



Do You Take This Man...Again?

by

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Chapter One

Annie Hamilton flipped the switch and held her breath...but only for a second. Oh God, she could barely contain herself and shouted to her empty house, "It's working!" She whizzed down the stairs, amazed she didn't do a nosedive. She couldn't wait to see if the pulley system she'd designed removed snow from the sidewalk.

She'd been born to be an inventor and could feel success so near she had mentally spent her first earnings about a hundred times already. How exciting! Inventing was in her genes, just as it was in her grandfather, Popi's. She grabbed the banister as her foot slipped off the last stair. Popi was going to be so proud when one of her gadgets, as he called them, allowed her to live independent of her past.

And, Lord knew, she wanted nothing more than to sever herself from that past.

If only Maxi were here to see the invention working, but since her son's safety always came first, she had sent him to his friend's house for a few hours. Not that she worried about the snow- remover causing any problems. Nope. It was going to work perfectly! But she'd been running the motor of one of her other inventions, the one that could revolutionize the paint industry, and she didn't want Maxi in the house. "Oh, this is going to work this time. I just know it!"

A blast of cold morning air slapped into her face as she yanked open the wooden front door. With a shiver, she once again promised herself she would move her family from the mountains of New Mexico to a warm sunny climate once her impending success became a reality.

Whiskbrooms slapped at the sidewalk, sending snow clouds puffing into the yard. A well- timed machine, the pulley sent the brooms along the line, across the walkway, then up the line to repeat the process until the sidewalk was cleaned.

A man crossed the front walk, came around the snow-covered fountain shockingly close to the pulley system and headed toward Annie. He walked with purpose, his broad shoulders straight, and he carried a black suitcase and matching attaché case. Hmm, he looked pretty interesting, but she wasn't expecting

any visitors today. Especially any male ones. She bent to get a look at him, but a navy blue hat shielded his face from her view. His head nearly touched the pulley as it clanged toward him.

"Oh, wait!" she yelled. "Hey, don't step under-" She ran forward, waving her hands at him. "Stop! You're going to ruin everything!"

A film of snow glistened on the walkway like a fairy tale picture, but beneath her feet the sidewalk proved a veritable ice rink. One foot slipped left, the other right. "Darn, double darn..." She grabbed the closest thing, the bough of a fully decorated Christmas spruce, to steady herself, but the man heading toward her wasn't so lucky. His expensive-looking wing tips didn't prove too useful on the slick walkway. She heard muttering, watched him spin around, and saw his feet lift from the ground. Before she could reach him, he landed with a thud. The bent pulley clanged above as whiskbrooms pelted his prone body while he sprawled across her sparkling white lawn.

"Oh, no! Are you hurt?" she asked. Before he could answer, she let the pine's bough spring away, sending an avalanche of snow in his direction. "Oh my!" Shutting her eyes for a second, she said a quick prayer that he wasn't hurt and...Oh God, please that he wouldn't sue her-not that she had a spare dime, but don't let him anyway.

The man stirred, and she wasn't certain what he said since it came out more like an annoyed grumble. "Sir, are you all right?" Gliding across the sidewalk, she stepped into the snowy grass for better traction. He'd managed to lift his shoulders. "I'm sorry. Really I am," she said. Wildly sweeping snow from him, she nearly shoved him back down. "Something malfunctioned." A whiskbroom slammed into the back of his head, knocking his hat into a pile of snow. "You stay here. I mean, don't move in case something is... Darn, let me run inside and turn the snow- remover off." She started to turn, but he remained on the ground, the whiskbrooms having a field day against his head. "I am so sorry, sir. Let me help you move so the brooms.... Can you sit up? Can you stand? Can you...."

He turned and growled.

Annie pulled away so quickly after looking into his familiar brown eyes-now glaring at her-she lost her balance and landed face to scowling face with him.

"I see nothing has changed, Annie," he said.

Yes, things have changed. My world just exploded. With eyes shut, she collapsed into the comfort of the freezing snow. Why couldn't it be a blizzard with five feet of the fluffy white stuff to suck her under...suck her away from him? She peeked from one eye to see if her mind had played a trick on her. It couldn't be.... Silhouetted against the cloudless sky stood her answer.

Major David Grainger brushed snow off his navy overcoat all the while shaking his head in obvious disgust. "A snow-remover, Annie? A snow-remover..."

She clucked her tongue and willed this to be a dream-correction-having one's ex-husband sprawled out in her front yard had to fall under the category of a nightmare. She'd settle for a nightmare with angry creditors beating at her door instead of having her ex-husband standing here. "The concept of a machine to remove snow shouldn't be that difficult to grasp, David. After all, you made it through medical school so you must have some brains beneath that hat."

"Annie, I did not come here to be insulted."

She readied a reply, but the pulley clanked to a halt by itself. "Oh great, you shorted out my snow-remover." David merely threw her a look of disgust while whiskbrooms dangled above their heads like the broken wings of a bird, mocking Annie. Of course, all the local songbirds would be basking in

the desert sun right now as if on vacation. It was February and, like the birds, David was a creature of habit, too. "By the way, why aren't you on vacation now?"

He glared at her. She wiped snow from her sleeves. "You always take your leave during February." He growled again. A broom thudded to the ground inches from David's leg. Darn. More ammunition for his assault on her integrity.

"Where is Maxwell?" David asked.

Cringing at David's usual formality, Annie managed between chatters of her teeth, "Maxi...is at h-his friend's house." She brushed snow from her shirt, sending puffs of white toward David. "Sorry." She forced a smile of her nearly frozen lips and said, "You didn't call to say you were coming. You know you are supposed to let us know...this isn't your week to visit. Why didn't you call?"

He glared at her. In his usual manor he didn't listen to her, but, strictly in character, he ordered, "Get up before you freeze. You're not wearing a coat."

He offered her his buttery soft, black leather-gloved hand, which probably cost over a hundred bucks a fist, but she swatted it away. "What're you doing here, David?" Not that she really cared to know. With a groan, she admitted she knew darn well why he was here. He probably had a copy of her third mortgage on the house in his black eel-skin attaché case among his other papers-all in alphabetical order, no doubt. "Come to think of it, don't you usually head south this time of year? Down to Acapulco, like clockwork?"

"Usually." He glared toward the decorated tree as he brushed his coat over and over. "Just as it is usual to remove Christmas decorations before Groundhog Day."

Glumly, she looked at the spruce. "Hey, I've been busy." How many times had she intended to remove the decorations? Her days seemed to zoom buy. She was either playing with their son, helping him with schoolwork, visiting Popi or squeezing in time to work on one of her inventions.

"Busy, of course. And stop with those darned vacation questions. This year...I have changed my plans."

Hmm, David changed his set-in-stone plans? "Wow. That's got to be a first." David kept brushing. "For a second you scared me. I mean, changing your annual vacation plans? Wow. I thought of that movie where aliens invade an earthling's body." He didn't even look at her, but kept brushing. "But, I see nothing's really changed with you, David. You never could tolerate not looking as if you'd stepped out of GQ."

Without looking up, he said, "And I see you use the same designer, Annie."

She looked down at her favorite red flannel shirt, the one with the frayed sleeves that she couldn't part with. "You're right, neither of us has changed." He looked as if he was ready to argue, but returned his gaze to his coat and wiped at it again. Swallowing her smirk, she stood and walked toward the porch. Thank goodness the pulley line had loosened enough for her to reach and use as a support. She looked at the bent frame that dangled like a wounded bird. Actually, she knew what the problem was now. She hadn't strung it high enough. David's six feet had gotten in the way-in more ways than one. Making a mental note to raise the line, she kicked snow from her shoes and walked up the steps. Thankful for the numbness that kept her from feeling the cold, she turned and raised an eyebrow. He'd taken off a glove to use for brushing. "For crying out loud, David. Snow melts into water. Didn't your tailor ever tell you it doesn't stain?"

"Well, grass does."

She looked toward the offending ground where he'd fallen to see a skid mark in the shape of David, like the chalk outline of a homicide victim. Double darn. It'd only snowed a few inches so far, not enough to cushion a grown man of his size. Looking back toward him, she shuddered at the sight of the slash of yellow-green across David's coat. "This isn't cosmopolitan Denver, but we do have a cleaners in Skyview. Emma's a whiz at getting out stains. I'll take it down later...that is, unless you're not staying long enough-"

"Have it cleaned."

She frowned. "I was afraid of that." David opened his mouth, but she scooted up the stairs before she had to listen to him.

"Maxi will be glad to see you," she called over her shoulder. No matter what Annie and David's relationship, she would never deny their son his father. She gave one last kick of snow from her shoes and hurried to the seclusion of her room.

** * **

A whirlpool of emotions swirled inside Annie as she made her way to her bedroom. Anger. Suspicion. Anger. And more anger still, when she admitted to herself how good David looked. Darn it all, he wore an Air Force uniform better than any officer she'd ever seen. Despite her huffing breaths, she hurried to the window in time to see David fishing his suitcase from a pile of snow near the fountain. He looked upward. She pulled back behind the drape.

Hopefully he hadn't seen her. But she'd seen him earlier-close up, too-and the years had enhanced his appearance. When had his chestnut hair been sprinkled with flecks of gray along the sideburns? How distinguished he looked. Of course, he always had, but now maturity and the tiny crow's feet wrinkling beside his eyes polished his appearance. Seven years her senior, she could clearly remember how impressed she had been when she met him. He, a drop-dead gorgeous second lieutenant, she, a slightly immature senior in college. Not one for clichés, she allowed herself the thought, I love a man in uniform.

It had been too, too long. She did miss having someone special in her life. The men she had dated since moving to Skyview had two things in common: they all looked as if they had stepped out of an L. L. Bean catalogue, and, she had never fallen in love with any one else since...

"Quit acting like some foolish teenager, Hamilton." She pushed away from the teal quilted drapes and sank into her rocking chair. Instead of ogling David, she should be trying to figure out her next move. He hadn't been here for two years. Why did he have to come now? The mortgage thing shouldn't have him canceling his stay-at-the-same-hotel, eat-the-same-food, and probably request-the-same-room vacation plans. She ran her finger across her lips. Had it really been two years since she'd seen David?

With a start, she sat forward. It wouldn't do to get all sentimental. David was a sharp businessman and no slouch in the brain's department, even if he couldn't grasp the snow-remover idea, she thought with a grin. But seriously, he'd run an entire hospital in the Air Force for the last two years. A feeling of pride sneaked into her thoughts at how fast David had succeeded in his career. But, even though she was proud of his accomplishments, she reminded herself that he could still cause her trouble even after so long. Throughout their marriage, he'd always carried his military background into their lives. With his commanding nature and exasperating pessimism about her inventions, he often interfered with her work. She was so close to succeeding now, she didn't need him around to interfere in her life-and ruin her dreams.

She leaned back. The last time she had seen David was in his high-powered attorney's office in downtown Denver when she signed the divorce papers. There was no reason to have any more contact

once the court said their marriage had ended. A tear stung her eyes. They had had some wonderful times, and she never regretted meeting David. No law could take away her memories or the best part of their relationship-their son, Maxi.

Since Annie had never returned to Denver, David's old nanny, Miss Windsor, always flew up to take their son to visit his father when he was stationed at the Air Force academy nearby. With a shudder, Annie remembered the attack of nerves she'd gotten at the thought of her baby, then a four-year-old, flying alone for the first time. She chuckled. Well, being with Miss Windsor couldn't be classified as being alone-the woman could make the Secret Service look like the Three Stooges.

But, Annie still worried about her son each time he and Miss Windsor flew to wherever David was stationed. Popi had insisted Annie was being foolish since airplanes were much safer than cars. Although Annie reminded her grandfather that he himself had never stepped his oil-tanned oxfords onto a plane, she knew Popi was right. And she'd never prevent David from seeing his son. Despite their differences, his never-ending pessimism, and highbrow attitude, David was a good father-when he didn't treat Maxi as if he were in an Air Force squadron.

She rose and peeked out the window. Tears burned in Annie's eyes as she watched David scoop his hat from the snow. She shut her eyes to stop the stinging, cursed to herself at her foolishness, then grabbed her second favorite red plaid flannel shirt from the closet. Touching her wet bottom, she decided to change her jeans, too. Snow does melt into water, she mused. With a giggle, she pulled the ribbon from her hair and bent over. Grabbing the end of her French braid with one hand, she managed to catch some loose strands and re-tie the ribbon. Her hair was wet, too, but she'd let it air dry. No time to put off the inevitable. She'd talk to David, then send him packing. He had to be wearing out her already worn Aubusson carpet in the hallway, waiting to talk to her. She sure as heck didn't want to talk to him, nor could she afford a new carpet.

* * *

David crossed the foyer of the old house again. "What's taking so long, Annie?" he mumbled. Usually quite confident, this nervousness to talk to his ex-wife didn't sit well with him. In fact, it had his insides wound into knots. The sooner he told Annie why he had come here, the better. He looked up and swallowed deeply as he got a good look at Annie coming down the stairs. Maybe he would not tell her the whole reason at once.

The years melted away like the snow on his overcoat as she stepped off the landing of the mahogany stairs. She had maintained her slender figure despite the fact that he knew she never worked out a day in her life. With her energy level, calories probably evaporated before she could gain an ounce. A warm feeling, not unlike the first time he looked at his newborn son's pink face, stirred inside him. Pulling his gaze from Annie, he forced the emotion back down and reminded himself of why he had come here. Thank goodness he had never met another woman who challenged his reason as she did.

He took his meerschaum pipe from his vest pocket and the silver-plated lighter Annie had given him on his twenty-seventh birthday. The inexpensive lighter still worked, although he had used it daily for the seven years since she had given it to him. With a puff on the mouthpiece, he watched her advance-and quickly tucked the lighter from her view.

"So, what are you doing here, David?"

She'd caught him off guard with her usual scent. Lavender. She still used lavender soap like the ones his mother imported from London and introduced to Annie when they first met back near his family's home in Denver. By the frayed ends of her shirtsleeves, he guessed she'd found a local supplier of the soap. Stubborn Annie wouldn't accept alimony from him, even to buy herself new clothes or quality soap.

Thank goodness she did take child support though.

"David?"

"Hmm?" He'd lost his train of thought.

"Let's go into my office."

The floor started to tremble. David's glance flew from Annie to the wall, which he swore moved. A whirling sound filled the air. A groan. A crack. From a nearby shelf, a glass pitcher wobbled, then toppled to the floor followed by a silence, then...

Boom! Clunk! Swoosh!

David yelled, "What is going-"

She didn't take the time to explain. The sound of the explosion came from her workroom, and unfortunately, she knew darn well what had happened. She flew down the hallway, saw the cause of the noise, and stopped as if she'd hit a brick wall. Oh boy. A brick wall falling on her right about now might help solve all her problems-but she never took the easy way out.

"Annie, what the heck was-" David called from behind and stopped short of slamming into her. Before she could turn, he grabbed her by the shoulders and asked, "Are you all right?"

Touched by his caring, she smiled since he couldn't see her face, then reminded herself he was a doctor. Of course he cared if someone got hurt. She quickly pulled free and turned to see his mouth hanging open as he surveyed the mess, but she thought better than to comment on his reaction. With his usual panache, he closed his mouth enough to mutter, "Annie. Annie."

She agreed with his sentiment, but wouldn't give him the satisfaction of telling him so. She eased past him and said over her shoulder, "I have to turn the motor off." She walked cautiously into her workroom and shoved off the switch to her "Painless Painting" invention.

The room she'd set up for her work area now sported walls splattered in lovely shades of green, purple, her favorite cherry red, and, she leaned nearer, oh my, motor oil. On the far wall, a hole the size of her fist made a makeshift peephole into the adjoining living room.

David was close behind. "Annie, even a hole in the wall?"

"Hey, now I can watch TV and work at the same time." The engine of her invention had seen better days, but it was all she could afford from Joe down at the junkyard, and now she knew why it had been so cheap. Parts of it harpooned themselves into the room's plasterboard, and the rest lay sprawled across the floor. Thank God Maxi wasn't home, she thought.

"How did this happen, Annie?"

She turned toward David, ready to explain that the engine was a good deal where her budget was concerned. But when she saw him standing at attention as if she were one of his airman, glaring at her with his demand, she said, "It's your fault, Major."

"What the heck does that mean?"

"If you hadn't surprised me by coming here today, I would have been back in my workroom to shut the motor off when it...overheated. Why didn't you call, anyway?"

"Call?" As much as he wanted to explain, to turn the blame back to her invention, he could not tell her

why he didn't call. He needed to have his visit be a surprise, so he wouldn't change his mind on the way here. He stepped forward. She stepped back. "Do not blame your exploding harebrained invention on me. If you would not spend so much time on these...these-"

She watched him wave his arms around the room as if to encompass all the wonderful inventions she'd ever worked on. But a red hue crept up his neck, as if he were attempting to control his temper, which took her by surprise. She'd expected him to explode like the Painless Painter.

In a much quieter voice, he finished, "-these things, this explosion would not have happened."

She sucked in a breath, ready to argue, but decided against it when a glob of purple fell from the ceiling and landed on David's shoulder. "Oh boy," she muttered.

"What?"

She cringed, then chewed on her lower lip waiting for a response. With her breath held, she gave him another second to say something, but he didn't notice the paint. She didn't really want to tell "neat freak" David that his Air Force epaulet was now a lovely shade of plum. So, she ignored it and said, "Maxi will be home soon. Let's go into my office so you can tell me why you came here." He motioned for her to lead the way. She walked across the room, through the door to her office, and toward her desk.

David swallowed his comments, knowing anything that came out of his mouth right now would be born of anger. So, he followed and tried to forget the psychedelic scene he had just witnessed. It wasn't hard at the moment because he looked at Annie. Her hair shifted ever so slightly as she walked in front of him. The dim lighting in the room managed to highlight the golden shades mixed with the darker blonde of her hair. She still braided it the same way. He blew out a sigh and walked further into her office. At first he thought he'd entered a museum-a museum of oddball contraptions that spoke volumes about his ex-wife.

"Don't bump your head," she cautioned as she seated herself behind a desk filled with- stuff.

Papers, magazines, empty coffee mugs, humming and whizzing mechanical devices. She motioned toward a nearby chair beneath some pulley system with little baskets attached. He bent and sat, all the while looking cautiously above. It was rude to stare, but Annie had changed-she'd gotten worse. More gadgets. More thingamabobs. More noisy inventions, and he could not even think about her workroom right now. He shook his head at the thought. Toward the end of their marriage, their house on base had become rather cluttered with her work, but this place...

"I know you didn't come here to visit me, David, and Maxi's not due to see you for another month. What do you want?"

He pulled a paper from inside his pocket. "This, Annie. This...for starters."

She curled her lip, and he was certain he heard her cluck her tongue like an impatient child-a habit she'd always had-and he just realized now how much he missed it.

"And this would be?"

He set the paper on a metal device that whirred and spun. Leaning closer, he could see paper clips inside it. They probably shot out like bullets when she pressed one of the buttons on top. "You knew the bank would notify me that you took out a third mortgage on this place." He shook his head and looked around the darkened office. "My name is still on the deed."

"Unfortunately," she whispered, but he heard her.

Behind Annie's desk, a bowed window of leaded glass overlooked a frozen lake. People skated along a narrow stretch that ran under a bridge-three Christmas wreaths still hung from the railing. In several spots silken burgundy wallpaper peeled from the walls. A crack marred the beauty of one beveled window, and the carpet had been worn to the wood beneath his feet. "Obviously, you have not used the money for repairing this place."

She glared at him and this time definitely clucked her tongue. "Not yet."

"So, you intend to?"

She fidgeted; he knew she was going to embellish the truth. Lying didn't come easy to her- never had. But she made attempts at it when necessary, and he always knew when she did.

"I only got the loan last week. Of course I'm going to...well, paint first."

He tapped his foot on the floor. Sucking on the pipe, he watched a thread of smoke billow out the end while he considered Annie's dismal attempt at lying. He'd bet his last dime that she never had plans to redo the old house, until he brought up the subject. Inhaling the cherry scent, David leaned back in his chair-and waited. She fidgeted again. He knew if he held out, she'd interrogate herself. Annie stood and turned toward the window. She shifted her weight back and forth. Her right foot twisted on the carpet as if she were stomping out a cigarette.

"After the painting...I'm going to..." She turned around and fiddled with the drape cord. "Oh, you have to see how good Maxi skates now. Double blades, of course. I thought of having him try to...well, you know I wasn't sure if I should have him start out on singles right off the bat. You know there are pros and cons about-"

His glare caught hers.

She bent over the desk and blew out a breath. "Look, I need the money."

David stood and leaned forward. At first she pulled back, then, in her usual defiant manner, she leaned closer. "What do you need the money for?" he asked.

"I don't believe our divorce decree says I need to explain things to you."

"No, you do not. But I am guessing repairing your...workroom," he glanced toward the hole, "is going to use up some of that loan. But, of course, it is your money to do what you want with."

"Darn right it's my money." She pulled back and started toward the door. "And I'll pay it back, every penny on my own."

"You do not need to explain anything to me, Annie. But I need to assure our son's...safety."

Not to disappoint him, she reacted exactly as he knew she would. Like the sun burning in the azure sky, a spark of anger ignited in her blue eyes. He did not enjoy making her angry, but needed to hear the truth about the loan. It was only a small part of why he came here, but he needed Annie to think otherwise.

"Maxi wasn't in the house when...I have a rule that he can't be here when I run an engine or use chemicals. You know that has always been my ironclad rule. I'd never do anything to hurt Maxi."

"Not intentionally, Annie. But with all your wild-eyed inventions, and now a third mortgage- "

She yanked the door open and stepped out into the hallway.

"Annie, I am not going to let you lose this house to the bankruptcy courts-or blow it up."

She turned and froze. He focused on Annie standing near the living room, the background a blur. Giant stones surrounding the fireplace bled to a mass of brown. The fire, whose yellow and red flames danced toward the chimney earlier, now dimmed, blended with everything else as he focused on Annie, scowling toward him.

"This place has been in your family for generations, and Maxwell is entitled to get the chance to inherit it." He paused. Inheriting an old house like this had little to do with his real feelings. But he couldn't explain why a sense of family had become a near obsession with him. For now, he would have to use other excuses as to why he came to Skyview. "Plus, you spend way too much money on your inventions. I am going to protect our son's interests, even from you-"

"How dare you! I have no intention of blowing up our home or losing it-"

"I never said you intended to, but...I know you."

"No you don't, David. You never knew the real me. Never."

Before she could walk away, he grabbed her arm. "I know enough that when you get an idea in your head, you can forget to eat, or forget to sleep, or forget some motor is on, or forget your child at the hardware store-" He wished he hadn't said that.

Tears welled in her eyes. He felt like a monster. He knew the story Maxwell had told him indicated Annie had been so busy buying supplies that their son had wandered away to talk to the storeowner, who had known Annie since childhood. She had only stepped out the door before she realized Maxwell was still inside. David knew he was not thinking clearly since coming here. "I am sorry, Annie, I should not have brought that up-"

"No, you shouldn't have. It's not like you to fight dirty."

She had lost some of her spirit, and it pained him to see the look on her face. How he wanted to hold her, but guessed she would only pull away. He could not afford to get her so angry that she would throw him out. "You have always been a wonderful mother. I could never accuse you of being-"

"It isn't easy raising a child-alone."

She hit a nerve. "You know I have never wanted our child being raised without me around either."

"I'm not getting into that, David. What is done is done."

"Is it?" He really did not need for her to answer that right now, because, for the life of him, he never could understand Annie leaving him in the first place. But he had come here now to see if he could remedy the situation.

"It is as far as I'm concerned."

She pulled herself straight as if at attention. How he wished he could just order Annie to do what he wanted. Deep inside his plan seemed to totter with her words like the glass that had fallen from the shelf earlier. He did not know how, but he would succeed to break the barrier of stubbornness that kept him from Annie. "I know raising Maxwell is not easy for you alone. I have offered you alimony many times, but you only see the world through your rose-colored glasses- "

"They're better than blinders like the one's you.... I don't want your money. I can support myself-"

"How? By working a month here and there at the local drugstore, some car wash, or some fast-food restaurant? Stop being so stubborn."

"There aren't any fast-food chains in sleepy little historic towns like Skyview, David," she corrected with a sneer. She couldn't argue about her being stubborn-she had no ammunition to contradict him there.

"Regardless. Taking out a third mortgage on this place was risky, irresponsible-"

"Irresponsible? You know, you've got a lot of nerve driving all the way up here to accuse me like this." With a flip of her hand, she pushed the strands of hair from her face. "So what are you planning to do about it? What really made you skip your warm, sunny vacation and drive all the way up here? What dragged you from your duty to the Air Force to come to the tiny town of Skyview?" Leaning forward she said, "In other words, what the heck are you doing here?"

"I am moving in."

Chapter Two

Annie pulled back from David and sucked in a breath. "Moving in?" His bombshell had her feeling as if an eighteen-wheeler had hit her. After letting his words sink in for a few seconds, she started to laugh. Her laughter, shamelessly loud, echoed to the twenty-foot ceiling of the foyer. David stood near the door of her office with determination in his eyes. Determination and, oh boy, anger. And Lord knew she couldn't help herself-she laughed even louder. She had to in order to suppress the fear threatening her inside.

"Stop that, Annie Hamilton-Grainger!"

She quieted long enough to correct him. "I dropped the Grainger two years ago." For once she ignored his commanding tone despite the annoyance gripping her deep inside-inside, where past memories simmered like a pot of boiling stew.

He took her by the arm. "Shall we take this back to your office before Maxwell comes home and hears us?"

"He won't be here for another half hour."

"What was so funny anyway?" he asked with his old tone of annoyance.

She sucked in a few breaths. Maybe she had misheard him. Hopefully. "I...you're gonna love this...I thought you said you were leaving your swanky base house to move into this old rattletrap." She started to smile.

David leaned forward and in his usual businesslike voice and said, "You know exactly what I said. I am moving in."

She pushed at his chest. "Get in there."

David stumbled backward, bumping into her brass hat rack. With a whizzing sound, the top of the rack spun twice and a periwinkle French beret landed on his head. He growled louder than a grizzly bear, grabbed the hat, and shoved it at Annie. "You and your inventions!" He blew out a frustrated breath and

pointed toward her desk. "What is that anyway? A gadget that shoots paper clips onto your letterhead?"

Annie followed his pointing and paused. "Hey, that's a good idea." Comically, she wrote on her palm with her finger. "Let me write that one down, David. So far I've only gotten my paper clips to flip out into my hand-"

"Stop it! Can you ever be serious? Can you ever face life and reality-"

"No, David. I only know how to live my trivial life in this old house, wasting every penny that I earn the hard way-by working for it-"

"Do not go there, Annie Hamilton." He grabbed her shoulders. "I wish you would let me help you. You know money does not mean a thing to me."

He'd softened his words, and she knew his temper had fizzled as quickly as it had ignited-as always. "I know the money isn't important to you, David. You could have lived off your family's millions, but you chose medical school and the Air Force. We aren't talking about just money, though, but...independence."

