flicked his tongue across her midriff.

"You taste good, Bobbie. So damn good."

The phone rang. "Forget it," she said when Justin paused. "The machine will pick up."

Justin paused again when Tom Haggerty's harried voice intruded.

"It's Tom. I don't mean to uh-bother you guys, but I could really use another pair of hands here. Justin promised to have the Jeep done by closing and Mrs. Marino called to say she needs it by three sharp. I told her he was working on it now. I'd finish it myself, but I have to get the last coat of lacquer on that Caddy asap." Tom Paused. "Mr. Peterson is here, too."

With a muffled curse, Justin reached for the phone. "It's me. We'll be right down. No. It's okay. We weren't busy."

We weren't?

Roberta stood and straightened her clothing as Justin walked to the front door as calm as could be. She should have known better. Well, she would not make this mistake again.

She took her frustration out on Mr. Peterson, the complainer. "If you choose to buy used parts instead of new, then don't complain when they don't last. I'll replace this carburetor for the cost of the part alone, but the next time it goes, you can find another mechanic."

"There aren't any others."

"You mean there aren't any who haven't told you this same thing. I'm sorry, but I have my limit, and you've crossed it one time too many."

Peterson zoomed past her when the job was done, nearly colliding with Sharon Courtland who was on her way home from a PTA meeting at the high school.

"Bobbie! Do you like the furniture?"

"It's great. Thank Dale for the discount."

"It's the least he can do," she said, swiping a few red curls out of her eyes. "Are you and Justin busy tonight? Come out to the house for dinner. I want to hear all about the wedding. Did you set a date? What will you wear? Did you pick a matron of honor?"

Feeling a little dizzy from the barrage of questions she could not answer, she instinctively looked to Justin. He closed the hood of the Jeep he'd finished repairing and came over, wiping his hands on an orange rag.

"What's shakin', ladies?"

"Sharon invited us to dinner, honey."

Justin's eyebrow arched at the "honey". He draped his arm positively over Bobbie's shoulder. "Great. What time?"

"I don't know if we'll be done here."

"We don't need to work overtime. I can do those two tune-ups before four."

Sharon Courtland beamed, her smile as bright as the highlights in her red hair. "Great! The kids are going to the movies at six. We'll expect you around seven, okay?"

"Okay by me," Justin said, giving Roberta a swift kiss before she could object.

"How does fried chicken sound?" Sharon asked.

Roberta could only nod. That had been a quick kiss, but it packed one heck of a wallop.

No! Her practical sense screamed. Don't think about it. Don't feel anything! This is business!

"Whatever," Roberta mumbled, unaware that she was thinking aloud.

"What?" Justin asked.

Roberta dismissed the question with a wave. "It wasn't important."

Chapter 11

Dale was late, and Roberta was touched by the concern in Sharon's eyes when his secretary said that he'd left some time ago.

"Try his car phone," Justin said. "He's probably on his way here."

"He took the Corvette," Sharon said, staring at the second hand on her watch. She looked up. "I told him to have you look at that old wreck. It keeps stalling on him." She took a long sip from her wine glass. "When he's running late, he always takes the short cut. You know the one," she said to Roberta.

"Across the freight tracks," Roberta said quietly, covering her friend's hand in a sympathetic gesture.

"Don't worry," Justin said, his strong hand covering both of theirs. "Court is just fine. He's probably chasing one of the new salesgirls around the perfume counter."

Sharon laughed and looked at the family portrait above the mantle.

Roberta followed her gaze and felt both fear for her old friend and a touch of envy. Sharon and Dale, whose coloring and last names were similar enough to cause confusion from the day they met, had married right out of high school. They had seven kids, all with the red hair and green eyes of their parents.

It reminded Roberta again of the photo of Justin's daughter. Odd, his Annie bore a resemblance to her own

childhood photos. Roberta's musing was interrupted by the sound of Dale's voice.

"Lucy, I'm home!"

Sharon ran to Dale, throwing her arms around his neck until he looked starved for air.

Justin looked at Roberta, taking her hand in his once more. They shared a smile, and he leaned over, eager to share a kiss.

"Quick, get the food, Shar! They're turning into cannibals!"

Roberta smacked Dale on the butt when he passed by. She was surprised to see a flash of ... jealousy? in Justin's eyes.

"What kept you?" Roberta asked. "Sharon was worrying herself sick."

"It couldn't be helped, he said, taking the salad bowl his wife brought from the kitchen. "I was on my way out the door, when one of my security people comes in with a shoplifter. An 88-year-old lady who got busted swiping a Wonderbra."

"Busted with a Wonderbra?" Justin said. "Geez, Court, you sound as bad as Tom."

"Maybe she was depressed," Roberta broke in. "She might have wanted to lift her spirits."

"She could have used some moral support, I bet," Sharon added.

The bad jokes flowed faster than the wine, and Roberta hated to see the evening end. But when Sharon's parents brought the children home and the eldest boy commented on the "old folks staying up past their bed time", she grabbed hold of Justin's hand and rose to leave.

"You wanna call a cab?"he asked. "I'm not driving, and you look lucky to be standing."

Roberta giggled. "I only had a couple glasses of wine."

"But you never could hold your liquor,"Dale said with a definite glassy look in his own eyes,

Roberta looked at the sky when the Courtlands walked them out. "Let's walk. It's so pretty."

"You're the boss."

"Give her a big wet one for the road,"Dale said.

Sharon pulled him inside. "Say goodnight, dear."

"Goodnight dear..."

Roberta giggled again.

"You are so wasted,"Justin said, shaking his head.

"Not wasted, relaxed,"Roberta whispered, coaxing him down for a kiss.

He tasted good. He felt even better. And she couldn't wait to get him alone.

"I want to stay with you tonight,"she said when they reached Fairmont Street.

"You're sure?"

"Very sure."

Justin responded with a smile that made her sweat. She clung to his arm as they entered the quiet house, clinging tighter when they went up the stairs.

At the bedroom door, Justin kissed her. She savored every second, then pulled away to sample his neck. His skin was deliciously salty and he smelled of spicy cologne mingled with his own male scent. She adored that scent and found it far more intoxicating than the wine.

She rejoiced in the way Justin shuddered as she ran her tongue along his jaw line. "I want you, Justin," she whispered in his ear. She repeated the sultry plea, kissing further down as she unbuttoned his shirt. She said it again, tugging his shirt off completely, kissing her way back up to his mouth. He responded as eagerly as she hoped.

"We're in the hall," Justin reminded her gently.

"Whatever," she sighed.

He fumbled with the doorknob and was amazed by his clumsiness. Taking a few deep breaths, he pushed the door open. "Wait a sec. Let me turn on the light."

When he turned he froze. Roberta was standing in the doorway, stark naked, her clothing at her feet. He gazed long enough to imprint the glorious sight in his memory, then with a joyous smile he delivered himself into her outstretched arms.

Passion boiled his blood and flooded his senses as she unzipped his trousers and closed her fingers around him in an act of raw possession.

The world blurred for Roberta when Justin swept her up and carried her to the wide Victorian bed. She didn't know if it was the residual alcohol or Justin's scorching mouth traveling over her body that made her head spin faster, nor did she care until he positioned himself between her parted thighs.

Her brain was like an engine racing out of control, and she decided to close her eyes just for a second, just until the ceiling stopped spinning and she could concentrate on each heavenly stroke.

Justin became alarmed as Roberta's movements lessened, then ceased. He raised himself on his forearms and looked down at her flushed face. Her sweet, besotted smile told him more than he wanted to know.

She couldn't have. She wouldn't have. He leaned closer to her ear. "Bobbie, wake up." She murmured softly while her breathing became steady and her rapidly beating heart slowed to normal.

Stifling a groan, Justin pulled himself from her, his body protesting painfully. He sat on the edge of the bed and stared at Roberta's peaceful expression.

"Bobbie," he called softly, nudging her with his elbow. She murmured his name, then turned onto her side, away from him. He tickled her back and her rear, but she only began to snore.

After a cold shower and a dozen push-ups, Justin climbed into bed next to her. He toyed with her curly brown hair and pondered her comical expression before closing his eyes, disappointed, yet content to have her beside him.

* * * *

Fingers of warm May sunshine reached through the sheer curtains to touch Roberta's face. She opened one eye, only to close it when the flare of agony in her head made her think that she was staring directly into the sun's core. Braving the pain, she opened both eyes and remembered why she never drank more than one drink. If only she'd remembered that after the first glass of wine.

"Have you slept it off yet?" Justin inquired from across the room. He was sitting on one of the wing chairs near the fireplace.

Roberta turned over to look at him.

He flashed her a sardonic smile as he pulled on a thick sock. "It's too bad you couldn't stick around for the festivities."

Festivities? Her eyes opened wide as it all drifted back into focus. She remembered the dizzying pleasure of Justin's lovemaking and then ... "I guess I dozed off."

"I guess so," he replied dryly.

Throwing the covers aside, Roberta grinned. "I'm wide awake now."

He chuckled, then put on his other sock. "No can do, boss. I have to run over to Court's to get my car, and then I have to get the engine pulled on that step van."

Roberta jerked the bedcovers back up over her naked body. "Pick me up at my place on your way to the shop, okay?"

"Walk," he said in a terse tone that did not match the humor in his eyes.

Roberta threw a feather pillow at his head. He caught it, tossed it back, then pulled the door shut before she could hurl anything else. Hearing his hearty laugh, she felt the corners of her mouth rise in response.

Roberta took a quick shower before dressing in the outfit she'd worn last night. Thankfully, Justin's genetic neat streak made him fold her pants and top so that they weren't too

wrinkled. She was on her way out the door when the phone rang. It was Sharon Courtland.

"I thought I'd find you there, after the play-by-play my peeping husband gave me from our front hall last night."

Roberta groaned. "I'm on my way to pick up my work clothes."

"Can you be late this morning? I want to show you that suit I told you about last night. It would be perfect for a wedding dress."

Wedding dress? Had she been discussing wedding dresses? Roberta made a mental note to never go anywhere near alcohol again. "Well. I, uh..."

"Justin told Dale that you'd set the date this morning."

"Did he now?"

"It's so romantic. He said you want him to handle all the details. That's great. It's hard pulling a wedding together in just three weeks!"

Three weeks! He really was mad about last night, but what a way to get even. And yet, it was as exciting as it was frightening.

"Bobbie? Are you still there?"

"I'm sorry. It's kind of overwhelming, that's all."

"Not for you. Justin is the planner. You get to go along for the ride."

"I'd better fasten my seat belt," Roberta said, not meaning to be funny.

Sharon laughed. "Let's not start the bad jokes again."

"I haven't even begun," Roberta said, imagining the many ways she might torture Justin for this prank. "I'll meet you at your house in a half hour or so."

Roberta's dreams of revenge evaporated as she raced to keep up with Sharon, "The Shopping Dervish". It was exasperating; it was hectic; it was the most fun Bobbie had had in recent memory—the times spent with Justin being the only exception.

She didn't make it to the garage until Tom and Justin were done for the day. They were in the office shooting the breeze and waiting for the customers to pick up their cars. They both made a show of looking at the clock when Roberta came in.

"Okay, so I slacked off one day. I'm entitled. After all, I'm getting married ... soon." She looked Justin dead in the eye.

Roberta turned the subject to what went on while she was gone until the last customer came, and Tom finally left.

Justin pushed the office door closed with his booted foot then swept her into an embrace. "You told me to surprise you the day we bought the furniture."

"That you did," Roberta agreed, sliding her fingers through his hair. "I'm kind of looking forward to it."

"Kind of?" he asked, before using his tongue to trace the outline of her mouth.

She shivered. "More than kind of."

He kissed her, and she broke off long enough to lock the office door.

Justin stopped her. "Let's wait."

"You're right," Roberta said. "My place or yours."

"Neither."

"I've been thinking," Justin continued, untangling Roberta's arms from around his neck. He stepped back. "It's not the right time. I'm not ready."

"You were ready last night."

He stepped back. "We were drunk," he said simply before leaving the office.

Roberta followed him. "Make sense, please." He didn't respond. "We're attracted to each other. We get along rather well, unless I'm mistaken. Why can't we have sex?"

He turned, his face a mixture of pain and sadness. "Because it would be just sex, for you."

Roberta's eyes grew wide. "Am I hearing you? Are you really Justin Hastings?"

A vein throbbed at his temple. "You don't know me at all. You never did."

Chapter 12

"I've known you my entire life," she said.

Justin remained silent as he walked outside. He leaned against the fender of his car, wiping a smudge with the tail of his twill work shirt.

Roberta's car was parked next to the Mercedes, and she assumed a similar position. "Tell me what I need to know."

"What does it matter?" Justin asked, looking up. "This is just business to you, a way to get Courtland's contract."

She crossed the small distance between them, her hands in the pockets of her cotton slacks. "Of course I care about getting that contract. It's a great opportunity to keep the shop going."

"I knew it," Justin muttered, walking away.

Roberta caught up, grabbing his arm. She stepped in front of him. "I'm trying to be honest, Justin. Isn't that what a couple is supposed to be?"

"I know where things stand. Bobbie, I'm not stupid."

"You want to bet?"

Justin gave her a suspicious look.

"I agreed to this arranged marriage because I want to marry you. I wanted to marry you when I was seventeen years old, but I settled for second best. I've regretted it every day for the past ten years."

Justin walked back to his car.

Roberta's shoulders slumped. She turned with the intention of getting her purse and going home. Justin's voice stopped her.

"It wouldn't have been any better with me." He paused, continuing when Bobbie came to stand beside him. "I didn't like my stepfather very much, but he made me see that I needed to grow up. It took me a very long time to grow up. It took losing my wife and daughter."

The silence seemed to last forever. Roberta reached back to steady herself on the Mercedes' fender. "I guess this is the part where you tell me that you realize you loved her after all."

"This is the part where I tell you that I think I'm dreaming."

Roberta looked up quickly. "I don't understand."

He moved close, so close that his presence gave her goose bumps. "I've wanted you in my life damn near forever, and do you know when I realized it? When we were painting Aunt Maddie's bedroom."

"I'm still lost."

Justin took out his wallet and showed her a picture. "What do you see?"

"You, looking sexy as hell in your uniform," she glanced up, imagining that she saw Justin blush beneath his tan. She looked at the picture again. "I see your wife and your daughter." She looked up. "I just don't get it."

"Look at Jan. Really look at Jan."

Roberta did, and once the first thing became apparent the rest quickly followed. She and Jan had the same curly hair, the same slightly crooked smile, the same thin build. "She looks a little like me."

"She looked a lot like you. She looked so much like you that I couldn't wait to get my hands on her." Justin put his wallet away. "I wanted her to be you, but she couldn't, so I pushed her aside." He ran his hand through his hair. "I hurt you both and I never even knew it."

Roberta simply stood and stared at a point just past Justin's shoulder. This was almost surreal. It was as if she were living in a skewered romantic movie where the big "boy gets girl" scene ends in an unexpected snag—or three.

And she couldn't help but admit that she'd needed to do a bit of her own growing up along the way. Losing her dad and almost losing the business he'd put so much effort into building had seen to that. Finally, she took hold of his hands. "Blaming yourself can't change the past."

"I know." Justin placed her hands around his waist, placed his around hers. He drank in the contentment her closeness brought. "I guess this is where we stroll off into the sunset, and live happily ever after."

Roberta punctuated her sentences with short kisses. "Almost. We have to get married first. And then we have to consummate it." She pulled back. "I'm dying to make love with you, but now, part of me wants to wait until we're really married. Do you think that's silly?"

Justin pulled her closer. "It's a great idea, boss."

NEW YORK

Gwyneth Kelly-Whitcomb changed her mind seconds before dropping the cream-colored envelope into her paper shredder. It was from that low-life soldier, who'd lured

Janette away and changed her daughter from a sophisticated debutante into a common little nothing.

Rubbing the envelope between her thumb and forefinger, Gwyneth sneered. Such cheap paper. She slit the envelope open and withdrew the simple invitation. How gauche. Hadn't anyone in that godforsaken place heard of engraving wedding invitations? And whoever heard of scrawling notes in the margins?

I'd like to bury the hatchet for Annie's sake. I hope you can make it. Justin.

"I should like to bury a hatchet in your skull," Gwyneth muttered as she dropped the invitation into the shredder. She went to wash her hands before having her secretary contact the attorney handling the custody case.

"This is ludicrous, Driscoll. That man has nothing to offer my granddaughter. He doesn't even know her."

"But he is her father."

"He has never been a father to Andrea. He abandoned her, just the way he abandoned my daughter."

"Janette is the one who divorced him. I'm sure he has the checks proving he tried to support Annie."

"Andrea."

"He is her father, Gwyneth. He has every legal right to full custody now that Jan is dead. I can't find any more loopholes. I'm sorry."

"Janette died because that dirty animal emotionally abused her. He didn't even care enough to attend her funeral."

"You didn't tell him she died."

"He should have known."

"How could he?"The attorney paused. "I have another call. I'll do my best at the July hearing, but it does not look good."

Gwyneth slammed down the telephone receiver, immediately checking to see if she'd chipped her nail polish. She got up and paced the length of her cavernous bedroom, varying her path so as not to mat the hand-woven Greek rug at the side of the bed.

That uneducated boor would not corrupt her only grandchild. Gwyneth walked to her Chippendale desk and pressed the intercom button. "Get me Mrs. Kendall Bancroft."

Gwyneth sat in her gilded chair, inspecting the diamonds in her wedding band until her secretary put the call through.

"Mrs. Bancroft on line two, ma'am."

"How lovely it is to hear your voice. It has been far too long, but we are both so busy, it simply couldn't have been helped. A dinner party on the seventh? It sounds divine,"Gwyneth bubbled.

She paused, her eyes emotionless. "May I be so rude as to interrupt? I am on such a tight schedule today, but I simply had to ask you something. You're on the board of some sort of adoption agency, aren't you? I'm interested in donating a bit of time. Could you give me the name of the director, darling?"She noted it on the pad beside her, frowning when her acquaintance began talking of all the good works they'd done.

Gwyneth joggled the phone cradle. "We're coming to a tunnel, darling. I'm losing your signal. Ta."She rang her secretary. "When an invitation arrives from the Bancrofts,

decline. I want you to schedule a meeting for tomorrow morning..."

* * * *

Sitting in the somber library of the mansion, Gwyneth congratulated herself as the young social worker made a quick inspection the room, her attention falling on each of the family portraits which surrounded them.

"How good of you to come on short notice, Miss Devlin. Would you like some coffee or tea? I had Cook bake some scones, and there is fresh raspberry jam." Gwyneth motioned the maid to serve. "I don't wish to keep you any longer than necessary, Miss Devlin, so I shall come to the crux of the matter. My late daughter's former husband is trying to get custody of my granddaughter, Andrea. The man is totally unsuitable to be a parent, and yet, my lawyers inform me that he has every legal right to step in now."

"That is generally the case."

"Generally?"

"Assuming he is of sound character and can provide for the child's physical and emotional needs."

"I don't think he can. The man is an auto mechanic. He has only a high school education. He can't possibly provide for my granddaughter. I want to stop this nonsense at once."

Miss Devlin sipped her coffee. "Have you been through the courts?"

"Yes. The latest judge has given permission for Andrea to visit for the summer. Anyone can make a good show for two

months. He will undoubtedly play the doting father, and have half his close-knit community vouch for his parental skills."

"Since I haven't been involved with the case, I can't offer advice, but you might petition the judge to have a local children's agency monitor the situation more closely."

Gwyneth signaled for the maid to remove the serving tray. "Thank you Miss Devlin. You have been most informative."

"I was happy to be of service."

OAK MILLS

The letter arrived two days before the wedding.

Roberta's worried expression turned even more gloomy. "Talk about raining on our parade." She read it aloud to see if it really sounded as frightening as it first seemed. It did.

"...The family court feels it would be in the child's best interest to have an impartial representative evaluate the temporary custody arrangement made in April of this year.

Therefore, my agency has been authorized to conduct said evaluation. Although we generally arrange such meetings ahead of schedule, we will be implementing a new policy with this case. A social services worker will be paying an unscheduled, day long visit, to observe your family unit sometime after your daughter's arrival in mid-June..."

Roberta set the letter on her kitchen table. "Did you call your lawyer?"

Justin nodded glumly. "He thought it sounded fishy."

"Well then, get your butt in court. Fight it. This is a set-up."

Justin's broad shoulders sagged. "I think it is, too, but what can I do? Trying to fight the dragon lady is like taking

on NATO with a pea shooter. Money talks, Bobbie, and she has enough to yell from here to Canada. She can bend the rules to suit her needs."

"Wants," Roberta corrected, coming around the chair to massage Justin's shoulders. "She wants Annie. Annie needs to be raised by the father who loves her. Case closed. We'll win."

Justin pulled Bobbie onto his lap, his spirits bolstered by the determined gleam in her eyes. "If more men in my platoon had your guts, I could have waltzed into the heart of Baghdad and pulled Saddam out by the short hairs."

Roberta laughed as she massaged Justin's chest. "Talk dirty to me, Hastings. I think I like it."

Justin ran his hands up her arms, down across the front of her sweater. "I don't want to talk anymore. I want to make out."

Roberta trembled at his touch, her desire to postpone sex grew weaker by the minute. The waiting was killing her and she could feel the effect it had on him. "Maybe..."

"Uh-uh, boss. We're saving the main event for showtime."

Roberta moaned when he kissed her throat. "But it's so far away." The vibration of Justin's laugh sent a shiver through her.

"It's the day after tomorrow."

Chapter 13

Roberta stuck her leg out, nearly tripping the hairdresser Sharon Courtland brought to her house from the department store salon. "Is there a runner in my stocking? It looks like a runner."

"It's not a runner."

"But what about these heels?" Roberta asked. "I'll kill myself walking in them. I'm not used to heels."

"You'll be fine," Sharon assured her. "You've been practicing all morning."

The hairdresser finished, and Sharon stepped in to do Roberta's make-up. "Will you be still? You're shaking so much I might poke your eye out."

"I'm not shaking," Roberta snapped.

"Then stop doing whatever it is you're doing. You're going to look like a raccoon if I smudge this mascara again," she said, wiping the splotch beneath Roberta's eye. "Try holding your breath."

Roberta felt herself grow faint. She hit her hand on the vanity top to get Sharon's attention.

"Just let me touch up this liner. There."

Roberta exhaled loudly. She jumped up from the chair. Tearing the striped smock from her shoulders, she rushed towards the full length mirror. "Are you sure this fits? It's loose. I don't have the boobs to wear this. I can't get married in this. I can't get married today!"

Sharon stopped Roberta from removing her jacket. She straightened the jacket's beaded lapels, tucked the edge of

the silk shell into Bobbie's slim skirt, then buttoned the jeweled jacket buttons. She stepped away so Roberta could look at her reflection again. "You look great."

Roberta frowned and plucked at her upswept hair. "I look like an electrocuted poodle! Look at this hair. I hate this hair!" She turned to the hairdresser. "Cut it off, all of it!"

"I have to get back to the shop," she said, exiting quickly with her supplies.

Sharon stepped in front of the door. "Will you calm down? You weren't this nervous even at your first wedding."

Roberta swallowed. "I wasn't marrying Justin then. I'm scared to death. I want everything to be perfect, and it has been for weeks, but it can't last, can it? What happens when reality hits and the honeymoon ends? What if we start getting on each other's nerves?"

Sharon gave her a sympathetic smile and a hug. "That's life. It's not all hearts and flowers. You know that. Justin knows that. You guys love each other. You keep that the number one priority, and you'll get through the rough patches. That's what Dale and I've done, and we're pretty happy."

Roberta smiled. "I'm still nervous."

Sharon opened the bedroom door. "Then let's get you married before you shake the crystal beads off your jacket."

Justin's mother and stepfather were waiting on the porch of Justin's house with bouquets for Roberta and Sharon.

Steve handed Roberta the larger of the two. "Justin insisted on cutting one of the garden roses for you," he said, pointing to the red rose in the center of the white carnations. "He

almost cut his arm off, he was shaking so bad. Luckily for him I'm a pretty good medic."

Roberta blanched. "Is he all right? Is he at the hospital?"

Connie Hastings Garver gave her husband a playful punch. "Justin is fine. He nicked his thumb, but Steve is right about Justin being nervous. He looks like he's ready to face a firing squad."

Roberta was not amused. "Has he changed his mind?"

"Are you kidding?" Dale Courtland said, coming out the front door followed by Tom Haggerty. "He just asked Father Vinnie if he'd ride over to my house and marry you there. He said it was taking you too long to get ready."

Tears of joy formed in Roberta's eyes. Sharon and Connie dabbed Roberta's cheeks with tissues.

"Walk her down that aisle, Tom, before she gets us all started," Sharon said, leading the way to the decorated back yard.

* * * *

Justin knew he'd died and gone to heaven. He was standing at the Pearly Gates, and gazing straight into the face of the most beautiful angel in the cosmos. Her cheeks were pink, her lips red and tempting, her eyes delicately colored. Her skin was glowing, her slender body stunning in the shimmering silk suit. She smelled of flowers.

"Hi," Justin whispered, when Tom led her to his side.

"Hi yourself," she said, licking her lips, taking in the sight of him in his dress uniform. "I guess this is it."

"I guess it is," Justin answered, forcing his eyes away from her beaming face. He looked to Father Vincent, instinctively taking Roberta's hand in his and giving her another smile as the service began.

The closing words brought tears to the eyes of all present.

"God has watched you each walk a difficult path, but He has been there with you, His hand guiding you back towards the crossroads where your lives once joined." He paused, handing the gold wedding band to Justin who slipped it on Roberta's finger. Father Vincent placed his hand over theirs, concluding the ceremony. "God binds you with this symbol, and as His messenger, I tell you to love one another as much as those of us gathered here today love each of you. By the power vested in me by the Church and this commonwealth, I now pronounce you man and wife." He closed his Bible and smiled at Justin. "Sergeant Hastings, you may kiss your bride."

His heart bursting with happiness, Justin swept Roberta into an embrace that made their guests' teary eyes grow wide.

Father Vincent cleared his throat, nudging Justin's elbow.

In unison, Justin and Bobbie offered their old friend a sheepish smile, then turned to face their loved ones who broke into laughter and applause.

Tony Rizzo got everyone's attention with a shrill whistle. "Let's get to the restaurant and start the party!"

The champagne and homemade wine flowed in abundance as everyone offered best wishes, but Roberta and Justin stuck to gingerale after the first toast.

When Tony called Justin to the telephone, Roberta became alarmed until she saw Justin's smile. "Who was it?"she asked when he returned to their table.

"Annie. She called to congratulate me."He hit his palm against his forehead. "I forgot to let you talk to her. I'm sorry."

"It's all right. I'll meet her soon enough."Roberta caressed his cheek, liking the feel of his beard stubble against her hand. She was about to kiss Justin when another of Tony's whistles got the attention of the small but boisterous crowd.

"Save it for later, you two,"Tony teased, wagging his finger in the direction of the bridal table. When the laughter died down, he cleared his throat. "If you dancing fools to my right will make some room, I think Bobbie and Justin might like to dance to this blast from the past that Vinnie found in Mama's attic last night."He signaled his brother who was acting as the DJ.

When the old slow song began to play, Justin stood, leading Roberta to the center of the floor. "Vinnie played this at the prom,"he reminded her.

"He certainly did,"she said, blowing a kiss to her friend to thank him for remembering.

"What made him pick this one?"Justin asked, pulling her into his arms.

Roberta swayed with him to the music, happier than she'd ever been. "He probably remembers me humming it every day after that until we graduated. He sat behind me in all of our classes."

Justin glanced at the corner table where Vinnie Rizzo sat before the portable stereo system. He had his fingers in his ears.

"I love you, Bobbie Richardson."

"Hastings," she corrected, coaxing him down for a kiss.

"I want to go home," she whispered. "They won't miss us."

Mama Rizzo came looking for Justin and Roberta who had slipped out into the restaurant's foyer. She clapped her chubby hands together to get their attention. "You took the vows, you cut the cake, you threw the bouquet. Why are you two standing out here kissin' in a corner like a couple of kids?"

She gave them a gentle shove towards the glass doors.
"Go home. Make amoré."

Roberta kissed Mrs. Rizzo's cheek. "Thank you for the party. The cake was beautiful. The food was perfect."

"It was great," Justin agreed, giving her a hug. "Thanks from me, too."

Mama dismissed it with a wave. "This was nothing. You wait until you have that first bambino. Christenings are my specialty." She ushered them outside and into Justin's car.

* * * *

"We're home, boss," Justin said, opening the car door for Roberta.

"And not a minute too soon. These shoes are killing me. I can't walk another step."

"You don't have to." Justin closed the car door, then lifted Roberta into his arms, carrying her into the house and up to the bedroom.

He set her down and kissed her, reveling in the way her tongue teased his, feeling himself tremble as she stripped him, kissing the bare skin she exposed.

Justin took a half step back when she planted a hot, tender kiss upon his rigid shaft. "Huh-uh, Bobbie. Any more of that, and I'll be done before we get started."

"Then maybe we should get started." she murmured, shrugging out of her jacket. Justin reached for the button at the back of her top and she stopped him, stepping away. "Close your eyes."

He did. He opened them when she instructed, and felt the desire for her grow and shoot through him. She was wearing a sheer lace bustier, over matching bikini panties. Her white nylons were held in place by a satin garter belt.

"It's my 'something new'," she said in a husky voice. "Do you like it?"

He replied with a lusty growl and swept her to the bed, stripping off the sexy underthings, his eyes locked onto hers. His body demanded satisfaction, but Justin remained in control, determined to make this a night to remember.

Erotic flames consumed Roberta the instant Justin began torturing her with unhurried kisses and intimate touches. She writhed beneath his skilled hands, so close to peaking that she begged him to enter her. Although her pulse thumped wildly in her ears, she heard the sharp intake of breath as he

eased between her parted thighs. He was hard, pulsing, and yet he took his time as if she were an innocent virgin.

She entwined her limbs with his, matching his deliciously slow rhythm until the mind numbing sensations intensified and her body compelled her to quicken the tempo. She cried his name when the waves of satisfaction swept her into a sea of fulfillment.

Roberta struggled to open her eyes, drained by the intensity of the release. She felt the hammering of Justin's heart through his thick chest wall, and she smiled, running her fingers up and down the corded muscles of his back.

"My sweet, sweet, Bobbie," Justin whispered, toying with the dampened curls framing her face. He was held prisoner by her gold flecked eyes, but had no desire to escape. Unable to express the depth of his feelings in words, he decided to show her the best way he knew how.

Roberta shivered later when the heat of Justin's body was at last replaced by the cool air blowing in the window. "I need a T-shirt."

He held her fast. "I'll keep you warm," he promised, reaching across her to turn out the light. He lay on his side, and pulled her into the curve of his body before tugging the sheet up over them.

Roberta snuggled against him. She luxuriated in the closeness, in Justin's warmth, and the way he cupped her naked breast with his hand. She curved her fingers lightly over his and drifted off into a deep, pleasant sleep.

Chapter 14

Warm rays of sunlight fell across Roberta's face. With a leisurely stretch, she opened her eyes. Justin was not beside her. For a moment, she feared it had all been a dream, but the solid feel of the thick wedding band reassured her. She was gazing at it when Justin came whistling into the room wearing only jeans, a breakfast tray in his hands.

Setting the tray on the bed between them, he took Roberta's hand in his and pretended to weigh it. "I might have to buy you a barbell. You're too scrawny to carry this baby around for the rest of your life."

The rest of my life, Bobbie repeated to herself. She liked the sound of that. "Where did you get it?" she asked, taking the cup of coffee Justin offered her.

"From Mom. My dad gave it to her on their wedding day. It's been in the Hastings family for generations. It's made out of a \$20 gold piece, the first money my great-great grandfather earned on American soil."

He drank in the sweetness of Roberta's lips, then kissed away her salty tears. "Don't you like hand-me-downs?"

She wiped her cheeks with one hand, playfully smacking him with the other. "It's incredible. I'll hate having to take it off to work." She gave Justin a questioning look when he hurried to the dresser. He returned to the bed with a small foiled box in his hand.

"I forgot to give this to you yesterday."

Inside the box was a gold chain with a tiny heart charm bearing their initials and the date of their marriage. "It's beautiful. Thank you."

He clasped it around her neck, nibbling her ear as he did so. "You can put the ring on it and tuck it in your shirt, next to your heart."

Roberta leaned back against his chest, sighing when he ran his hands over her rib cage. "I'll tuck it into my bra, I think."

"About here?" he whispered, cupping her breasts.

"Something like that."

Justin placed the tray on the floor then moved over Roberta, licking a path between her breasts. "This looks like a good spot."

"Yes."

"Or here," he murmured, tracing her pebbly nipples with his tongue.

"Oh, yeah..."

Roberta moaned as his kisses continued. "I need a shower," she protested weakly.

"We'll get one together ... in a few hours, or so."

They spent the day in the bedroom, making love, watching television, and planning for the future. They phoned out for a pizza for dinner, and Tony sent along a bottle of champagne and an audio cassette his brother Vinnie had recorded for them. It contained all the songs they'd loved in high school, beginning and ending with the one he'd played at the reception.