"Not that again." He sighed.

"Yes, David. I don't want to be under anyone's control. Not yours, not-"

"Your mother's." He could not argue with Annie's feelings, but he had not intended to throw her past in her face either. He should not have said what he was thinking. The words, that gave insight as to whom Annie was and why she acted as she did, had merely slipped out.

"Yes...her."

Annie's words came out softly, barely a whisper, as if the reminder had deflated her spunk, her usual stubbornness. David felt awful, wishing he had not brought Annie's mother up. "Parents have a monumental task in raising children-and a monumental affect on their lives." That, he knew first hand.

She breathed in the bittersweet memories of cherry tobacco mixed with a hint of David's cologne: spicy, yet never overpowering. Only the most expensive cologne, only the best imported tobacco for a Grainger. "We were discussing your ridiculous statement of moving in, not parenting. I'm not saying you can stay here overnight, David, but since you drove all this way, you can at least visit with our son."

When he hesitated, she knew he had more to say. A lot more, knowing him. Used to getting his own way, Major David Grainger would not leave until he was ready. But, was she ready to let him stay? No way. "Of course, you can join us for dinner, David, but not sleep here. There's a nice inn downtown, and naturally, you can visit Maxi whenever-"

"I have my orders to go remote next month," he said.

Annie gasped, and she knew she would never forget the solemn, painful look in his eyes. "Oh my, David. Korea?"

He nodded, and she knew serving a remote tour, over a year away from one's family, was part and parcel of an officer's life if they wanted to advance in their career. "Korea," she muttered. "It's...the other side of the world." Part of the shock was that she'd never thought David would ever be so far away even though she knew how much the Air Force meant to him. "Won't there be a good chance you could advance to lieutenant colonel after serving a remote tour?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's a good thing." Then why did she feel like that eighteen-wheeler had just backed up over her? She didn't know what was harder to do, look him in the eye or say the words, but she also knew there was no question now of what she had to do. "You can stay in the spare bedroom," she whispered.

"Thank you, Annie."

The news of his remote had so taken her by surprise, she could barely move. "Maxi will be devastated not seeing you for so long." As she watched a dullness cover David's eyes, she admitted, she hated knowing that he wouldn't be a short drive away and could not visit with Maxi every few months.

Seeing David again reminded her of what it used to be like when they were married. There were many good times. The nostalgic feelings that now surfaced reminded her of the memories evoked whenever she tasted a piece of apple pie and inhaled the spicy cinnamon. She would become overwhelmed by recollections of when her grandmother used to bake apple pies for Annie and her sister, Megan. Seeing David and missing their life together was like tasting a piece of pie and then missing Nana. She knew the pleasures of what it could be like, and she knew the sorrows of what it was like to no longer have it available anymore. All she could manage to say was, "Need help with your suitcase-"

"I will get my trunks myself."

She forced a smile. "Fine." Pleased that the word came out on a perky breath, she pushed past him. She would deal with the remote news later. Right now the pressing matter was having her ex-husband move in-even temporality. She froze in the doorway as his words hit her. Trunks? How long did he plan to stay?

** * **

David scowled at the scuff on his shiny wing tips as he settled in his room. He had prided himself on looking top-notched, especially when in uniform. Lugging his trunk up two flights of stairs proved more difficult than he had imagined. No wonder Annie had told him to stay here. The room should have been on the first floor but was on some kind of mezzanine level, down a long corridor and up a small winding staircase-maybe the servant's quarters in the old days when her great grandfather had lived here.

Untying his shoes, David lifted them off and brushed the scuff with his linen handkerchief. With a glance at his watch, he remembered Maxwell would be home soon. David wanted to change out of his damp suit before his boy arrived. The excitement of seeing his son urged David's unpacking as he carefully lifted his folded clothes from the trunk and laid them into the mothball-lined dresser. He sighed, knowing that the odor would cling to his clothing. Of course, there were not enough hangers for his shirts, so he had to hang two on one, certain they would wrinkle. Annie could use a few tips on how to run a household. He leaned back on the bed, his body sinking into the feather mattress. Annie.

It had been much harder seeing her today. On the drive up, he had rehearsed his speech to her several times. But when he saw her, sprawled out in the snow like an angel on a cloud, old memories shadowed his thoughts. There was no one like Annie. Her smile not only lit up a room, it flooded it.

Maybe he had made a mistake in coming here? Maybe he should have had Maxwell come visit him on base before David left? Maybe...he should admit that he really wanted to see Annie? See her and...he could not get his hopes up yet. He sank further into the softness of the old mattress and shut his eyes. Pictured like a home video in his mind, he saw Annie when they had first met in Denver. He saw her romping in the snow, aiming sloppy white snowballs at him. She giggled like a schoolgirl and ran like a schoolboy. She bent over like a Bronco's center, snapping a snowy football at him while yelling, "Hike!" His eyelids flew open with a start.

Yes-he had to be here now. He got up, took an ironed pair of jeans from his suitcase along with a gray and white wool sweater, then slipped off his trousers. After putting on a white turtleneck, he tied the sweater around his shoulders and slipped on the jeans. The tiny room was sweltering. Knowing Annie, she probably never adjusted the heater's thermostat and instead, faced huge heating bills. He took out his notebook from his attaché case and started a list. At the top he wrote, "Annie's List," knowing she would be furious when she saw it. Along with checking the thermostat, he wrote repair and paint workroom, new carpeting in the hallway, and dismantle the snow-remover-which he underlined. With the notebook tucked inside his jeans pocket, he went to see if Maxwell was home yet.

** * **

Snow crunched beneath Annie's boots, threatening to spill her across Main Street if she ran any faster. She defied the icy hazard and hurried past Peg's Pancake House, The Sugar Spice Bakery, nodded toward Mr. Cranston shoveling the sidewalk in front of Cranston's pharmacy, and turned into The Do Drop Inn. The pungent odor of beer mixed with that of morning coffee. She knew Popi and his cronies would be slugging down their usual caffeine fix as they argued about why the president spent so much money on "fererners" instead of increasing the men's pitiful social security checks.

Popi noticed her above the thick white mug he held near his lips. When she saw the alarm in his pale blue eyes, she wished she had called first. She never intruded on Popi's hangout unless it was an emergency.

"Maxi is all-"

"He's fine, Popi." She brushed a kiss across the paper-thin cheek above his marshmallow soft beard. When Maxi had turned three, she'd had an awful time convincing him that his great grandfather was not Santa Claus. A sparkle gleamed in the old man's eyes-sometimes she believed he was Santa, too.

"One of your do-hickeys worked?"

She laughed. "Well, that's what I need to talk to you about-"

"Ayah. You old coots, keep your mitts off my hand." Carefully, he set his cards face down on the table and jiggled a salt and pepper shaker onto the end of the cards. "Come on, pumpkin pie," He waved toward his friends and slid into the booth by the next table. "Sit yourself down."

Gordon Dickerson set a cup of steaming coffee in front of Annie as she slumped next to her grandfather. "Thanks, Gordon," she said to the owner. "I only wish-" She let out a slow breath. "- that one of my inventions did work. Boy, do I wish that today, Pops." Adding a spoonful of sugar and enough cream to color her coffee beige, she stirred, took a sip and said, "David's back."

Popi paused and tapped an arthritic finger on the wooden tabletop. "David who?"

Annie shook her head. "Don't start that. You know I mean David, my ex, Maxi's father, the guy you used to love like the son you never had." She couldn't help feeling loved by Popi's attempt to protect her. He'd acted as if David had fallen off the face of the earth after they divorced even though she always had her doubts about Popi's real feelings. "I know you never agreed with my decision to leave David. But that's water under the bridge."

He looked at her with the wisdom of his age in his eyes. "You were young, and impulsive. Not mature back then. But if he hurt you, you did what you had to do."

"Our breakup wasn't all David's fault," she admitted. "But I've always appreciated you being my defender." He'd also been her friend and confidant since she was nine. How many times had she sought

the refuge of Popi's house when she was a child?

Popi leaned near as if keeping a secret from his old cronies, whom she was certain couldn't care less about what she and her grandfather discussed. "Has he seen the boy yet?"

"No. No," she said softer. "Maxi will be thrilled."

"Ayah. Boy loves him."

"I know, Popi. But sometimes David, although he loves Maxi, too, can be so...so commanding."

"He is a major."

"I know, but we aren't in his squadron."

"You were young back then, but you knew he was in the military when you married him."

"Yes. Yes, I did." She looked out across the room, not seeing anything and said, "He didn't listen to me, to my opinion of things, because I wasn't as worldly and mature as he." She blew out a breath of frustration and didn't want to get into this with her grandfather. It wasn't as if they hadn't gone around in circles about David before. Popi supported her decision, as he would do for anything she did, even if he disagreed with her choice. But even though Popi never encouraged her to breakup with David, she knew it was time to leave him the day Maxi turned four. As if the past snaked its way from beneath the table, gripping Annie's heart, she felt the same fear, felt the same sorrow as she had felt on the day of her son's fourth birthday.

"David and I did not belong together." She knew it that very day-and knew it now. The snake of fear gripped tighter, reminding Annie of Popi's words that she was much younger back then, less mature. It wiggled amongst her thoughts, allowing a thread of doubt to question what she had convinced herself was true.

"Why's he up here now?"

"Hmm?"

"David. Why is he in Skyview?" He took a long slow sip of coffee and broke a cruller in two before dipping one end into his mug.

Annie watched a drip of coffee run from the donut poised near his lips into his forest of beard. Her mind snapped back to why she was here. "Says he's...moving in."

"Ayah?"

"I put him on the mezzanine floor," she interrupted.

Popi chuckled. "Walk will do him good, but what brought him here? Has he seen the light and realized he'd never find a better wife?"

"Remember, I left him, Popi. David never questioned my being a good wife. Although he didn't think I fit the role of an officer's wife too well. And, truthfully, I didn't. But, no, he hasn't come back to be reunited."

Her grandfather nodded, ran a paper napkin across his mouth, and dabbed at his beard, then he dipped the other part of cruller into his coffee. "Ain't AWOL, is he?"

"David? Please, Popi. You know him better than that." She chuckled at the thought, despite her insides

feeling as soggy as the donut her grandfather had dunked into his coffee. The past was soaking up her emotions, her thoughts. "No, he is not AWOL. He's...first he had some cockamamie reason like to make sure I don't go bank-" The word stuck in her throat. She swigged down some coffee and asked, "Do you think I am doing a bad job of things?"

Popi took his time answering-it seemed like forever and sent her insides plummeting. He looked at her and ran his fingers up and down his beard as if that would help him think. He shouldn't have taken so long if he didn't agree.... Her heart slowed. Oh sure, even her own grandfather agreed with David now.

"Well, pumpkin pie, I know it's hard what with raising the boy and all...." He ran his finger over his lips then looked at her. Annie couldn't help but notice the scar on his index finger from when one of his "do-hickeys" had cut him. There was a definite bond between her and Popi. She had idolized him since childhood, and now, she respected his opinion-even if it hurt.

When he patted her arm with his large hand, dotted with liver spots, she had her answer. He didn't even need to say a word. She was doing a lousy job. Even Popi, who just about raised her, thought she stunk at running a household, being a single mom. She was too busy inventing things. She was too absorbed in breaking her ties to the past.

"I've never seen a better mother, Annie, despite your not having the best...role model. And don't you forget that."

Her heart thrilled at his compliment. When he called her by name, she knew he meant business. And she also knew how hard it was for him to point out the failings of his own daughter, Annie's mother. But Popi was the most honest person Annie ever knew-and the most forthright. And, darn it, she was a good mother and did her best to keep up the house.

"Thanks, Pops. That means a lot to me. You have no idea how I needed to hear that now." He reached across the table, taking her hand into his firm grip. There were no words shared, only the concerns of an old man, a man whom she loved with all her heart, sent through his touch. "David...has orders to go remote."

Popi looked at her, a sadness in the depths of his pale blue eyes. "Whereabouts?"

"Korea."

"Can't a body pay for his family to travel and live on one of those tours?"

"I think." She nodded. "But not an ex-family. I have to let him...spend time with Maxi before he leaves." A knot twisted inside her abdomen tighter than the wound hemp hanging from the far section of the bar. Each area of the local hangout had a theme: mountains, animals, and, Annie stared at the stupid rope, nautical. "I have to let David move in even though he will probably snoop on me like some private detective. And right now my latest invention is coming along so well." She rubbed a hand across her abdomen as if that would ease the knot inside. "He's going to ruin everything, again. I plan to sell the Stayput, then invest in more supplies, but now I have got to repair the stupid workroom first-all because of David."

"What happened to the workroom?"

"Oh, you didn't hear any...loud noise earlier?"

"Nope."

"Well, the motor overheated-" Popi chuckled, and she didn't need to explain further. He'd had his share

of overheated motors and stained walls, too.

"Ayah, pumpkin. You have to let him stay, but I don't agree with that snooping part. Ain't a dishonest bone in the young man's body." Popi leaned and kissed her cheek. "I'll be over to visit later today. Setback tournament, you know."

After leaving the restaurant, Annie made her way across the frozen ground barely paying attention to how many times her feet slipped. Broken bones would be a lot easier to live with than having her ex-husband move in. Anything would be better. She couldn't argue with Popi's sentiment about David. He was a good person-wonderful, to be exact. But just not married to her. How she wished she could get David to leave and have her life back to normal. But he deserved the time with Maxi, and as much as she would like to have it some other way, a father had every right to be with his son, especially in this case. Her thoughts had been in turmoil since seeing David attacked by her snow removal invention this morning. At least that was worth some humor. She chuckled, despite her misgivings, and hiked two steps at a time up the porch stairs to go inside.

"What time is lunch, Annie?"

She swung around to see David standing beneath the elk's head that was mounted above her fireplace. David held his hands toward the fire and rubbed them together. By the healthy glow on his cheeks, he'd been outside. Despite the clean mountain air, the ever-present cherry tobacco scent clung to his clothes.

"Annie, are you going to eat, or do you not make time in your busy day for meals-"

"Go into the kitchen and help yourself. I'll be right in-"

The tiny muscle to the side of his lips twitched. It always did when something bothered him. She smiled to herself. Eat in the kitchen-that's what had David's muscle in a twitch. Graingers always ate in dinning rooms.

"If eating in the kitchen is a problem, you can fix yourself a tray for your room." She yanked off her jacket and slung it across her arm.

He straightened his perfect posture. "Do you think I am going to eat in my room the entire time I am here?" It wasn't that he cared where he ate, he only wanted Annie across from him when he did.

She leaned forward. "And how the heck long is that going to be, anyway?"

"As long as it takes," he said, with an odd, faraway look in his eyes. She had no idea what he meant or why he should look so...so, darn, she couldn't put her finger on it. But his expression certainly confused her. He turned and started toward the kitchen.

"Takes to do what?" She cursed at the kitchen doors as they flapped and swallowed up David. "As long as it takes, my foot." He really was using visiting Maxi to spy on her. Popi was wrong. That had to be it. Annie bit her lip. She turned toward the kitchen. Before she had time to fume, she shoved open the door. David sat at the table, cutting a sandwich in half. Sunlight filtered through the lacy curtains of the bay window, casting a ray of gold across his darkened hair. No, David wasn't here to spy on her...Maybe add his two cents, but he wouldn't be dishonest. With a sigh, she wondered if she'd ever make it through his visit. She reminded herself that he was a product of his upbringing. Then she looked at his sandwich and said, "Oh, good. You helped yourself. You know I don't wait on anyone." David's raised eyebrow didn't go unnoticed. "Okay, so I was never was much of a cook. Although, we did have some wonderful meals of hot dogs and beans on that Wedgwood china your parents had given us for a wedding present." She forced a chuckle. Slapping a glob of mayonnaise onto a piece of bread, she wondered why she

thought of that and softly said, "Maxi will be home soon."

David remained silent, but when she'd mentioned Maxi, David's brown irises sparkled back at her like the mahogany china cabinet when she had time to polish it. "Maxi really is going to be thrilled to see you." Hey, maybe their son could keep David out of her hair! Yeah, that was it. Plans churned in her head revealing a light at the end of her dismal tunnel. "You know, I can borrow a pair of ice skates your size. Maybe Popi's will fit. You're a what? Nine?"

"Yes, nine."

He seemed pleased that she remembered. Oh geez. "I'll show you the nearest sliding hill to take Maxi sledding." And of course, make sure they walked into town for a hot chocolate at the old soda fountain in Cranston's pharmacy, she thought. Walking would take up at least a half-hour, maybe a whole hour if David only brought his darn wing tips with him instead of boots. "Oh, and you can read Goodnight Moon to Maxi." Over and over as she often did until she nearly had the words memorized. That would leave most of her evenings "Davidless."

"I would love doing all of that." He took a bite of his crustless sandwich, leaned back in his chair and watched her.

With a shove, her sandwich landed onto a plate. The more time she spent with him, the sloppier, more harebrained he made her feel. His speech was an English teacher's dream, and his formal use of their son's name was getting on her nerves along with his typical officer's behavior. And, oh geez, that crustless bread stuff. That nearly took her appetite away.

This was going to be a long visit.

"Can I get you a glass of milk?" he asked.

As if she'd drink the milk from the bottle. A carton, maybe, but not a bottle. "Sure," she mumbled with a mouthful. "You can take Maxi sliding when he gets home, and Cranston's pharmacy has the best hot chocolate. Of course, Maxi loves to walk there-"

He stood and poured two glasses of milk, handed her one. "Can you make us hot chocolate?" He sat down and resumed eating.

"Sure, but..." She swallowed and thought, but then you would still be here. "Is your room all right?"

She smiled at his look of disgust. High falutin' David. He must be fuming inside about the mothball-scented dresser. The tiny room. The long, long walk to it. It was finally put to good use. Just maybe it would loosen up stuffy old David and he could forget his rank while on leave this time. Ha! she thought. She was an optimist, not an illusionist.

"I could use more hangers."

"I'll find some." She leaned forward. "Um. Exactly how many things to hang did you bring?"

He looked at her sternly. "Annie, if you want to know how long I will be here, just ask-"

"How long are you going to be here?"

"As long as it takes." He stood and lifted his jacket from the back of the chair. "I will go wait for Maxwell in the living room. Does he generally use the front door?"

"No, the window..."

He scowled at her.

"Yes, David, the front door."

He turned and pushed at the kitchen door. "Thank you."

Annie jumped up. "Hey, how long is 'as long as it takes,' David?"

He paused. He could not tell her his plan, nor did he know how long it would take to succeed. If he said too much, he would have her temper rising and his future in shambles-not to mention his heart. Patience was the utmost important element in his strategy. One always needed a lot of fortitude in dealing with his Annie. "I am giving you plenty of time to show me how you manage this household."

"So, less than a week?"

He glared, said "A month," and turned to walk out.

The doors wobbled on their hinges after he passed through them. Annie wished they'd fall off and put her out of her misery. Then again, she'd never want to leave Maxi and Popi. But having David around for a month was going to be a slow death of sorts-the death of her sanity, the death of the success she could almost reach out and touch.

"Damn you, Major."

Chapter Three

Annie sank further into her kitchen chair and groaned. The kitchen doors continued to wobble from David's departure. One month, a veritable lifetime, she thought. She knew it'd feel that way having him around. Even sharing lunch with David was annoying. If he wasn't giving her insulting looks as if she should have gone to finishing school and eat with her pinkie finger sticking in the air, then he was insinuating that she had no chance for success. She had to do something about him being here.

First on her list was to keep him away from her. It was only logical that he'd put a cramp in her working. She chuckled to herself. If David heard her, he would get quite a kick out of her calling herself logical. She knew he thought she was scatterbrained, an absentminded professor type, but she was not. She knew it, and didn't much care what David thought any longer.

Still, she wouldn't mind his recognizing how far she had come all by herself. She was proud of all she had accomplished as a single mom. If anyone thought it was easy filling two pairs of shoes, they never walked in hers. Well, to be truthful, David did say she was a good mother, but he could have expounded on that a bit. Oh heck, what did it matter what he thought of her anyway? she reminded herself.

Stuffing hers and David's dishes into the dishwasher, Annie decided she really had no choice but to come up with a plan to keep them apart as much as possible. Of course, Maxi was going to love spending all the time with his father that he could, but to what cost? The child might become too attached at having his father around and be confused about his family situation. Maxi could get hurt when David left. She would never do that to him. But then again, Maxi was one smart kid and maybe she was blowing this out of proportion. Maybe her spending time with David was the only thing she should concern herself with right now. There might not be any reason to worry about Maxi, who brought sheer joy to her life each day, the little imp.

"Mommy! Guess who's here?" the little imp shouted from behind her.

Catching him on the rebound before he careened into the sink, she looked at father and son and answered, "Let's see. The boogie man?" David's lips pursed. Maxi giggled and shook his headful of dark curls. "Santa Claus?" she tried and placed a kiss on Maxi's nose.

He squirmed from her hold and darted toward David. "Really, Mother, it's only February."

Her heart sank at the kid's formality. Was David's stuffiness already rubbing off on Maxi? Had he already been treating their son as if he were in the military-at age six? Her anger halted as she watched David bend down to let their son snake his little arms around his wide shoulders and nuzzle into the crook of his neck. She waited for him to flinch as jelly from Maxi's school snack was sure to seep from the kid's little hands onto David's beige fisherman knit pullover, which was very expensive no doubt.

"Daddy, silly Mommy! Daddy is moving in!"

Annie's eyes flew wide open. She mumbled incoherently, "No, Maxi, no...you have it...well, for a few-" She poked David in the side.

"Ouch! Stop that, Annie."

"Tell him," she ordered through clenched teeth as if she were the Air Force officer.

David kissed their son's cheek. "For a month, Maxwell. Only for one month."

"One long month," Annie mumbled, but when she saw her son's eyes sparkling she said, "Daddy came here especially to spend a whole month with you, slugger." The ecstatic look Maxi gave her was no surprise, but when she noticed her ex-husband's face, she steadied herself against the counter. His eyes held a warmth that could only be attributed to his love for their son. And David's undivided attention was aimed at Maxi. It had been so long since she saw father and son together, maybe her memories were not exactly accurate. Maybe she had prejudiced her opinion of David because of the pain she'd suffered. She looked up and smiled inside. Hmm, David never flinched at the jelly staining his expensive wool sweater.

** * **

"I have work to do," Annie protested as Maxi swung her around on the frozen pond later that afternoon. She couldn't turn down the little imp's request to join him and David for a skate a few times around the lake. Maxi had been beside himself to have both of his parents together, and she could not disappoint him and ruin his excitement. Her plans of having their son keep David out of her hair were deteriorating fast. She had a creative, and sometimes crafty mind, and would have to work out a better plan. "I really have work that needs doing-" Annie affirmed.

"But Mommy, you always tell me that the house isn't going anywhere when you need to spend time on your inventions."

Annie groaned. "Kids," she mused. With a shove to Maxi's shoulders, she sent her son skating toward his friends near the bridge. The little imp giggled hysterically. She forced a laugh. "They do say the damndest things."

David gave her a stern look. "I have been making notes of some suggestions for...things," David said as he placed his hand on the small of Annie's back. Gently he guided her toward the other side of the lake. Luckily, a crowd of neighbors was enjoying the afternoon sunlight, and there were no secluded spots on the frozen pond. Annie could just hear the rumors that would fly in the tiny town, where everyone knew

each other, as she and David skated. He held her with the slightest pressure, but she did not pull away and decided she didn't care if she was the latest gossip of the Do Drop Inn tonight. It wouldn't be the first time. She knew her being an inventor was the subject of many a conversation in Skyview. He pulled her closer as a child nearly collided into them.

"I hope you mean mental notes." She pulled free and spun around three times. Skating backward, she glared at David who watched, giving her a serious look. "Oh geez, not another one of your lists?" How she hated the notes he had left her when they had been married. "You know how I felt about those notes reminding me to go to the cleaners, to get something at the base commissary or to make sure I took out the garbage."

"I was only trying to help. To get you organized."

"Yeah, help." It wasn't the fact that he asked her to do the things, but his organizing her life only made her feel more disorganized. And she was sometimes-but only because she was so busy. Her mind had a way of covering one too many things at a time. But she'd worked on that since becoming a single parent. She looked at Maxi skating in a circle and smiled to herself. She had done a great job with him and never stopped feeling proud of him. "Tell me you haven't loaded my office with yellow sticky notes, David?"

His expression confirmed that he still arranged everything in his life into orderly cubbyholes. She would never become used to his lists of things for her to do while he was at duty...nor had she ever forgotten his other lists. Those notes...she sighed, she did not want to forget. Against her better judgment, a fondness touched her heart.

"There were certain notes that you never minded," he said, smiling.

He remembered, too. She returned his smile and felt warmer inside than if she was near the fireplace instead of on a frozen pond. "No...I liked those notes you'd tuck away-"

He leaned near. "In your dresser drawer, under your coffee mug-"

Mesmerized, she added, "Or once, in my checkbook when I went to pay the grocery bill." She forced a breath and thought of those cherry tobacco scented notes that listed why David loved her so much.

"Watch out, Annie!" he shouted and grabbed her arm.

She looked behind to see she had come within inches of a low hanging tree branch. For a second, he didn't let her go, and she did not pull away. "Thanks." She eased free.

David remained near the branch. Sunbeams glistened like a spotlight in the winter wonderland with him the center attraction. Every woman on the lake seemed to notice him. Or maybe it was Annie's active imagination that made her think the women stared-or because she herself had been glaring at him.

"No problem," he said.

"I promised Maxwell some hot chocolate." He turned, pushed forward, and stopped. Over his shoulder he asked, "Would you care to join us?"

She shook her head, knowing he couldn't see her. Finally she managed, "No...thanks anyway." Like a tiny fissure in the ice a crack in her heart seemed to widen. It wasn't a major wound seeing David like this she told herself, because, after all, she was way past loving him. David skated toward the bridge. Despite her heavy winter clothing, the cold wind chilled deep into her. Into her thoughts, into her heart.

Annie skated to a bench beneath the trees and flopped down. In the distance, she watched Maxi and his

father skate to the end of the lake until they became tiny figures. With a deep sigh, she willed time to turn back. Yesterday her life ran like one of her well-oiled inventions-today a tanker full of crude couldn't help.

On a faraway bench, David assisted Maxi with changing into his boots. With their skates slung over their shoulders, father and son made their way up the snowy hillside. She swallowed the lump in her throat. Not only didn't she want David around interfering, but now she did not know what to do. If he spent too much time with Maxi, the child might get too accustomed to having his father there and get hurt, she told herself. A streak of honesty ran along her thoughts like the blades of a skate across the ice. Maxi knew they were divorced. He'd adjusted very well. Maybe, just maybe the honesty said, she really was worried about her spending too much time with David.

David and Maxi walked toward the back of the house where she watched them set their skates on the back porch. They crossed the backyard and turned down the road into town. Although they were out of earshot, she imagined Maxi's squeals of laughter as David pelted him with slushy snowballs. Just like the ones she had thrown at David when they first met.