All or Nothing
by Barbara Sheridan

Justin let Roberta sleep the following morning, leaving a fresh cut rose and a note on the pillow beside her, saying he would open the garage, then be back for lunch.

He met Stanley the cat at the foot of the stairs. "I don't think so, cat. You wake her up, and you'll lose every one of your nine lives."

Stanley paced the small floral rug as if considering her options. Finally, she looked up at Justin and meowed, then twined herself through his legs, rubbing her head on the shaft of his boot.

"I get it,"he said, scooping her up. "We forgot to feed you, didn't we?"He chuckled when Stanley purred and rubbed her head against his chest. "Sorry, Stan,"he said, taking her to the kitchen. "I'm spoken for."

* * * *

Roberta was in the back yard taking in the freshly dried bed linens when Justin walked around the corner. She thought nothing of his being without his car until the Rottweiler next door growled as Justin passed its yard. Justin growled back. The dog turned tail and ran.

"What happened?"she asked, meeting Justin at the gate.

He backed away when she tried to embrace him. "I'll tell you after I get cleaned up. Would you fix my lunch?"

Roberta cut a few roses to decorate the kitchen table, then chilled their lemonade glasses, tossed the salad she'd put together earlier, and warmed a hearty hero sandwich in the microwave.

Justin's blue eyes sparkled when he saw his lunch waiting, and Roberta found his thank-you kiss especially sweet, knowing that she'd pleased him with such a simple act.

Pulling out her chair, Justin looked at her small salad. "Is that all you're having?" he asked, taking a bite of his sandwich.

"I'm not very hungry," she answered, suppressing a shiver when he licked a dab of mustard from his lower lip. The things he could do with that mouth ... She took a deep breath, more than a little unnerved by the desire he roused in her. "Tough day, huh?"

"It's right up there with Desert Storm." He rubbed the back of his neck. "The day was shot to hell five minutes after I left. I hit that crater on Kincaid Street to avoid hitting two baby raccoons. The drive shaft on the Mercedes is history."

The color drained from Roberta's cheeks. "Oh no," she said, understanding the panic she'd seen in Sharon Courtland the time she couldn't locate Dale. If it had happened on the open road, at a high speed, the sudden loss of steering could have been fatal. She reached over and took hold of his hand. "Are you okay? Did you hit anything?"

He gave her a reassuring smile, and raised her hand to his lips. "I hit the pothole, and that's all there is to tell. Sort of." He sipped his lemonade.

"Once I got the car pushed to the garage, Old Man Peterson comes in wanting another new carburetor. Then he says he's going to sue because he saw carbs advertised a lot cheaper from a parts warehouse. He says we're gouging him because he's old. I tried to explain the fine print in the ad he

shoved in my face, but he didn't want to hear the truth that his car is a relic they don't even make anymore, and he's lucky there's still a dealer that stocks his parts at all."

"Poor baby," Roberta cooed, getting up. She walked around to the back of Justin's chair to massage the tense muscles of his neck and shoulders.

"The topper came when I was leaving. Rhonda Flanagan comes in, begging me to check her car before I took my lunch break. She said the windshield washer didn't work. I checked it to shut her up, and you know what was wrong? She hadn't refilled it with washer fluid. She said she didn't know she had to, and then tried to shove that fake chest of hers under my nose. I handed her a gallon jug and told her where to pour it."

A triumphant smile curved Roberta's mouth.

"Your hands are so soft. Maybe I should start using that baby lotion you keep in your tool box. My hands must feel like sandpaper on you."

"They feel magnificent," she told him, planting a kiss on the top of his head. She continued to knead the soreness from Justin's knotted muscles, delighting in the feel of him, so strong and warm beneath her fingertips. Touching him made her quiver deep inside, and when he turned his head to kiss the spot inside her elbow, her knees turned rubbery. She bent forward to kiss his neck, sliding her hands down, across his pectoral muscles to run her fingers through the springy brown hairs covering his chest. She felt her nipples peak as she remember the feel of that hair rubbing against her last night.

Justin groaned when Bobbie's hands roamed lower, but he stopped her with a firm, but gentle grasp when she reached for his fly. "No can do. I have to get back to the shop."

"Tom can handle things. We only had two jobs scheduled."

Justin tightened his grip when she tried to unzip his pants. "I told him to take the rest of the day off. His daughter is coming in from Cleveland to show off her new baby."

Roberta deposited herself on Justin's lap when he tried to get up. "So, we'll just keep the shop closed. People will understand."

"But I promised Court I'd fix his Corvette this afternoon."

"It can wait," Bobbie said. "I can't."

Justin laughed, his will weakening. "I promised ... "his words dissolved into a moan. Though he hated to end it, Justin kissed her and stood, setting her on her feet. "I don't like to break my word." He chuckled Roberta under her chin. "I'll make it up to you. I promise."

"Oh all right," she said with feigned annoyance. She drove him back to the garage, intending to stay and help, but he insisted she go home.

"I want you rested for later. Why don't you make a couple more sandwiches for dinner? We'll eat upstairs."

Although Justin's request was said with a smile, Roberta began to feel inadequate as she drove home, realizing he had been the one to do their shopping and cooking. She knew it was foolish and yet she had the urge to prove she wasn't a total washout in the domesticity department.

Besides, hadn't Justin's lawyer told him that providing a normal, traditional home would help him secure custody of his

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daughter? Yes. She would do this for him. She would become a skilled cook by the time little Annie Hastings arrived from boarding school in two weeks.

Roberta lowered her expectations considerably as the afternoon rolled on and she struggled to get dinner on the table in time for Justin's anticipated arrival.

Chapter 15

The mouth watering aroma of homemade spaghetti sauce enveloped Justin before he stepped into the entrance hall a few minutes before six. He paused just inside the door to inhale the wonderful scent. He certainly hadn't expected anything like this. He was glad he'd decided to shower and change into one of the clean uniforms the laundry service delivered this afternoon.

He closed the front door and let his nose lead him across the hall to the dining room where he received another surprise. Bobbie had gone all out, setting the freshly polished table with the fine china and silver she'd brought from her house. Not only that, she'd decorated the table with white taper candles and a bouquet of multicolored carnations in a cut crystal vase. The unexpected sound of her voice rounded out the total effect.

"I take it you approve?"

"I'm impressed, boss. I can hardly wait for the main course."

"Your wish is my command," she said, setting down a chilled bottle of wine and silver basket filled with biscuits.

Justin started to follow her towards the door, which connected to the kitchen. She stopped him.

"No, no. You stay right here. Open the wine. Have a biscuit," she said in a glib tone, averting her eyes from Justin's questioning face. "I want to be Suzy Homemaker tonight."

Although confused by the sudden domesticity, Justin sat at the head of the table. "Okay." He opened the wine, filled their

glasses, and then took one of the golden brown biscuits. It began to crumble when he tried to slice it in half, and disintegrated further as he spread the soft butter on it. He took a hesitant bite, regretting it instantly.

What should have been a melt-in-the-mouth biscuit, turned out to be a stick-to-the-teeth-and-gums-biscuit. He took a long sip of wine and swallowed hard.

Roberta entered from the kitchen. She set the steaming bowl of spaghetti on the table in front of Justin and sat to his right. Her expression was bright with pride as she saw the biscuit crumbs on his plate. "What do you think of the biscuits? Pretty good for a beginner, huh?"

Justin took another sip of wine to clear the paste-like residue from his throat. He forced a smile. "I've never tasted anything like them."

Roberta's smile grew wider. "I made a dozen and a half. I didn't think they'd turn out, though. I had to add extra flour and roll the dough four times to get it the right thickness."

Justin groaned inwardly.

Roberta reached for Justin's plate and spooned out a generous helping of the pasta, then ladled on extra sauce. She took a smaller portion for herself and watched him, watching her. "Go, on. Dig in."

Reminding himself that he'd faced a dozen heavily armed Iraqis with less hesitation, Justin wound the spaghetti onto his fork. He braced himself as he lifted the fork to his mouth. He chewed slowly, anticipating a delayed reaction. There was none. It was good. Better than good. He took another forkful

to be certain, in the event his taste buds had been annihilated during the initial assault. They hadn't. It really was delicious.

"This is great, Bobbie," he said, reaching for another biscuit to make her feel good. He doused it liberally with sauce. The biscuit had hardened considerably, it was almost edible. He turned back to the pasta. "You don't know what you're missing," he said, gesturing to her barely touched plate.

"I'm not hungry. Too much taste-testing, I guess."

"I'll finish it if you don't want it."

Roberta handed him her plate. "Do you want another biscuit?"

"Maybe later."

Roberta set the basket down and sipped her wine. She'd gotten her first real meal out of the way. She just hoped that the next wouldn't come anytime soon, like before the turn of the 22nd Century. She openly studied Justin as he finished her spaghetti and took a third helping from the serving bowl. "Ready for another biscuit?"

"No, thanks," Justin said. The last one had been like plaster. He polished off his pasta, then sat back, patting his flat stomach. "That was delicious. The best I ever had."

"Thank you," Roberta said quietly. She stood and began to collect the plates and flatware. Justin tried to help. "You sit. I'll do this part, too."

"I don't mind. You went to all this trouble. The least I can do is—"

"I don't want any help," she interrupted, taking the empty serving bowl from him. "Go sit on the porch, or watch TV, or something." It was more an order than a suggestion.

That didn't escape Justin's notice, but he shrugged his broad shoulders. "You're the boss." He took his half empty wine glass and left the room.

Roberta sighed with relief when she heard the front door close. She squared her shoulders and ordered herself to reenter the kitchen, grimacing as the carnage bombarded her. She filled the sink with hot water and detergent, and began cleaning the first of many used items. She rinsed the plates and scrubbed out the serving bowl. This shouldn't take too long. With any luck she'd be done around eight o'clock. Next Wednesday.

"What have you done?"

Roberta dropped a large metal mixing bowl as Justin's voice roared through the quiet kitchen like a bomb blast. The bowl made a ringing sound as it bounced on the ceramic tile floor and skidded, leaving a trail of soapsuds and water in the fine powder of flour that obscured the tiles' geometric pattern.

She heard him whimper as he turned in a circle to survey the red-splattered chaos surrounding him.

"I have never seen anything like this! Wait, I did see a kitchen this bad once. It was the kitchen at my base in California after we were hit by an earthquake." He made a vague gesture with the empty wine glass in his hand. "Heaven help us all if you ever try a six course meal."

Roberta slumped against the sink. "It seemed like a good idea at the time." She wiped her hands on a sauce stained tea towel and pointed to the pile of cookbooks in a box near the basement door. "I read through every one until I found the

easiest looking recipe. I followed the directions. I didn't know two of the pages stuck ... "Her voice trailed off as Justin's eyes fell across the sauce hand prints on the refrigerator door, the splotches on the wall behind the stove. He whimpered again.

Roberta let out a defeated sigh. "Don't worry. I'll clean the mess. Just go away for a few hours, okay?"

The quavering of her voice and the glimpse of the tear she managed to blink away softened Justin's anger. He surveyed the mess again and tried to imagine her struggling to get the meal done on time. It was funny. Sort of. He pushed up his shirtsleeves. "I'll help you."

"You don't have to. I really do know how to clean."

He came forward and cupped her cheek with his palm. "I want to help," he said softly, brushing a kiss across her forehead. "I'm not angry."

Within an hour and a half the kitchen was once again spotless. Almost. Roberta came up beside Justin, who was studying the wall behind the stove. It had been covered with bright red polka dots, but now, after much elbow grease on his part, only a few pale orange spots remained.

He looked at her. "It will have to be repainted."

Roberta steeled her nerves for the tirade that never came. "I'm really sorry. I can rebuild a 357 engine in my sleep, but put me in front of a stove and...."

Justin laughed and slid his arms around her waist. "At least you finally got it right."

"Not really. The first pot of sauce was like red water, and the second was like liquid garlic."

"But the third was great."

"And from Rizzo's Ristorante,"she confessed. "I knew I'd never make it to the grocery store in time, so I called our good friend Tony."She reluctantly moved out of Justin's light embrace to open the freezer door. Inside were four large plastic containers of spaghetti sauce. "I told Tony to bring his pickup in for a free tune-up,"she said, closing the door.

Justin took her in his arms again, flattered that she had worked so hard to please him. "How about some dessert? No cooking required. I'll even give you a free sample."

Her reply was a smile.

* * * *

Justin woke in the middle of the night to use the bathroom. When he returned to the bedroom, he found Stanley the cat in his space, curled up next to Roberta. The cat made a trilling sound as Justin picked it up then let it lay on his chest.

Stroking the cat's fur, Justin gazed at Roberta asleep beside him, her curly hair spread out on the pillow, one long leg poking out from the sheet's edge. He was so glad to have her as his wife. He loved her strength, her courage, her wild abandon when they made love; but most of all, he loved her determination.

She'd tried again and again to get that sauce right this evening, and he knew she would keep on trying. She'd said as much after they'd showered together.

"I know what went wrong and it will never happen again. I'll go to the mall and get some new cookbooks. Ones with

step-by-step pictures. I'll be a great cook by the time the evaluator comes..."

Sighing, Justin stared at the play of moonlight on the marble dresser top. Bobbie would never be able to pull it off, but he couldn't tell her that. He looked at her again, telling himself it didn't matter what sort of meal they served to the dragon lady's pawn. What mattered was the environment he was providing for his daughter.

Food is part of the environment, his practical side told him. Annie may think living on pizza a few nights a week is a kick, but her grandmother won't. She'll find some way to make it count against you.

True, but the solution was simple. He'd do all the cooking himself. He was good at it, and he liked doing it. It's the perfect solution, his practical side chirped sarcastically. Gwyneth will scuttle that one, too. With her money and influence, she'll be able to hire a busload of "experts" to back her up and say it's so far away from the typical male-female relationship Annie is accustomed to, it will damage her psyche.

A prick of pain, the result of Stanley stretching and extending her claws, brought Justin out of his thoughts. "Gimme a break, cat," he mumbled, setting the tabby at the foot of the bed. He curled up next to Roberta. She murmured and turned towards him. The feel of her breath against his skin was soothing, and Justin closed his eyes, setting aside his concerns until morning.

Justin offered to coach Roberta in the kitchen, but she shot the idea down, giving him a cold shoulder and a "how dare

you doubt me?"look. He left her alone that evening and the next. But after polishing off a bottle of antacid tablets over the course of the succeeding three days (in addition to helping with major clean-ups) Justin knew that he had to point out the obvious before the hardware store ran out of paint, or his digestive system collapsed.

They were sitting on the front porch, on the swing Justin had built for his Aunt Maddie. It was drizzling and they rocked slowly, to and fro, listening to the patter of the drops on the roof above them.

Justin wrapped his arms tighter around Bobbie, rubbing his cheek against the top of her head. "I've been thinking, boss."

"Hmmm?"

"You've been working so hard on the cooking thing, gone above and beyond the call."He paused, certain that he heard a catch in her breathing. Dismissing it, he continued. "I'd hate to see you stuck in the kitchen when Annie gets here. I want us to do things together, become a family."

"Hmmm?"she murmured again, rubbing her hand across his middle.

"Why don't we set up the freezer that's in the basement? I can make some stuff and we can save it for a rainy day."

Roberta pulled her head from his shoulder and gave him a critical look. "A rainy day? You mean 'E-Day'. The day the evaluator comes."He did not deny it, and she moved to the opposite side of the long swing. "Okay, so I haven't gotten the hang of the cooking thing. There is a wide variety of microwave products out on the market—"

"That's not good enough."

Roberta did a double take. "Excuse me?"

Justin got up and went to the porch railing. He leaned on it, staring out at the rain puddling on the sidewalk.

"Everything has to be perfect when Annie gets here." He turned and faced Bobbie, annoyed at her skeptical look. "I told you what Gwyneth is like. I told you what my lawyer said about proving I can provide the All American family for Annie. It has to be like a Norman Rockwell painting, better if possible."

Roberta folded her arms across her chest. "That's bull and you know it. Stop with the conspiracy theory. Gwyneth is on the defensive. You are Annie's father. You have the upper hand."

"She has money and political influence. This whole evaluation business proves that she has striking capability we can't counter."

Roberta got up and approached him, his rigid stance staving off her urge to embrace him. She shook her head, shoving her hands into the pockets of her denim shorts. "I can't believe that you, of all people, are running scared. I hate to say it, but I'm disappointed."

Justin's eyes darkened to the color of the stormy sky. "Of course I'm running scared," he said in a low tone. "I lost my daughter once. I don't want to lose her again."

He looked at her and Roberta was able to insert the things he'd left unsaid. "You don't want to lose Annie because of my lack of motherly skills, right?" Justin looked away, saying more than any verbal answer could.

All or Nothing
by Barbara Sheridan

It was the one week anniversary of their wedding, but they didn't make love that night. Or the next. Or the night after that.