"Get a grip, Hamilton." She could not sit here and rehash the past like some foolish daydreamer. As much as she enjoyed watching father and son, she knew she had to face reality. With her hand shielding the sunlight, she stared ahead.

The house loomed in the distance, a paint chipped, weathered blue elephant that had been in her family since her great grandfather. After her mother had died and Annie became single again, she and Maxi moved into the house that was way too big for two people and way too much work to keep up. With a groan, she pushed up and skated toward the beast. The wind slapped her face, keeping her attuned to reality. Suddenly her heart stopped when she looked at the north side. Oh, geez! Good thing David hadn't skated in that direction. The damage to her workroom stood out like...like the catastrophe her invention had caused.

Sure she knew it was a small hole, but after seeing David's reaction, even she started to see it as a gigantic scene of destruction. Now that David was snooping around, she'd had to fix it with the money from the loan. If only she could have put it off until spring since her invention for the dishwasher was nearly perfected. She could have boarded up the workroom and moved to Popi's old barn, which was only a hundred or so yards away from her house. Of course, she reminded herself, if David hadn't shown up, she would have been in her workroom to shut off the stupid motor before it broke. Then her money could have been used for paying her lawyer's bills and supplies.

She had contacted Attorney Landry, a patent attorney, after learning the devastating news-a plain ordinary civilian couldn't even fill out the required paperwork for a patent. No, good old Uncle Sam had written it so that only an expensive attorney, specializing in patents, could manage to fill in the blanks. Scraping the bottom of her savings account, she applied for the patent. She needed the loan to replenish her account, and now she couldn't do that. But, it would all be worth it. She'd succeed this time. When she looked at the tiny figure of her son, walking beside his father, she knew she had to.

She had to be free of any influence from David or her heart could never heal, never forget. The tiny fissure would widen, open, until it could never close. Skating to the edge of the lake, she spun sideways as the blades of her skates sung on the frozen water. She still was a darn good skater. Maybe not as good as in her college days, but a lot had changed since then. She knew she wasn't the same person, and seeing David now had her wondering about him, too. After taking off her skates and putting on her boots, she walked in her ex-husband's snowy footsteps and smiled down at the little imp's prints that left a waffle pattern of white from his boots. Yes, a lot had changed.

Inside the house, Annie passed by the workroom door and paused. How like her life. Not only were both

a mess now, but she thought of how her marriage had deteriorated until the final explosion when on his fourth birthday, Maxi ran away to Popi's. It was only next door, and the child needn't have run there. She recalled how David had ordered Maxi to share his precious new toys with the other children at his party. She wouldn't put Maxi in any situation where he would want to run again.

Annie, too, had sought the refuge of her grandfather's workshop and the world of inventions at an early age. There wasn't much hope for her and her sister, but maybe if she had worked more at her relationship with David, Maxi would have both parents together. Maybe she really had been too young and immature to make the right decisions. The scent of oil stung her nose. She looked up and thought, this room isn't the only thing in need of repair.

Once in her office, she dropped her skates on the carpet near her desk and sat in her chair. From the center drawer, she pulled out a folder with the paperwork from her loan. The figure had looked so huge when she first got confirmation of the money. Now, her mind reeled. Would she have enough to repair her workroom and pay the patent attorney the balance she owed him? And, she sighed, could she now afford supplies to make her Stayput? Figures skipped through her thoughts until she grabbed her calculator. She was always good at math, but she believed in machines. Loved machines. With a groan she admitted, a machine is what had gotten her into this mess. She stabbed at the plus sign and grimaced. Even a machine couldn't change the numbers glaring at her, but she continued working on it until her vision blurred.

Hours later, Annie looked down and blinked. The figures on the calculator remained the same. The minus sign near the dollar amount mocked her. An annoying cuckoo from the clock David had bought her years ago in Germany said she'd been running figures through the calculator for two hours. Two hours and she had a negative balance. There was only one way she could afford everything. She would have to have help with the repairs and, oh God, how she dreaded asking him for it. The clock cuckooed three times, like a death toll.

** * **

"Hire someone," David insisted when Annie had worked up the nerve to present him with her budget after he returned from town.

She leaned across the kitchen counter, thankful Maxi had gone to his friend Timmy's house until suppertime. It wasn't only David's "suggestion" to hire someone that had her insides in a knot, it was the way he'd said it-like a direct order. "Over half of my loan will be spent on labor. How hard could it be to slap some paint on a wall? I've got a carpenter coming tomorrow to patch the hole, then we can paint."

David took a sip of tea and shut his eyes. She sneaked in a quick sneer at him then hurriedly turned it into a lopsided smile as he opened his eyes. His frown of disapproval didn't go unnoticed. It wouldn't do to anger him. David's temper could erupt with great force, although he'd never been physical with her or anyone else. As fast as it would erupt, though, it would simmer down. The trick was to get through this little eruption and have him help with the repairs. She had to, or her money wouldn't last for all the things she needed to buy.

"Let me see the workroom again," he said.

She hesitated, not certain if the purple, green, yellow, and her favorite cherry red paint staining the walls would help or hurt her plea. Darn it, she needed to get along with him so she said, "Come on," and was glad she kept her words civil. She could hear the click of his footsteps on the hardwood floors as they made their way toward her workroom-or what was left of it. Outside the door she turned. "You don't have to hold your nose, after a few minutes you'll barely notice the odor or the colors."

David glowered at her. "By the way, my epaulet needs cleaning, too."

"Oh?" She hurriedly opened the door and stepped aside. Before his gasp sent him into a fit of wheezing, she said, "The motor was used before and apparently had a few miles on it. I only needed it for mixing and to produce enough energy to-"

He pushed past her in a daze. "Enough energy to do what?"

"I was working on an invention that would speed up painting. Ironical, huh?" She laughed despite his scowl. "We could use it now. Well, as I had said, you arrived-"

David's face was red. Almost the color of the cherry paint on the wall, minus the purple. He wasn't too adept at keeping his comments inside. Obviously, by the hue of his complexion, he tried, and she knew better than to tell him he would be better off to release some of his feelings and not keep it all bottled up inside. And, besides, red wasn't a flattering color on him. Surprisingly, he hadn't exploded like the paint ejector, yet. How unlike David.

"Thank God no one was hurt," he finally said.

"You know I've always been extra careful about Maxi being around."

"Yes. I know. But you could have...."

At least he wasn't going to point fingers at her mothering skills again. David had some weird, logical he would call it, way of thinking, but she knew he didn't doubt her being a good mother. She also knew he could never understand why she had left him. With a sigh, she swallowed the lump in her throat, the one caused by their past.

"I am sorry about my earlier comments...about the hardware store," he said.

"We often say things out of haste-both of us." She turned away for a second. "I really don't want to get into this. Really." There was no way to have someone as set in his ways as David understand what had happened between them. Before he spoke she said, "Please help me with the painting," in an attempt to detour the conversation.

"Neither of us knows anything about painting, Annie."

She stared at him for several minutes. That's all he was going to say? He wasn't going to accuse her of being the "absentminded professor?" She quickly shoved all questions from her mind and went along with David's ignoring the cause of the...problem. She hated to think in terms of explosions. Too messy. Too...explosive. "So, we'll learn to paint. We're both intelligent people, and I'm sure we can get a book at," he shook his head, "the library, and Popi knows all those kinds of things."

"Your grandfather is not going to be climbing on a ladder-"

She shook her head and sighed as if David were being ridiculous. He was. As usual. "Of course not. But he can give us a few pointers and, anyway, there is no choice. I've made a budget- " She reached into her pocket and pulled out the calculator tape. It looked pathetic. Wrinkled and ripped, it would never pass the scrutiny of a stickler like David. He reached for it. She pulled it away. "I'll decipher it for you." A flash of color-plum to be exact-on the opposite wall caught her eye. Oh boy.

"Can we take this downstairs?" she said. She needed to get him out of the room. It wasn't just the pained look on David's face that made her want to leave, but she would have a much better chance at her proposition to him...anywhere else but here.

"Sure," he agreed.

In the kitchen she turned and said, "Sit down."

David followed her to the table. She wished he'd had the decency to leave an empty chair between them, but he not only sat next to her, but to her dismay, moved his chair closer. So close a thread of cherry scented smoke tickled her nose and awakened more memories. They used to sit like this at the kitchen table while David helped her do homework back in college. When she would get the hang of some obscure formula or understand a difficult physics equation, he would give her a peck on the cheek.

"No, Annie, I am not going to help. I am a doctor, and an officer. I know nothing about manual labor. I will, however, be glad to supervise-"

He looked as if he wanted to swallow back those words and it was at that moment she knew she had him. She would get her way and have enough money to pay Attorney Landry's bill and get her supplies. "I see," she said. She stood with the hopes that her added height would wrap up her case. "Supervise? As usual, David Grainger supervises, Annie Hamilton works. Just like during our marriage."

"Annie, let us not bring that...."

Her statement mirrored their past life together, and she knew it killed him to hear it. David's upbringing interfered once again. "Do you always have to be the one in charge?"

"It is in my nature, I guess."

She snorted. "You don't have to tell me that, David. I lived with you, remember?"

"Yes, of course, I...do. It was wonderful, too."

Oh darn. Again he got that same serious yet sad look on his face, confusing her for the umpteenth time. And she didn't much like being confused.

"Annie, I have never meant-" How he had missed her and was glad to get out of the darn workroom to concentrate.

"I know, I know, David, you never meant to say that. You never meant to make me feel inferior. You never meant to make me feel like an outsider when we were married."

"An outsider? I never treated you like an outsider."

But before he could leave, she leaned forward and said, "Do you know how hard I tried to be a perfect officer's wife?"

He could not help himself. A million visions of their past life filtered through his thoughts. Sometimes she was so infuriating. "Tried?" "Yeah, tried. I sat through a gazillion teas with those women who thought they wore their husband's rank and all made me feel like an outsider."

"Maybe if you didn't spend all your time going on about your latest invention-"

"And what? Talked about the lilies growing in my garden, the never-ending fundraisers, the stupid garden parties, or any number of mindless things they used to go on about while nibbling their crustless sandwiches?" She blew out a breath but managed to finish with, "I was the Mad Hatter at Alice's tea party, David, and everyone knew it."

"Except me," he whispered.

Oh boy, he sure knew how to take the wind out of her sails. She didn't like the direction this conversation had gravitated toward. Their past as a couple was all over and done with as far as she was concerned, and she needed David's help whether she liked it or not. Okay, she admitted, maybe she couldn't ignore that they'd once been in love. But she needed to try, so she decided to turn the tables on this sentimental nonsense and hit him below the belt. "So, you're only capable of supervising me like you always used to do, Commander?"

"That is not what I meant, Annie, and you know...I did not mean to imply-" He paused to sigh.

She leapt in for the kill. "So what did you mean to imply? You are too good to help?"

"You do not play fair, Annie. You know I have no experience with manual labor."

A twinge of guilt stabbed at her heart. David never had anyone to teach him the simple things in life like how to change the oil in his car. Miss Windsor concentrated on manners, and his father...well, that was a lost cause. Servants did the work around the Grainger mansion. Nanny Windsor shaped the kids' futures. Okay, Annie wasn't playing fair, but she had good reasons to need his help. She decided to end this conversation for now, but when she looked up, she knew she couldn't have continued anyway. At any second she expected tea to spew from David's flared nostrils. His pipe slammed into the ashtray sending clouds of gray onto the table. Both stared at it.

"I will help, but I am not responsible for the quality of my work." He stood and left before the dust settled.

Annie waited until he was safely out of sight, stood and walked to her bookshelf. Kneeling on the hardwood floor, she opened the center cabinet and started pulling out old photo albums. Unable to resist, she flipped through pages of Maxi's first year, his days in play school, and took out the packet of photos of his three birthdays from the back of the album. She had to find the time to put these pictures in the album before they began to yellow. Another book had hers and David's wedding pictures in it, but that one she set on the floor unopened. After thumbing through several more books she closed the last page and settled back on her heels. Time seemed suspended as she looked at the mass of hers and her family's lives all around her.

What had she been looking for anyway? Her conversation with David, and now the waves of nostalgia the old photos sent through her, caused a lapse of memory. Oh well, it would come back sooner or later. She started to get up, but a box tucked in the corner of the cabinet caught her eye. Oh, darn. Talk about coincidence. Why on earth had she kept that?

Gingerly, she lifted the old jewelry box from the shelf with every intention of throwing it, unopened, in the trash. She sighed, knowing the old box did not contain any silver or gold trinkets. Darn David and his stupid notes. And darn her for keeping them.

** * **

Paint the workroom, David thought, shaking his head and stepping down the front porch stairs. After agreeing to such a task, he needed some air. Annie had gone too far this time. Obviously she had some harebrained budget that would allow her to use part of her money for some contraption. Who the heck would buy a hat rack that shot hats at them? Who the heck, except Annie, would think to build one? She knew he wasn't capable of repairing anything. She knew he did not mind helping. She also knew how inadequate he felt, but she persisted, just like when they were married.

Snow glistened on the yard where the clouds had seen fit to camouflage the spot where he had fallen this morning. This morning? It seemed as if he'd been here for days. No, it seemed as if he belonged here. He

walked across the yard to a bench beneath the Christmas decorated pine. When he sat, a couple skating hand in hand caught his eye. They looked as if they belonged together. How many times had he heard that about himself and Annie from everyone who knew them?

Maybe they were all wrong. Seeing Annie after all this time might have been a mistake. Deep inside, he knew the chance of his plan working was a long shot, but he came anyway. And now he knew why. He missed Annie. Today, skating as a family had proved it. He had dated some since their divorce but never met anyone he wanted to marry. And he did like being married. Not only did Maxwell deserve two parents, but he needed them. In David's heart he knew family had to come before anything else-even his pride. Annie still loved him, he was certain. But, they were like the surrounding jagged mountains and the flat desert below-pure opposites.

As David and his father were, too. Despite his attempts to forget the pains of loneliness from his childhood, they kept cropping up. Fear that he would turn into his father drove him to be the best father he could. A father so very different from his own. A father who spent time with his son, went to games with him and helped with homework. Annie yanked that chance away from him two years ago, and now that he faced a remote tour, he had little time to change everything. He lifted his arm and inhaled the grape jelly scent from his sleeve. A father who did not care that his son's sticky, jellied fingers stained his sweater. Nanny Windsor had meant well, but even she couldn't convince him that having his son's jelly print on his sweater was a sin. No, he knew it was nothing short of the reminder of how magical it was to be a father. He inhaled again.

His son was not going to grow up feeling alone. Not if David had any control over the situation, and one thing he strove for was control in all aspects of his life. He was an Air Force officer. If he could run a base hospital, advance to major, and proudly accept numerous ribbons for his achievements, he certainly could develop a strategy to change this situation.

But, knowing Annie Hamilton Grainger...he sighed, startled by the pain in his heart when he remembered she had dropped his name. He sucked in a breath and corrected himself. Knowing Annie Hamilton, it would not be easy. But, in David's book, nothing was impossible.

* * *

"David. David! More to the left," Annie yelled. They had started working the next morning in the living room where there was less damage. The carpenter had come and repaired the hole, but Annie didn't want to start her day with the worst room-and put up with the underlying tension she felt from David. Oh, he didn't say anything, but it was the look he gave her. Thank goodness it didn't take long for her to get all the paint since Henniker's Hardware, the only one in town, didn't have a vast array to choose from. The faster the job got done, the sooner David would be able to spend more time with Maxi when he wasn't in school. Just the two of them.

David scowled towards her. "I cannot move much more than this." Stretched as far left as he could manage without falling from the ladder, he shoved the paintbrush a fraction of an inch farther. "I told you to move the ladder over before I had to reach out like Stretch Armstrong."

Yeah, you told me, she thought. So what's new? Suddenly it dawned on her what he'd just said. Stretch Armstrong? Annie laughed despite the fact that David's tone didn't sound as if he was trying to be humorous. "I didn't know you knew who Stretch was."

David pulled the paintbrush from the wall and motioned for her to hand him more paint. "Maxwell keeps me informed of all kinds of toys." He dipped the brush and shoved it toward the wall. The bristles scratched along the surface as David pressed down, covering the cherry red with Navaho white.

Annie took two steps up the ladder. As amazing as it was to see David Grainger doing manual labor, she couldn't get over the fact that he knew about Stretch Armstrong. Maxi always boasted about his visits with David, but she assumed he lavished the kid with toys that one of the airmen in David's squadron bought for Maxi. She always pictured David giving the airman a direct order, too, like, "Buy something appropriate for my son-now." Hmm, maybe she assumed wrong. "Looks great, David."

She leaned to see the rest of the wall, still marveling that David paid attention to names of children's toys-and wondering how well she knew him anymore. Actually, how well had she ever known him? Popi's reminder that Annie was young and not too mature when she married David had her rethinking how she had viewed him. "Yes, it looks pretty good. But I think it's going to take several coats to cover, though." She leaned a wee bit further.

"Annie!" The ladder tilted, but he grabbed a nearby light fixture to steady them. "If you are going to work like that, I hope your Workman's Compensation is paid up."

"Workman's Comp. Good one, David." She laughed. "Take it easy. You know we've never had a catastrophe on a ladder yet. Don't you remember how we used to get books from the top shelf together-" Why had that memory popped into her mind? Déjà vu had her remembering how she and David used to climb the brass-trimmed ladder in his father's library while doing school research for her. His parents were often abroad, and since she and David had so little money because he had refused his trust fund, they would consider it a vacation from their tiny apartment in Boulder to go to the Grainger's mansion in Denver.

"Yes...I do." David paused, the paintbrush held in his hand, a sparkle in his eyes. "I remember eating Chinese takeout in the gigantic dinning room, too, and wishing the darn seats weren't miles away from each other, so I could see you better," he said. He actually leaned against the ladder, letting paint drip onto the tarp below. Wow. Neat freak David really had changed.

She laughed again, and it felt kind of nice to share these memories with David. "That was the biggest table I ever sat at. Remember how we wouldn't allow the servants to wait on us-"

"-and we would run back and forth, serving each other, laughing."

The ladder shifted-but not as much as Annie's heart. David's words, the reminders, his tone, had sent her into a fog of memories where his words pulled and tugged at her emotions. She would never have thought that the memories could be so wonderful, yet so painful. "This color really is looking all right," she managed in a soft tone as she tried to change the subject.

As if he wasn't listening to her, David moved towards the wall, the sparkle in his eyes now replaced by a faraway look. He continued, "When the servants were let go for the night, you did manage to get some homework done."

"Yes...I remember." She forced a laugh and sneaked a look at his face before he turned.

A pained look had dulled David's brown eyes and she wished she had never glanced at his face. "Yes, I remember it all. Seems like a lifetime ago, Annie." He took a few steps down. She jumped off the ladder.

"I don't know why that popped into my...I guess being on the ladder together..." She took several steps back. "Although this paint-stained aluminum beauty isn't any resemblance to the handcrafted mahogany one in your father's library-"

David moved forward. "I guess we are going to have to get used to memories from our past arising now and again." He sighed. "It is not such a bad thing."

"True. They weren't all bad memories," she heard herself say, startled by the nostalgic tone.

"No...they were not bad memories-"

"Anyone for a break?" Popi interrupted as he came into the sitting room.

Annie spun around never so glad to see her grandfather as she was right now. "Oh, gee thanks, Popi." She managed to walk over and take the tray from Popi. She looked at what her grandfather had brought them, and her emotions shifted to her interfering grandfather. Leaning forward, she whispered, "Don't think your romantic reminders of our past are going to get David and me back together." She pulled back. "Look at what Popi brought us, David. Mulled cider and sugared donuts like we used to share during snowstorms." Before she turned, she gave her grandfather the evil eye and whispered through clenched teeth, "Don't try this again." Then, she kissed him on his ruddy cheek.

Popi winked and turned. "Nice to see you, David."

"Thank you, Popi. You, too." He reached out to shake the older man's hand. "How have you been?"

Popi's eyes sparkled, and Annie felt like hugging him. "Same old coot, I'd say. Health's hanging in there, and I try to help out here, much as I can."

Annie noticed David's smile fade a bit. She wasn't certain if the look in his eyes came from the pain of Popi's reminder that David didn't live here, or from David's wishing that he did.

"That has always been a great comfort to me, knowing you are so near. And thanks for the snack. Manual labor does have a way of increasing one's thirst," David said.

Annie rolled her eyes and set the tray on the table. She was annoyed that David had used her childhood nickname for her grandfather, but then she realized the situation she faced. Working with David was one thing, but taking breaks together, alone, could get uncomfortable-especially after the conversation they'd just had. Surely her own grandfather would not betray her. "Popi, don't you want to join us?"

"Setback finals today, pumpkin," Popi said with his hand on the doorknob.

"Next time maybe you should go practice your card game, and we'll take care of getting ourselves a snack," Annie added with another don't-interfere-even-if-you-want-us-back-together look at her grandfather. On the way out, he patted David on the back as if her ex-husband needed reassurance from the old man. Traitor, Annie thought.

David handed Annie one of the mugs with painted snowflakes on the sides. "He has not changed," he said, smiling as she took the mug.

"Unfortunately not." The cider warmed her inside as she sat on the tarpaulin-covered floor. David sat opposite, in a high back chair with a sheet thrown over the back. For a few minutes, her fears were confirmed. This was going to be one uncomfortable break. Both stirred the cinnamon sticks in their mugs as if mixing a cake. Annie looked down until she found herself staring at a piece of cinnamon floating in the cider. She peeked up to see David cross and uncross his legs until she wanted to scream, Stop! She ate two donuts, when she never really wanted any.

David broke the silence with a chuckle. "Remember when you first took me to meet Popi? He stared at me for nearly the entire meal."

"I remember." She took a sip and wished the liquid would wash the lump down her throat. "Maybe your uniform impressed him." As much as it did me, she thought.

David uncrossed his legs, stood and came uncomfortably near. "I had never met anyone so...natural as your grandfather. Nothing pretentious about him-" He bent down on one knee. "-or you for that matter, Annie."

Surely the lump would choke her at any minute.

"You know, I envied you back then," he continued. He set his mug on the table, took out his pipe, and turned from her view.

Annie watched him, head bent, obviously puffing on the pipe to light it. She thought it odd that he kept turning whenever he lit his pipe as if hiding something from her. Heck, she'd seen his stupid pipe a million times. Soon a thread of smoke rose above his head and a sweet cherry scent filled the air. "Envied me? You're the one who grew up in the lap of luxury." Still, she was a bit saddened that he envied her. Not that she'd ever want to make him jealous, but it was more that she had lucked out having a grandfather she could run to when David had no one. The thought hurt, knowing that David had suffered as a child.

His smile faded. "But you...you had Popi."

And all you had were absent parents, she thought, but said, "Well, you did have Miss Windsor."

David chuckled. "Yes, stuffy as she may have been, she meant well."

Annie had always felt sorry for David's upbringing, but she couldn't forget her past either. "I didn't exactly grow up in a Beaver Cleaver situation either you know."

"I know, Annie. I know."

"You know my father died when I was an infant, and I always wanted a father so deeply. As a kid I used to pray that Mother would remarry. Of course, as I got older I wondered who would want to marry my mother..."

David sighed. "At least she was around."

Annie forced a chuckle. "Around? Sure, she was around us like a hawk. She wouldn't take her eyes off Megan and me. I used to envy all the other little girls with two parents. Family took on more importance to me-as with anything out of reach." She looked across the emptiness of the room and said, "The more you can't have something, the more you want it. I used to fall asleep dreaming about my parents. Of course, the mother in my dreams was nothing like my real one. In my dreams the father never left..."

Annie shut her eyes and mourned hers and David's loss of a normal childhood. For as long as she could remember, she had wanted a real family, a father and mother, like the ones all her friends had back then, more than any toys, games, or any material things a little girl would normally dream about. That was the hardest thing to face after the divorce.

She and David had taken Maxi's two-parent family away from him with the scribble of a pen across some stupid court documents. She inhaled and wondered how the scent of tobacco could make her so sentimental. She and Maxi were fine, and, she did not need a husband. But, she couldn't ignore the question that played on her mind much more so since David's arrival. Did Maxi dream of a two-parent family, too?

"I always envied you having a grandfather like him."

"My grandfather was a great help when I needed somewhere to...spend my time."

David knew she meant to run away, but he did not comment. There was no need. No need to remind Annie of something that would cause her more pain. So, he nodded towards her and offered a smile instead of advice.

"I'll always be grateful to him. I owe him a great deal."

"Popi is special and really has not changed in all these years."

"He doesn't get out much." Suddenly David using the nickname didn't annoy her. "Yes, he really is special, and sometimes annoying as all get out." She smiled and set the other half of her donut on the platter, chuckled, and David leaned over. He held the pitcher of cider toward her. With unspoken understanding, she moved her mug forward. As he poured, she added, "He couldn't get over the way you talked when he first met you. What was it he kept calling you-"

"Dictionary Dave." He laughed and settled on the floor next to Annie.

"That's right! He said you knew so many fancy words that he'd make a mint playing Scrabble with his friends if he knew all of those words. And what else...oh right, he said you never used contractions. Well, this isn't getting the painting done. Is it?"

He refolded the napkin and set his mug down. "What next, boss?"

David's attempt at humor failed. Annie was too annoyed with his compulsion to refold the napkin until perfect. It reminded her of how different they really were-and always would be. "Let's measure the wall around the window to be sure we have enough paint. It looks like a pain-in-the neck job."

"Not for a professional-"

She glared at him before he could finish. Maybe he was attempting humor again, but his comment irritated her. Maybe he was reiterating that she should have hired someone to do the repairs. "Look, David, I've managed to fix the refrigerator's shelf by myself, reseeded the lawn, and last week even changed a cracked handle on the commode." She looked at the darned adorable pout on his full lips. Maybe she should have hired someone. Her intent to remind him of how capable she'd become as a single parent had only seemed to cause more hurt for David. And it probably hurt him to realize that not only couldn't he have done those things, he never had anyone to teach him how. She touched his arm and said, "I didn't mean to imply that you couldn't-"

He looked at her and said, "I couldn't. But Annie...." He covered her hand with his other one. "I am proud of you."

They spent the rest of the day working in the living room but didn't finish the repainting. Annie worried they'd never be done in a month's time. They had to work faster. When she got the chance, she would have to run the numbers though the calculator again. Hopefully she could afford the repairs, new supplies for her dishwasher invention, and to pay her attorney's bill real soon.

Because she knew darn well-her heart couldn't take this tug-of-war much longer.

** * **

Annie dialed Attorney Landry's number after hitting the "plus" button on her calculator. "May I please speak to Attorney Landry?" she asked the receptionist. After the woman explained he was in a meeting, Annie set up an appointment to see him in two days. She hung up and flung the receiver into the cradle. Two days and she'd know more about her patent process!

"Annie, dinner is ready," Popi called through the door.

"Oh gosh, Pops, I forgot it was Wednesday." She ran to the door and swung him in an unexpected circle. Her grandfather always came over to help out, making Wednesday his special day to join them for a dinner that he cooked. Normally Annie used the extra time to work on her inventions, but today she had to paint.

"Please, Annie. Do you want to be wearing my supper?"

She let go. "No, silly, and I thought you said dinner was ready now."

Popi untied his apron and took it off to reveal his favorite red wool vest and gold pocket watch he'd earned after retiring to spend time on his inventions. "It is, pumpkin, but tonight is bingo, you know."

"Oh, right. Forgot it was the last Wednesday of the month. I was just so happy, Popi. I'm going to meet with my patent attorney and find out about-"

Popi's eyes sparkled as if he'd be getting a patent for one of his own projects. "Which one?"

"The one for the Stayput."

Popi started toward the front door. "Is that the snow thingie?"

Annie rested her elbows on the banister, dropped her head into her palms. "No," she said with a sigh. "I haven't named, or perfected, that one yet." A chill chased up her spine when she pictured David sprawled out beneath that invention. She shuddered. "This one is the netting that goes in the dishwasher. You remember, to keep the plastic cups and bowls from turning over and filling with sudsy junk?" Popi nodded, but he looked as if his feet couldn't wait to move. Unlike David, her grandfather and Maxi were the best supporters of her ideas. But all Popi probably cared about right now was getting a seat near Father McDonough in the church basement so her grandfather could hear the bingo numbers being called out.

"Go ahead, Pops. I'll see you later. Good luck!" Annie turned and went into the kitchen.

"Hi, Mommy!" Maxi yelled with a mouthful.

David held up his forkful of mashed potatoes and said, "Do not speak with your mouth full, son."

"Okay, Daddy," Maxi mumbled through his potatoes.

Annie smiled. "What's for supper?"

Maxi swallowed a mouthful and said, "Potatoes, meat, and vegetables!"

Annie laughed. "Thanks for being so specific, slugger. I see Popi already ate. I'd forgotten tonight was bingo."

David wiped a napkin across his lips. Annie wondered where he had dug up the linen napkin. Annie and Maxi always used paper. They must have belonged to her grandmother. "Yes, Popi ate earlier. I wanted to wait until you came, but fearing Popi's wrath, I started."

Annie and Maxi laughed. She placed a kiss on his nose, which he promptly wiped off with the linen napkin, and she said, "Popi's bark is worse than his bite. Isn't it, slugger?" While she watched Maxi nod, she thought the same was true about David. His temper set off in seconds, but he cooled down just as fast. She sat opposite David and took a sip of hot tea with the exact amount of sugar and milk that she

always used.

"How's your tea, Mommy?"

"Fine. Popi knows how I like it-"

Maxi nearly sprayed mashed potatoes across her red flannel shirt in his hurry to correct her. "Daddy fixed your tea!"

Annie paused. "Oh, oh...it's fine. Really fine. Thank you, David."

He finished chewing his corned beef, swallowed, and whisked the napkin across his lips again. "You are welcome."

Annie turned to their son before memories of the past tugged at her heart once again. No way could she eat a bite if that happened. Darn David for remembering. "So, how was your day day, Mr. Dayday?" she asked Maxi as she did each night during their meal.

He giggled. "Jenny Calhoun threw up all over her shiny black shoes at recess-"

"Maxwell! Do not discuss things like that at the dinner table," David ordered. After she gave him a look to remind him their son was not in the Air Force, he softened his tone and corrected, "It is not polite, son."

It isn't? Annie thought. David should hear some of the conversations she and Maxi had when they were alone. "He's only six, David." She took a bite of meat and wondered if she had let Maxi get away with too much to balance out David's commanding nature.

David gave her a stern look and asked their son, "Can you tell Mother and Father what else you did at school today?"

Mother and Father. Annie felt the lump from this morning's donut in her throat again. She looked at her son, their son, going on about building a tower of blocks taller than himself and nearly bouncing out of his seat in elation. Maxi swung his head back and forth between her and David as if watching a tennis match. Usually Maxi ate while he talked and mumbled that nothing happened in school that day. It usually took most of the meal for Annie to pull out some information about her son's school day. Right now, though, his brown eyes, like his father's, sparkled, and she hadn't noticed it before, but her son had the beginnings of a dimple in his chin, again, like David's. Maxi continued on about his day, even boasting of a "B" on a math test.

"I didn't think you got letter grades in first grade, slugger," she said.

"Well, maybe it was a "G" for good. But, anyways, I got a good letter on my paper."

She and David laughed until their son said, "This is so much fun having both of you guys here-at the same time, all together. I don't have to repeat the same things to you both like I usually do."

Maxi's words dug deep into the recesses of Annie's heart where she felt the pride of a mother- and the sorrow of a single parent. She looked out the window towards the frozen pond. The pain in her heart started like a crack in the ice, deepening, solidifying into chunks like icebergs of frozen feelings clogging in her veins, in her heart. The pain was there, and she wondered if she would ever be able to do anything about it.

What had she and David snatched from their adorable little imp?

Chapter Four

Annie couldn't sit at the table with her ex-husband and son, worrying if she'd made a major mistake in the past. Her life was fine. Maxi was fine-doing great in school and a terrific kid. She looked up to see David wipe his lips again with the stupid linen napkin. He set it down, straightened his shoulders and suddenly she pictured him dressed in his service dress uniform. It fit him-to a T. Not only his physical body, but his demeanor. David belonged in the military. He wasn't merely acting in the role of an officer, he was a born officer. Born to control. She had made the right decision to divorce him.

Daily living with David had been a major reason for their breakup. Who else insisted that all of his socks be arranged by colors? How many men wanted their jeans ironed? How many times did she feel as if her housekeeping was being inspected? Who else always saw the glass as half empty? She looked at David smiling towards Maxi. Her heart warmed at the tender look on David's face as their son rattled on about school. Oh God, who else had such patience and cared so deeply for the ones he loved?

She sighed and admitted to herself that David always gave his undivided attention to Maxi, and to her, too, for that matter. Not like her. So often she felt so harried, almost scattered in a million directions. It wasn't easy as a single parent to do everything, and despite her every effort to spend as much time with her son as possible, she knew he missed being with his father. And, in her opinion, boys needed a man around. That was evident in her attempts at teaching Maxi baseball or-she shuddered at the thought-how to fish. Who ever came up with the idea of using worms? Thank goodness Popi lived next door. He had some old fashioned ideas at his age, but Maxi loved him and had the benefit of a man's influence in his young life. Damn it, she did try her best. When Annie looked up, she noticed David and Maxi sharing a joke over their dinner. She'd just let her mind wander, again.

She pushed away from the table and mumbled, "I...have to go...something to do." Over her shoulder, she said, "Maxi, slugger, please clean up." Her son's "Sure, Mom," floated through the swinging doors as she hurried down the hallway. She raced out the front door, her mind a fog of confusion.

February wasn't a month to forget one's coat, but she couldn't care less what the temperature was at the moment. Walking around to the side of the porch, she dropped into a wooden rocker glad that there was a winter moon out tonight. She had to be alone.

It seemed having David around to help with the repairs was a perfect idea-free labor. But seeing him and the darned reminders of their past in his every movement made the idea less than perfect. A few days ago she would have scoffed at the thought of her still being attracted to her ex. Heck, she would have laughed in the face of fate if she were told they'd be stuck together again, but fate or no fate, she was having a hard time dealing with being around David. Freezing out here, a numbness in her heart, she wasn't scoffing at anything. Actually, this entire situation stunk, and she decided she needed to change their predicament. But how?

With a shiver, she hugged her arms around herself, not ready to go back inside. Moonbeams danced across the snow-covered lawn in a gentle night's breeze. Several neighbors skated on the lake to music from the set of outdoor speakers Popi had rigged up. Floodlights lit the area around the ice, but with tonight's full moon, they were barely needed. She sighed and thought about what to do.

Streams of fog floated in front of her as the cold air blended with her breath, yet no sure-fire answer burned into her mind. She reached up to blow warmth on her fingers and inhaled cherry tobacco. David's scent clung to her plaid shirt like frost on the windowpanes. She leaned forward and pulled her sleeve closer to inhale once more. Behind, the chatter of voices could be heard through the closed

windows. She turned toward the side of the house and noticed movement through the bay windows.

With the sleeves of his fisherman's knit sweater pushed above his elbows, David stood by the sink washing dishes. Suddenly the cold air felt like a slap in the face. Revived, Annie stood and watched as Maxi brought dishes to the sink. David dunked them into the suds. Early in their marriage-when they had little money-he used to wash dishes. He used to listen to her ideas, and encourage her. He used to write her lists of how much he loved her. Tears formed in her eyes. It had to be the cold air, she rationalized. Annie Hamilton was no sentimental fool. But all these thoughts kept popping into her head and the one that stood out the most was: David used to be a wonderful husband.

Actually, he still was a wonderful person she admitted, watching father and son. With a swipe of her sleeve, she wiped away the tears and wondered how she'd ever make it through the next month. When she turned to see if any answers lay in the moon's glow, she heard the door open behind her.

"Maxwell is off to watch cartoons," David said, coming up behind her by the sound of his footsteps.

Annie sucked in a breath, the cold air burning into her lungs. "That's a nightly ritual for him. He loves ones about animals."

David laughed. "I brought you this."

She ran her hand across her cheeks one last time and turned to see David holding her parka out towards her. "Thanks."

"I saw it hanging in the hallway and figured you would need it." He looked at the wooden rockers on the porch as if asking for Annie's permission to sit down.

"Have a seat." She slid on her coat, realizing how cold she'd been and sat down, too.

"Something wrong, Annie?"

"I'm fine, now that I have my coat." She forced a laugh but the concerned look in his eyes said she wasn't fooling him at all. Actually, she never could. David always had a way of knowing what she was thinking, and often times, he would act before she could voice her needs-like with her parka. "It's just that, well, I've got a lot on my mind lately."

"And having me around does not help."

Suddenly she felt the unusual need to defend David, even if against himself. "Maxi is on a perpetual cloud nine with you here, and...I appreciate all your help. Really I do, David."

He smiled and took out his pipe and once again turned away from her to light it. She thought it odd that he would turn away since there was no wind tonight. Soon, threads of smoke rose to dance above his head. She took a deep cherry scented breath, forgetting the inevitable-she'd be once again reminded of their past. Softly she said, "You've never changed the flavor."

He turned, the pipe resting on his lips, one hand holding it in his usual grip. She swallowed at the memory.

"Guess I never have." He took a puff, leaned near. "What else is on your mind?"

She knew better than to discuss her inventions with David, but he conveyed a genuine caring so she said, "Soon Attorney Landry, my patent attorney, is going to dangle a carrot of hope in front of me."

David paused, puffed twice, then said, "Oh?"

"I've applied for a patent and will have a chance at financial independence. Hopefully soon. The last time I spoke to him, he had said that once I filed for my patent I could start manufacturing my invention, The Stayput."

David remained attentive and asked, "The Stayput?"

"It's an elastic mesh netting that keeps plasticware from flipping over in the dishwasher. You probably wouldn't understand, but plastic bowls and cups flip over from the water's pressure and get filled with dirty, sudsy water."

"I hate when that happens. I usually stick big pots over the plastic bowls."

She felt her eyes widen and wasn't certain if she was more shocked that David wasn't arguing about her work yet, or that he finally did understand the need for one of her inventions. Confusion filled her thoughts as she vacillated between awe of David's newfound housekeeping abilities and sorrow that he had to take care of himself.

"This is the closest I've come to...succeeding. I really know it will work." But having you around makes it tough to focus, she thought. "Now that I have to spend the time painting instead of making the product-"

"Let me hire painters-"

"You know I can't let you do that-"

The concern in his eyes turned to annoyance. "Why not?"

"I don't want to owe you-"

"Consider it a gift."

She stood and walked to the railing, leaned against it. "I can't take a gift from you. I would always feel as if I owed you back-as if you were in control, again."

"Damn it, Annie!" He was up and near before she could move. With his hands on her shoulders, he gave a gentle shake as if he could persuade her to change her mind by his hold. "You and your damn pride...and unfounded fears."

She pulled free and poked at his chest. "I am not afraid of anything. I've managed pretty damn well without the Grainger money."

He firmed his lips, set his jaw. "It is not Grainger money I am offering." She'd hit a nerve-a nerve she really hadn't intended to touch. "I only meant-"

"My father is the one with the attitude that money can fix everything. I only want to be able to help. To take care of my family."

She thought better of reminding him that she was no longer part of his family. Or maybe she didn't mention it because it was difficult for her to admit it to herself. Still, what he said sounded logical, and for a moment, she almost believed him. But then she thought of his comment about supervising instead of helping to paint and rationalized that it proved David thought like his father. Maybe not in the money-can-buy-anything mentality, but definitely in the I-have-control- department.

It wasn't the money as much as the attitude, the power that went with it that had ruined their marriage. She would never let him have any power over her again. Growing up with her mother had been

suffocating enough. Then, before Annie could finish her college education and start a career she had married David, making the biggest mistake of her life. He became her supporter, but also her keeper, stripping her of her independence. He took control of their relationship much as her mother had controlled her from childhood to adulthood. Now, Annie wanted all ties cut, all responsibility for herself, and to be in charge of her own life. At times she had felt smothered, but lately she could take a deep breath.

"You've set up a trust fund for Maxi's college education, and have never been late with child support. Which I only use for Maxi," she hurriedly added.

"I never doubted otherwise."

"I really appreciate all that you've done for him. But I need..." To sever all ties with you- or my pain will never heal. "I need my independence. Besides, I like working and know one of my inventions will pay off some day." Hopefully soon. "Money has never helped us in the past-actually it had caused a lot of our problems."

"It was not the money, Annie. Never was. No, it was your damn focus on what you called independence. That was the cause." David saw the hurt in her eyes and decided he should not continue. He knew very well how her mother had affected her, but Annie never would admit it, nor lose the fear that had come from being raised by Elizabeth Hamilton. He watched the pain in Annie's eyes turn to anger. Anger he wished he could deflate. It took all of his control not to touch her, knowing she'd pull away right now, or perhaps slug him, he thought with a smile inside. But all he knew when he saw the pain in the depths of her eyes, was that he wanted her now more than ever.

Wanted her physically, of course, but also wanted to stop the hurt for her forever. But Annie's words, "The more you can't have something, the more you want it," reverberated in his head like a warning. He leaned back, watching Annie and wondering if he would ever be able to have someone he wanted so much.

* * *

"Where did you get this can of paint?" David asked as he stood back and looked at the wall in the living room. Annie had rushed them through breakfast the next morning to start working as soon as possible.

"There's only one hardware store in Skyview, Henniker's, and they have quality stuff," Annie said. She leaned nearer the wall then turned to face him.

"I know that is where you got the other paint, but I thought this can might have come from somewhere else. The color looks different, Annie." Despite part of the room being a warm off white, and the wall they had just finished taking on a more yellow color, he had to smile to himself. Not at the fact that they had just wasted their time, but it was looking at Annie that had him smiling. She turned, jutted one hip out and rested her hand on it in defiance. Surely she thought it would emphasize her words, but to him it made her look like a child, an adorable little girl who knew she did something wrong-but wouldn't admit it. She looked exactly like his Annie.

He turned to hide his smile. "Okay, I am not questioning your local supplier, but what happened?"

Annie clucked her tongue. "What? Do I look like the Dutch Boy?"

"No, but the paint looks a bit different to me. If you want me to continue, I will. But I think it has more yellow in it." He reached out to where the paint had dried at the same time she did. Their fingers touched. David swallowed. "Did...you read all the directions in the book before we started?"

Her eyebrows narrowed. She pulled her finger away. "Yes, I did, David. Reading a book on How to Paint had nothing to do with the damn color." She moved away and sank into the sheet-covered chair. "Damn it. There is more yellow in it. I guess they mixed the color wrong at the hardware store. Mrs. Henniker's nephew is working there now."

"Has he ever mixed paint before?" "How should I know?" She glared at David. "All I know is, now we have to get new paint, and it is going to take longer to finish." And I'll have to work with you longer.

And it will cost you more, he thought. "Let me pay for the new-" She scowled at him. He lifted his hands as if to say stop. "Okay, you pay. You are the one who bought it."

She tried to hide the anger, or maybe it was embarrassment on her face, but a crimson glow worked its way up her neck and across her cheeks-he used to be able to feel the warmth of her skin with his lips when he had kissed away her embarrassment.

She sat upright. "How the heck could I tell that the kid goofed?"

"True." She looked adorable when angered. He couldn't help glaring at her-or wanting to kiss her.

"There's no need to stare at me like I'm some simpleton, David."

He pulled his glance to the wallpaper. "I was not...it is just that...you are a very intelligent woman, Annie. I have always thought so." He'd never had such a hard time keeping focused on someone before. Least of all someone he had known so intimately, her every tiny wrinkle of skin, every birthmark dotting her creamy white complexion. But she was his ex-wife. Even after two years, he had a hard time with that term.

"Okay, maybe I should have asked Mr. Henniker to mix the paint. But I thought the kid knew what he was doing. I can't be responsible for everyone or everything. Can I?"

He knew she did not expect, nor want an answer to that.

She shoved the top back on the paint can and muttered, "Double darn."

David smiled to himself at Annie's attempt at cursing. A familiar old feeling, like the one he felt when he had held her on a cold night, crept from his heart to warm him inside. That phrase had been a part of her vocabulary since they had met. It never failed to produce a chuckle deep inside him.

"Now we have to repaint this area," she said then sighed.

He wanted to shout "Yes!" since he'd be spending more time with Annie, but thought better than to be so obvious. Instead, he raised his eyebrows at her.

"Don't look so horrified, David. I'll do it myself when I get the new paint." She stood and went to pick up the paintbrush.

"I am not horrified. It is just that-"

"Go sit down, out of my way."

He sat on the sofa. With a slender finger, she rubbed the wall as if the color would change under her touch. "I'll never trust that kid again." She leaned over to shove the paintbrush into the coffee can full of paint thinner. Her braid swayed with the movement. A freshly showered scent floated on the breeze of the forced hot air heater as she moved near to put the brush with the others. When she reached up to grab the other brush from the ladder, David sucked in a breath. Oh hell. Could the paint fumes be

getting to him?

Today she wore her familiar gray plaid shirt that normally fit like it belonged to Popi, but as she reached up the fabric hugged her chest. Her breasts were not large, but they were perfect. Memories of holding, massaging her soft breasts bombarded his thoughts when he knew he should ignore them and concentrate on the damned wall. But he could even hear her moans of pleasure as if he caressed her right now. Oh hell, again.

As she bent down, the gray shirt moved ever so slightly, but enough to reveal the soft, white skin of her back. He knew what lay beneath the rest of the shirt. He pulled his eyes to an old chandelier, with two burned out bulbs, hanging above and blew out a breath. Maybe it would fall and knock him out.

"Are you all right, David?" She stood and turned. "You look a little flushed."

He knew his face glowed like the fire in the hearth. Damn, his hormones had long memories. "I am fine." He stood and moved towards the window.

Reflected in the pane, she stared from behind him with her thin brown eyebrows raised. She always took great care to pluck her eyebrows into perfect half moons. Although she wore little makeup except for coral lipstick, she looked beautiful, even in a clear pane of glass.

"Just start cleaning up, and we can go get new paint." Damn, he hadn't meant for that to come out like a command. It was just that watching Annie had him all confused.

"Yes, sir!" She gave him a sloppy salute and one heck of an evil eye. "You're acting weird. Weirder than usual that is."

He glared at her staring at him. "I'm fine!" He threw down his paintbrush. It landed in the coffee can with a splash.

She looked at it for a minute, paused as if in thought, then looked him in the eye. "You...you used a contraction."

"What?"

She paused again, this time biting at her bottom lip, staring and stretching back as if her back pained her. Her shirt clung to her breasts as if to taunt him. "You said, I'm...I'm fine."

"I am. And so what, Annie?"

"This isn't like you, David. I just wanted to know what got you so preoccupied that you'd use a contraction. I mean, repainting one wall is not a catastrophe. What is wrong?"

You don't want to know, he thought, but said, "Nothing." An ex-husband shouldn't be lusting after his ex-wife's body. But he was, and it made him furious at himself. He pulled his gaze away from her and looked upward. The chandelier wobbled as if reminding him to keep his lust to himself.

A chandelier on the head would be too good a punishment for him right about now. No matter how much he wanted Annie physically, he couldn't win her back with lust-but he could with love.

After the room was cleaned up David went to wash his hands. When he came back Annie was sitting on the floor looking upset.

"Annie, what happened?" He leaned down and touched her arm.

She pulled away and swung around toward David. "You know what happened! The color is off."

"I meant...well, I am not sure what I meant. I know about the paint, but we are going to buy more. You look as if there is more on your mind than the paint-"

"Nothing ever seems to go smoothly for me...since-"

"Look, love..."

Love. He hadn't called her that in years.

She looked at him as if he expected a reply, and could see his lips moving, but she hadn't heard a word after he'd called her "love." She knew the term came from Miss Windsor's influence on him. The nanny had called him the same thing, only with her accent, it came out, "luv." She had a fondness for David and his sister, Julie. At least the woman cultivated their abilities to love, unlike their parents were ever able to do.

"Annie?"

With a shake of her head, her braid fell forward, and she said, "I didn't hear you. I'm...just so angry at this mess."

"I said I am not trying to make matters worse. Now that I think about it, if the boy mixed the paint wrong, they should not charge you-"

"That's right!" Oh God, she was in bad shape, worrying for nothing. How she wished she'd hired painters instead of working with David.

Before she could chastise herself more for not foreseeing how hard all this would become, David lifted her braid into his hand. In the process, he brushed against her breast. She swallowed back a gasp. It wasn't as if she should be embarrassed that he'd touched her. Heck, he'd done a lot of touching in their past, but as if the damned divorce papers made them strangers, heat burned up her neck to her cheeks. Pulling her thoughts to the present, she felt him gently lay her braid behind her shoulder. She could swear he'd leaned forward and inhaled before he let go. And that little gesture was nearly her undoing. But, she managed to whisper, "I will go to the hardware-"

"Let me come this time."

"Fine," she heard herself say. His hand seemed to remain near her shoulder longer than necessary, but she didn't complain.

"I'll...help you gather up the old paint cans first."

I'll? Again he'd used a contraction. David had never been so distracted since she'd known him. This time she decided not to mention his change in behavior, but an odd sensation tugged at her heart.

"I need to do something first, then I will come back to help," David said as he hurried to the door.

Once outside and out of Annie's sight, he leaned both hands against the porch railing then collapsed against the nearby wall. Love? Why on earth had he called Annie love? The endearing term, while he had started calling her on their third date, had just slipped out so naturally. He remembered that night from years ago so vividly, because after their first two dates, he hadn't been able to eat or sleep like a normal human being if he wasn't around Annie. That's when he knew he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. And that was the first time they had made love.

His jeans tightened. Thank goodness he hadn't tucked his wool sweater into his pants or his reaction to Annie would be obvious. With a push, he moved away from the wall, in through the foyer, and hurried up the stairs, this time thankful for the long walk. Inside his room, he stepped towards the window and pulled aside the drape.

At first the winter day sparkled a golden tone of sunbeams across the frozen ground. Normally he hated the coldness, the emptiness that this season had brought since his divorce. But outside sparkled like a magical land, a land where dreams might come true. He smiled and looked towards the front yard. Remnants of Annie's snow-remover hung from a pulley near the fountain. The site cleared his thoughts and lessened the discomfort of his jeans. "Damn it all, Annie." He shook his head, looked at a lonely whiskbroom left near the sidewalk. If only she would give up her harebrained ideas, they could get back together now. He just knew it.

But what he didn't know was how he was going to get past her wanting to be an inventor and, more importantly, an independent woman who didn't need him.

** * **

Annie stuffed old newspapers dotted with paint stains into a large trash bag. David walked into the room as she looked up. "Thanks for all the help," she said. She shoved a tie around the bag and started to flip it over her shoulder.

"Here, let me." He reached out, but she swung the bag out of his grasp. He couldn't explain why it had taken him so long to get back. How could he tell her that his body had been reacting to her nearness as much as his mind.

"I can manage, David." Near the door she turned. "I have been managing for years."

Her words hit hard. Again, he stood speechless, but not because he lusted after his ex-wife. This time, she had managed to strike a blow to a wound that had never healed. He'd never wanted her to have all the responsibility of raising their son. If only she'd take some financial support, he knew she'd be better off. But he thought better than to get into the same argument they'd had numerous times in their past.

"I tried to hurry." He couldn't tell her that he needed to get away or he'd have attacked her earlier. He couldn't say that she made him crazy with wanting. And he sure as hell couldn't tell her that he wanted to pay for her and Maxi to join him on his remote tour. He was crazy with needing Annie, but not insane. No wonder he was using contractions now, because Annie had him nuts. "Please let me take that bag." He reached out, but she refused to relinquish it.

"Go get the keys to the station wagon from the hook in the kitchen. I'll meet you out by the trashcan," she said.

Well, at least she was still going to let him go to the hardware store. He lucked out. He couldn't have explained why he had to leave the room before. Annie would have a field day with his emotions if she knew how he still wanted her. He grabbed his jacket and walked out of the door before she had the chance to say anything. Not that Annie was malicious in any way, but he couldn't live down his desiring her when she didn't return the sentiment. Back when they were married he never had to worry about that. Sure she was a bit immature in her thinking and talking about the future, but he was a bit cocky as a newly commissioned officer back then, he admitted. Still, their love life hadn't suffered during those early years.

Popi's old Chevy station wagon, with the fake wood paneled sides, sat outside the kitchen door. Annie came out and lofted the bag into the trashcan then walked towards the car.

"Is Popi around somewhere?"

Annie seemed to hesitate. "Oh. Oh, no. He leaves his car here, just in case."

"In case what?"

Oh boy. She didn't need this right now. "Just, in case."

"How long has Popi had this thing?" David asked.

Annie chuckled. "Since I was a kid. Still runs when it wants to. Get in."

"We're going in Popi's car?"

"Um...yeah." Please stop interrogating me so that I don't have to tell you I sold my car three months ago to make my Stayput. "I know Maxi would love to spend as much time with you as he can, but he made plans for a sleepover this weekend before we knew you were coming." They headed into town along the snow-covered road. "So, it's all right with you?"

"All right...yes, I guess. Of course he can go. I will not be hurt. Maxwell and I will have plenty of time together."

Unfortunately a lot more time than she wanted. "Take a left up there." She pointed as if he didn't know his left from his right.

Turning to the window, she reminded herself that she knew David pretty well. There had to be a way to get him to want to leave sooner. There had to be something she could do to send him away from Skyview-all the way to Acapulco. There had to be some way, some thing she could say... She had it! "Hey! Maxi has a week off from school coming up. How about taking him for a little vacation?"

"Right or left?" he asked.

"Right."

The station wagon skidded on the road, but David had it under control. Just like everything in his life. "Vacation?"

She turned towards him. "As in sun, beach, water." Miles from here.