Chapter 16

Tuesday after work, Justin went on a cooking binge in anticipation of Annie's Friday arrival. Needing to ease the tension that had developed between them, Roberta offered to help.

"Let me cut those carrots. I'm not that big of a klutz."

Justin handed her the paring knife. While he shelled some peas, he watched the way she dropped her uneven carrot slices atop the symmetrically cut ones he'd lined up in a precise circle at the bottom of the glass casserole dish.

"It's kind of cramped with both of us working on the same thing," Justin said flatly. "Do me a favor and check that container of consommé in the fridge. I think it's cool enough to go to the freezer."

When Roberta came up from the basement, she noticed Justin had removed the carrots she'd cut from the dish and was cutting more. Their eyes met; his expression took on a guilty cast.

"Bobbie—"

"Save it," she said, grabbing her purse from the counter. "I'm going to call Sharon, and see if she wants to go shopping. I'd better have her help me pick out a suitable outfit or two to wear when the Queen's minion comes to visit."

Justin response was a scowl.

* * * *

"I don't believe this," Roberta told her friend as they sat in the mall's food court. She stirred the ice in her cup of soda with the striped straw. "Justin is obsessed with everything being perfect. He'd have it beyond perfect if that's possible."

"Be patient with him. Dale gets that way about the store sometimes. It's best just to let him do it his way right now. Once Annie gets here and the social worker comes and goes, he'll be back to normal."

Roberta sighed. "I know. It's just hard. I want to help. I want to share this parenting thing with him, but I'm afraid he'll shut me out like he's doing now." She sipped her soda. "Justin didn't come out and say it, but I have the feeling he's going to say that I made the food because he thinks that's what is expected."

She took a moment to study a family that passed by. She wanted that closeness with Justin and his daughter, but how could she have it if he thought she wasn't "good enough"? And if she didn't fit the motherly mold in his mind, what did the future hold? She ordered her imagination to stop running wild.

Sharon toyed with her French fries. "You said Justin is doing these fancy entrees and side dishes, right?" Roberta nodded. "Let's go to my house. Baking cookies is a snap, and if you fill up a nice silver tray with a few different types it will be great. We'll pick out the recipes tonight, and you can come over tomorrow after work and bake them."

Roberta's expression brightened as she remembered the cookie tray Justin's mom and Mrs. Rizzo had prepared for the wedding reception. "That sounds great."

The cookie baking went well, although Roberta guessed that Sharon's experience in letting her children help in the kitchen was what kept her smiling as Roberta fumbled her way through the endeavor.

As she was leaving, Dale Courtland presented Roberta with a cookie jar shaped like her favorite cartoon character, Snoopy.

However, Roberta's happy mood evaporated when she entered her house through the back door and saw loaves of bread cooling on a wire rack in the center of the kitchen table.

If Justin was going to bake, too, she didn't stand a chance. She felt like throwing the cookies into the trash, but didn't, taking some instead to the chest freezer. She would serve them proudly when the time came, Justin's perfectionism be damned. Returning to the kitchen, Roberta moved the bread to the counter near the stove and set her cookie jar in the center of the table, with a "Take that, Hastings."

Roberta's eyes had the sheen of a woman ready to do battle as she walked into the hall, but when she saw the single red rose and note lying on the bottom step, her expression softened. The note said simply, *I'm sorry*.

She retrieved something from the kitchen before going upstairs.

Justin was sitting on the bed wearing nothing but a pair of denim cut-offs. His shoulders seemed broader and his chest wider than Roberta remembered, having caught only glimpses of him this past week. He was magnificent, and it had been much too long since she'd been in his arms. He looked away

from the television when she came into the room, his eyes traveling to the rose in her hand.

"I was a jerk,"he said, clicking the power button on the remote.

"I could have been more understanding,"she answered, sitting on the bed to remove her sneakers and socks. She stood and took off her shorts, dropping them to the floor, then climbed into bed leaving on her T-shirt, bra and panties.

She noticed Justin's disappointment and suppressed a smile. She snuggled against him, sighing when he wrapped his arms around her.

"I just want everything to be perfect,"Justin said softly, stroking her arm.

"Nothing is ever perfect, Justin."

"I know."He paused, wrestling with the desire to have things be exactly the way he wanted them to be. "So, what did you and Sharon do all evening, trade notes on the bad behavior of men?"

Roberta sat up, wanting to see his reaction. "We baked."As she expected, he was skeptical.

"You baked? What?"

"Cookies. Six different kinds. Some really fancy ones, too. I put them in the freezer, but I have some extras. Dale even gave me a Snoopy cookie jar to mark the occasion."

"I'll have to try one tomorrow,"Justin said with little enthusiasm.

"You can try one now. If you can find it,"Roberta added with a grin. She settled back on the pillows, her arms over her head, one knee bent.

Justin's brows arched at the challenge. He gave his chin a thoughtful stroke. "Let's see, if I were a cookie where would I hide? I guess it depends on how big I was. If I was a big round chocolate chip it would have to be here." He lifted the hem of Roberta's T-shirt and flicked his finger across her belly. "Not there."

"But close," she said.

He pretended to think it over. "I might be some dainty little tea cake, the kind that's best served warm." He knelt and slid down her panties, parting her thighs with a prod of his elbow. He stroked the petals of her sex, grinning when she moaned and moved her legs further apart. "I must be getting warmer." He slid a finger into her passage, and moved it around and around as if searching.

"No, but I am," Roberta told him between quick breaths.

"Darn," Justin said when he removed his hand. "I might have missed something. I'd better check there again later."

"You'd better."

Justin scratched his head. "Give me a hint. What kind of cookie am I looking for?"

Roberta forgot as he ran his fingers through her pubic curls. "I think it's a lady lock."

Justin's surprise was real. "You really made some of those? The pastry ones like Aunt Maddie's, with the vanilla cream filling?"

"They're the ones. Believe it or not, they're easy, the hard part is waiting for the dough to chill between rollings ... " Her voice trailed off as Justin straddled her and ran his hands

across her shoulders. His wicked chuckle sent a ricochet through her.

"I guess it's hiding around here since you kept your top and bra on." He playfully tweaked her nipples, his own desire mounting when she arched beneath him. "Am I getting warmer?"

"God, I hope so..."

He lifted the edge of her shirt, and she raised her shoulders so he could pull the shirt off. "And what have we here?" he asked, eyeing the pale purple bra. "I don't think I've seen this in the hamper."

She barely got the words out because the way he was rubbing his rough hands over and around her breasts was driving her crazy. Her breasts swelled and strained against the sheer fabric. "It's new ... I got it at the mall. Yesterday..."

"Go back tomorrow ... buy one in every color..."

He tortured her with his lips and tongue, tracing lines and circles all along the cups and elastic band of the bra.

"Justin," she moaned, feeling the creamy frosting of the filled cookie begin to melt. She cried out when he ran his tongue just under the bottom band to lick the filling.

"Aunt Maddie's never tasted like this."

She tried to laugh.

With one quick move, Justin unsnapped the bra's front closure and pulled it aside, gently holding Roberta down when she tried to wriggle out of it. "Don't you make my cookie fall. I didn't eat it yet."

"Eat it?" she asked, her voice barely audible, her limbs trembling in anticipation.

"Yes. Slowly," he said, dipping his head down, settling himself on top of her.

Bobbie's moans filled the room as Justin nibbled and licked the dainty pastry, using his tongue to smear some of the creamy filling over her engorged nipples. He suckled her, savoring the sweetness of the sugar filling as it mixed with the saltiness of her skin. "You're making more of this creamy stuff when we're done." His voice was raspy, almost a growl.

Roberta whimpered her reply, only to moan again when he rocked his hips against her burning flesh, the bulge of his denim-covered erection making her climax.

Justin let out a groan that was half pain half pleasure when she shuddered beneath him. He waited a moment, then climbed off the bed, his fingers pulling the zipper of his shorts down with infinite care. He took a calming breath when his shaft sprang free and he noticed, as he got back into bed, that Roberta had a tiny dollop of the cream between her breasts. "I forgot to lick my plate clean."

She followed his gaze and squirmed away, pushing him onto his back. She swiped the vanilla filling onto her index finger and then onto his erection. "Now it's my turn..."

And the following morning, when the manager of the local grocery store opened he would tell his cashier, "It was the strangest thing. I was locking the front doors when this big guy comes running up to me. His shoes were untied, his shirt was inside out. He waved a \$20 bill under my nose and begged me for a box of powdered sugar. He said it was an emergency. I can't imagine what the emergency was..."

* * * *

"I'll race you to the kitchen," Roberta called, rushing out of the car as soon as Justin parked it in the garage. She squealed with delight when he caught up and grabbed her around the waist.

He kissed her deeply until her senses reeled, pulling away suddenly to beat her to the front door.

"That's not fair!"

"All's fair in love and war," Justin countered, pretending her playful punch hurt. He unlocked the front door while she took the mail from the brass mail box.

Roberta shuffled through the envelopes. "Bill for me. Bill for me. Bill for you. Junk. Junk. Oooh." She held up a thick white envelope bearing a governmental seal. "For you, from the Pentagon." She gave him the envelope along with a wicked grin. "They heard what you did in your uniform this morning."

Justin's cheeks colored. "What you insisted I do," he corrected, slitting it open with the edge of his door key.

"I thought you retired already."

Justin finished reading the top letter then glanced at the remaining papers. "I did, but it isn't quite official. My C.O. has a bizarre sense of humor. He gave me my regular leave, an emergency leave, plus a few extra days I had coming. I won't really be a free man until the first of August."

Roberta's flushed cheeks paled as they entered the house. "That means they can call you back anytime. They could call you tomorrow, and send you to fight some psycho terrorists..."

Justin gave her a reassuring hug. "It won't happen. This is just typical military red-tape. They want to file everything in quadruplicate. I signed the real discharge papers before I left the base. This is just a bunch of extra copies for some endless file in Washington."

He took the other mail from Roberta's hand and set it on the table inside the parlor door. "I'll take this upstairs while you get your cute little behind in the kitchen and fix us a pre-dinner snack."

Roberta patted his back side. "I'm really getting into this cooking thing."

He laughed with her, his smile fading once he entered the bedroom. Sitting on the edge of the bed, Justin reread the handwritten letter from a former commanding officer who was currently working with the Joint Chiefs in Washington.

You're throwing away a fine career, son. I understand what you're trying to do, but you're close to retiring with a full pension. I've got your discharge on hold, pending your decision, but I guarantee that if you give Uncle Sam five more years, you'll retire with Captain's bars. Sign the re-up papers, and get them back to me on or before 1 August and I'll see you get assigned as close to home as possible. We need combat vets like you...

Stanley the cat sauntered past the door, catching Justin's eye. He looked at Stanley. "This offer is making my palms sweat, cat." Justin looked at the forms, then to the ornate mahogany dresser where smiling photographs of Roberta and his daughter reminded him of his first priorities.

All or Nothing
by Barbara Sheridan

"Naked or not, here I come!" Roberta called from the bottom of the stairs.

Taking a longing look at the reenlistment papers in his hands, Justin shoved them back into the envelope and then into the bottom of his underwear drawer, letting his disappointment be shadowed by the beauty of his wife's smiling face.

Chapter 17

CONNECTICUT

Annie Hastings' blue eyes sparkled as her father told her a very bad joke. "That reeks. Do I have to spend the whole summer listening to more bad jokes? Good. Yeah, today was my last day. I have to stop at Grandmother's to pack the rest of my stuff tomorrow." She paused, rolling her eyes. "I do not want you to come and get me. I'm no baby. I can fly to Pennsylvania without someone to hold my hand. Yes, I can even change planes at the airport all by myself. What? No, I have to hang up. It's okay. Bobbie can say hello Friday when you introduce us. 'bye."

"Andrea?"

Annie jumped. "Grandmother, it's you," she said, hanging up the pay phone. "I thought you were picking me up tomorrow morning."

"I've missed you, darling. Hurry. The driver is waiting."

Annie led the way back to the spacious room she shared with another girl at Brookside Girls' Preparatory Academy. She looked around the room while removing her folded clothing from the drawers of her bureau. Placing them carefully into her leather suitcase, she took a farewell look at her room. "I think I'm going to miss this place. I've been here since I was in kindergarten. I hope the kids at my new school like me."

Gwyneth Kelly-Whitcomb made no attempt to conceal her disgust. "If you stayed, he'll send you to a public school no doubt."

Annie shrugged, getting her tooth brush and shampoo. "I guess. I think Oak Mills only has two schools. Elementary and High School."

Gwyneth's reply was another contemptuous look. She remained silent until they were in the limousine.

"You don't have to go through with this summer visit, darling. I'm certain I can have your grandfather's friend, Judge Martin, overrule the temporary custody order."

"Why?" Annie asked. "I want to see my dad. I want to get to know him. He seems really nice."

Gwyneth shook her head. "You poor, innocent child." She sighed. "I had hoped to spare you this, but I must tell you for your own welfare." She turned her head to gaze out the tinted window.

"Tell me what?"

Exhaling another long sigh, Gwyneth turned, patting her granddaughter's hand. "I fear that your father's sudden show of devotion is not as it seems."

Annie's eyes darkened with displeasure. "I don't understand."

"How could you? You're just a child. You are so innocent of the world, you have no idea of how desperate some people can become."

Annie rolled her eyes. "Mom told me you never liked my dad because he doesn't have a lot of money."

"But he will," Gwyneth remarked casually, looking out the window again.

"What do you mean?"

"I haven't the heart to tell you, darling. I'm sorry."

Seeing curiosity flare in her granddaughter's reflection, Gwyneth settled back in the softly padded limousine and closed her eyes.

OAK MILLS

"Please?" Roberta asked, holding up Justin's uniforms. "You are so hot in these, especially the blue one."

Justin gave her head a sympathetic pat before reaching past her to take a simple dark suit from the closet. "I might wear it when we have the final custody hearing, though. I need to score all the brownie points I can with the judge."

Roberta watched him dress, her body tingling with each ripple of his prominent muscles. "I wish you'd stop worrying about that."

"I won't stop worrying until I get those custody papers in my hands." He looked away, carrying his suit to the bed as he tried to get those other papers out of his mind. Captain's bars. Retiring an officer had always been in the back of his mind. He'd even enrolled in long distance classes to get a college degree to try and help make it happen.

"A penny for your thoughts," Roberta whispered in his ear, wrapping her arms around his middle as he buttoned his shirt. "You look so serious."

Justin pulled on his trousers, allowing Bobbie to button and zip them. "I'm seriously in love with you, boss."

Roberta ended the kiss. "We'd better get to the county airport, or I'm liable to forget we're meeting your daughter."

"Can't do that," Justin said lightly, leading the way.

Roberta closed the bedroom door, casting a glance towards the photo of Annie on the dresser. She was a cute kid. She was looking forward to meeting her.

* * * *

"These shoes are killing me," Roberta grumbled as she looked around the people waiting for the commuter flight to arrive. She nudged Justin. "There's Marge Sanders. She's probably waiting for her golden boy, Sammy. The last time I inspected her car, all I heard was Sammy this and Sammy that. Sammy is going to the NBA after college. Just what the world needs, another dumb jock."

"Here comes the plane," Justin said, wiping his palms on his trousers.

Roberta smiled and followed him to wait for Annie to leave the plane. She took his hand in hers after he straightened his tie and ran his fingers through his hair three times. "Relax."

"I can't. What if she doesn't recognize me? I haven't seen her except in court."

"You'll recognize her. How many kids traveling alone can there be on this plane?"

Justin flashed her a quick smile.

Roberta noticed Sammy Sanders walk off the plane with his arm around the shoulders of a sleazy looking brunette who was wearing a skintight red dress and matching spike-heeled shoes. She nudged Justin. "Wait until Marge gets a load of the bimbo her precious Sammy picked up at UCLA."

"Ow," Roberta said as Justin crushed her hand.

"I think that bimbo is my Annie."

All or Nothing
by Barbara Sheridan

Bobbie stared at him, watching his complexion take on a greenish cast when Annie saw them and gave them a look that said she'd rather be anywhere than here. Undaunted, Roberta gave Justin a shove. "Go."

He went like a battle weary soldier anticipating an ambush.

Things will get better, Roberta told herself, ignoring the feeling that hinted "things" hadn't even begun.

Chapter 18

Annie groaned when Justin pointed to the Malibu. "I thought you had a nice car. You told me it was a classic Mercedes."

Justin put her large bags into the trunk and the two smaller ones in the back seat. "The gullwing is a two-seater."

Annie gave Roberta a passing glance, then looked at her father. "Your point being?"

Roberta watched a vein swell on Justin's neck, but he said nothing. He held the rear door open for Annie. Brushing between him and Roberta, she took the front passenger's seat.

Roberta opened her mouth to protest.