He paused long enough for her sense of accomplishment to surge from her booted feet to her brain. Nice going, Hamilton, she thought. That was a stroke of genius. He'd be spending time with Maxi and not be able to interfere with her work. Her heartbeat skipped. She was not only clever with machinery, but with trickery as well! As if a pile of snow had been lifted from her body, she could breathe easier.

"I didn't know he had time off from school soon. A vacation with Maxwell would be wonderful...but."

He pulled into the driveway of the hardware store. Before he turned the key off, the old station wagon groaned as if it'd never turn back on again.

She opened the door and stepped out. Over the top of the car she looked at him. Oh hell, he's got a "but."

"I would love to take him for a vacation, but I am not going to."

"What do you mean you am...are not going to?"

"Annie, you heard how happy he was to have us all together. So am I."

She knew he was talking, but the avalanche of snow from his revelation smothered her-or else she'd gone deaf from shock in an attempt to protect herself and her heart.

Chapter Five

Annie shook her head as if that would help clear her hearing. As she watched David make his way around the snow-covered parking lot towards her, his words about their son reverberated in her head. You heard how happy he was to have us all together. Damn David for reminding her. She ran his words through her brain again. But she had no more ammunition to counter his move this time than she could come up with when he'd first said them. David wouldn't take Maxi on a vacation. Oh, she knew their son was thrilled to have them together, but it wasn't going to last. He would find that out sooner or later. Double darn. Now what could she do or say to get David out of her hair?

"Annie? It is cold out here," David said.

Not if anger boils in your blood stream, she mused. "Sure. Cold." She motioned for him to go inside in case he got the bright idea of helping her across Henniker's parking lot. The last thing her mangled brain needed right now was David's interference-or his touch. She'd had enough in the short time he'd been here.

Inside the hardware store, Mrs. Henniker told them she'd have to order the new paint as they'd had a bad batch of base paint and had to send it all back.

"What?" Annie asked.

"They'll get it soon, Annie," David interjected.

He must have noticed Annie's eyes bugging out and how she had to hold her hands back from shaking Mrs. Henniker by the lapels. "But, ordering takes so long-" She spun towards the storeowner. "How long will it take? Wait! Maybe you have some in the store room."

David gave a weak chuckle and pulled Annie by the sleeve. "Excuse us." He nodded towards the woman. Near the shelves of interior paint, he leaned close. "What is wrong with you?"

"Nothing," she mumbled, knowing she was behaving like some lunatic.

"Nothing?" he whispered. "You nearly accosted that woman over some paint-"

She pushed at his chest. "Don't be so dramatic, David. You'll cause a public display-" She hadn't meant to hit a nerve, but when she looked up into his eyes, she wished she hadn't said that. He'd been brought up to keep to himself, and not make any scenes in public. No one was allowed to soil the Grainger family's name-not even a Grainger. In a softer tone she said, "It's just that I have things to do and wanted the repairs finished as soon as possible."

He paused. "Things...like concocting some invention?"

So much for her attempt at being nice. She brushed past him towards the paint thinner. "I do have my own life you know."

When she turned back, she noticed him take a deep breath. He came forward. She knew that look. David

was so much more sentimental and softhearted than she. Not that Annie would consider herself hardhearted. Far from it. She cried at movies, while reading schmaltzy books, and whenever Maxi made a goal during his soccer games-even if not very often. But how many times during their marriage had she unintentionally hurt David's feelings? Reminding him that she had a life without him seemed to upset him. Well, she did though. And it was partially his fault. She would only take blame for half of their troubles.

"I certainly understand that. But waiting a few days for the base paint is not a disaster. We could start painting another room in the mean time."

"Paint another room? Good idea." She pushed past him back toward the interior paint cans. "I knew you'd come in handy for something." She had to joke or who knew what her anger at herself would cause her to do next? Having David around was changing Annie, and she didn't much care for what was happening. As she readied to move away from him, she heard him chuckle. Damn. It warmed her inside. Despite the rotten luck of them getting divorced, she never had the urge to hurt David. They'd both been hurt enough from the entire mess.

Despite her heavy goose down jacket, she'd felt David's touch when she'd passed him. Warm and familiar. She knew how her body could react to him. She knew how his fingers could dance across her skin, make her feel the movement as if they floated across a ballroom. And she knew how she'd return the pleasure he'd give her with her utmost attempt to please him if she'd ever be foolish enough to allow herself to.

David carried the paint cans to the car while Annie stayed to pay the bill. He couldn't lie to himself that he was glad they had to order the paint. This way, he could prolong his working with Annie. Being with her was wonderful and frustrating all at the same time. He wanted to spend every second with their son, too, but with school that wasn't possible. Having to help with the repainting was a way David could work on his plan to win back his ex-wife. Being at Skyview proved a better trip than his usual Caribbean vacation. The same hotel suite, the same food, and the same females clad in skimpy bathing suits all trying to occupy his time each year was no comparison.

Annie walked out of the store. Her jacket hung open with one sleeve sporting a patch not even close to the same shade of blue, and strands of hair pulled free of the French braid as she slipped on the walkway. He could hear her mumble a "double darn," as she stopped and picked up a handful of snow. Reminded of the wonderful snowball fights they'd shared years ago, he readied to duck. But, she turned, flung the snow, and watched it slam against the hardware store's brick wall. That had to be meant for Mrs. Henniker.

So why should David feel disappointed?

Annie's laughter floated on the winter wind. The soft sound seemed to come from deep inside her, very near her heart, and bore a contagious note. His heart skipped. It never skipped like that when the women in the Caribbean laughed. A warm feeling sped throughout him as he felt a chuckle work its way from deep inside-inside where memories of Annie hid.

"Let's get out of here!" Annie yelled as she hopped into the old station wagon.

"You hit a brick wall, not a window. She will never know." He laughed.

She giggled and bent to grab her purse and pulled out a stick of gum. "Want some?"

"I am afraid that whatever flavor that bubble gum is would not go well with cherry." He puffed on his pipe, sending a thread of smoke into the air. Annie giggled again. His heart felt as if it floated about

inside his chest as the threads of smoke floated into the freezing air. "So we can start the hallway when we get back?" he asked, hoping she would say no because there was no hurry.

"Um," she mumbled through a bubble.

Damn. That wasn't what he wanted to hear. He held the pipe in one hand, resting it against the steering wheel. The roads were so bumpy, he had to go slowly and hold on tight. "Maybe we should take a break first?" He hadn't intended for that to slip out. It was only his thought.

"A break from what?"

She leaned and took his pipe from his hand.

"We haven't done much work yet," she finished.

For a few seconds he couldn't answer her. His mind was stuck on her previous action. She did it so matter-of-factly, just like when they were married. Some things never changed, and it seemed he and Annie had spent so much time together being married, they had acted and reacted to each other without a thought. Like riding a bicycle, her action seemed to come back so naturally. And his reaction followed suit.

"I know, but--" But what? He had no idea what to say, except that he knew he didn't want to rush the job of painting with Annie. "Well, Maxwell wants me to teach him to skate backward, and...you are so much better--"

"I'll teach him soon then." She blew another bubble. This time it popped, and he could see her reflection in the window as she turned to peel gum from her nose.

"No!"

She swung around, gum and all.

"I mean, no," he said quietly. "I promised Maxwell I would teach him, so, what I need you to do is...help me brush up on skating backward."

She paused. Sunlight glistened on the gum. He slowed the car, looked to see that no one was behind, and leaned close to peel the sticky pink mess from her nose.

Oh God, why the heck did David have to do that? Annie could feel the heat spreading up her neck. She knew ruddy blotches covered her cheeks. David's touch shouldn't affect her like this. Heck, he was probably disgusted with her breaking a bubble on her nose like some kid. She looked into his eyes. A sparkle winked at her. She swallowed hard and realized-he wasn't disgusted at all.

"That's better," he said, giving her nose a final brush.

Can the tip of one's nose blush? It sure felt as if it did as heat surged from her cheeks to the spot David's finger just left. Geez, this was crazy. She forced a giggle. "Hey, any traffic behind us?"

"Oops!" He pushed his foot to the pedal and turned down the road to the inn.

Oops? She didn't think she'd ever heard David use that word before. Geez, first contractions, now "oops." The frigid New Mexico air must be frosting his brain cells. It was kind of cute, though, to hear him say that. She smiled to herself. David pulled the car into the spot near the kitchen door. "Here." She handed him his pipe. It dawned on her that she'd taken it without a thought. What a long memory her reflexes had.

He pushed open his door. "I'll get the paint."

She reached for her purse and paused. Heck, contractions were starting to be an everyday occurrence for ole "Dictionary Dave." Smiling to herself, she decided not to mention that fact. He might become too aware of how he spoke. It was a breath of freezing air, to hear him loosen up like that. He seemed to need it. Admittedly she hadn't seen David in a long time, but someone shouldn't seem that different. In many ways he was still the same, but-and she couldn't put her finger exactly on it-there was something different about David. He seemed to be bothered by something. Something that kept him from being happy. Maybe leaving his hospital to go remote? Annie walked to the back as David rolled down the station wagon's rear window. "I'll take a few cans."

He didn't argue, but as he handed her one, he paused a second to be sure it wasn't too heavy. Oh God, why did he have to do that? He used to make sure things weren't too heavy for her all the time when she was pregnant and had so many backaches. The protective habit had stayed with him the rest of their marriage.

If she were the sentimental type, she'd be tearing up over her taking his pipe and his little gesture. But, years of struggling on her own had toughened her up. Anytime she thought of the temporary jobs she had taken like the summer at the car wash, where her skin remained prune- wrinkled the entire season, or the three weeks she managed to work at Cranston's pharmacy until her allergies to dust in the old building prevented her from returning, or the month in Mr. Frank's Funeral Parlour-she shuddered and didn't even want to think about that job. Yep, those memories kept her tough. She forced herself to turn before David's actions undid the protective barrier she'd maintained over the past two years.

"We really need to get started painting. Now." Before he could say a word or suggest a ridiculous thing like teaching him to skate backward, she took the paint and went inside.

After three hours of painting, they had only one wall finished. Annie looked at the room and sighed. She'd heard the phrase "dogging a job" but never really understood the meaning until today. David had taken so long to paint. He'd come up with excuses to touch up what was perfect, redo what was going to be hidden by the drapes, and even spilled half a can of paint. She could swear he did that on purpose even though David didn't have a devious bone in his body. Something was up.

Straight-laced, stuffy David seemed to be having fun painting. Maybe he had needed a "manual labor fix." Someone whom she'd never known to touch a paintbrush to wall was joking and laughing with each brush stroke. If that wasn't enough, every other sentence contained a contraction. She had to admit-she was enjoying herself, too.

"Hey, I'm starving, boss. What time is lunch?" he asked as he set his paintbrush in the can. It nearly toppled.

Annie reached out. "Watch it!"

He'd managed to steady the can, and catch her hand before she could pull back. "You're a mess." He took the cloth hanging from his pocket and wiped it over her hand. Spots of hunter green smudged. "This doesn't seem to be working." Still holding onto her, he rubbed it across his beige chambray shirt. This morning she'd tried to get him to wear one of Popi's old flannel shirts over it, but David insisted it didn't matter. Didn't matter? Usually a fly resting on his pant leg sent him into a dither. Miss Windsor had raised him to be spotless.

Annie's thoughts on David's upbringing were interrupted by the silky softness of his shirt against her hand. Not that the material had that much to do with it, but beneath the material harden chest muscles reminded her of too, too many things. As if her hand had fallen asleep, tiny prickling sensations ran

along her skin to her wrist and hand. The darn feelings had her jittery inside. Beneath her flannel shirt the tips of her breasts reacted with a tingling, a fullness, as if David's hand had brushed over them. She forced herself to look up.

"I can't get it clean, love." He pulled her hand to his cheek and leaned forward.

His lips brushed across hers as if he were trying to take a smudge of paint from them. Her hand became limp in his hold. Heck, her entire body weakened as she leaned into David. He eased her hand to her side and placed both of his hands on her shoulders. In the second she blinked, his lips touched hers again. This time, David's lips lingered. She reached around his waist and pulled him closer. He sprinkled kisses along her cheek, nuzzling behind her ear-where he knew so expertly how to send her to Nirvana, a term they'd used for their most intimate pleasure. She moaned in the delight of her trip.

David inhaled Annie's scent. He'd always had a hard time deciding if she'd used the lavender soap or cologne. One had a clean, floral fragrance, the other always mixed with her body's chemistry to give a sweeter scent. He inhaled again. "Soap or cologne?"

Beneath his hold, her breasts pressed into his chest as she gave a gentle laugh. "Cheap lavender soap."

"It smells wonderful-"

"Mommy and Daddy!" Maxi screamed.

Annie pulled away from David as if he'd turned to fire. Oh God, had Maxi seen them? What did she think she was doing? Maxi would never understand. She didn't understand. There was nothing to understand. Their hormones had just played a rotten trick on them. If Maxi saw, she'd have a heck of a time trying to explain-his divorced parents had no right kissing each other like that-certainly not in a way that had electrified her body. Oh God, how she hoped Maxi couldn't notice her hands shaking, her knees wobbling, and hear her heart thundering.

"Hello, son," David said, scooping the excited child into his hands.

Maxi grabbed onto Annie's shirt from his perch in David's arms. "Are you two getting married again? Yippee!"

Annie jabbed David in the side so hard, he nearly dropped Maxi. "Correct him!" She eased Maxi from David's hold and set their son on the floor so she could hold his shoulders and look into his chocolate brown eyes-as if that would make a six-year-old understand better. Positioning the child so she could see that she held his attention, she said, "No, slugger, Mommy and Daddy aren't getting remarried-" Once again, she poked David.

"Ouch!" He gave her a firm look. "Okay, okay, Annie." He looked at Maxi and ordered, "No, we are not getting remarried. Now go play, son," in a firm tone.

Maxi's eyes filled with tears. Annie knew David always turned into his commander mode when backed into a corner, and having to explain their kiss sure was backing him into a corner. She needed to lighten the mood before Maxi broke out into tears. "Hey, slugger. Tell Daddy, yes, sir!" she exclaimed and gave David a snappy, comical salute.

She couldn't tell who was more confused, David or Maxi, but suddenly the boy broke out into wonderful little boy giggles. "That's a boy, slugger." She sucked in a breath and momentarily had a vision of Maxi, suitcase packed with a toothbrush and his favorite stuffed Dalmatian, trudging through the snow to the safety of Popi's. The vision brought back painful reminders, painful memories of a nine-year-old girl doing the same. Only the little girl really never came back.

"I'm sorry, slugger."

David had never called their son by that nickname. His sudden words touched Annie's heart, and she wasn't even jealous having to share her son's nickname with David. Actually, she liked it and by the smile on their son's face-he did too. David took Maxi's hand and led him to the sheet-covered couch. "Sit down and I'll explain."

Her darling imp had the most confused look on his face. His little cheeks, which had earlier glowed in happiness, now drooped around his frowning mouth. Annie's heart broke as a tear worked its way down her cheek. With a swipe, she wiped the back of her shirt against her face, not caring if Hunter green permanently colored her skin. The deep forest color fit her mood as if she'd fallen through a giant hole into a thicket of haunting trees.

Maxi looked up into his father's face. David remained so calm, so loving. She felt like exploding, like shouting, like taking their son and holding him so tight they'd be as one, yet, David sat next to Maxi smiling and talking in a soft tone as if it was the easiest thing on earth. That was one of David's character traits she had fallen in love with so long ago.

She realized she was staring at David and not hearing a word he said. As if a fog of memories floated inside her head, she felt the past inching its way into her thoughts, yet again. Their picture-book wedding, strictly military style with saber-carrying airman that had to cost the Grainger family more than Popi had earned in a lifetime. The day she and David sat in anticipation watching her home pregnancy test turn positive, and the hot, loving sex they had shared after learning the wonderful news they'd be parents. She wiped her face, knowing she must look ridiculous with reddened eyes and a hunter green-streaked complexion.

Annie watched her ex-husband take out his linen handkerchief and wipe a smudge of purple, obviously jelly, from Maxi's face. Then David ran his hand across their son's forehead, pushing darkened curls away from his saddened eyes. David had soothed Maxi so many times like that before. With every disappointment, every scrapped knee, every broken toy, David would get their son to feel so much better. Maxi was a great kid, and she couldn't take all the credit even if David didn't live with them.

This is what it'd be like if he did though, she mused.

"Oh geez," she mumbled.

David looked towards her. "Did you say something?"

"Hmm? Oh, no...well-" She came near and took Maxi's sticky hand. More jelly she suspected. "Do you understand what your Daddy is trying to tell you, slugger?"

Maxi pulled free and touched her arm as if she were the child. "Mother, I always understand Daddy." He gave her an adorable wink-one like David always used to give her-and turned. "Can I go play now?"

She managed a nod and wondered when their six-year-old had gotten so mature. David's short visit already had a positive effect on Maxi. At times he appeared a miniature version of his father-and that really wasn't all bad.

"Sure, go ahead, Maxi," David said.

Maxi? Annie watched the boy scamper off, nearly knocking a vase of crimson silk roses to the floor in his haste. Children were resilient, she told herself. Children of divorced couples do lead wonderful lives. Then why the worry in her heart? Because children need their parents-both of them. She thought of David moving to the other side of the world, and sighed. Oh God, she prayed that Maxi wouldn't get

hurt. She looked at the love still glowing in David's eyes after he had watched their child leave.

And added her name to the prayer.

David turned away from Annie. He knew his eyes held the moisture of pain. In his haste to come win back his family, he hadn't realized how hard it was going to be to live with them in the mean time. Okay, so he and Annie weren't married, but it sure as heck felt as if they were when they had to deal with a family situation.

And, oh God, how he wanted that feeling to last-forever.

He turned. The blue of Annie's eyes had dulled like a sky covered by a wisp of clouds. His heart ached. His stomach knotted. And he couldn't control the urge to hold her.

"What are you..." Annie mumbled into his shoulder as he pulled her tight.

"Shh." At first he'd expected a struggle. He only meant to hold her for a second, only needed that minute amount of time to feel her in his arms. After their scene and Maxwell catching them, he knew she'd pull back. But she leaned into him, knocking all logic from his logical brain, and oh hell, it felt so good.

Annie tilted her head back enough to look at David. A glassy film moistened her eyes. Before he could apologize for touching her, she bent forward and brushed his lips with hers.

Startled, he nearly pulled away. Her kisses touched so lightly, as a butterfly to a flower, that he had to concentrate to feel her caress. But he did feel Annie's kisses, and his body responded as it always had. Deep inside a swirling of emotion, a pleasant whirlwind spun-spinning love and wanting as a blizzard tosses flakes of snow above the earth.

Eagerly he ran his hands along her spine. Before he could return her kiss, Annie cried out his name, kissing him deeply, with a needling from deep inside as if they'd never been separated a day in their lives. He pulled her so tightly she moaned, but he knew the sound came from pleasure, not pain. She kissed him hard, kissed him long and as if the wind blew the door open, the blizzard of emotions swirled David into its depth.

Hungrily she kissed his lips, ran her tongue across his mouth until he eagerly opened for her- for the sweetness of Annie. He tasted her pureness, the honey of the woman he'd loved long ago, as her tongue ran across his. He tasted her hunger, the need he hoped she would still feel. And he tasted her zest for life as she melted into his hold. His body responded as it always had, luxuriating in the joy that only Annie could give him.

Without a thought, Annie ran her hand along David's shoulder, feeling the hardness beneath the silken material. Sliding her fingers onto his chest, she continued downward until she reached below his waist-to feel how she pleased him beneath the heavy denim of his jeans. David's moans, deep sounds that seemed to resonate so deeply in his chest she knew they came from near his heart, increased with her touch, her desire to hear more.

"Oh God, love," he whispered in her ear.

His words sent her heart into a flutter. She could barely breathe. Sucking in only enough air to keep her from passing out as David kissed along her cheek, across her temple, and to her favorite spot behind her ear-the spot that sent her over the edge-Annie pressed her hand into David harder.

And remembered how it used to be.

She pulled her hand away and cupped beneath his chin. Their eyes met, she blinked, released her hold,

and looked away. "We...we have to stop." Not that she wanted to. Oh God, she didn't want to. It occurred to her that logical David was not stopping them. Why not? He'd always been the sensible one-and right now they both needed someone to be sensible. He had to know how wrong this was, how hurt they could both get, again. Quickly she released her hold, took a step back.

"Annie...I'm sorry-"

She touched his lips with her finger. "Don't, David. Let's just forget this happened-"

He stepped forward. She stepped back, two steps.

"Forget? I know you felt the same...Annie." He reached for her, but she moved farther away. "I know you did. I know you-"

Annie pushed past him and stood near the window. "Yeah, David, you know the physical me, how to push the right buttons..." She did it again. Her words seemed to drop the temperature in the room to near freezing, much like the air outside. Pain filled his eyes, pain she never meant to cause, but did. "I don't mean to hurt-"

"Push the right buttons."

It wasn't a question, but a painful statement. It would have been easier to look at him if he'd gotten angry. Even accused her of leading him on and stopping, but he didn't. He only stood there suffering.

He stepped toward her, but she didn't fear him touching her. She could see the dullness in his eyes, the way his lips turned slightly at the ends when he was hurting. And the dimple, similar to the one she'd just noticed on their son that morning, disappeared.

"Look, David, I didn't mean to make it sound so...so-"

"Mechanical?" he forced a chuckled. "You are the expert on things like that. Aren't you?"

Ignoring his implication that her inventions always interfered, she continued. "All I meant was, you know me physically, how to make me feel...wonderful. How to make me want you, but we can't." She turned away. She couldn't concentrate, seeing him standing there as if her words pierced through his heart. "I do want you, David."

He sighed.

She flinched and took a deep breath. "But-" She turned and faced him. Grabbing a nearby chair, she said, "Yes, you know how you just made me feel, but you really don't know me."

** * **

David turned and walked from the room. The scent of paint mixed with Annie's lavender clung to his clothing. He pushed the kitchen door open, not certain where he was headed. Annie had said something, but he couldn't stay to listen. Once again she'd managed to yank at his heart, and even though he knew she didn't mean to intentionally hurt him, it didn't feel any less painful.

"Hey, David," Popi said as he looked up from under the sink. "Pipe's leaking." He gave David a curious look, but thankfully didn't ask why he looked like hell.

"I'd offer you my help, but I don't know how-" Hell, Annie had him using contractions as a routine now.

Popi chuckled and returned to his job. "No need. Keeps me off the streets to come help."

"Popi? May I borrow your car?"

He remained under the sink and said, "Keys are on the hook near the back door. That is, if Annie returned them. You heading off somewhere alone?"

David knew Popi wanted an explanation, but how could he tell him David needed to get away from this house-away from his ex-wife, whom he still loved so deeply? He couldn't.

"I need a change of scenery."

"Go ahead, son." Popi craned his head from under the sink and smiled. "She'll do that to a body."

** * **

The old car ran along the snow-dusted roads as if on autopilot. Good thing, David thought, since he had no idea where he headed. The "Welcome to Skyview" sign glared at him from the roadside. Annie Hamilton's great grandfather had started this town so long ago. Hamilton, he thought. David couldn't get away from all the reminders. With a sigh, he pulled up to the curb in front of the Sugar and Spice Bakery. It'd been years since he'd parallel parked, but he managed to get the old station wagon near enough to the curb so it wouldn't get hit by passing cars.

Digging into his pocket, he pulled out a quarter for the meter. Skyview was a quaint old town, a town with character, a town with every amenity as Denver, only on a smaller scale. He looked up to see Mrs. Henniker leaning so far into the window of her hardware store to get a look at him, he thought she'd fall into the display of snow tires. Skyview was a town where everyone knew each other's business.

With a wave in her direction, he sent Mrs. Henniker scurrying away. He walked past the bakery, chuckling, despite his boiling emotions and the pain in his heart from Annie's words.

You really don't know me.

Of course he knew her. For God's sake, he was married to the woman for years! How could he not know her? A cold wind slapped his face as if to knock some sense into him. Annie must have meant something else. But what?

He found himself standing in front of a pawnshop on the edge of town. Quaint little Skyview had a row of buildings near the lake that didn't exactly fit into the mountain setting. A man inside rubbed a cloth over the counter as if polishing gold. The shop wasn't as sleazy as one's in a big city, but it didn't look as if it belonged here. A cold wind blew open David's jacket. He had no idea how long he'd been walking and thinking-thinking of Annie.

He made his way inside to warm up and ask how to get back to the bakery. Not that he'd worry about someone stealing Popi's car in this town. Everyone knew whom it belonged to, but David needed to get back. Why the rush? he asked himself.

To see Annie was the reply.

"Afternoon," the man said as the bell on the door clanged behind David. "New in these parts, son?"

Someone in Skyview actually doesn't know I'm Annie's ex-husband, he thought. "Hello, sir. Actually, I have been here before, several years ago. I'm staying in town at the Hamilton's."

The man gave a nod as if to say he approved and continued rubbing the counter. With a squirt of some liquid cleaner, that reminded David of the pines surrounding Annie's yard, he said, "Aye- yeah. Nice

place."

The pawnshop looked well cared for-not that David had ever been in one before. But it didn't look as bad as anything he'd seen in a movie. On the opposite wall was a booth for mailing packages and near the back wall was a Western Union section. Seemed the shop had a variety of uses.

"Yes, well, I must have gotten turned around." The man's rubbing caught David's attention as he looked downward to follow the gnarled fingers push the cloth across the counter. A gold band sparkled beneath the glass. "I started out walking near the bakery-" At first he didn't pay much attention, but when the cloth passed further down the glass, he noticed the embossed rose on the top of the ring. "-and ended up..." He leaned closer. The Denver jeweler, who had worked for his family for years, had handcrafted the original design just for David. He knew roses were Annie's favorite flowers. "That ring...could I see it closer?"

The man hesitated. He pulled his cloth from the counter. "You know the owner gets first crack at buying it back-"

"I only want to see it," David interrupted.

"Aye-yeah." The shop owner pulled a chain filled with keys from his worn black vest and unlocked the display case. "This here's a special one."

David felt sick. Of course he knew that ring was special-because he'd had it made for his wedding to the woman he loved. "Annie's ring," he mumbled.

With a curious look, the man pulled the ring back. He stuck it into the box and shoved it inside the case, then locked it. "She'll be back." He stuck the keys into his pocket and peered at David below his bushy gray eyebrows as if he thought David a robber. "She always comes back-it ain't for sale, mister."

Words stuck in David's throat as if the pine scent filled his lungs instead of life-sustaining oxygen. He couldn't manage to explain, to apologize. It became difficult to breathe as he wondered, how could she? How could their past mean so little to Annie that she'd pawn his ring? He walked to the door, glad for the support of the brass doorknob.

"Two lefts and a right'll have you back to the bakery," the man's voice drifted through the door as David shut it.

"Thanks." His heart weighed heavy as he walked along the street, not caring if he slipped on the snowy surface. Passersby nodded as David walked by the Do Drop Inn, the pharmacy, and neared the bakery. Mrs. Henniker remained away from the window, but he could see her crane her neck from behind the counter as he stepped into Popi's car.

A tear worked its way down his cheek and he couldn't have cared less if the nosy woman or the entire town saw him cry. His heart hurt too much not to. How could Annie pawn his ring? Pawn. The word had such a sleazy ring to it. He pulled his linen handkerchief from his jacket pocket and wiped his eyes. Grape scent touched his nose. Maxwell's jelly. He'd used the handkerchief earlier when his son was so excited about seeing his parents kissing.

David had been excited, too.

He held the linen to his nose and inhaled. The reminder of his son, their son, helped to ease the hurt. He felt his heart warm at the jelly scent almost as if the sweetness were a Band-Aid for the wound that Annie's actions had caused. Suddenly he sat upright and shoved the handkerchief into his pocket.

Now he knew what the hell was going on.

Chapter Six

Annie sat in Attorney Landry's office staring at the picture of the White Sands National Monument on the wall behind his desk. She recognized the scene from her childhood trips to the sandy hills with Popi. Annie wished she were a child, hiking through the hot sand right now, her little hand in the comfort of Popi's leathered grasp.

Then, she wouldn't have to think about her life, worry about her son...or think about her ex- husband.

She touched a finger to her lips. Things had gotten too complicated. Gently she tapped her finger, thinking she should be thrilled to be sitting here awaiting the patent attorney so he could discuss her application. Instead, she sighed and thought about David. How she wanted him earlier today. The feeling seemed almost impossible to resist. She remembered his body so near, his warm breath on her neck, his kisses to that sensitive, special spot he knew so well behind her ear. Physical lust. That's what it had been.

She guessed David hadn't understood what she had meant about not knowing her, but she couldn't explain it. If she said the words out loud it would hurt too much and make it all too real. He never really understood her. Okay, so she was a little absentminded about certain things, got her mind going in more than one direction at a time, but she had a purpose in life. She needed to succeed for Maxi, to pay Popi back for all he'd sacrificed to help her, and to be independent of anyone-any man.

Even during their marriage, David provided for her while she attended college, then, before she could have a profession, she was a stay-at-home mom. She loved being with Maxi, but the hunger of wanting to be able to support herself had never left. Now, she needed to make a living on her own, without David or any one else's help. She didn't want her son to live the way she had had to as a child. Although she loved her mother, Annie's childhood had been filled with pain and sacrifices. A noise at the door startled her.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Hamilton." Attorney Landry stood near his desk with his hand held out toward her.

She shook his hand and tucked her problems inside. She'd have enough time to think things through later. Seeing the elderly patent attorney got her inventive juices flowing. Inside her purse she had a check that would finally start her career-hopefully.

"Hello, Attorney Landry." She reached into her purse to get out her checkbook.

His deep chuckle filled the office. "I see I don't need to ask if you are willing to take any further financial risk of getting a patent."

She laughed. "I understand I may not get it, but if I don't continue, I can be certain I'll never get it."

He pulled a manila folder from his desktop. "Okay, let me explain what is going on so far. As I have told you, your invention would be compared to similar ones that already have patents." He opened the envelope and pulled out some sheets. "Unfortunately, there are similar..."

Annie felt as if the room was closing in on her. He was about to tell her that she would never get her patent. Despite her throat constricting, she managed, "I...didn't get it?"

"Not yet. Now don't be so distressed, Ms. Hamilton. It is not uncommon that the first go-around is denied. We will merely reapply."

And pay you and the government more money, she thought. "Is it worth it?"

"How badly do you want the patent?" She forced a smile. "Reapply."

"I'll need you to write up another description of your invention. I will redo my part. We need to make it sound different from these." He pushed the pile of papers towards her.

Annie rifled through her briefcase and produced a wrinkled sheet of legal paper. "I remembered you mentioned that we might need to redo, so I have been working on it already. Here it is. And a better photo of my prototype."

He gave her a polite smile, but she wondered if he thought she was some kind of overeager nut. She was an inventor. Not a nut. Of course she was eager. It was a long enough process so why not be excited at every step she took? One more thought added fuel to her excitement fire- she could feel herself getting closer to success.

Taking the paper, he read it over his Benjamin Franklin styled glasses. "Looks fine. Now, I'll have to rewrite it to cover all the possibilities as I'd told you. I will have the draftsman redesign his drawing to submit with the new application." He leaned back in his chair. "Your invention is quite a good idea, Ms. Hamilton. Unfortunately, it will cost a bit more to reapply." He gave her a warm smile. "I wish you luck."

Annie's heart flipped like the darn plastic cups in a dishwasher. Maybe this was going to be the one. Even the lawyer liked her idea! Then she realized that her budget was going to have to be redone now. She groaned.

"Are you all right?"

"Fine."

He continued, "I will notify you when we have refiled, and of course, send you a copy. As I said, you may choose to start manufacturing your Stayput-"

"I can? That's right! I'm sure you had already mentioned that in our other meeting, but what if someone already with a patent...although I've never seen anything like it in stores or catalogues."

He chuckled. Maybe at her excitement, maybe at her foolishness. "Many people get a patent and don't have the finances to manufacture the invention."

She thought of Popi's patent for curtain rods and how he had never been able to afford to manufacture any product to sell. She had come close to being one of those poor inventors because of the darn explosion of her Painless Painter-because of darn David. Luckily, mesh netting and plastic hooks didn't cost as much as other inventions might, and she could make The Stayputs and package them herself. Those were the reasons she had decided to pursue this invention right now. Money, or her lack of it, and time. Oh brother, now that she thought about it, she really didn't have much time to devote to her Stayput. Not with having to repair the damage her Painless Painter had caused.

"In any case, if someone with a similar patent sees you have started to manufacture your idea, they would ask us to cease and desist from further manufacturing."

"Oh wow. That sounds scary, but it's worth the try." She looked up to see Attorney Landry standing with

his hand toward her. At the rates lawyers charged, she didn't need to be sitting any longer than necessary. With money as tight as it would be for a while, she would have to be more conscious of things like wasting it on extra attorney time. "Thank you, sir." He nodded. She turned and left.

The ride home flew by as Annie reviewed Attorney Landry's words over and over in her head. She could start making and selling her Stayput and pray that those people with similar ideas already patented didn't manufacture theirs. An old Chevy truck pulled out in front of her, causing her to swerve to the side. Luckily Popi had insisted she use chains every winter or she'd be careening down Potter's field like a bobsled. A sick feeling gripped her when she thought of not being around to raise Maxi. She needed to concentrate on driving.

Geez, she did have the tendency to let her mind wander as David had accused her of doing so often.

As Annie turned into the driveway, she noticed David on the porch rocking and obviously enjoying his pipe. He never did mind the cold, and she'd give him credit for always offering to smoke outside if it bothered anyone indoors. She planned to sneak in the kitchen door to avoid him, but when she stepped out of Popi's station wagon, she decided to walk around the front. Never one to hide from trouble or confrontations, she admitted to herself that she'd run into David eventually anyway. "Hi," she said, climbing the small set of stairs near where David sat.

He nodded towards her. She'd expected a little hesitation after their kiss today, but David looked, well, angry. What the heck did he have to be angry about? It wasn't as if she had kissed him against his will. Maybe he really did think she had led him on. "May I join you?" she asked.

"This is your house, Annie. You can sit where you like."

Why'd she get the feeling he'd like to tell her where she should sit-and it wouldn't be on a porch rocker? "Maxi around?" she asked as she collapsed onto the wooden seat.

"He's at his friend's for the weekend." He turned and stared. "Remember?"

How could warm brown eyes look like ice-covered boulders so fast? "Oh damn, I didn't mean to be gone so long."

He took a puff on his pipe, then asked, "Something get you so preoccupied that you forgot your son-again?"

Wow. That was a low blow-not at all David's style. She wrinkled her forehead at him. "What the heck does that mean?" David was angry, and she didn't have a clue why. Oh heck, he must have found out she went to the patent attorney's office today. Maybe Popi told him, and it was like rubbing salt in David's wound. He stood and leaned over the porch railing facing away from her. Great. Now she couldn't read his expression, and that was one thing she was good at doing. Of course, David's emotions were always obvious. He was an honest person and didn't try to hide his feelings.

"What it means, Annie, is-" He paused.

Worry worked its way into her thoughts. Realistically, she shouldn't have to be concerned about what her ex-husband thought, but they needed to keep on good terms for Maxi's sake. That, she knew, was one way to keep from having their divorce affect their child's life too much. But what David thought about her seemed to bother Annie way too much lately, as if she really cared, or wanted David to think well of her. "So what did you mean? It's not like you to say hurtful things, David."

He spun around, and she wished he hadn't. Pain had replaced the anger in his eyes as if the ice melted into tears. Oh God, how had she hurt him this time? What would make him accuse her of forgetting

Maxi again?

"People change," he said.

"Change? You're not making sense. Are you telling me you've turned into a vicious person who likes to hurt others? 'Cause if you are, I don't buy it-"

"Why did you pawn my ring?"

Pawn? He made the word sound so dirty, so deceitful. And how the heck did he know she had pawned the ring? She sat down and fiddled with her finger, where the ring would have been.

"What's the matter, Annie? I know you've never been good at lying, but I thought you'd at least make one of your half-hearted attempts...and tell me I'm mistaken. Tell me that the handmade ring I designed for our wedding is not really the one I saw today-in a pawn shop."

He remained staring at her, and it looked as if he would break down into tears at any minute. Oh God, she couldn't stand that. Her desire to comfort him grew as she looked at his face. With a surge of willpower, which she had no idea she had, she ignored his look and allowed her shock at his finding out about her ring to turn to anger. That was the only emotion she could summon to control her urge to run and hold David. That, she knew, was not a good idea. They'd already made one mistake by kissing. Her physically consoling him would be...too much to bare. Both hands clenched and unclenched on her lap. Despite the cold winter air, heat burned up her cheeks, and she didn't care if she looked like a cooked lobster in the middle of February. "First of all, David-" She stood and faced him head on. "-the ring was mine. Or did you only lend it to me when we got married?" He started to answer, but she waved away his words. "It was mine to do what I want-"

"So you pawned it to get money for one of your inventions?"

"Stop saying 'pawned' as if it's some dirty word. It's like a loan. Mr. Wicker holds the ring for me and gives me cash. Then I take him money when I have it and get the ring back-not that I wear it, anyway."

Again, his lips curved to a pout. What did he expect? She'd still wear her old ring? It didn't matter what he thought right now. What mattered was how he obviously felt. By the look in his eyes, he was hurting. She couldn't stay angry with him anymore. Not that she didn't want to give him a quick upper cut for his accusations, but there was never a need to hurt David. Physically or mentally. Before she had time to soothe his pain, it dawned on her-she had used every cent from the mortgage on repairs, supplies for her invention and having to refile for her patent. Now, she didn't have the money to get back the ring.

"Let it go, David. This is another example of how different we are." Since the day her snow- remover had attacked him, her life had taken a downward spiral much like the snow flurries swirling across the yard.

"Right now I'm not going to try to convince you that people really can change, Annie." A slight smile had returned to his lips, lightening her heart. "Besides, can't you get the ring back now that you have the money?"

Leave it to nit-picky David, who needed to have every detail covered, to ask that. Why couldn't he assume she could buy it back? She couldn't go into detail of how she'd already spent the money, so she tapped a finger to her lips to buy herself time to think. Coming up with even a little white lie proved useless. Damn, David knew her so well. "Well, let me think-"

"Didn't you budget getting our wedding ring back from the pawn shop?"

That did it. His question dredged up reminders of the days he'd inquire about her every move as she tried to run their household. She poked at his chest and said, "I don't have to answer to you, Major Grainger. I'm a Hamilton now, not a Grainger and not an airman in your squadron. Stop trying to interfere in my life! Stop trying to run everything!" She pulled away and turned. "You came here to protect our son from me losing the house and to see him. So, keep out of any of my business that doesn't involve paintbrushes, paint, thinner, or spending time with Maxi!"

Annie stormed off the porch before David had a chance to say anything. It was difficult enough trying to argue with a "wounded" David. She had to get out of there. Damn. She'd nearly forgotten about the ring. Truthfully, she had forgotten. Why hadn't she planned to get it back from Mr. Wicker with some of the mortgage money? "Maybe I subconsciously didn't want it back," she mumbled. A passing neighbor gave Annie a curious look as she walked down the sidewalk headed nowhere. "Evening, Mrs. Harper."

"Hello, Ms. Hamilton," she said, glaring at Annie as if she'd grown a set of antlers larger than the moose's that hung above her fireplace. Annie wanted to tell the woman to mind her own business, she felt so tense now, so...so, heck, David had her at a loss for words-something that didn't happen often. After a quick wave to Mrs. Harper, Annie turned toward the back door and once inside, ran up the stairs two at a time to the seclusion of her room. She tripped over Maxi's fire truck that was near her bed. Before she made a mental note to tell him to be more careful, she realized this was the weekend of his sleepover at his friend's house. She had forgotten, again-and blamed it on David's arrival here.

Annie flopped onto her couch and pressed her head against the back with a sigh. Maxi was gone and Popi had planned an ice-fishing trip with the winners of the setback tournament who were staying in a cabin near Cloudcroft. "Oh great," she mumbled. She was stranded in her own house with David. No buffers around. No son to take her mind off her problems, or to just hold for a moment of comfort. No one around in the gigantic blue elephant except her and her ex. What a combination. By the way her body had reacted to David's kiss earlier, she knew this could be quite a challenge. She grabbed a pillow and hugged it to her chest.

What were the chances she could get David to paint the hallway tonight-by himself?

** * **

Annie stuck her toe out of the cold bubble bath. It had started out hot, to soothe her aching muscles and ragged soul, but now she wouldn't be surprised if soon she'd have another skating spot for herself right here in her tub. She'd procrastinated too long. She'd avoided David too long. She'd thought she could spend the entire evening in her room, but darn it all, she was hungry. Why hadn't she stopped for dinner on the way home?

Because she couldn't afford to spend the money eating out.

Grabbing a towel, she stood and dried off her waterlogged body. Maybe David was in his room busy at work. Maybe he'd eaten something earlier and wouldn't come to the kitchen. Maybe she'd get a million dollars for her Stayput invention-next week. Yeah, right, she thought.

Dressed in her comfortable red flannel shirt and gray corduroys, she walked down the two flights of stairs to the kitchen in slow motion as a prisoner might approach the electric chair. Worrying like this was ridiculous and very uncharacteristic for her. If other's opinions had affected her life, she'd be in a different profession with all the jibes she'd taken over the years about her inventions. Why should she care what David thought of her anyway? He'd visit with Maxi, make sure the kid was safe, that his harebrained mother wouldn't lose their house, and leave. Leave for his remote tour. She paused on the landing.

Why didn't that sound like the answer to her prayers?

At the kitchen door, she stopped. The radio played classical music, and the scent of food, not anything identifiable to her palate but smelling heavenly, wafted through the crack. Her heart dropped. Double darn. She hesitated, sucked in her breath, and shoved open the doors.

The table was set for two.

No, not just set-arranged. Maybe he's got a date, she thought. That'd be the perfect solution to get him out of her way, yet, a twinge of jealousy sparked at that thought. Oh great, he'd taken the crimson silk roses, her favorite flower, favorite shade, and had set them in the middle of the table. Somehow he'd found the good china that had been left from her great grandmother and had it arranged perfectly.

"I thought you'd be down much earlier, Annie."

She turned toward the stove to see David, wearing her navy patchwork apron over his jeans and ivory chambray shirt, stirring something in a pot. He never looked more masculine. She swallowed. Hard. More adorable. More sexy....

This time she barely managed a sigh.

"I...was in the bath." Ready to drown myself after the day I've had.

He turned away and said, "I heard the water running from my room, but it seemed like a long time ago." He gave a soft, sensuous laugh. "You should be real clean." After he set the spoon on a nearby dish, he wiped his hands on a towel and turned. "Let me reheat your tea."

Oh great. She couldn't believe this. He'd gone to so much trouble. Reluctantly, she shuffled her feet until she neared the table. She peeked at him to see his expression. No anger there. "I'm sure the tea is fine." When she reached for the mug, he did, too. His hand covered hers. As if a spark flew from the candle near the roses onto her skin, a warmth spread up her arm- but the candle wasn't even lit yet.

David hesitated. She felt so good to hold. "Don't be silly, Annie. The tea is ice cold now." She looked at him and didn't pull away. Confusion filled her blue eyes, and tiny wrinkles creased into her forehead. She looked darling. "I will...I'll heat it for you." Their eyes met. David took her hand from the mug and held it for a second.

"You're using contractions on a regular basis lately, David."

He leaned forward and kissed her softly on the cheek. "I told you people change."

"Yeah, change," she mumbled, not even sure if she'd spoken out loud. The room seemed to take on a hazy, foggy, Casablanca-type quality. Her David-her ex-David-became her focus with the background a blur. Déjà vu had her mind in a tailspin. Maybe she'd fallen asleep in the bath and this was all a dream? He'd done so many wonderfully sensual things like this when they were married. Her subconscious could have been dredging them up. Yeah, that had to be it. She was dreaming. She snaked her hand along her side and pinched. "Ouch!" Geez, that hurt!

"Annie?"

David's voice pulled her from her observation. She was awake, and he'd gone to a lot of trouble. The least she could do was remain coherent. "Hmm?" His chuckle, his old familiar chuckle, filled the room and despite her attempts to ignore it, warmed a special place in her heart. Obviously the place had lingered there after the divorce.

"I didn't think you heard me. Have a seat. I'll heat the tea again," he said.

Like a robot, she moved to the chair and sat as he pulled it away from the table. David scooped up the mug and headed towards the microwave. He'd worn his jeans, her favorite ones, which had a whitish "wear and tear" mark on the rear pocket from where he always carried his wallet. But she wasn't looking at his pocket. The material hugged him so closely, she had to swallow again. She should have given them to Goodwill years ago. It wasn't like David to wear worn clothes. She looked at the table, but it was like David, the old David, to want to please her.

She sighed, and then blinked the foggy scene back to reality. She had to keep her mind clear. If she got all entangled in the physical David, well, the morning's kissing scene came to mind. Tonight there was no Maxi to interrupt. Nor anyone else for that matter.

"Here, love," he said.

As he set the tea mug down, she groaned. Did he have to keep calling her that? Since David wasn't the devious type, she knew it had slipped out very naturally for him. But it still made her want to shake his shoulders and shout to stop. Stop making her remember. Stop making her feel special. Stop making her want him, again. But, for once, she knew better than to ask him not to call her love because it would hurt his feelings. Hmm, maybe David was right-people do change.

But not enough in their case.

She took a sip-the darn tea had the perfect amount of sugar, the perfect amount of milk. "Thanks, David." She took another sip to give herself time to think, but all she could do was taste the perfectly fixed tea and remember how it used to be when they were together. "Look, you...didn't have to go through so much trouble." Of course he didn't have to, but he obviously wanted to. After another quick swig of tea, she said, "This is a nice surprise. Something smells yummy. Can I help do anything?"

He smiled. "You always were better at making gravy."

She stood, took her mug, and walked to the stove. David fiddled around with some things in the refrigerator while Annie mixed flour into the meat stock in a pan on the stove. She still had no idea what they were going to eat, but the growling in her stomach didn't care. She was famished, and it smelled like a four star restaurant in the kitchen. Heaven knows her cooking never created such wonderful aromas.

"All set, love?"

She paused her hand, then continued. "In a minute." Trying her damndest to ignore his nickname for her, she stuck a finger into the gravy, tasted it, and proclaimed it done. "So, what's for dinner?" she asking, licking her finger.

He looked as if he would say something about her finger in her mouth, but instead he said, "Potatoes, meat, and vegetables!" Just as Maxi had said. She and David looked at each other, sharing a laugh that warmed the room better than the stove on full power.

At the table David placed spinach salads with warm bacon dressing onto their plates. She sat across from him and looked up. It seemed as if they still belonged together. How could two people who still loved each other remain apart? She knew she'd never stopped loving David and could tell he still felt the same. So what went wrong?

Does the term "night and day" ring a bell? she asked herself.

With a forkful of salad crunching in her mouth, she admitted they were just too different. David was neat. She was sloppy. Pessimism led David's actions, she was so optimistic that she rarely thought of consequences before doing something. She swallowed and sighed. Why not admit the real reason she bristled at the remembrance of their past? He never encouraged her with her inventions, and he thought her an absentminded professor-although she really wasn't one. His discouraging her about her inventions was the wedge that drove them apart as far as she was concerned. Obviously he wanted her to stay at home and not have a career of her own. Again, he wanted control-like her mother.

David cleared the salad plates and served roasted veal, which she could never afford, oven-baked potatoes with rosemary, and asparagus swimming in a cream sauce. What he paid for fresh asparagus this time of year could probably buy her a new flannel shirt. Still, this was all a nice surprise, and she guessed he'd made a quick trip to the grocery store while she hid away in her tub.

"This was all wonderful, David." She ate the last bite of meat that she could manage. His smile satisfied her desire for something sweet. No dessert could have made her feel as she did inside right now-not even chocolate-and she usually craved something sweet after a meal, with chocolate as a top priority.

"Come on." He reached across the table and took her hand. She rose and started to follow.

"What about the dishes?" She knew David couldn't leave the kitchen in this condition.

"I'll get it later."

Oh geez, this mountain air had to be doing something to the set-in-his ways major. She giggled and thought what a nice change as he shoved open the kitchen doors.

The hallway seemed eerie without Maxi's chatter. David led her to a table set in front of the fireplace and held the chair for her. It had been so long since she enjoyed the gesture that she didn't insist that she was capable of getting her own chair, as she used to do. Not that she'd given up her feminist beliefs, but she had mellowed her actions with age and probably a bit of maturity thrown in.

A Scrabble board sat on the table. Little rows of letters caught the glow of the nearby fire as David stoked the embers. Soon a blaze of orange filled the room amid the crackling flames and scent of pine. He pulled out the chair across from her, took out his pipe and started to relight it.

Annie leaned closer to see if her eyes were playing tricks on her. David held the lighter she'd given him years ago near the bowl of his pipe. Threads of smoke billowed to the beamed ceiling while she sat there wondering why someone with David's finances still carried the old silver-plated lighter. The darn sentiment of him keeping it had her eyes burning and her throat tightening.

"Can I get you something before we start?" he asked.

She managed to shake her head. "I'm fine." I'm not really, she thought, confused at his keeping the old gift. She pulled her thoughts to the letters in front of her. It wouldn't do any good to harp on why he kept the old lighter. Maybe he just never got around to buying himself another one. She forced herself to believe that and added an "e" and "t" to David's word "me." They started out simple, and Annie lost track of time as she enjoyed challenging David's words. Their laughter circled to the ceiling, their hands touched between each newly created word.

The evening had turned out so well.

Good thing she didn't stay in her room starving, she thought. The meal, the tea, the game were all so wonderful that she shoved the disappointment of having to refile her patent deep inside. She peeked at David as she pretended to study her letters. Shadows danced across the smooth skin of his jaw. The

dimple, similar to the one Maxi had inherited, formed in the center of David's chin with each laugh. He puffed on his pipe, sending the cherry scent across the game board. She inhaled until the flavor replenished her old memories.

"Hold on. 'Blenny' is not a word," he accused.

She straightened in her seat. "No, it-"

"Uh huh!"

"Uh huh, nothing. It's a fish."

Despite the dim lighting, his teeth sparkled white as his laughter filled the giant room. She pointed to the dictionary, but he leaned back, took a drag of his pipe, and waved his hand as if to accept defeat.

"Looks like Dictionary Dave has been outdone tonight!" She pushed away from the table as he did.

"Wait just a minute. Don't I at least get a consolation prize?" He took her by the shoulders.

Looking up into his eyes, she lost her concentration and any humorous retort to his comment. Before she could clear her mind, David leaned near. Heat from the fire had warmed his skin and as he touched his cheek to hers, that same warmth spread throughout her. His kisses started lightly across her cheek. Before he worked his way to behind her ear, she moaned, pulled him tightly and kissed him on the lips with a longing that had lain dormant for two years.

Nirvana would soon be hers. How she remembered the term they'd used for taking their love to a special height, the most wonderful feeling on earth. She knew she should stop and pull away, but, damn it, she really didn't want to. Somehow, David's actions tonight erased all her memories, except the ones sending currents of love throughout her right now. No way did she want to stop.

David ran his hands across her back, sending sparks of fire through the flannel as if the logs had tumbled from the hearth onto her skin. But the logs remained on the grate, glowing flames dancing above like a scene on a Hallmark Christmas card.

When they bumped against the table, tiny clattering sounds surrounded them as Scrabble letters pelted to the stone floor. He pulled her near. She clutched at his shirt as if to bring him just a little closer. Firm muscles of David's chest pressed into her breasts, now tender from her wanting him. She eased away enough for him to relieve some of the wanting as he cupped his hand beneath each one, ever so gently, just as always. No, the wanting only increased as she knew she needed him right now. He held his fingers still.

It seemed like forever, David's pause. His hands remained in place as he looked into Annie's eyes. "Very soon...I won't be able to stop."

She'd had a million things on her mind these past few days, but for the life of her, all she could think of was what she wanted David to do right now. "Then, stop," she whispered.

Despite how their bodies reacted to one another, there was more to a relationship. Sure, their love life had been wonderful but the time was not right.

David touched a finger to her lips. "Annie, let me know when you are ready."

Chapter Seven

A mixture of sadness and confusion filled David's eyes. Annie hadn't meant to hurt him, but she needed to make it clear to him-and to herself-that they could never make love again. Instead of arguing, which she fully expected, he took her hand and said, "I'm dying for some cold, fresh air. You game for a walk?"

Startled, and a bit relieved by the change, she nodded. "Sure." Suddenly the room, David's nearness, and the heat still simmering to the tips of her toes smothered Annie. She followed David as he helped her with her coat and put on his jacket, too.

Once outside a blast of cold air cooled the heat David had caused in her before she made it down the porch stairs. Moonlight glowed on the walkway, beams glistened on the ice. The frigid atmosphere mimicked how Annie felt after the foolish thing they had just done.

"I have an idea. Come on." He took her arm and guided her around the back of the house.

Annie let the excitement of their evening together take her mind off the mistake they had just made. Instead, she sucked in the cool air and watched David run ahead and turn. Now she knew how Maxi felt on Christmas Eve. David pointed towards their skates hanging on hooks near the kitchen door. "You game?"

She nodded, and her laughter echoed in the silent night as she raced him up the stairs. "Last one across the lake is a rotten egg!"

David loved a challenge and pushed ahead. "You're on, love!"

Before she had her final lace tied, David had made it halfway down the stairs to the lake. Annie hated defeat. She looked around and spotted Maxi's sled. Before she could think better of the idea, she grabbed the sled, stumbled off the porch in her skates and with a whoop, slid past a mumbling David and landed several yards onto the frozen lake. She pushed herself off the sled and headed towards the other side, ignoring David's protests that she had cheated.