"Just let it go, okay?" Justin asked softly.

Against her better judgement, Roberta held her tongue, not a small accomplishment considering Miss Annie Hastings' only words were critical.

"Doesn't the A/C work? It's so hot in here."

"Open your window," Justin suggested.

"And ruin my hair?"

Annie muttered to herself until they reached the restaurant where Justin had made reservations. "We're not eating here."

"We are," Justin told her.

"Why? This place is for Ancient Mariners," Annie whined, glaring at the older couples who were entering ahead of them.

"We like it," Roberta informed her. "Your father and I had our first real date here."

"Oh, please, spare me the details."

Justin gripped Roberta's hand as Annie followed the maitre'd. "Maybe we should go to Rizzo's,"he suggested.

"I want to stay."

Justin nodded and escorted her to their table where Annie was studying the menu.

"What's wrong, Annie?"Justin asked, watching his daughter stab her fork into her salad. She said nothing, but stabbed the lettuce again even as the waiter was removing it to bring the main course.

Roberta shook her head, her heart breaking for Justin.

"You're going into the tenth grade, aren't you?"he asked.

Annie said nothing.

Justin sipped his water, looking to Roberta for help.

"You'll like Oak Mills High,"Roberta said. "We went there. I think a few of the teachers are still there. Justin, do you remember, Mr. Greenlow the History teacher?"

The corners of his mouth rose ever so slightly. "Do I ever."He tapped Annie's arm. She jerked it away.

Roberta forced herself to be cheerful. "If you want to get out of a pop quiz, just mention the sinking of the Lusitania. He'll start rambling about World War I and eat up the whole class hour."

"Mrs. Fields in Geometry is another one,"Justin added. "She—"

"Oh, who cares?"Annie snapped. "I want to go to my school. You can send me back next term even if the stupid judge gives you custody of me."

Justin's shoulders sagged. "I wish I could keep you at Brookside, but it's too expensive for us."

Roberta's heart broke further when he looked at her. "You'll make a lot of friends here," she said. "Our friend Tony Rizzo has a niece going into the tenth grade. His nephew is in the eleventh I think."

"I'm thrilled," Annie sneered.

The waiter brought their dinners. Annie pushed hers away. "No way am I eating that. It's a plate of snails."

"It's what you ordered," Roberta said calmly. "You said the escargot seemed interesting. Besides, it cost \$37.50."

"Is it my fault some brainless waiter can't tell an order from a comment?" She threw her napkin on the plate, then stalked towards the ladies' room.

Roberta stood. Justin grabbed her hand and urged her to sit. "Let it go, Bobbie. She's really a sweet kid. This whole thing is hard on her. She misses her friends."

"Missing her friends is no reason to be so rude." The knot of tension in Roberta's stomach prevented her from taking more than a few bites of her steak. She watched Justin. He hadn't even touched his food. He simply sat staring at it, casting a look every so often towards the ladies' room.

Finally he set down his fork, pushed the plate away. He looked at Roberta, his topaz eyes as dull as plastic beads. "Would you please tell Annie we're ready to go home?"

"We could just leave her," Roberta teased, hoping to lighten the mood.

"I left her once," Justin said, his clipped words splitting the tense silence while regret weighed heavily upon his shoulders.

During the drive home, Justin tried repeatedly to spark a conversation with his daughter, getting no response until he turned from the main highway to the smaller road leading to the Oak Mills town limits.

"The sign should say 'Welcome to Jerkwater, USA—An Inbreeder's Dream'."

"Give it a chance, Annie."

"Andrea. My mother named me Andrea."

"But she called you Annie," Justin told her, ignoring the rude sound his daughter uttered from the back seat. "When you slept, she'd stand by the crib and call you 'Annie with the angel's smile'."

"My mother had more class than that."

"Stop the car, Justin," Roberta said as calmly as she could. "I need to use the bank machine."

"We'll wait. There's no one in line."

"I feel like walking home," she said getting out, unable to look him in the eye, unable to believe that he would not react to the put-downs of his daughter.

"It was such a pleasure to meet you," Annie called.

Roberta whipped her head around, stopping further sarcasm with a look. She used the automated teller machine, then walked the length of Main Street. She took off her high heels and continued walking, needing to think, to get her anger under control. She was angry with Annie, of course. Surely the girl had been taught common courtesy somewhere along the way; but most of all, she was angry with Justin.

And as she passed by the main residential part of town, Roberta realized that her anger was really disappointment.

Disappointment he wouldn't say a single word, wouldn't demand his daughter give him the respect that he deserved.

Roberta turned back in the direction of Fairmont Street, barely aware that her stockings were torn and running from the abrasion of the pavement. Justin was waiting on the front porch steps. He looked sad, lost.

"Where were you?"

"Just walking. I thought of stopping by the bar at Rizzo's, but..."

Justin almost grinned. "That thought crossed my mind, too when Annie saw her room."

"It's a beautiful room. Any girl would love to have a room like that."

Justin shrugged. "She's used to different things. Better things."

Roberta sat next to him. "Stop this right now. Annie is the one with the problem."

Justin stood, giving Roberta a harsh look. "She's only fifteen. She lost her mother. She's going to spend the summer with a father she doesn't know. Give her a break."

"And watch her attitude break you?"

"It won't."

"I wish I could be so confident," Roberta said.

Justin got up and went to the end of the porch. He leaned on the railing and stared out into the shadows. Roberta went to him and tried to rub the tension from his shoulders. He moved away.

"I'm going to take a shower and get ready for bed."

"I'll be up in awhile," he said.

It was after midnight when Justin came upstairs. "You didn't have to wait up."

"I can't sleep without you here."

He offered her a half smile and began undressing, stopping often to rub his neck and shoulders.

Roberta knelt on the bed. "Let me rub your back." His muscles were as yielding as tree trunks. "We have to bring out the artillery for this one." She went into the bathroom and returned with a small jar of muscle rub. The smell of wintergreen filled the room as Roberta rubbed the gel into Justin's shoulders. Little by little, she eased the stiffness from Justin's back and neck. If only she could do the same to his lagging spirits.

"That's a lot better, Bobbie. Thanks."

"The pleasure was all mine." She washed her hands then climbed into bed next to him, inhaling the minty scent as she rested her head on his chest. "I touched yours, you can touch mine."

"I really don't feel like it. I'm sorry."

"That's all right," Roberta said, reaching to switch off the lamp. She snuggled against Justin and toyed with the springy brown curls covering his chest before closing her eyes.

"Bobbie?" Justin asked in the darkness a short time later. "Am I doing the right thing? Maybe I should let Annie stay with her grandmother. She can offer her more than we can."

"Oak Mills is a great place to grow up. We certainly turned out all right." She kissed his cheek. "Try to get some sleep. Tomorrow is another day. You can give her the guided tour of 'Jerkwater, USA'."

All or Nothing
by Barbara Sheridan

Justin's faint chuckle warmed her.

* * * *

Annie looked at the lighted clock on her night stand. It was almost one in the morning. She turned on her bedside lamp. It was old fashioned, with a rounded glass shade and glass pendants. It was pretty, and reminded her of the room her mom had told her about—the one Mom planned for, the quiet country house, the house she'd spoken of so often in her final days.

"This is a museum, not a real home," Jan had said of her parents' estate. "I wish we had a real home, honey, like the kind your father used to talk about, the house he grew up in. He said it was light and airy. A place where you could put your feet up on the table, as long as his Aunt Maddie wasn't looking." Jan paused, struggling for breath. "We talked about living in a house like that when we first got married."

"Did you love him?" Annie asked, swabbing her mother's feverish brow.

Jan smiled. "How could I not? He was so handsome in his uniform, so polite when he asked me to dance. We met at a noisy little club, and all the girls were watching him, but he talked to me." She looked at her daughter, smoothed back her hair. "You look a lot like him. You're sure stubborn like him. When you were first born, he held you in those big strong arms and said you had a lot of growing to do to fit into the pretty canopy bed he'd buy you."

"But why did you get divorced? Why do we stay with Grandmother? Why doesn't my father ever come to see me?"

All or Nothing
by Barbara Sheridan

"It's a long story. A long, long story..."

Annie looked up at the bed canopy, more confused than she'd ever been. Her grandmother had finally told her the story this afternoon before she'd left to come here. It wasn't a very nice story at all.

Chapter 19

Roberta opened the chest freezer to take out the sandwich buns she'd frozen the other day. Strange. She could have sworn that Justin had put an apple pie in there. Dismissing the thought, she took the buns to the kitchen. She could still hear the water running through the old pipes in the bathroom above. The water stopped and Roberta checked her watch. Annie had been in the shower for over an hour. It was a good thing Justin didn't mind cold ones.

"Good afternoon, Annie," she said, looking away from the stove.

"I'm on Connecticut time," she informed Roberta, dropping down onto one of the kitchen chairs.

"So is the rest of the East Coast, Oak Mills, included," Roberta said over her shoulder. "Are you hungry? I'm making lunch."

Annie sniffed the air, then got up and came towards the stove. "What is that?"

"It's a delicacy brought out to these parts from Pittsburgh by my mother. You mix equal parts of ketchup and cola, then dump in a handful or two of some ham from the deli, and stir it all together like this, and stand here staring at it like a moron while it gets all bubbly and the ham looks like it's alive. Look, it's bobbing up and down like its breathing." She poked it with her long handled spoon. "Back, Simba! Back!"

Annie told herself not to smile at the lame joke. "Do I have to eat that stuff?"

Roberta took three dishes from the cabinet to her left.

"You can eat it, or you can fix your own lunch."

"Should I thaw these buns in the micro or do you hicks eat them frozen?"

"You're so funny I forgot to laugh."

Annie thawed the buns, then placed the dish in the center of the table while Roberta took a pitcher of iced tea from the refrigerator.

"Where is my father, buying a stomach pump?"

Roberta contained the urge to dump the tea on Annie's head. "We have one. It was a wedding present." Roberta filled her glass, then Annie's. Hadn't this pitcher been full last night? "Actually he had to go to the garage. He's looking for a driveshaft for his Mercedes. A pothole ate the old one."

Annie stared out the window above the sink. "My friend's brother hit a big hole on a motorcycle. He was killed."

"I'm sorry, Annie." She patted the girl's hand.

Annie shot her a cold look. "Can I have some of that stuff, or do we have to wait and have a cozy family meal?"

Roberta shook her head. "I'll wait, but you can have yours now. Help yourself, princess. We don't have servants in this old hick town."

Annie shot her another look that was pure Justin Hastings.

"It drips," Annie said, picking up the barbecued ham slices with the tongs Roberta set out on the stove.

"That's half the fun, kid. We ain't got much excitement 'round these parts," Roberta said dryly, looking at the newspaper. She cast covert glances towards Annie who was

making quick work of her sandwich. She was definitely Justin's daughter. "How is it?"

"Crummy," Annie grumbled, swiping her index finger across the dish to get the last of the sweet, tangy sauce.

"Your dad likes it."

"Who cares?"

"I do," Roberta said, putting the paper aside. "I can't stand to see you hurt him like this. What's with the attitude? You've been calling him, you wrote to him. Why are you like this now?"

Annie responded by leaving the room.

Roberta took the newspaper out to the front porch and waited for Justin to come home. "Any luck with the driveshaft?"

"Maybe. I found that magazine ad you told me about. The place is in New Jersey. They're going to get back to me next week." Justin rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm starved. What do we have that's quick and easy?"

"Me," Roberta said as they went inside. She was cheered by his grin.

Unfortunately, the grin faded quickly when Annie came into the kitchen "I thought we could do something this afternoon, maybe go for a ride," Justin commented. "Do you want to see the garage?"

Annie groaned as she washed the dish she'd brought down. "Why would I want to see that?"

"I just thought you might want to," Justin said, pushing aside his plate.

"We could go to the Nittany Mall," Roberta suggested.

Annie spun to face them. "Can we? Is it big?"

"Big enough," Justin said.

"I'm changing my clothes."

Roberta and Justin exchanged a look, and Justin's expression brightened in the same way that his daughter's had before she darted from the room. "I really hate to go shopping, boss."

Roberta ruffled his hair. "You're a Marine. You can handle it."

Even Justin wasn't braced for the appearance of his daughter some thirty minutes later, a frizzed ponytail bobbing on the left side of her head. She was dressed in painted-on yellow pants, red high heels and a red mesh tank top over a navel-showing yellow T-shirt that was hanging off one shoulder. She seemed to have emptied an entire cosmetics counter on her face, and carried a furry backpack in the shape of a frog. She bounded down the last few stairs and out the door.

"Let's go!"

Roberta rummaged in her purse until she found her sunglasses. "You want yours?" She asked Justin, who was staring at his garish daughter waiting impatiently near the Malibu.

"They're in the car."

"Let's hit the road, then," Roberta said, pulling the front door closed. She thought she heard Justin whimper.

Roberta trailed behind the mall-hating Justin and his intrepid Annie, who was about to break Sharon Courtland's record for 'most stores shopped in an hour'. Where did that

girl get her energy, and how could she move so fast in those outrageous shoes? And the spending! The kid had her own gold card!

That was an item not sitting well with Justin, judging by the muscle that flickered along his jawline each time she whipped the card out. "Take it away from her," Bobbie told him as Annie racked up a three digit purchase on CDs.

"When you went to the ladies' room she told me that it was a gift from the dragon lady. She's paying the bill."

"So?"

He shrugged and followed Annie out the door.

Roberta was surprised when Annie made a beeline for the bookstore. Justin went to the gardening section. Roberta browsed the bargain rack, choosing a cookbook on one-dish dinners, then walked towards the romantic suspense shelf where Annie was browsing.

She gestured to the paperback in the teen's hands. "I've read all her books. That's one of the best."

Annie shoved the book back to its place, then turned up her nose. "I don't read this silly romantic stuff, but I always wondered what kind of losers did."

Roberta counted to ten, then went to pay for her cookbook, grabbing a magazine on her way to the sales counter.

"That's the twelfth copy of that magazine I've sold today," the clerk said. "Apparently a lot of people are looking for help with those 'Troublesome Teenaged Years'."

Roberta cast a sideways glance at Annie who was ignoring Justin as he tried to make small talk. "If the article doesn't

help, I guess I can always roll up the magazine and beat some sense into her."

Annie led the way into the pricey lingerie shop. She pretended to look through a selection of silk robes as her father and his wife walked towards the display of newly arrived merchandise.

Annie wanted to smile as they looked wide-eyed at the lacy undergarments, her father holding one after another in front of Bobbie. He really was handsome, and the way he looked at Bobbie said how much he cared for her. Annie's mouth turned down. He sure didn't care for her. He didn't care what she did or how she looked. He just wanted her there, like grandmother said. He needed to have her with him so he could get his hands on her mother's money.

She trudged over towards them. "I'm going upstairs."

"Wait a minute," Justin said. "Bobbie's getting this."

"So?" Annie asked, leaving the store.

Roberta hung the lacy teddy back on the rack. "Come on."

Justin handed it to her again. "Get it. I'll keep an eye on her."

Roberta found Justin near the escalator. Annie was half way up to the next level. They followed, nearly colliding with the girl when she stopped dead to stare through the window of a quirky jewelry boutique featuring body piercing.

Grimacing at the college student who was having a large gold hoop threaded through his navel, Annie looked down at her own. She took off her backpack, stopping when a rough hand clamped around her wrist.

"I don't think so," her father said in a tone that defied protest.

"You can't stop me. I can pay for it myself."

Justin let her go, his eyes guiding her towards the sign in the lower corner of the window.

Customers under eighteen require the written permission of a parent or guardian.

"I'll come back on my own. I'll lie," she told him, taking her credit card from her backpack.

"I don't think so," Justin repeated, taking the card. He closed his fist over it, breaking it in two then four pieces.

"What you need, I will buy you. What you want, you can earn."

Roberta watched them stare each other down, two halves of the same coin. Annie looked away first. Justin turned towards Bobbie. "I'll meet you at the food court. I'm thirsty."

Roberta nodded, pleased that Justin was finally asserting his authority. "Is there anywhere else you want to shop?"

"No," Annie grumbled, walking slowly in the direction Justin was headed.

* * * *

"What would you guys like for dinner?" Roberta asked when they arrived home.

"Nothing," Annie and Justin replied in unison, giving each other a suspicious look.

Annie ran up to her room with her bags. Justin plodded behind, calling to Roberta over his shoulder.

"I'm going to change and go for a run."

Stanley wandered in from the dining room and wound herself between Roberta's legs. Roberta picked her up. "I know what you want for dinner. Maybe I'll join you." She fed Stanley, then went to the parlor and switched on the television, settling on an old musical.

"I'll be gone for awhile," Justin muttered when he came down the stairs.

"Take your time. I might call Rizzo's for a pizza."

"Whatever." He gave her a quick kiss.

Annie meandered in a short time later and dropped onto one of the flowered wing chairs, propping her feet on the marble coffee table.

Roberta cleared her throat, and gave Annie a visual warning. Annie dropped her feet to the floor. "Do you like pizza, or is it not classy enough?"

Annie rolled her blue eyes. "It's okay." She picked up the remote and turned to a baseball game. "Get mushrooms."

Shaking her head, Roberta went toward the phone. Why couldn't this kid get along with Justin? They were clearly cut from the same mold. Of course, Miss Annie and her attitude probably couldn't get along with anyone.

Roberta hung up the phone before she finished dialing as a thought occurred to her.

"I'm hungry," Annie whined. "Aren't you ordering it?"

"This phone isn't working right. It's got static."

Roberta went to use the kitchen phone, then put Plan A into action. "Hey, Tony, does your good-looking nephew Marc have a girlfriend?"

Tony laughed. "I think you can be arrested for that, Bobbie. Anyway, you're spoken for."

"Be serious. I thought Marc could show Annie around town and introduce her to some of the other kids."

"You want her out of your hair, right?"

"Exactly."

Tony laughed again. His voice was muffled as he called to his nephew. "Hey, Marco, you got a girlfriend this week? Bobbie wants you to take Justin's daughter out." he paused, then spoke to Roberta again. "He wants to know if she's the stacked babe with the tight pants and long legs he saw you with at the mall."

Roberta chuckled. "That's her, but tell Marc not to let Justin hear that kind of talk."

"I hope you're not in a big hurry for that pizza," Tony said. "Marco just ran out the back door. He said he wanted to shower and change clothes."

Roberta waited on the front porch until she saw Marc Rizzo's old Ford Mustang turn onto Fairmont Street. She hurried inside, addressing Annie who was now sprawled on the sofa watching a music video. "Let the pizza guy in when he gets here. I have to run upstairs."

"I'm not paying for it."

Roberta waited at the top of the stairs, grinning when she heard Annie's grumble at the sound of the doorbell.

"Wait until this video is over, you old fart." Annie's high heels clicked on the wooden floor as the bell rang again.

"Keep your pants on! Ring that bell again and I'll.... Oh, hi. Come on in. My stepmother will be down in a minute."

Stepmother?

Roberta came downstairs. "How nice to see you Marc. This is Justin's daughter, Annie. Annie, this is Marc Rizzo."

"Marc," Annie repeated wistfully, gazing up into Marc's dark eyes. She sighed when a lock of his black hair tumbled into his eyes. He was wearing jeans and a football jersey, which he filled out rather well, even without the shoulder pads.

Equally moonstruck, Marc was allowing the pizza box to slip from his hands. Roberta grabbed it from him.

"The money is in my purse. I'll be right back."

Annie waved her away. "Whatever."

Roberta sat at the kitchen table and began counting down the seconds. Ten, nine, eight—A new Rizzo record.

"Can I go out with Marc?" Annie asked breathlessly. "He has two more deliveries, and then we're going to a movie. Please say yes. Please."

Roberta pretended to think it over. "I don't know, Annie. Your dad isn't here to approve."

"You're his wife." Annie looked towards the hall door. "Marc is soooo cute. I'll be home early. The movie ends at 9:30."

Roberta smiled. "Sure."

Annie ran upstairs to get her purse. Roberta paid Marc for the pizza, adding a twenty dollar tip. It was a small price to pay to divert Annie from her attitude.

Roberta walked them out, picking up Stanley who'd come to investigate. "What do you think, Stan? Have we made progress? Do you think that handsome devil Marc can get that chip off her shoulder?"

Stanley purred

Chapter 20

Roberta and Justin were curled up on the sofa in the parlor, watching a cheesy horror movie, when Annie floated into the house a few minutes after ten. She hovered in the parlor doorway for a moment, her cheeks flushed, her eyes dreamy.

"Hi. You guys have to see that movie down at the Plaza. It is so romantic."

Justin and Roberta exchanged a curious glance. "They must have changed it," Justin remarked. "I thought they were running some end of the world battle epic."

"That's the one," Annie said, breathing a long sigh. "Marc asked me if I wanted to go on a picnic tomorrow. I said you wouldn't mind. 'night, Dad, Bobbie. You, too, cat." She sighed again then drifted up to her room.

Stunned by the change, Justin watched her go, his arm tightening around Roberta's shoulders. "How did you know?"

Roberta tickled his scratchy chin with her index finger. "If rumor is to be believed, young Marc is closing in on your record of conquering the girls of Oak Mills High." She grinned when Justin's expression hardened.

"If he put the moves on Annie, I'll—"

Roberta silenced him with a kiss. "Marc is a good kid," she reminded him. "But you have me curious," she said, tickling his chin again before sliding her finger down across his chest and up under his T-shirt. "What kind of moves did you use?"

Justin pulled her onto his lap. "You know all my moves, boss."

Roberta hit the remote, switching off the television. "But I'm old, my memory is starting to go."

Justin stood, lifting her with him. "I'll just have to give you a refresher course."

"Now why didn't I think of that?"

* * * *

"Didn't we have a dozen eggs, yesterday?" Justin asked Roberta the following morning.

"I suppose," she said, glancing up from the Sunday comics. "Where'd they go?"

"That's why I asked you." Justin took out the remaining carton, showing Roberta that there were only two eggs left.

"Don't look at me," she said. "You're the one who came down for the midnight snack after ... " She paused when Annie came into the kitchen. "Midnight." She greeted Annie, trying not to stare at the girl's bizarre attire. She was wearing a lime green leather mini skirt, a black satiny top, and matching lime green vest, along with clunky platform shoes.

Justin also tried not to stare. "How about some pancakes, kiddo?"

"I'm not hungry," Annie said quickly. "Marc said his family usually stops for breakfast."

Justin looked at Roberta, then back to Annie, who'd moved to the back door. "You're not wearing that, are you?"

Annie spun around, looking down at herself. "What's wrong with this?"

Everything? "Nothing's wrong with it," Roberta said. "But the Rizzos usually have their family picnics at the state park. It's pretty rustic."

"You should change," Justin said, taking a mixing bowl from the cabinet. "Put on jeans and tennis shoes."

Roberta watched Annie give him one of his own stubborn looks. "You can't tell me what to wear."

"I'm suggesting. If I was telling, you'd know it."

Annie strode from the room, her shoes pounding the floor.

You'll wish you had changed when the Rizzo women get a load of you, Roberta thought when Annie left with Marc thirty minutes later. She looked to Justin, who was waving as Marc drove away, his face lined with concern.

"Maybe we should tag along. You have a cooler at the shop. We can pick up some ice."

"And will you stop worrying, Mother Hen?"

Justin gave her a sideways look. "I can worry. They have to drive the interstate. The kid's only had his license for what, a year?"

"A little less," Roberta told him. "But in case you've forgotten, Marc's father is the state trooper in charge of the driver's testing and licensing center."

Justin dismissed this fact with a look. "The kid passed the test because of favoritism then. It's not like we have anything to do."

Roberta patted his behind. "The kid passed because he's a good driver, and I'm sure we'll think of something to do."

* * * *

They were on their way downstairs, shortly after noon, when Annie burst in the front door, nearly bowling them over.

"I hate it here!" she screamed, pushing past them. "I hate everybody in this stupid place!"

"What the hell—" Justin broke off when Marc Rizzo ran up the porch steps. He met the boy at the front door. "What did you do?"

"Nothing. I swear."

Roberta stepped in between them. "What happened?" she asked Marc.

"You know how my grandmother is." He lowered his eyes from Justin's angry face. He looked at Roberta. "Let me talk to Annie."

"Stay away from Annie," Justin said, going inside.

Roberta looked at the forlorn teen. "It'll be okay, but it would be best if you go." When he trudged away she went inside, then upstairs. Justin was knocking on Annie's door.

"Annie?"

"Go away!"

He looked at Roberta, who motioned for him to try the door. Finding it unlocked, he entered and Roberta followed. Annie was lying face down on the bed.

"Please tell me what's wrong," Justin said softly.

"Leave me alone!"

Justin unconsciously adjusted the pleats of the canopy curtain. "Maybe you'd rather talk to Bobbie?"

Annie sat up and glared at them both. Running mascara formed black stripes beneath her red-rimmed eyes. "I don't want to talk to her or you. Get lost."

Justin made a move to go. Roberta gave him a gentle prod, keeping him in place as she reached for the box of tissues, lined with military precision next to Annie's other toiletries on the cherry dresser.

She handed Annie a few tissues. "Did Marc's grandmother give you a hard time?"

"His whole family did!" She turned her angry eyes on Justin. "You knew it, didn't you? Marc told me you're such great friends with his uncles. You set me up!"

Justin sat on the edge of the bed. "No."

"She did," Annie hissed, scowling at Roberta. "That's why you told me to change clothes, isn't it? Go ahead and gloat."

"I don't want to gloat," Roberta said, rubbing Justin's tense shoulders. "I was trying to help. The Rizzos are conservative."

"They're stupid," Annie grumbled, burying her face in her pillow again.

Justin stroked her frizzy hair then stood. "If you want to talk, I'll be downstairs."

"Don't hold your breath."

"I'm going to work in the yard then," Justin said miserably.

* * * *

Roberta sat in the kitchen, watching through the open back door as he weeded the area near the rose bushes. As always, she was entranced by the movement of his hard muscles, attracted by the sight of perspiration beading on his bronzed skin. But, she was troubled by the lines creasing his face.

Annie padded into the kitchen in her bare feet and went to the refrigerator, taking a large apple from the fruit bowl. She walked toward the door, and Roberta prayed that she would go to her father. She didn't.

"Marc is so nice," she said after a time. "Why is his family so mean?"

"They're not mean," Roberta told her, not surprised to see Annie respond by rolling her blue eyes. "Really. I told you they were conservative."

"That gives them the right to make fun of people, right?"

"No. I can't believe they made fun of you."

Annie looked out the back door and ate her apple. "They were talking about me in Italian. They called me names."

"Names?" Roberta asked, setting aside the crossword puzzle she'd picked up.

"They made fun of my name, okay? They kept calling me 'Andreana'." She threw the apple core away, then went to the fridge for another apple.

"They like you. What did they call Marc?"

"Marco. They were calling his uncle, Antonio."

"They used to call me Roberto," Bobbie said, encouraged by Annie's suppressed grin. "They've welcomed you as one of the family. If they didn't like you they would have ignored you and acted as though you weren't even there."

"They were making fun of my clothes. I know it. They didn't even give me a chance."

"Now you know how your father feels. You haven't given him much of a chance, have you?" Roberta turned back to her

crossword. She said a silent thank you when Annie wandered out to the yard.

"You should get some dusty miller," Annie said casually, glancing at the roses clustered at the rear of the yard.

Justin gave her a questioning look. "Is Dusty your boyfriend?"

Annie rolled her eyes. "Duh. It's a non-flowering plant. It has grayish leaves that will bring out the color of the roses."

Justin beamed and stood, moving to another part of the yard. "I'll have to look into that. Do you want to help me pick some of these weeds?"

"As if," Annie said, showing off her French manicure. She finished her apple, nearly choking when her father knelt and reached for what appeared to be a sturdy looking weed. She grabbed his hand. "No. That's a peach."

Justin grinned and kissed the back of her hand. "So are you."

Annie groaned. "I mean a peach tree. That's a seedling." She pointed to a tree in the neighboring yard. "One probably blew off in a storm and landed here. You should replant it before it gets too big. It doesn't have enough room here. There's a spot out front that would be good."

Justin stood and gazed lovingly at his daughter. "You really know your stuff. Do they teach you gardening in that fancy boarding school?" He regretted the teasing tone when her eyes grew cold.

"I learned it from my mother. She liked to help the gardener at Grandmother's."

All or Nothing
by Barbara Sheridan

I'll bet the dragon lady loved that, Justin thought. He tried to ease the tension. "Your mother was a special lady."

"And rich," Annie added sharply. "I'm sure you haven't forgotten that." She strode towards the house.

Justin picked up his gardening tools and followed her inside.

"What happened?" Roberta asked, slipping her arm around his waist as Annie rushed into the hall.

He pulled away, his eyes straying to the swinging door connecting the kitchen and dining room. "I guess it's the money thing."

The Money Thing

Just outside the kitchen door, Annie bit down hard on her lower lip and rushed up to her room.

Chapter 21

Justin jogged to the grocery store, then spent the remainder of the afternoon making dinner. Roberta watched as he used a tiny metal scoop to ball watermelon, cantaloupe and honeydew for a fruit salad, then painstakingly julienned steak and red, green, and yellow bell peppers more precisely than any infomercial kitchen gadget ever did.

"I'll bet you polished and sorted each and every bullet your men used, didn't you?"

He looked down at the table then back to Roberta. "It relaxes me."

"I don't mean to tease," she said quietly, covering his hand with hers.

"Teasing me has been your favorite past time since you were nine."

Smiling, Roberta made a so-so motion with her hand.

* * * *

The savory smell of Justin's fajitas lured Annie out of her room, and when she remained downstairs to watch television after dinner, Roberta hoped that the tense atmosphere would begin to ease. It didn't, and Justin's mood sunk after Stanley deposited a rubber mouse in the commode in Annie's bathroom, necessitating the removal of said commode to retrieve the offending toy. Roberta's own disposition took a downward spiral the following morning.

"You might as well stay home today," Justin said when Roberta woke with the alarm clock. He was ending his workout and about to take a shower.

"Why don't you stay?" she said, sorry that she'd agreed to take turns "Annie sitting" when he had brought the subject up after a mind-numbing lovemaking session the day after their wedding. "I'll stay tomorrow or the next day."

"Nice try, but no go," he said, placing his barbells in the closet across the room.

Roberta gave him a questioning look. "Are you grounding me because of Stanley's mouse?"

"Ha, ha." Justin crossed the room and took clean undershorts and socks from the dresser. "With the winch on the fritz, you don't have the muscle power to pull the engine out of Courtland's truck."

"I bet I can round up a couple of kids from the neighborhood."

"Tom needs help with the Jag paint job, and you have no hands-on experience restoring vintage finishes. And then there's—"

"Okay," Roberta interrupted, raising her hands in submission. "You win. This time."

She pretended she wasn't moved by Justin's boyish grin or the playful way he chuckled her under the chin on his way to the bathroom.

"The Marines always win."

"As if," Roberta said to the closed door, wincing when she realized that she was sounding like Annie.

Although she hated the thought of staying home instead of working, Roberta knew this arrangement was for the best, especially with the specter of the surprise evaluation by a social worker looming over their heads. Roberta petted Stanley when she came into the bedroom and jumped on the bed.

"With any luck at all, the big inspection will happen on one of Justin's days home."

It didn't.

The following Wednesday, Roberta decided to remain in the football jersey and patched shorts she'd slept in while she did the laundry and cleaning. She put off showering and dressing a little longer, when she was struck by the urge to bake a chocolate cake. A chocolate cake from scratch.

"Must you stare at me?"she asked Annie, before turning down the volume of the portable radio.

Annie smirked. "I have the feeling that this is a major event and I don't want to miss it."She raised the radio's volume again.

Roberta mumbled under her breath and carefully beat the butter, sugar and eggs by hand before adding the melted chocolate, which had gotten a mysterious lump in it somehow. She measured the dry ingredients. The doorbell rang. She ignored it.

"You should have done that before you started mixing the other stuff,"Annie said knowingly.

"Well I didn't, so hush up, and see who's at the door."She was delicately folding the dry ingredients into the mixing bowl when Justin burst in through the back door.

He thrust the company checkbook under her nose. "Sign me a check. Now."

"Buzz off. I'm busy," she shouted back, pushing his grease-stained hand away with her elbow.

He shoved the checkbook back. "Bobbie! The delivery guy won't take a personal check or credit card for my drive shaft. And somebody forgot to drop the new signature card off at the bank putting my name on the business account."

"Okay, I forgot again. Just give him cash."

"He said he can't carry that much cash!"

"Wait a minute!"

"I don't have a minute!" he yelled, pulling the bowl away from her. "If I don't get right back he's gonna leave."

Annie's shrill whistle put an end to the argument.

"Dad. Roberta. This is Ms. Teague from Children and Youth Services."

Roberta and Justin gulped in unison. Justin recovered first, poking Roberta in the ribs.

She swallowed hard, wiping the flour from her hands onto her jersey. She stepped forward to greet the woman after turning off the loud radio. "How nice to meet you. Things usually aren't this, er, hectic, right Justin?"

Justin mumbled his agreement. "I'd shake your hand but I'm filthy."

"I see," Ms. Teague said quietly, a look of distaste coloring her pinched features. "May I sit down?"