"Don't be a sore loser!" she shouted as he skated towards her, nearly colliding with a nearby tree.

"You never said anything about combining sledding with skating-" She pushed against his chest and skated past him. "Hamilton's house, Hamilton's rules."

He laughed and headed towards her. "Okay, you win that one, but don't turn your back on me, love. This if fair warning."

"Hey, I owe you a few lessons." She took his cold hands into hers and looked at into his eyes. "We should have brought gloves."

"I'm fine. Show me your stuff."

Annie gave David a few instructions on how to skate backward, and, not the least bit surprised, she watched him take off as if he had taught her.

"I think I can manage to teach Maxwell how to do this." He spun in a circle and skated facing her.

She laughed. "He'll be thrilled." Almost as much as his mother is watching you, she thought. She chose to forget that they'd made one mistake-albeit a big one-and considered this the best night she'd had in a long time. Two years to be exact, she admitted to herself.

All the dates she'd had since becoming single again couldn't compare to the fun, the excitement, or the wonderful feelings she'd felt with David. But this couldn't last. He had to leave soon. Her heart jolted as David's skates skidded along the frozen surface. This time next month he'd be on the other side of the world.

David touched her cheek. "Hey, what thought took the glow from your rosy complexion?"

"Nothing, it's just...I'm getting kinda cold." She hated lying to him, but she couldn't tell him the truth.

How could she explain something that she herself didn't understand? How could all the pain of their past, their breaking up seem like a distant dream-not real?

He wrapped his arms around her and guided her toward the bridge. Once beneath it, they stepped into the snow and walked to the porch. David helped her unlace her skates, and she didn't protest. After she put her shoes back on, she stood and turned. "Thank you for the fun evening."

"Hey, we didn't have dessert."

"I'm not-"

He looked as if she were about to burst his balloon. Obviously he'd planned something for dessert with his special meal. Sharing store-bought cookies and warm milk wouldn't cause him to frown like this. But she didn't want to be with him any longer. It was too hard to keep her hands to herself, to keep that old barrier from crumbling. When she looked at the excitement in his eyes, she stepped near and wrapped her arm under his. "Okay, wow me with your specialty." Hearing his laughter made any amount of worry disappear.

Once in the kitchen David ordered Annie to sit while he cleared the table and fiddled with dishes, pots, and things from the freezer. He set a mug full of steaming tea in front of her and returned to the stove. The aroma of bananas, cinnamon, and butter circled around the kitchen, causing her taste buds to salivate.

"Something smells great, David."

Without a word, he held the silver plated lighter towards the pan and a flame popped into the air. Bananas Foster. How could she have forgotten what used to be her favorite dessert?

Maybe she'd repressed the memory along with so many others.

David served the steamy sweetness over mounds of vanilla ice cream he must have prepared earlier. The crystal dishes frosted in the warm kitchen as he pulled them from the freezer and ladled the warm bananas cooked in butter and rum on top.

Annie took a bite and nearly dropped her spoon. Memories flooded back with every sweetened sensation rushing across her taste buds. Finally, she couldn't take it anymore. She needed to get out of here. The way they were getting along too well was not good. Not good at all. "That was delicious, David." Annie licked the last morsel of ice cream from her spoon. She noticed it was the middle of the night as she looked past David, but amazingly she wasn't the least bit tired-only a bit saddened.

"Thanks." He stood and took their dishes to the sink. As he ran water in them, Annie took a sip of tea and watched him. He looked so comfortable in the old kitchen as if he'd lived there for years. Quickly she halted that thought as he turned and came near as if he could read her mind. He lifted his mug of coffee.

"Look, about today and the pawn shop," he said.

She shook her head and tried to swallow quickly. There was no need to rehash that stupid ring scene. Not tonight. Things had been too nice.

Before she could speak, he continued, "You were correct, Annie. I had no right to question you about the ring. It's just that...well, I was hurt when I saw it...."

She knew he was talking, but she'd gotten caught on the "hurt" part. The knack of hurting him seemed to come so easy for her. Too easy and always without intent. She managed to wave her hand, and after a quick wipe of the napkin to her lips she said, "Let's forget that." David stopped drinking and stared. Now what? Had she said something wrong? He dropped into his chair. "What?" she asked.

"That's it."

"That's what? You look as if you've just realized some magical formula-"

"Close, Annie. That's been our trouble. Forgetting our problems, instead of talking them out."

She took a sip of tea before saying anything. It bought her just enough time to think. Think if she wanted to get into this conversation. The night had been going so well. Couldn't they just enjoy it like two friends? David sat staring at her, obviously waiting for her reply. But the only reply she could think of right now was, guess they couldn't be just friends. "All I meant was, we don't need to talk about your seeing the ring today-"

"But maybe we should. Maybe you will understand how I really feel-if we talk." He reached over and touched her hand. "Maybe if we'd talked about our problems..."

She watched his lips move but didn't hear a word he said. Memories flooded her thoughts. Arguments, pain, hurting someone you loved. It had all seemed like so long ago, until now. Now vivid scenes of David coming home from work and becoming upset with her as, oblivious to the world around her, she fiddled with one of her inventions, his dinner never started.

Days of working on a project would be washed away by an argument. Excitement that she'd be close to something salable would be dimmed by hurtful words. How many times had she tried to do both? Be a good wife, a darn officer's wife and be a successful businesswoman. She'd even stomached hundreds of wives' teas to help David's career. "I tried," she blurted out without thinking. His lips stopped moving, a look of confusion covered his face.

"Tried what? All I said was we should have discussed our problems, maybe even with a therapist-"

"Therapist?" She realized he still held her hand so she pulled away and stood. "We needed more than a therapist, David." She looked into his eyes. "A lot more."

He pushed up from his seat and touched her arm. "Annie, therapists can do wonders to repair relationships."

"Repair." The word sounded so pathetic, but that's how she felt. The urge to chuckle at the ridiculous thought of therapy helping someone so different as she and David choked in her throat. She looked down. David took her hand again, his touch burning into her skin. She had to forcefully control her thoughts-and not let her physical desire for her ex-husband interfere. It wasn't easy since she still found him the most attractive man she'd ever known. Damn it!

He was the only man she had ever loved so deeply. The only man she had wanted so badly, it hurt, hurt

down to the bottom of her soul not being around him each day, not being able to make love to him. Easing free of his touch, she turned. "No amount of therapy could repair two people who are so different, David. That's what we need to face, not trying to talk out our problems."

She turned toward the door, before she saw his face, before she heard his words, before she allowed herself to stay.

"People can change, Annie. They really can," David whispered as the swinging doors swished back and forth. He knew she didn't hear him, and, for now anyway, it didn't matter. Annie wouldn't believe his words.

She'd have to see for herself.

He'd have his work cut out for himself, and he really didn't know if he could change enough to accept Annie, and all that came with her. But when he'd touched her arm, felt her soft, warm skin beneath his hold, made love to her—he knew he wanted to try. All he had to do was think of the loneliness he felt, the wanting to be with her each time he crawled into his empty bed back on base.

Yes, he would keep up his plan until he succeeded.

Pushing the chair leg with his foot, he dropped down into the seat. Without a thought, he took a sip of cold tea and realized there was nothing in the world that could keep him from giving his best shot at accepting Annie and her seeing the world through her rose-colored glasses.

Tomorrow would be one more day he'd face that challenge.

** * **

After a restless night of drifting in and out of sleep, Annie forced herself to get up before the first sign of light. All night she vacillated between remembering the wonderful evening with David—then facing the reality of how it had ended. Oh God, they'd made love. She really hadn't dreamt it. Not that it didn't rock her world, but it did tear down a wall of her barrier. She had to build it back.

She couldn't remember getting up before sunrise in a long time, but at least they'd have an entire day to paint. Now the desire to get the repairs done grew so strong, she could feel her adrenaline pumping. David had to help finish and leave her alone soon. He just had to, or she didn't even want to think of the consequences. Yanking her corduroys up, she realized they still had until tomorrow before Maxi came home.

On the way to brush her teeth, she pulled the drapes back and groaned. Snow swirled in gusts of winds, and by the look of the wintry scene, it'd been coming down for a long time. Despite the early morning darkness, she could see that drifts covered what used to be the walkway like giant sculptures of cement. Just what she needed. Now no one could even make it down the road for several days. Snowplows concentrated on the main roads and the seclusion of a tiny town now seemed a detriment. With any luck some tourists visiting the local ski resorts would stumble upon Annie's house. She'd give them free room and board until the snow stopped, and she'd be saved from being secluded with David.

She was a bit of a dreamer at times.

After dressing quickly, she hurried downstairs to at least have a short time of peace and a leisurely cup of coffee. She jumped off the last stair and ran smack into David as he came around the banister. "Geez, you scared me!" She took a step backward to avoid any more contact. This had to be a platonic day of painting. He reached out, but she pulled further back.

"Sorry. I've never known you to get up so early."

And you used to get up this early to jog and fix my breakfast, she thought. "Couldn't sleep too well with all the snow." She swung her head away from his view and rolled her eyes. As if the snow made so much noise falling that it kept her up. Why was being around David making her act so crazy lately?

He politely ignored her foolish statement and turned towards the fireplace. She noticed he'd started a crackling fire, and a pot of coffee with two mugs sat on the table they'd used for Scrabble last night.

Damn him, he assumed she'd be down early.

"Ready for coffee? I'm afraid there's no morning paper yet." He walked to the table and held the coffee pot midair, waiting for her reply. "Actually, there may not be one all day."

How she wished she could excuse herself and go into the kitchen alone, but that would be rude. She may be a lot of other things, but she did have good manners. "Love some."

He started to pour the steamy liquid. The scent of French vanilla wafted on the currents in the huge room, enhancing her craving for her morning fix of caffeine. "Have a seat. I mixed blueberry muffins, but didn't put them in the oven so they could be hot when you came down."

She sat and stared at the room. A crackling fire, blazing heat, heavenly coffee aroma, and, oh geez, a handsome, thoughtful man. Great. This had all the makings of a romantic moment, but she couldn't let it become one. A vision of last night's almost lovemaking had her fly out of her chair. "Actually, I'd like to get started on the painting early." Despite his look of disappointment, she continued, "Don't want to miss the opportunity to get the hallway and workroom done before Maxi gets home. He'll want to spend all his time with you telling you about his sleepover."

"Us. He'll want to tell us about it," David corrected.

"Yeah, us."

David forced the feeling of chagrin inside. Annie couldn't be pushed too hard. He knew her despite what she had said. She didn't do well backed into a corner. He'd have to ease off and go along with starting to paint so early. Damn. The muffins would have been a great touch. But things didn't go so easily in life. Anything worth working for certainly had a better reward than something that came too easily.

He knew that first hand from his past.

Because his parents traveled most of the time without him and his sister, his mother would send David and Julie gifts, expensive ones, from all over the world. But his parents-especially his father-never understood David. Never knew that all he really wanted was to be with them. At least Nanny Windsor had made David and his sister realize that material things weren't as important as spending time with someone-as showing them that they were loved. David shuddered to think what he would have turned out like if he had allowed his parents to buy his love. Thank goodness he had learned to appreciate people, not objects.

All he had to do was think of the earlier years he and Annie had shared when they had little money. Giving up his trust fund had been the smartest thing he'd ever done-well, except falling in love with Annie. He'd give her credit for trying to manage back them, even giving to charity when they had a tight budget. But it didn't matter. Hot dogs on Wedgwood, or paper plates for that matter, tasted so much better when sharing them with the woman he loved. He'd tried his hardest to have a meaningful relationship with Maxwell, and not act like some rich "weekend daddy" when the boy came to visit

David. By the way his son had turned out, David was very proud and felt his efforts had been paying off.

Actually, thinking about Maxwell reminded him why he was here at Annie's house. David had put his "plans" for winning back Annie on hold for now, knowing that couldn't be rushed. This time, he wanted everything to work out-and be permanent. Spending every second possible with his son would keep him busy while he gradually worked on Maxi's mother. "Sure we can start painting instead. Here," David said. He poured Annie a cup of coffee and let her fix it herself. Smiling, he watched her ladle three spoonfuls of sugar and more cream into her mug than he'd use in a week. "I'll stick the muffin batter in the refrigerator and meet you in the hallway." Annie's look of hesitation was a good sign. She really did want to share breakfast by the fire together.

He knew it, and he smiled again.

** * **

Annie leaned against the wall, forgetting about the wet paint until she felt her shirt stick to the surface. "Double darn," she mumbled and pulled away. She and David had been working for hours, and he seemed to be doing a faster job today, but she kept being distracted. It had to be because they were alone in the house. No Maxi to interrupt them, she told herself. Of course, she could have tried harder to keep her concentration on the wall instead of David.

Why'd he have to wear those jeans again?

Each time he bent, she nearly painted her hand. Once when he leaned across her and she inhaled his darn cologne, she did spill part of the can onto the tarpaulin they'd covered the wood floor with. Now he insisted on whistling. Not just a carefree whistle of notes, but a song, heck, a complete song but she couldn't think of the title of. That didn't bother her as much as the fact that his whistling sounded so familiar-just like he used to do when they did anything together during their marriage. Suddenly she stopped and glared at him. John Denver's "Annie's Song." How could she have forgotten that? Maybe she'd repressed it.

He turned and caught her staring. "What? Am I doing something wrong?" he asked.

What a loaded question, she thought. "Um...no. Wall looks fine to me."

"And the color?"

"Perfect. Oh, that reminds me. I'll have to call the hardware store for the other paint." David frowned. He was enjoying this way too much and obviously was in no hurry to finish, unlike her.

"How about a little break now? My arms are not used to all this reaching." He carefully set the paintbrush into the can of thinner and reached to rub his neck. "Manual labor can be quite painful." He laughed.

His little action made her feel bad. It was her fault for pushing David so hard that he now had a kink in his neck. "Sure we can stop." She went to set her brush down near the can of thinner, too. Before she could turn towards the kitchen, David lifted the brush into the can, grabbed a rag, and bent to wipe the floor. She readied to curve her lip and turn, but David paused. He couldn't see her reaction from this angle, but he stopped and stood-without wiping the paint. She had to steady herself against the unpainted part of a nearby wall at the thought. Neat freak David had controlled his obvious urge to clean up after her. "I'll...stick the muffins into the oven."

Maybe she could silently pay him back by massaging the kink out of his neck. Shoving the doors open, she flipped on the light and stopped. Letting out a sigh, she looked at the counter. He'd had a tray all

ready to serve her earlier, complete with a single crimson rose in a vase. For a second, she grabbed the counter and shut her eyes. Even a silk rose had the same effect as a dozen real ones might have. She inhaled and imagined the familiar scent. A warm feeling started deep inside and like a current of a river, worked its way throughout her. Damn David for his simple, wonderfully romantic gesture.

Her eyelids flew open, and she pushed away from the counter towards the refrigerator. David had neatly covered the muffin batter with plastic wrap. Taking the bowl and a handful of frozen berries from a nearby dish, she shoved them into her mouth and set the bowl on the counter. Within a few minutes, she had the muffin tins full and stuck them into the oven. Grabbing another handful of berries from the refrigerator, she stuck them into her mouth, wiped her hand on a napkin, and slammed the door shut. David stood right in front of her on the other side of the door. "You scared me, again."

"Sorry."

Before she could say anything, he leaned near and took a few berries from the bowl, then tossed them into his mouth! Okay, maybe he set them neatly into his mouth, but the old David would have been chastising her for not using a spoon instead of joining her.

"Hey, blueberries taste better this way."

Oh, man. This wasn't good, she thought. After an inward moan at his obvious change in character, she couldn't convince herself that her attraction to David should be weakening several notches after all these years-instead of gaining strength. Although she knew it was based on the physical, his actions confused what she had always considered major differences between them.

"Yeah, better." It dawned on her that he didn't seem to care anymore that she wasn't a graduate of some finishing school.

"Muffins smell good." He took a napkin and wiped at his lips.

Okay, she didn't expect miracles. She smiled to herself. "They do. You obviously have been taking cooking lessons." She took the timer she'd invented from the shelf behind the stove. With a flip of her wrist, she sent the metal ball inside on its journey through the maze. It had taken her months to perfect, but now the ball's trip took exactly ten minutes before it hit the bell on the bottom. Sure, it was a limited invention, but it was good practice and an amusing hit with all Maxi's friends. They got a kick out of it, and she'd earned enough to apply for her first patent with the money she'd made selling the timer at local craft fairs. From the corner of her eye she could see David staring. "Never see a timer before?"

David's raised eyebrows gave a clear indication that he'd never seen a timer like this before. "It's unusual. I'll give you that."

He turned towards the stove, and she cursed that she couldn't see his expression. Was that a compliment? "Thanks," she said, hoping to determine the answer by his reply.

With a shake of his head, she guessed his eyebrows were raised to his hairline. Oh well, so much for her timer. He poured coffee for both of them, set their mugs on the table, and turned. "I like it. What do you call it?"

"What? I mean, I call it a...timer."

David's laugh nearly had her reaching to check his forehead for a fever. "Surely you can come up with something more clever."

"I can? Oh, yeah, I can. Actually, I thought of 'Countdown to ten.'"

He smiled and said, "I like that," as he craned his head back in an obviously painful stretch.

"Here. Sit down." Annie knew she had to be either nuts or a hypnotized by the transition of David, but she motioned for him to sit and placed her hands on his neck anyway. With a few skillful massages of her fingers, she had David purring-and herself hotter than the damn muffins in the oven.

"God, Annie, I've missed you." He reached up to take both of her hands into his.

She felt her heart jolt and a little voice in her head scream, "What the hell are you doing?" Not one to ignore the little voice, she pulled free of David's hold and walked away from his chair. She stopped near the window and watched the snow fall. Tiny white flakes danced in the yard, tapping against the windowpane. How beautiful the flakes were. Usually she enjoyed snow, but not today after the recent changes in David-and the recent foolishness of herself. Instead of admiring the winter beauty, suddenly Annie felt as if the darned frozen water kept her and David secluded in here like the darn muffins locked in the oven.

"It's beautiful up here when it snows." David came up behind her.

She stepped to the side. "Yes, it is."

"Do we need to clean the sidewalk-"

She looked at him. "If my snow-remover was working, we wouldn't." Darn, now their painting would get behind, but she couldn't take a chance of someone making it down the road and falling on her property. That would be more ammunition for David to prove her absentminded by not being a good caretaker of the house. And, in this day and age, a fall was a possible lawsuit. That would be all she'd need. Maybe David would even try to take Maxi away. She looked into David's eyes and guilt flooded her. How could she think that? He would never do that. "Yeah, it's a good idea to clear a path," she said.

David looked at her for a few minutes. She knew he had some remark about that invention on the tip of his tongue. While she glared at him, her mind churned with retorts. As if she scared the words out of him with her staring, he remained silent. Or maybe she'd imagined that she was the cause of his silence. A smile covered his face, and he took his pipe out, nonchalantly lit it and puffed away. The action always had such a calming effect on him. Funny, it seemed David was making some kind of effort not to comment on her work. First the timer thing and now this.

Well, at least this was a welcome change. She had no desire to argue about her work for the millionth time. He could never understand her need to be self-reliant, to earn her own money. Growing up with only a mother, Annie had to give up so much that all the other children had. She guessed her mother loved her children in her own way, but it had never been easy to watch the other girls with new bikes, pretty dresses, or shiny patent leather shoes for school. The day Maxi was born, she vowed her son would never do without as she had. Not that she wanted to spoil him with material things, but she at least wanted to make sure he never got into a situation where the other kids would tease him-she knew too well the pain of childhood teasing.

And she knew the pain of a dictatorial parent.

Her thoughts had wandered as David stood silently looking out the window as if waiting for her to finish her daydreaming. He puffed on his pipe, sending the familiar scent to mingle with the aroma of the baking muffins. Inhaling, she realized that he above all people should understand her reasoning. David had spent most of his adult life trying to break away from the Grainger family's money. Early on she had thought David joined the Air Force to escape his family, but his dedication to his country through his duty had changed her way of thinking.

"Annie?"

"Huh?" She looked to see David watching her. "Sorry, I was thinking."

His smile was warm and genuine as he asked, "Shall we go work on the snow?"

Her earlier thoughts still very much on her mind, she nodded. "I'll get my jacket and gloves. Make sure you wear a hat. It's cold out there."

David watched her leave. A tiny feeling warmed his heart at her words. At least she cared about him staying warm. She'd said it so matter-of-factly as she used to years ago. Earlier, when she had massaged his stiff neck, he thought he'd have to pull her onto the floor and once again make love to her. But he could still hear her warning him that they could never do that again. As much as he wanted to make love again, he needed to hear Annie admit she had been wrong in saying that. With a sigh, he followed her out of the kitchen.

The frozen ground crunched beneath their feet as they tried to find the sidewalk buried under the cover of white. "You sure we are in the right place?" he asked.

Annie looked up from her shovel and smiled. "Yes, I know the walkway is down there somewhere. It didn't look like the snow was this deep from inside." She flung a pile of snow into the yard. "I'll have to call and see how Maxi is when we get done."

"I'm sure he's fine, but I do miss him."

She leaned on the handle of the shovel and pretended to rest. It was only an excuse to watch David. When he'd spoken about Maxi, his eyes sparkled, the dimple in his chin deepened, and maybe it was the cold, but she was certain his cheeks glowed. A pang of guilt touched her when she thought of how David and Maxi should be together all the time. He was a terrific father when he didn't try to order Maxi to do things, and Maxi idolized David.

Forcing herself back to shoveling, she refused to allow the guilt of being a single parent eat away at her. Before she could think, a cold wetness slammed into her arm causing streams of icy water to drip between where her glove met her jacket sleeve. "Hey!" She looked up to see David armed for another icy assault. Her shovel landed in the fountain after she flung it to free her hands. Ducking, a snowball whizzed past her. "No fair firing at an unarmed woman!"

His laughter mingled with the howling wind. "Like you'd give me a chance to equip myself with ammunition!"

She grabbed a handful and didn't bother to smooth it into a ball.

The pile of snow landed across David's chest. "Cheater!" He pulled his jacket forward and shook. "Damn that's cold, Annie."

She darted toward a tree for shelter. "You started it, Grainger. Remember the Hamilton rule..." A snowball caught her behind the neck. With a swipe to clear it before it worked its way down her collar, she stopped. David tackled her to the ground. "You're the cheater!" He pulled her close. "This isn't the NFL, buddy."

"Nope. It's the NKL."

She wiggled from his hold into a drift of snow. He grabbed her foot. "What the hell is NKL?"

With a swift pull, he met her face to face and kissed her. "National Kissing League, Hamilton."

His words came out a husky whisper, geez, a sexy whisper that had her sweating beneath her goose down. They laughed and nuzzled each other. David's lips found hers again. With a heat that made her think summer had arrived, her body welcomed his lips, his taste, his hardness pressing into her thigh.

She could feel his arms straining beneath his jacket as he held himself above her, not wanting to crush his weight into her. With every kiss her desire to touch him grew. She snaked her hands inside his jacket and rubbed across his chest. David's moans filled her ears as his breath warmed her neck.

"NKL my eye," she murmured and shook her head.

His laughter vibrated against her face. He pulled back enough to look at her, his eyes sparking a deep mahogany in the brilliant sunlight. "I thought that was pretty clever."

"Clever? That's a first for you, Grainger." She ran her hand across his cold cheek, gently tracing around his lips.

"You're not the only one who could come up with foolish inventive thoughts-" As soon as the words came out, he knew he'd chosen the wrong ones.

Beneath his hold, she stiffened as if the icy snow had frozen her body, but he knew her reaction wasn't from the cold. "I meant-" She pushed at his chest, toppling him into the snow. She must have known that he didn't mean anything hurtful. Annie had to be able to see that he was different now, but her damned pride must have gotten the best of her.

"I know exactly what you meant. That if I wasn't such an absentminded inventor, I wouldn't make such foolish inventions like a snow-remover, a ten-minute timer, or any number of gadgets that I waste my time and measly amount of money on."

"Don't, Annie. Things were going so well-"

She stood. Snow from her hasty brushing flew into his face. "They were, David, but as usual, you'll never be able to accept me as is. You see me as some flighty little woman."

"Wait a minute-" He reached for her arm.

She pushed his hand away.

"I never said you were damaged. If you'd concentrate on something other than one of your inventions, things would go so well, things would have gone so well, we'd be together- "

She leaned inches from his face. "This walkway would be cleared by now if you'd dug the snow as deeply as you've dug yourself into this hole." Turning, she said over her shoulder, "I'm going to succeed with one of my foolish inventions-despite you, David Grainger. And I am not absentminded or flighty!"

Collapsing into the snow, he wondered why he didn't keep his mouth occupied with his kisses. Annie was wrong. He didn't think of her as absentminded, but for the life of him, he couldn't explain why her putting so much effort into her inventions bothered him. When he thought of her working so hard, it worried him. If he couldn't explain it to himself, how could he tell Annie the truth? Maybe he'd never be able to accept her as a serious inventor. Or maybe he'd never see why she had this need to make a profit on her own when he'd gladly support her and Maxwell.

Maybe he would never be able to win her back.

Chapter Eight

Annie kicked her boot off so high it hit the porch ceiling. She knew David could still see her from where he stood in the snow, but she couldn't care less. This roller coaster ride her emotions had been on since his arrival had to stop. She couldn't take it any longer.

Her heart knew the pain all too well.

In her stocking feet, she headed into the house. From the hall window she could see the snow hadn't let up. How much longer could it last, anyway? Running into her office, she shoved on the radio to hear the latest weather report.

Rap music filled the office. She pushed the knob through classical, country western, and a lot of static. No weather report. Damn it. She quickly flipped off the switch before "Annie's Song" came on and her anger would be inhibited by nostalgia. Collapsing into a chair, she sighed. There was a lot of work to do to repair the workroom, and sitting in her office wasn't going to get it done-sitting and feeling sorry for herself that is. She had to take advantage of David's help before his leave ended.

When she stood to leave her favorite picture of Maxi, at age three and wearing the clown Halloween costume she'd made for him, caught her gaze. Maxi. Geez, she'd been so preoccupied, she'd forgotten to call and check on him. David's accusation that she left him in the hardware store came to mind. She knew he didn't mean to be malicious, that there wasn't a malicious bone in David's body. Nevertheless, she felt horrible when she relived that incident of leaving Maxi in the store even if only for a few seconds. Again, she let a momentary worry that David might try to take Maxi away slip into her conscious mind. The thought sent her jumping up and grabbing the phone.

Through the window, she caught David's form amid the gusts of snow. He was removing the Christmas decorations from the tree near the front walkway. A warmth melted the ice of fear. No, he wouldn't be that cruel. She knew she was a good mother, despite her slight forgetfulness, and David, a wonderful father, knew it too. Maxi deserved both of them.

With the phone to her ear, she dialed. "Hi, Margaret. This is Annie. How's my little guy doing?"

Margaret Batlow had four boys, and she managed to juggle raising them with a full-time nursing career on the base where David was stationed. Although she was a civilian, David had said she was one of the finest nurses at the hospital. Annie never worried when Maxi stayed there.