"Of course," Roberta said. She grabbed the filled clothes basket from the center of the table, handing it to Annie who made no move to accept it. "Take this upstairs, please."

"Move it," Justin ordered, bending to pick up the newspapers Roberta had spread on the floor in front of the counter.

Roberta shot them both a warning look. "Would you like some coffee, Ms. Teague?"

"Yes, thank you." The social worker sat, carefully smoothing her gray skirt. She took a notebook and pen from her briefcase and began to write.

Roberta and Justin exchanged a worried look. "Ms. Teague?" Roberta asked weakly. "What—what are you writing?"

"I'm taking notes on the interaction of the family unit."

Although she wanted to crawl under a rock and die, Roberta signed a check for Justin and poured Ms. Teague a cup of coffee, praying that she wouldn't spill it or upend the sugar bowl in the woman's lap. "Would you excuse me for a moment?"

Ms. Teague glanced up from her notebook. "Of course."

Roberta walked Justin out to the car. "What are we going to do?"

"How the hell should I know?" He leaned back against the Malibu's fender, smearing the grease from the seat of his pants across its shiny white surface. "We'll think of something. Hold down the fort for a bit." He brushed a kiss across Roberta's forehead. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

Justin's kiss was like a shot of adrenaline, and Roberta went back inside, her head high, her posture confident. Her shoulders slumped when she saw that Ms. Teague was still taking notes. The pen certainly was mightier than the sword.

In this woman's hand it was more intimidating than a nuclear bomb. "I'm sorry to keep you waiting, Ms. Teague."

The social worker put aside her notebook and sipped her coffee as Roberta finished beating her cake batter and pouring it into the waiting pans.

"I'm sure this is an inconvenience, Mrs. Hastings, but I feel that an unannounced visit gives a more realistic picture of those involved in the evaluation."

That's what I'm afraid of, Roberta thought, sliding the cake pans into the oven.

Ms. Teague motioned towards the litter box in a recessed area near the back door. "I take it you have a cat?"

"Yes," Roberta said cheerfully. "I've had Stanley since she was a kitten."

"I'm allergic to cats."

"Oh," Roberta said, piling her utensils in the sink. She felt the social worker's narrow eyes on her until Annie came into the kitchen.

"Gross, gross, gross, gross, gross, *gross*," she chanted, tossing the wadded tissues she held at arm's length into the trash. She pushed past Roberta to scrub her hands. "That stupid cat of yours threw up a hairball in the front hall. Mice in the toilet, hairballs on the floor. Gross."

The headache Roberta had awakened with that morning returned with a vengeance when the social worker picked up her pen. "Annie, keep Ms. Teague company while I get cleaned up." The girl opened her mouth to protest, but Roberta's look stopped her.

"Okay."

Upstairs, Roberta took something for her headache, showered, then dressed in the pink sweater and full black skirt she'd picked up at Courtland's and slid on the leather flats she'd picked up at the mall the other day. She laid out trousers, a shirt, and blazer for Justin before mustering her strength to face Ms. Teague and her pen.

The oven timer sounded as she entered the kitchen and her confidence was bolstered by the rich, chocolaty aroma filling the air. Her confidence nose dived when she pulled out the oven rack and found two cracked brown disks in the pans where her cake layers were supposed to be. "What happened?"

"You used baking soda instead of baking powder," Annie told her, punctuating the sentence with a smug smile.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she asked, forcing her voice to remain calm and hoping that Ms. Teague couldn't see the murderous expression in her eyes.

"You didn't ask."

Roberta mentally dissected an oil filter to steady her nerves and temper. "Justin is the real cook in the family."

"Isn't that interesting?" Ms. Teague asked, making note of it.

"Justin is a man of many talents," Roberta said as she took the cake pans to the trash. She dropped one layer into the can. The other missed and fell to the tile floor with a thud. It didn't even chip. Roberta disposed of it, making certain to give her hands a thorough washing lest Ms. Teague note that she was unhygienic.

"Will you be joining us for dinner, Ms. Teague?" she asked, taking a container of spaghetti sauce and an assortment of cookies from the freezer. Strange. She could swear she'd stored the cookies in the basement freezer. Hadn't there been some croissants in there yesterday?

Ms. Teague made more notes. "I would like to stay if you have no objections."

"Heavens, no. I hope you won't expect anything gourmet."

"Or edible," Annie added as she came in for a can of soda and two bananas.

Roberta trampled her emotions into submission as Ms. Teague wrote something else. "Would you like to sit in the parlor?"

"That would be lovely," Ms. Teague answered, notebook in hand.

Annie was sprawled on one of the chairs watching a soap opera. To Roberta's surprise she sat up, switched off the television, and spoke politely when Ms. Teague asked her about her school in Connecticut.

Who'd been hiding this girl who was a member of the National Honor Society, President of the freshman class, and a ballet student who'd performed for the governor of her home state?

Overwhelmed by these revelations, Roberta was caught unaware when Ms. Teague spoke to her. "I'm sorry. I didn't hear you."

"I was telling Andrea what a lovely house this is. Did you decorate it?"

Roberta's smile was bright and she felt herself relax. A little. "Partly. Everything in this room is a reproduction with the exception of the rug and piano. They came with the house, as did the dining room suite and the furniture in the master bedroom. Justin would like to do a more thorough restoration sometime in the future. This house has been in his mother's family for ages."

Ms. Teague made note of it. Roberta didn't mind.

"Would you like to look around, Ms. Teague?"

"Yes I would. I simply adore old houses." She stood notebook in hand. "Could we start with your garden, Mrs. Hastings? I was quite taken with the rose bushes I glimpsed through your kitchen window. My grandmother had rose bushes like those."

"Justin helped his aunt plant them when he was ten," Roberta said as she led the way, feeling less intimidated by Ms. Teague and her pen.

From the garden they went to the dining room where Ms. Teague offered to help set the table. She admired the expensive china and crystal, Roberta was glad that she'd refrained from smashing those wedding gifts after her divorce.

Next, Roberta took the social worker to the attic to show her the rooftop widow's walk, which commanded a wonderful view of Oak Mills and the surrounding countryside. Next she showed her the bedrooms. She was glad Justin's sense of spotlessness was rubbing off on her and that Annie had inherited it.

All or Nothing
by Barbara Sheridan

Closing Annie's door she said, "In 1878 Justin's ancestor, who built this house, had a furniture maker come from New York to build the bedroom suite on site because the pieces were too large to be brought assembled. If you think the dining room set is incredible, wait until you see this." Her eyes on the social worker's face, Roberta threw open the door. "Voilà."

Ms. Teague's jaw dropped. The color fled her cheeks. She let out a strange, choked cry.

Roberta stared at the petrified woman. Surely an ornate bedroom set couldn't have caused that. Her thoughts fragmented when she turned her head and her brain registered what her eyes saw.

Justin was standing near the foot of the bed, stark naked, his undershorts in his hand, and looking every bit as shocked as the social worker.

Chapter 22

Roberta slammed the door closed. "I don't know what to say."

Ms. Teague tucked her notebook under her arm, then wiped her glasses on the front of her blouse. She nervously cleared her throat. "Mr. Hastings is quite a ... muscular man."

"He most certainly is," Roberta agreed, before leading the way downstairs.

Roberta left Ms. Teague in the living room with Annie and went to the kitchen on a pretext of getting the dinner started. She was standing near the back door, holding a tea towel over her mouth to quiet her laughter when Justin came in.

"I don't find anything amusing about this, Bobbie."

Roberta wiped her eyes as she turned to face Justin. He was actually blushing. "I can't help it. I will never forget the look on her face." She went to Justin. "To tell you the truth, Hastings, I felt the same way when I first saw you naked." She patted the front of his trousers. "It is truly a sight to behold."

Justin's cheeks colored again, and he moved her hand away. "I won't be able to look that woman in the eye for the rest of the day."

"I don't think she'll be looking in the vicinity of your eyes, either." Roberta leered.

He winced. "I guess I'd better go and introduce myself." He put his hand over Roberta's mouth, his eyes sparkling. "Can you handle dinner?" he asked, lowering his hand. He went to

the freezer compartment of the refrigerator. "Where are the breaded pork chops I brought from downstairs?"

"I don't know. They must have run off with the marinated chicken you couldn't find yesterday."

"Where has it been going?"

Roberta shrugged, looking to Annie who'd poked her head in the swinging door.

"Are you just gonna leave me alone with her? When are we gonna eat?"

A thought occurred to Roberta who remembered hearing Annie coming downstairs late last night. "You haven't been raiding the fridge at night have you?"

Annie rolled her eyes. "It's not like you guys have anything good. I usually give it to the cat."

Justin's jaw clamped, and he darted downstairs. He came up giving both Annie and Stanley menacing looks. "The freezer containers are half empty. All the containers are half empty."

Roberta looked at her container of cookies. They were intact. "However did these escape you?"

Annie frowned. "When I saw the crooked icing stripes on the cut-outs I figured my dad didn't make them and I thought I might get food poisoning. I didn't want to take the chance they'd kill the cat."

Roberta placed her hands on her hips. "You have been a pain in my butt since you stepped off that ... "Her voice trailed to nothing when she realized that Miss Teague was standing in the door connected to the front hall. Bobbie managed a weak smile.

"Justin, why don't you and Annie talk to Miss Teague? I'll handle things in here," she said, smiling towards the social worker before taking some of Tony Rizzo's sauce from the freezer. "Even I can't mess up spaghetti," she whispered to Justin.

When Justin and Annie left, she made a salad, put it in the refrigerator, then put a pot of water on to boil. Once it did, she added the noodles then went to see how things were going in the other room.

She sat on one of the side chairs near the door, listening Justin answer Ms. Teague's questions about his military career.

"It certainly wasn't any Hollywood action movie, but I wouldn't change a thing," Justin said, unconsciously rubbing his injured leg. "To start out with a bunch of street brats, and mold them into an efficient team you can trust your life with, is like nothing else..."

Roberta stared at Justin, losing all track of time until the chime of the mantle clock reminded her of the spaghetti. "The noodles!"

She sprinted from the parlor, only to wither at the sight of the pot. Most of the water boiled away, turning the pasta into a mushy glob. She checked the pantry, and was not surprised to find a lack of any type of noodles. She thought of going to the grocery store, but feared that with her luck she'd be involved in an accident. She dumped the spaghetti then made a frantic call to Tony Rizzo who said he'd send over a pan of lasagna and a loaf of fresh garlic bread. Justin came in after she hung up the phone.

"What happened?"

"I cooked. Do you really need further explanation?" Roberta said sinking onto a chair. She rubbed her aching temples. This was the worst day of her life. If she could only get through the next hour or two she'd be fine. She hoped.

Justin looked in the refrigerator. "What are we going to feed the woman?"

"Don't worry. I called Tony. He's sending something over." No sooner had she said the words than they heard Annie shouting.

"I don't want to see you!"

They ran to the hall. Ms. Teague was in the parlor doorway, watching intently as Annie tried to close the front door on Marc Rizzo.

"Listen to me, Annie. I'm sorry about the picnic."

"I don't care. Go away!"

Justin pulled Annie from the door and stared menacingly at Marc. "Stop upsetting her boy, or I'll—"

"Justin!" Roberta pushed him out of the way and stepped out onto the porch.

"I just wanted to explain to Annie about the picnic," Marc said. "I don't want her to be mad at me."

"I know, but not now. She'll call you after our company leaves."

"No I won't!" Annie yelled.

Roberta took some money from her skirt pocket and gave it to the teenager. "Just go back to the restaurant, okay?"

He nodded, then gave Roberta the food containers he'd set on the wicker loveseat. "I'm sorry if I embarrassed you in front of your company."

Roberta forced a smile. "It's all right." She went back inside, groaning internally when she saw Ms. Teague once again taking notes. "Dinner will be ready in a few minutes. Will you wait for us in the dining room?" She turned to Justin and Annie. "I need help in the kitchen."

While she and Justin transferred the lasagna and garlic bread to serving platters, Annie took the cut crystal salad bowl in to the dining room, then came back for the dressing cruets.

"Ms. Teague said it would be fine with her if you guys wanted to serve wine or something."

Roberta didn't know whether to be relieved or worried. When Annie returned again, Roberta gave her the bread and butter plates, Justin the lasagna platter, then grabbed the bottle of wine Tony had sent along with the ice water pitcher. "We are going to go out there, and we are going to show that woman what a wonderful, well-mannered family we are. Agreed?"

Although they both wore similar sour expressions, Justin and Annie nodded their agreement.

To Roberta's relief, the dinner went well, with pleasant small talk and no further mishaps. Afterwards they had coffee and cookies in the parlor. Sensing that they were entering the home stretch, she began to relax. What else was there to evaluate?

Miss Teague looked to Annie. "According to the court records I reviewed this morning, you told the judge that you were eager to spend time with your father. How is your visit progressing?"

Annie's words fell like stones.

"I don't like it. I want to go home,"she said, rushing upstairs.

Miss Teague studied the stunned faces of Roberta and Justin. "May I go up to speak with her?"

Justin said nothing. Roberta stood. "Of course. I'll show you the way."

"I remember. The second door on the left?"

Roberta nodded then re-took her seat beside the stricken Justin.

"It will be all right,"she said softly, reaching out to touch his cheek.

He pulled away, got up and began to pace the length of the Oriental rug in the center of the room. "It's not going to work. She hates me, and I don't know why."He rubbed the back of his neck.

Roberta went to him. "She hasn't been here long. It'll take a little more time."

"No,"Justin said. "I've seen that kind of look before. In the eyes of kids who washed out of boot camp. She's not willing to give us a chance. It will never work."

And if she goes, it will kill you, Roberta thought, watching as Justin walked sadly to the front bay window.

She was watching Justin gaze out at the darkening sky when Miss Teague came down from Annie's room. Roberta's

spirits were further dampened by the social worker's remote expression.

"Did Annie tell you what's bothering her?"

"That's confidential, I'm afraid, but it will be included in my report to the Connecticut courts." She took her briefcase from its place near the sofa.

Justin came over to stand near Roberta, and together they walked Miss Teague out.

"Thank you both for your hospitality."

After she drove away, Roberta and Justin went back inside. Justin loosened his tie. "I'm going to go for a run."

Roberta accompanied him upstairs. And I'm going to get to the bottom of this, she thought, casting a glance to Annie's room.

Chapter 23

Roberta watched from the bedroom window as Justin jogged out of sight before going across the hall to Annie's room. She knocked once then entered. Annie was sitting on her bed, her back to the door, headphones from a portable CD player covering her ears. Roberta removed the headphones, yanking the cord from the player.

"Hey! Give that back!"

"No." Roberta tossed them onto the dresser, blocking Annie's path when she made a move to get them. "Just what is your problem? You have been complaining and sulking since you stepped off that plane two weeks ago. Don't you see what it's doing to your father? Don't you care? He's tried to make you feel at home, but you keep blowing him off, and I want to know why."

"I'm may be a kid, but I know when I'm being used."

Roberta's jaw dropped. "Are you crazy? Why would Justin use you? How could he?"

"The money," Annie said slowly.

Roberta shook her head. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Annie hit her with a contemptuous look. "I heard you two a couple days ago. You asked him what was wrong and he said, 'I guess it's the money thing'."

Roberta was caught off guard by both the remark she could barely recall and the inflection with which Annie repeated Justin's supposed comment. She was every inch her

father whether she knew it or not. "Do you mean last Sunday after the picnic?"

"Duh," Annie said, turning towards the window, her arms folded.

"He was talking about not being able to give you the luxury you've grown up in. What on earth are you talking about?"

Annie turned, her blue eyes dark and critical. "My mother's money. The money my dear father will get if the judge gives him custody of me," she said, turning her back on Roberta again.

"Where did you get a crazy idea like that?"

"The dragon lady."

Bobbie and Annie turned at the sound of Justin's voice. He came into the bedroom, perspiration glistening on his face and bare chest. He was favoring his wounded leg. He brushed off Roberta's concern with a quick, "There's rain in the air." He stepped past her and faced his daughter.

"Your grandmother told you that crap, didn't she?"

"Did you think I was too young and stupid to ever figure it out?"

"There isn't anything to figure out," Justin said. His expression and tone softened. "The only money I know about, is the money that goes directly to you the day you graduate from college. Jan left everything to you, as she should have." He paused and sat on the pink chaise and rubbed his aching leg. "Your grandmother doesn't like me. She never did."

Annie gave him a venomous look. "Did she lie about you divorcing my mother and forgetting I was ever born?"

Justin stood and went to her, gently taking her by the shoulders when she tried to turn away. "Your mother left me, but I admit that I didn't put up much of a fight." Annie tried to pull away again. "We were wrong for each other. We came from two different worlds. The only good thing that came out of the marriage was you. I didn't forget you, but I knew I couldn't give you the nice life Jan could."

He dropped his hands to his sides. "I didn't have a lot growing up. We lived here with my aunt and cousin. My mom worked two jobs because she never had a fancy education or any kind of training. I wanted more for you. I wanted you to have it all."

Annie looked at the canopy bed then back to her father. "Mom used to dream of us having a house like this one. A simple house in the country she called it."

Roberta slipped out of Annie's room and went across the hall, closing the bedroom door behind her.

She took the picture of Jan and Annie that Justin had relegated to the closet before the wedding. He'd said that Jan had been a substitute for her, but could it have been the other way around? Was she his substitute for the wife he'd let slip away, the mother of the child he was eager to have in his life once again?

"Don't even think it."

Startled, Roberta dropped the framed picture. "I'm sorry," she said, bending to pick up the piece of glass which broke free of the frame. "I ruined it."

Justin took the picture and glass piece from her, and set them atop the mantle. "It's not important." He tilted Roberta's face up towards his. "I can read your mind, you know," he said, tracing her lower lip with the edge of his thumb. "I cared about Jan, but it doesn't compare to the way I feel about you, Bobbie. You're a part of me." He raised her left hand and brushed a kiss across her ring finger. "Jan didn't wear this ring. I never even thought to give it to her."

Roberta smiled, melting into Justin's embrace when he pulled her close. "I love you."

"And I love you. With all my heart." He kissed her forehead. "I'm going to soak in the tub. My leg is bothering me." He grinned. "If you play your cards right, I might just let you rub it for me."

"Ooooh."

Justin laughed, then went to the mahogany dresser for clean clothing.

"You might as well leave the drawer open," Roberta said, pointing to the basket of clean laundry Annie had set in a corner earlier. "Don't worry. I'll use a ruler to make sure I fold and space everything just the way you like it."

"Old habits die hard," Justin said lightly, snapping her a salute before going into the bathroom.

Roberta smiled to herself. Opening her jumbled lingerie drawer, she made a half-hearted attempt to sort and arrange the garments she put away, doing a better job when she reached Justin's underthings in the basket.

"No, no, no. Your civilian shorts can't fraternize with the old GI greens." She spotted the corner of an envelope beneath

Justin's shorts. "Move it soldier," she said, pushing the olive drab undershorts aside.

Her brow creased when she recognized it. It wasn't like Justin to forget to fill out something as important as his final discharge papers. She grinned when she heard the bathroom door open behind her and removed the forms from the envelope. "You'd better get your butt over here and sign these, Hastings, or they're going to put you AWOL." She looked up to see his reflection. It wasn't at all what she expected.

"I don't...."

"Don't what? Don't want to leave the Marines?" she joked seconds before her eyes fell on the letter from his former commander.

After reading it, she looked into the mirror again, her shocked reflection meeting Justin's guilty one.

Roberta turned slowly, and suddenly she was a starry-eyed seventeen year old, being slapped in the face by reality. "When were you going to tell me? An hour before it was time to go?" She threw the papers on the bed and went downstairs.

"Bobbie," Justin called following her. "Wait." He grabbed her arm just before she reached the front door. "It's not what you think."

"Isn't it? Tell me you really want to quit. Look me in the eye and tell me you don't want to put in the whole twenty years. Tell me you don't want to retire an officer."

He opened his mouth, but did not respond.

Roberta turned away, taking a deep breath and steeling her nerves. She turned back, Justin was staring at the floor

planks beneath his bare feet. She looked at the jagged scar on his thigh and the smaller, faded ones she'd never wanted to acknowledge. He'd been wounded in the line of duty. Three times in fact, and yet he'd gone back to the front lines to fight battles half the world away.

Her eyes traveled up to the little skull tattoo, the one he'd told her about one time when they'd bathed together. There'd been no mistaking the proud gleam in his eye when he'd told her that in his platoon, the men who earned the right to wear this tattoo were the toughest of the lot, the best of the best.

Finally she looked at Justin's bowed head and when he looked up a tear formed in the corner of her eye. "You want to stay in, don't you?"

His own heart breaking, Justin took her in his arms. "I can't lie to you, boss. I would like to put in my twenty years and get those silver bars." He paused when Roberta looked away then turned her face towards his again. "You're the one who said that a couple is supposed to be honest with one another."

"I never could keep my big mouth shut."

Justin tried to smile at her weak jest. "I want to stay in the Corps, but I won't. The military is no place to raise a family. I was in long enough to see that first hand." He offered her a smile and ran his hands up and down her back, doing his best to silence the nagging voice within him. "I belong here with you and Annie, and maybe a little rugrat of our own one of these days. I love you and my daughter, and I like my life just the way it is."

Roberta willingly kissed him, although her heart wasn't in it. She went upstairs with him and made love the same way, with her body but not her soul. In the dead of night when the house was still, save for the creak of a settling timber, she looked at his peaceful face in the moonlight.

"You're the best," she whispered, easing herself out of the bed. She put on a pair of shorts and an old T-shirt, and took the re-enlistment papers and letter he'd torn in half and thrown in the wastebasket.

She took them downstairs. She'd just taken a seat at the kitchen table when Annie came up from the basement, a plastic container of chicken stew in her hands.

"Okay, I confess. I've been munching in the dark."

Roberta covered her mouth with her hand to stifle the cry that wanted to escape her lips.

Annie rushed forward. "What's wrong? Is my dad okay?"

Roberta wiped her eyes with trembling fingers and patted Annie's hand. "He's sound asleep. He's fine. He's wonderful..."

Annie sat, pulling her oak chair closer to Roberta's. "Please tell me. I'm sorry for being such a brat. I should have just come out and asked Dad about the money business."

"It's not that," Roberta said, taking a tea towel from a cabinet drawer. She pieced the torn letter together and let Annie read it.

"Will we have to move to some Army base?"

Roberta shook her head. "Justin said he knows where he belongs, that he wants to be with us."

She and Annie shared a smile, but their smiles faded within seconds.

"He really likes the Marines," Annie said. "He never told me a lot about it, but I could tell he was really into it."

Roberta nodded, remembering the way his eyes had glittered this evening when he gave Ms. Teague an overview of his military career. A career that had only five short years to be completed the way he'd wanted when he was nineteen.

Annie looked at the letter. "He has five years until he can really retire?" Roberta nodded. "Five years is a long time."

Roberta almost laughed. "Not when you're our age, kiddo. Justin can do those five years standing on his head. And he should do it."

The silence was broken by Annie's soft sigh. "I can tell the judge I want to stay with my grandmother until I'm eighteen. I don't want to, especially now, but you guys can go wherever he has to."

Roberta shook her head. "Justin wants you to grow up here in Oak Mills. How do you feel about staying with me while he's gone? The letter said he might be stationed close by. He'll probably get leave on the weekends."

"Okay by me. This town really isn't so bad. The kids I met at the movies are pretty cool, and Marc Rizzo is hot." She smiled. It was Justin's wicked smile.

"There's only one small problem." Roberta paused, her hand instinctively touching her lower abdomen. "I'm sure if we team up on him, he'll go, but he'll quit the minute he finds out I'm pregnant."

Annie gasped. "No way. How many months are you?"

Roberta held up one finger. "Somewhere around there. I missed my period last week and got one of those test thingies

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when Justin stayed home with you yesterday. He really regrets not being there for you. Once he finds out, there is no way we're going to get him to re-enlist for five years."

"Don't tell him," Annie said. "Get him back in before you show."

"That's not the answer. I can't lie to him, even for his own good."

"Then what are you going to do?" Annie asked, putting the food container in the microwave.

"I don't know."

Stanley jumped onto Roberta's lap and nuzzled her hand. Roberta looked Stanley in the eye. "Do you have any bright ideas?"

Stanley meowed.

"Now why didn't I think of that?"

Chapter 24

Roberta insisted Justin take the rest of the week off work to be with Annie, knowing he would never question her motive, which was to coordinate his reenlistment, the custody hearing, and the news of her pregnancy with the kind of planning that would do the Joint Chiefs proud.

Justin was at the garage the following Monday when Roberta and Annie happened by with a picnic lunch and an express mail envelope that had arrived that morning for Justin.

He swallowed when he read the return address. "It's from your grandmother's lawyer," he told Annie, carefully opening the envelope. He pulled it out an inch at a time, reading as he went, whipping the papers out after the first paragraph.

"They settled out of court. After two years, the stupid lawyers sat down and worked it out between themselves. Geez." He looked at the official court documents signed and notarized. "I don't believe Gwyneth gave up." He grabbed Annie in a bear hug. "She's not going to try to take you away from me."

Annie managed to work one hand free and gave Roberta an "O.K." sign. Several long, loud phone calls to her grandfather having been the deciding factor.

Justin released Annie, then kissed Roberta. "We have got to celebrate."

"I figured it would be that or drown our sorrows, so I made reservations at Rizzo's for seven tonight."

Roberta eagerly kissed him, silently counting down the next phase in her plan. The gruff voice outside the garage made her flash a "thumbs-up" to Annie behind Justin's back.

Justin pulled away and moved to look out the open bay doors. "Talk about your small world," he muttered, hurrying out to the car limping forward on only three good tires.

After boisterous greetings and hearty handshakes, Justin introduced Roberta to his former commanding officer, Colonel Houston and his grandson.

The Colonel greeted Bobbie then bent down to where Justin was examining his flat tire.

"That's one hell of a puncture," Justin muttered. "What did you hit?"

"Damned if I know," he answered, reaching inside the opened car window to cover the survival knife on the seat with his hat. He turned a critical eye to his grandson who was speaking with Annie a few feet away. "It's an omen, boy. I told you Penn State is a bad idea." He turned back to Justin. "Kids. Greg is heading to college after this school year, and he thinks he'd rather go to Penn State than West Point. We were on our way to my cabin to get in some fishing when the tire went. How soon can you fix it?"

"Ten minutes, max."

"Are you in a big hurry, Colonel?" Roberta asked. "If you have time, maybe you and your grandson would like to join us for dinner. Do you like Italian food?"

He pretended to mull it over, casting a disparaging look towards his grandson and Annie. "Don't know if I should. Any more time with your daughter, Hastings, and West Point will

lose for sure."He laughed. "I guess that big bass with my name on it can wait a little longer, and I know I won't rest easy until I get you to re-up."

Justin shook his head. "I'll be sending you away empty-handed. I'm retired."

"Not just yet,"Colonel Houston reminded him. He pointed to the insignia on his collar. "Persuasion is what got me this bird, Son."

* * * *

And now for the full frontal assault, Roberta thought as they waited for dessert to be served. "You have to do it Justin. You know you want to."

"Yeah, Daddy. Go ahead, do the macho soldier thing. Bobbie and I will keep each other company. It's not like we'll never see you."

Justin shook his head. "I made up my mind. A base is no place for women, equal rights be damned, ladies. And I will not leave you two alone."

Roberta and Annie groaned in unison.

"Be serious, Justin. Annie is a big girl, and I've been taking care of myself for a very long time."Roberta scored a symbolic point when she saw the resolve in his eyes flicker.

"Go on, Daddy,"Annie cooed, tickling his chin. "Marc said that the Biology teacher has this thing for men in uniform, and Biology is like my worst subject. If I can pin a picture of you in uniform in my locker, I'll ace an A."

Justin gave her a sideways look, turning to Roberta when she breathed a wistful sigh.

"That dress uniform of yours would look nice with some Lieutenant's bars." She licked her lips and winked as Justin suppressed a grin.

"It will be even better with Captain's bars," Colonel Houston said, removing a fresh set of enlistment papers from his uniform jacket. He set a gold pen on the table. "The nearest reserve base is going to be taking on supply detail for the western half of the state, and there's going to be a lot of shuffling of personnel and promotions. And new positions will need to be filled asap. Strictly stateside duty."

Justin's determination wavered and Roberta beamed. "Stateside duty? A promotion?" His eyes narrowed. "Something is fishy."

"Strictly on the up and up, Son," the Colonel said, taking a letter from his jacket. He showed it to Justin. It spoke of the personnel realignment and requested that Houston supply a list of potential officers to take command of the new units.

Roberta handed Justin the pen. She looked deeply into his eyes. "You want to finish out your twenty years. Annie and I want you to be happy. We love you enough to share you with Uncle Sam. We can take care of ourselves."

Justin kissed her. "You're sure?"

"Positive."

"Ditto," Annie chimed in.

Justin thought it over and signed the first page. He paused at the next signature line. "Why do I have the feeling I've been set up?"

"Because you have," Roberta told him. "You are so stubborn, you make me crazy. If our baby is as stubborn as

you, I'll go gray before my time."She held her breath as she watched the realization dawn on him.

"You're pregnant?"

She nodded, quickly placing her hand over his. "Do it, Justin. Reenlist."

"No. Not with a baby on the way."

"You have to."

"No."He picked up the forms to tear them in two.

Roberta and Annie grabbed his hands.

"I can't be away now. I want to be there when the baby comes. When is the baby coming?"

"Not until next March. Sign the paper."

"No."

"Yes."

Colonel Houston hit the table with his palm to get their attention. "I can pull a string or two and see that you get an emergency leave the minute she goes into labor while you're on duty."

"Really?"Justin asked, overcome by more emotions than he ever experienced at once.

"Can do,"the Colonel said, handing Justin the pen again.

Justin looked at Roberta, then Annie and then the reenlistment papers.

He signed the forms and gave them to Colonel Houston, who tucked them into his jacket. Houston stood. "If you good folks will excuse my grandson and myself, I'm itching to get the bass that got away last summer. Carry on with the celebration, Hastings."

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Justin stood at attention and snapped his commanding officer a salute. "Will carry on as soon as I see you out, sir."

* * * *

"I can't believe you set me up," Justin told Roberta later that night as they danced in their bedroom to the tape Vinne Rizzo made for them.

"I set you up and knocked you down."

"Yes you did."

He rubbed his hand over her flat belly. "But two can play that game you know."

Roberta stopped dancing. "What?"

Justin took his suit jacket from the closet and removed the reenlistment papers he'd taken back from Colonel Houston. They were torn in thirds. Justin tore them again for good measure.

Roberta tried to take the papers. "What are you doing? You have to re-enlist. You want to."

Justin deposited the papers in the bathroom wastebasket. "I thought I wanted to stay in, but I know the minute I walk out of this house, I'd be homesick."

He returned to the bedroom, pulling Roberta into his arms again. "Ever since the other night, I've been thinking, and I realized that becoming an officer and retiring with twenty or more years was a boy's dream. I'm a man now, and all I need is what I already have—my wife, my daughter, and this little one." He brushed his fingers across Roberta's belly.

"Why did you sign the papers?"

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Justin grinned. "Would you and Annie have simmered down otherwise?"

Blushing, Roberta shook her head. "No."

Laughing, Justin picked her up and swung her around before gently laying her in the center of the wide Victorian bed. He cradled her face in his large hands, caressing her flushed cheeks with his thumbs. He rained tender kisses across her face. "I'm the luckiest guy alive because not many men get to have it all."

Roberta smiled, her heart bursting with love and pride. "All or nothing, Hastings. That's the only way to go."

"You know it, boss," he answered softly as she pulled him down for a kiss.

The End

All or Nothing
by Barbara Sheridan

Award winning novelist Barbara Sheridan lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, with an unruly menagerie including two children, an older brother, a bird, a turtle that thinks it's a cat, and five cats—one of which "sees things" and has a mad crush on a Japanese musician. Is it any wonder she writes to escape the daily madness we call life?

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Other works by Barbara Sheridan:

Angel City

As the owner of a Boston day care center, the down-to-earth Carol Bakker loves the children in her care and sympathizes with the financial difficulties of their blue-collar parents. In order to keep the day care center's fees as low as possible, Carol doesn't take a salary. Instead, she works nights at Angel City, a local gentlemen's club.

When Carol's best friend begs her to "fill in" as the dancer at a private bachelor party, Carol nearly topples off her high heels! Her initial reaction is a very definite, "No!" However, Carol's strong sense of loyalty melts her resolve. Her boss is counting on this "gig" to make Angel City a "classy entertainment establishment" and such a change would benefit all the club's employees, herself included.

Thirty-nine year old business magnate, R.J. Mansfield is competitive, driven and used to getting his way. With R.J., business comes first. But that's about to change. He's come to Angel City to fulfill an obligation and attend a friend's bachelor party. When Carol steps onto the stage, he's completely captivated. The sultry dancer seems as out of place as he is, and the determined R.J. will stop at nothing to get to know her better.

Angel City is a beautiful modern day Cinderella story by award-winning author, Barbara Sheridan. Like Cinderella, Carol gets swept into R.J.'s lavish world. But there is more than a bit of tarnish beneath the armor of the handsome and charismatic White Knight of Wall Street. Can Carol and R.J.

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put aside their fears about relationships long enough to take a chance on love?

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