"They're out back, digging their way to China. Want to talk to him?" Margaret asked.

Annie could see the two boys covered in snow. "No. Let them be. I'll try to get over there later-"

"Try? Annie, haven't you been listening to the weather reports?"

She looked outside. Not only couldn't she see David, but the pine tree was indistinguishable in the fog of snow. "No, I've been trying-"

"Don't worry about the kids. When the snow lets up tomorrow, Tom will bring them back."

"Tomorrow?" Her heart did a flip at the thought. Was it going to snow that much and trap her here longer-with only David around? "Are you sure it's going to snow that much?"

"Well, when they call it a blizzard and give it a name like 'Agnes,' I'm guessing we're all snowbound for

a while." Margaret's laughter rang through the receiver.

Annie couldn't summon even a smile. A blizzard? Why didn't this bad news surprise her? For a fleeting moment she felt worried for Popi, then relaxed as she remembered that Popi was a die-hard New Englander, who was always prepared for a blizzard. Popi might even have hoped for this storm to keep her and David together...Well, someone upstairs had a mighty devious plan going to keep her and David together. But didn't the man upstairs know Annie and David didn't belong together? She rubbed her finger across her lips, recalling his kisses. Maybe it wasn't such a bad plan after all.

"Thanks, Margaret. I owe you."

Margaret chuckled. "I'll take you up on that when I can manage to farm out the other three."

Annie laughed and said good-bye. The slamming front door took her attention from the phone. She shoved it onto the holder and ran to the door. "Oh Geez!" Like Frosty the Snowman, David stood in the foyer, covered from head to toe in white. "What the heck happened?"

He sneezed.

She ran forward. "Get those wet things off and sit by the fire. Maxi is fine, but Margaret said this isn't any old storm."

He raised one eyebrow covered in droplets of melted snow. "No kidding."

"Did you fall or something?"

As he yanked off his snow-covered jacket, he glared at her. "My foot got tangled in a pulley system-"

Oh great, she thought. As if hearing that a blizzard, with a name yet, raged outside the house wasn't enough. Now he was about to tell her that her snow-remover attacked him, again. She really should have removed the pulley till she was ready to fix the system, but it had slipped her mind-and that she blamed on having David around. "I'm sorry-"

He sneezed, again.

Colds couldn't come on that fast she assured herself, but guilt nudged into her thoughts. Poor David. "Let me get you some dry clothes and a hot drink. Chocolate?"

He curled his lips, then coughed. "Something stronger."

"I'll fix Popi's hot-buttered rum recipe. You go sit by the fire. Take the afghan and wrap it around yourself." Without thinking, she touched the back of her hand to his forehead. "No fever, yet." Following David to the couch near the fireplace, she made certain that he was tucked in and comfortable after he slid his wet clothing out from under the covers. "Close your eyes and rest until I get your drink. Do you want me to get you some dry clothes?" She hoped he'd say no. She sure as heck didn't want to go rummaging around in his room. But he nodded. Double darn, she thought. "Okay, take it easy." She turned to leave.

"I took the Christmas decorations down, so the snow wouldn't break them."

A weak "thanks" came out as she worried David looked a little pale. Of course, she'd be concerned about anyone getting sick, but this worry dug deeper. Deep into the past. She always worried even when he had complained about an ordinary headache. And if Maxi got sick, she was a veritable basket case. Luckily, Popi always managed to help, and thank God, their son never got anything worse than a cold. If she thought logically, she could convince herself that she had always managed to make the right

decisions for her son. She knew her concerns came from her overprotective mother's influence, but her logical mind never managed to deal with the worry. Guess she didn't do well when those she loved took ill.

She looked at David, cuddled on the sofa, snoring softly. As much as she'd like to deny it-she still loved the man. She walked back, tucked the afghan tighter, and pushed the wet hair from his forehead. Placing a kiss on her finger, she touched it to his head.

"Night, love," he mumbled.

"It's not night...." His eyes shut. Worry had her hesitate, making certain his breathing came in a rhythmic pattern. Being a mother somehow came with an innate sense of taking care of others. Taking care, and being concerned. How many times a night did she check on Maxi when he was a baby? Once, David accused her of nearly climbing into their son's crib to see his little chest rise and fall. She smiled at the past-their past. "Sleep tight, David."

Annie decided to get David's dry clothes first. He probably needed to rest, so she'd make him his drink later. On the way up the stairs, she felt guilty about sticking him so far away. The darkened corridor led to the few steps up to his room. Surprised that he didn't complain the first day, she fought the urge to knock on the door and walked in.

"Wow." The room never looked so good. David had managed to move the furniture to make it look bigger, aired out the mothball scent, and set up some office equipment on the old roll top desk as if he belonged here. Obviously he used it to check on things at the base hospital. How surprising that he could be so enterprising. Seems his early years of being waited on by numerous Grainger servants hadn't stifled his ability to manage on his own.

For a few seconds, she sat on the bed to think. Think about their past, think about the present. Think about being snowbound with her ex. Without a thought, she lifted the pillow and inhaled. Her heart jolted. Cherry tobacco mixed with his spicy cologne tickled her nostrils.

How often that scent had lulled her to sleep in the comfort of her husband's embrace. Shaking her head and hoping some sense would pop into it, she stood. She didn't have time to reminisce. There was a lot of work to do to get the house back into shape, and she might have a sick man on her hands. He definitely needed warm, dry clothes. Knowing David, he'd have a pair of some silken pajamas and a robe hanging in the closet. She opened the door and paused.

Shirts hung to the left, followed by sweaters, pants neatly folded in half, and jackets to the far right. It looked like an expensive clothing store. Nanny Windsor would be so proud of her little "luv." Annie fought the urge to mix the sweaters with the pants, the shirts with the jackets and grabbed David's black silk pajamas and paisley robe.

To the far right, hanging neatly on a coat hanger was his uniform. Silver buttons sparkled on the navy background. Without a thought, she reached up to touch the rows of ribbons above the left pocket. Major David Grainger had done himself proud. He'd accomplished so much in the years that they'd been apart. Margaret always managed to fill Annie in on the goings on of his hospital. It had passed all inspections with flying colors since he'd taken command. Tears burned in her eyes. She pulled her hand away, knowing David would be furious if she left water stains on his uniform.

She held the clothing far enough away so as not to have to inhale David's scent any longer. She'd been married to the guy for years, but now it felt as if she were some voyeur, fondling his nightclothes and he a stranger. Sadness touched her at the idea. Chiding herself for the foolish thoughts, she turned to leave. The silver lighter sparkled on the dresser. Slowly she picked it up, telling herself that she only wanted a

closer look. It really was the lighter she'd given him seven years ago. She had bought it in a little gift shop in Santa Fe with money she'd saved for months.

As if the metal were glass, she gently rubbed it. Ambivalent feelings churned inside her. Why had he keep it? With his money, he could have bought a solid gold one. Holding the lighter to her chest, she murmured, "Was it as hard for you to let go as it was for me?"

"Yes it was, Annie."

She swung around, knocking the lamp from the bedside table onto the carpeted floor. "What are you doing sneaking up on me like that?" Embarrassed, she grabbed the lamp and set it back on the table. She hadn't meant to holler, but it was better David saw her as angry-instead of as caring for him.

He leaned against the doorframe. His solid chest muscles took her attention as he stood with the multi-colored afghan clutched to his waist. His hair had dried into a wind-blown look. The dim light caught a glint in his dark eyes. She swallowed hard and thought again how she really liked a man out of uniform.

"I was wondering if you had found me some dry clothes." He stepped forward.

Heat burned up her cheeks, and she knew the color of her skin looked like a holly berry. He was like some private dick sneaking up on her. As if she'd go rummaging through his things! Her hand tightened on the metal lighter. Oh Geez, she had been rummaging through his stuff. And worst of all, he'd heard her. Oh God, he had heard her say it was hard to let go of him, and she felt as if she stood there with her soul bared to the world. "Here." She shoved his pajamas and robe towards him. He reached out, and before she could make her way to the door, his afghan loosened enough to reveal a tuft of dark hair below his waistline. Annie froze in her tracks.

Double, triple, quadruple darn.

"I did keep the lighter because of you." He stepped forward and thank goodness managed to tighten the afghan.

She backed up and focused on the window to his side.

"I know you said we could never again make...oh God, Annie, it has been hell living without you-"

She swallowed so hard, she thought David would think she was choking. Did he ease closer or was her peripheral vision playing tricks on her? Without turning, she held the lighter out to him. She felt him gently take it, his hand brushing against her breast. Oh Geez. A little thud indicated he'd set the lighter down. He touched her shoulders with both hands, and her breath held. If she could speak, she wanted to scream to let her go. She wanted to run from the room. She wanted...she wanted David.

"I missed you, love," he whispered, causing her undoing.

Annie swung around and grabbed his shoulders. Before he could say another word, she leaned upward and kissed his lips. Passion flew fast, furious and against all thought, making the raging blizzard outside look like snow flurries.

David's kisses had her heart pounding. Beneath her flannel shirt she felt his heartbeat speed up. Moisture dampened her panties, and the fullness in her breasts hurt until his touch relieved her need. The same feelings, the same pleasures, and the same wanting filled her as it had last night.

Before she could allow something so wonderful, so wrong to happen again, she eased back. Confusion

wrinkled into David's forehead. And maybe a little anger. He stared at her.

"This isn't wrong, Annie. It was wonderful before, and can be again. Haven't you missed me, Annie?"

"Of course I have, and yes it was wonderful...but, damn it, David-" She turned to the window. No way could she keep her thoughts clear if she looked at his face. And, she needed to keep them clear. There was a familiarity in David's eyes that had said it was just like old times. Well, maybe physically, but emotions and the past had changed. With a deep sigh, she continued, "Yes, I have missed you, missed having someone to share my life with, and missed having you around to raise Maxi." Sucking in a breath, she faced him. "We have a lousy record though. Despite what we feel now-that is physically-we...David, we've both been hurt enough already."

She could see it in his eyes-he didn't agree. But he also didn't start to argue-which surprised her. How she wished she'd never volunteered to come to his room.

"But, we have changed, Annie-" A look of confusion covered Annie's face. His heart jolted at the thought that he'd managed to put some doubt into her. Maybe she was right to stop them, though. But damn it, his body didn't agree. "You know, Annie, sometimes people need to except others as is, and not try to change them."

He leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead. "Think about it, love." She managed a nod and turned. After Annie left, he collapsed onto the bed and shut his eyes. The pain in his gut from their brief time together dug deep. Opening his eyes, he looked at his room. He could stay here indefinitely if he had enough leave. But he couldn't stay here much longer and survive unless his plan succeeded.

Running his hand through his hair, he inhaled lavender. Annie's scent clung to his skin. He sucked in a deeper breath. Was he correct? Could two people change? Or did they really need to? What if they were wrong and never gave themselves another chance to find out? Annie had been right to stop them from making love right then. That would have complicated matters, and things were complicated enough as it was. But now, inhaling her lavender he clutched tighter on the metal lighter. Neither of them had ever been quitters in their lives, but they'd given up on their marriage so fast. Opening his fist, he looked at the inexpensive lighter.

It was time to face the real reason he kept it all these years-and put the final stage of his plan into effect.

* * *

Annie shoved at the kitchen door. A river of snow ran to her feet as a drift obviously blocked her from opening the door all the way. With a surge of adrenaline, she managed to get the door open. She was angry at herself for going to David's room, angry at the whole damned situation, and angry at the fact that she had nearly made love to her ex-husband, again. She could probably shovel the entire driveway in ten minutes right now.

Pellets of frozen snow slapped at her face. The wind howled across the lake as if laughing at what a fool she'd been. Despite the cold, she wrapped her arms around herself and sucked in the much-needed fresh air. Her lungs hurt from the freezing temperature, but maybe the discomfort would burn into her brain and be a reminder the next time she felt like making love to David. Oh God, hopefully she wouldn't be tempted again. She remembered the feel of his arms around her, his hot breath against her skin...Geez, it was going to be hard to fight the temptation until he left. Despite the fact that she had worn no jacket, heat from her memories burned throughout her.

The skin on her face started to numb. She couldn't stay outside any longer and risk getting sick. Popi needed her, Maxi needed her for a million reasons, and she had to get her Stayput on the market to earn

some money-fast. For a few seconds the thought of allowing David to support them tempted her. But as fast as the thought popped into her frozen mind, she disallowed it from her consideration. She was going to manage on her own. The wind blew a gust that had the shutters dancing on their hinges and luckily took Annie's mind from her foolish thoughts of alimony. Stepping across the snow-covered porch, she paused. His words that maybe they should accept each other as is had her grab onto the cold railing. Could he be right? It only took a second to think of the arguments they'd had the last year before their marriage ended. "You're wrong, David." She released the railing to go back inside. She still owed David a hot drink, and one wouldn't hurt her right now either.

Taking the supplies from the pantry, she fixed two hot rum drinks and headed to the living room. If David wasn't around, she'd drink them both, she thought, because she sure as heck wasn't going to his room to find him. She looked up, the tray tilted, spilling part of the hot rum drink. Across from the fireplace David sat in an overstuffed chair. A thread of smoke from his pipe worked its way above his head. Double darn. Now she'd have to share the drinks. She held her breath as she approached and set the tray down.

"Thank you," he said, soaking up the spill with a napkin.

She nodded and moved as far toward the fireplace as she could without looking obvious. If she inhaled their past, the warm cherry aroma, surely the scent would cloud her with confusion. And she'd only cleared out her brain a few minutes outside in the cold.

David took a sip of the hot toddy. "This hits the spot."

He leaned near, she pulled back. Following his gaze, she could tell he wondered why she didn't have shoes on and why her socks were wet, but it didn't matter what he thought she told herself. No way would she explain how she had rushed outside to cool the heat he'd burned into her. Even her shoes had to come off. Her reaction to David ran all the way down to the tips of her toes, and she'd rather freeze into an icicle before she'd admit it.

After a sip of the buttery drink to stall for time and decide what to say, she managed, "It does take the chill out of one's bones. I stepped outside to see how bad the weather is." Oh geez, she thought, looking towards the window. As if she couldn't tell by the howling wind and the fact that the windows were a sheet of white. Luckily David ignored her foolish comment and had the decency not to ask why she really went out into the blizzard when any fool could just look out the window.

David glanced at her and his deep brown eyes locked her in his stare. "Look, Annie. About before-"

"You know the old saying about spilled milk, Major. Let's forget it nearly happened again and use this time to get the repairs done." She'd ignore the fact that her heart felt as if it was breaking in two and held the mug to her lips, forcing herself to look away from him. The hot toddy burned her throat as she took way too big a sip to finish. A fit of coughing seized her, and it looked as if David were about to jump out of his seat to save her. Wildly motioning for him to stay put, she swallowed hard to clear her throat. Maybe the alcohol would numb the pain and confusion she felt. If not, at least she it might give her a burst of energy to finish the work and forget this entire situation.

** * **

For the next several hours, Annie worked like a maniac, painting until every muscle of her arms, back, and legs clenched as if she were twenty years older than Popi. She hated to admit it, but the work went so much faster since she secretly watched David, and learned a few tidbits of organization from him. He never wasted a step, always carried things he needed, and had an annoying habit, that she now followed but sure as heck wouldn't tell him she did, of having all the supplies he needed in the pocket of his work

pants. Rags and brushes, all hung at the tip of his fingers. With only the workroom left, their time together would soon be over.

Then David could return to spending all his time with Maxi.

She sank onto the floor, paint from her brush staining a line down her pants. There was no reason why she should feel so bad. After all, that's what she wanted. Exactly what she wanted. David out of her hair and her life back in order. Okay, her life was never in order, but her heart had been starting to heal-until he had shown up. The phone rang. She shoved the brush back into the can, hoping nothing had happened to Maxi or Popi and rushed into the hallway to get it. "Yes?" she said.

"Mrs. Hamilton please," a male voice said.

"This is she, and it's Ms. Hamilton," she corrected.

"Hello, Ms. Hamilton. My name is Forster Carter. You sent me a prototype of your Stayput."

Annie's hand shook. This had to be good news. Why else would he be calling? Foster Carter. Foster Carter? The name didn't ring a bell, but she'd sent off samples of her invention to millions of stores, mail order suppliers, and dishwasher manufacturers. Now which one did he belong to?

"I'm with Carter Catalogues, and I think we can do business together if you can deliver your product within the next two weeks."

"You do?" God, she sounded like Maxi. One thing she learned from watching David in action was to act like you knew what you were talking about every second. She looked into the hall mirror, straightened her shoulders, and wiped the smudge of paint from her cheek as if Forster Carter could see through the phone. "Well, I'd be interested in what you have to say, Mr. Carter. Perhaps we can make an appointment for say-" Maxi should be home on Monday to take David's attention from her. "-Tuesday."

"How's ten sound? I'll drive up there."

"Ten is fine." She danced around in a circle, the chord of the old phone wrapping around her body, her feet barely touching the floor. As she spun to unwind herself, she froze. David stood in the doorway, his brows furrowed, his paintbrush aimed at her like some weapon.

"You're dancing around while I'm working my tail off?"

"Dancing?" she asked innocently. Whew. She thought he'd heard her conversation and was going to nosy in on her life, again,. "I was just...answering the phone."

"We should be able to finish the workroom tonight, Annie."

"Sure-" Oh no, she didn't have time! She couldn't keep painting. She needed to find her records about the Stayput and see what she'd proposed to Foster Carter. She'd have to start manufacturing and packaging the netting for the dishwashers if he wanted them in the next two weeks. David stood with the damn paintbrush poised. What were the chances he'd paint all alone and let her work on the Stayput?

"Well, are you going to help paint the walls-" He looked at the stripe of white down her leg. "-or your pants?"

"Look, David. Something has come up-"

"With Maxwell?" He dropped the paintbrush to his side, and his eye's widened as if she'd readied to tell him something horrible had happened.

"Oh, no. Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. Nothing happened to anyone. Maxi is fine." She forced a laugh as she tried to think of a way to weasel out of painting. "It's just...look, that call was very important to me. But I need a few hours to spend on something now."

He raised an eyebrow. "Something-as in one of your inventions?"

She nodded and thought of how David always did manage to figure her out-and it made her furious. If only he could have really known how she felt years ago-they might still be married. She refused to wallow in the past and said, "Yes. I have to work on something now. Like I said, it is very important to me."

She wished he would yell. She wished he would throw the paintbrush against the wall. She wished he'd do anything else, except stand there with an odd expression on his face that she couldn't figure out. Worry? Confusion? No matter what he was thinking, it made her want to console, to comfort him, but she feared her self-control. So, she said, "I'll be in later."

"Annie, are you certain...all right. I'll start by the window." He turned and left.

Certain? About making her invention? David really didn't understand her or her drive, but she was thankful, and a bit surprised, that he didn't go on about her invention. She leaned against the wall, sinking to the floor and wishing she could sink lower into the bowels of the damned house. The place wrapped her in a jail of sorts, preventing her from doing what she wanted most in life- complete an invention. Now David's reaction had taken the wind out of her sail of excitement from Forster Carter's phone call.

Double darn.

Suddenly she realized sitting here was a waste of time, a precious commodity to her. She needed some kind of financial commitment of her Stayput to wave in David's face so he'd realize she wasn't some absentminded professor who'd never succeed. She pushed herself up. "I'll show you, Major Grainger. You'll be as proud of me as you are of Maxi when I-" She stopped and realized what she'd just said. Why did she care what David thought? She wanted to say she didn't, but she knew that'd be a lie. Of all the rotten things that could happen, she did, in fact, care what her ex-husband thought about her.

And damn it, she hated that it was true.

** * **

David shoved the paintbrush into the can. He'd never be able to concentrate on painting if he didn't come to grips with Annie's behavior. Why on earth did she suddenly need time to work on her invention? He'd heard the phone ring before and could only guess the call had something to do with it. Maybe she'd gotten someone interested in one of her gadgets. He let the paintbrush drop into the can, there'd be way too much paint on it when he picked it out, but right now, against his better judgment, he needed to think about Annie.

The wind howled, slamming pellets of ice against the bay window. David pulled a chair away from the table and sat. His head dropped into his hands as he rested his elbows on the table. Nanny Windsor would never let him rest his elbows on the table, he thought. He'd never been one to disobey her, and wished to heck that she was here right now.

Nanny Windsor had taught him so much. Sure, she was strict, and he knew his actions were lead by her upbringing, but he didn't do so badly in life. Heck, completing medical school, rising to the rank of major, and being the commander of a base hospital was no easy feats. Yet, he realized as a faint hint of

lavender filled his nostrils when he leaned further into his palms, he'd give it all up to have Annie back in his life.

No matter how annoying. No matter how forgetful. No matter how stubborn Annie Hamilton was, God help him, he still loved her and wanted her back. But this dream of succeeding with some cockamamie invention was almost too much for him to handle.

"Why?" he asked himself. Why did it bother him so much? He wouldn't care if Annie worked at some legitimate profession as long as Maxwell didn't suffer. And, if Annie never worked a day in her life-he'd gladly support her with that decision, too. But he did care that she wasted her time and money on some damned invention that threatened to ruin her financially and break her...heart.

"I'll be damned."

That was it! He really didn't care that Annie wanted to invent something, hell, he wished she'd succeed. But in his ever-logical mind, he knew her chances were slim to none. He had a keen mind for business and religiously kept up with the world financial market. New businesses failed faster than the snow falling outside the window. Failed and ruined lives-and he didn't want to see Annie get hurt.

He pushed up and headed for the door. If she was going to insist on this invention nonsense, he was going to make certain she didn't get into any financial trouble.

David ran into the living room ready to take her into his arms and explain how he worried about her getting hurt, but Annie wasn't there. He headed to her office, but she wasn't at her desk, not that he could tell right off until he walked around the pile of "stuff" strewn across the desktop. Her chair was empty. There was no sense in calling her in the gigantic mausoleum of a house, so he ran up the stairs, deciding to look for her there.

He ran along the second floor, opened a few doors. No Annie to be found. At the end of the hallway, he noticed a beam of light sneaking under the door. Either she'd left the light on earlier, which was entirely possible, or she was in the room. He hesitated, knocked, then shoved opened the door. "Hey, Ann-"

Annie sat huddled in a mass of netting and plastic hooks. He watched her flinch for a moment as she stretched her neck. Obviously she'd been working cramped like that to finish her Stayput. Here he'd come to explain to Annie how he worried about her and tell her how businesses fail all the time. But when he saw the determination in her actions, he couldn't. Instead, he watched silently for a few minutes and decided he would try his damndest to accept a woman who...damn it all, would never, ever change.

Chapter Nine

Annie's fingers, the muscles cramped from work, stung, but she shoved another plastic hook onto the elastic mesh fabric with vigor. She held the Stayput up to check for flaws, smiled, and folded it into the plastic bag she'd bought to package them. This invention had shown promise from day one. She'd used it on her own dishwasher for months. The mesh screen snapped over the dishes after they were loaded onto the top shelf and held them in place. For the last two months, no plastic cup or bowl had flipped over from the water's pressure and filled with sudsy gunk. This one really had the most promise, she knew in her heart.

"So, this is where you are."

Annie swung around. David stood in the doorway. She readied to hide her Stayput from his view, expecting to see him scowl at her at any second. Instead, he stepped forward, amongst the mess of

netting and hooks and stooped down-a faint smile on his face. Oh boy, maybe she was really overworked. She figured he'd searched her out to complain that she was once again wasting her time. Maybe if she told him about Forster Carter's phone call? Naw, no need stopping her motivation short when she needed it most. "I told you I needed some time to work on this," she said.

He came closer, his eyes boring into her Stayput as if they could burn a hole through the already perforated mesh. "Yeah, you did. So you hid out in this...closet?"

Yeah? Had David really just said "yeah?" Not only had he taken to using contractions since coming here, but now he was using slang. But she didn't have time to try to figure him out right now. "It's not a closet, more like an alcove since my workroom is...not in use. I'm very busy. So, what do you want, David?"

He raised his glare toward her-she wished he'd kept looking at the Stayput. After a quick shudder, she forced herself to ignore how the temperature in the room had taken a nosedive since David's arrival, and she grabbed a hook.

"What do I want?"

She sighed and said, "That's what I asked."

His lips firmed, his eyes widened into bronze fireballs, and he seemed so much taller from her view. Even though he hadn't spoken right then, she knew what it felt like to be one of his airmen. Poor dears, she thought. With a commander like David, they couldn't get away with a thing. She thought she heard him growl. Obviously David was upset with her, but all she could think of as she let the Stayput drop was-how adorable he looked. Actually, she wasn't at all certain it was anger in his glare. Maybe more like confusion. She had no idea why he'd be confused, but, geez, suddenly his eyes looked like rich chestnuts roasted on an open fire. She blinked and confirmed she had indeed misread him before. His lips had formed into a line, nearly looking as if they'd blended to one. But, she only thought about how interesting it would be to separate the line-with her tongue. He actually pulled his shoulders straighter than his ramrod posture already had been. She couldn't control herself. An overwhelming urge to comfort him whatever the cause had the words, "Are you nuts?!" screaming in her head. "David, I really don't have time to-"

"I want...I wanted to ask you to give up this-" He took her hand into his. "Your fingers are reddened." Softly he rubbed away the discomfort. "What can I do to help, Annie?"

"You can leave me alone-" She pulled free, then realized he was being...nice. "What did you say?"

"Annie, I always wanted you to be happy. A few minutes ago, I realized I'd been worrying that you might get hurt, disappointed, even lose everything because of the risks involved with a new business."

Annie felt herself immobilize. David's words needed time to sink in, they were so damn hard to understand.

He let go of her hand and said, "I'm guessing that phone call had something to do with your hastily working on your Staystill."

"Put," she managed. "Stayput."

"Sorry."

"I got an order-"

"Oh." At first he looked hurt. Obviously because she hadn't shared her exciting news with him. But then

he seemed to force a smile and an excitement grew in him-which baffled, and thrilled Annie. David stood, yanked her up, and danced her in a circle. "That is wonderful!"

She didn't even hesitate to make certain that this man, dancing and whooping like a cowboy, was really Major Grainger. Instead, she held him still long enough to kiss him. The kiss landed smack on his firm lips as she grabbed his shoulders, and despite him having a good fifty pounds on her, she yanked him so close she could feel his speeding heart against her breasts. Then, she separated those thin, firm lips-with her tongue.

"Annie," he whispered. "This is...more wonderful than anything."

She kissed him again, this time harder. Not to silence him, because right now she'd love to hear him encourage her invention. But she wanted to kiss him harder, and deeper...and by the way her body was reacting, she wanted to do a lot more than a kiss.

"I...really am quite...Oh Lord, Annie...."

David eased his hands beneath hers. At first she worried he was trying to separate them, but his lips parted and she ran her tongue across his, tasting the familiar cherry flavor she used to love so much. His hands did wonders, sending shivers of excitement and delight throughout her as he caressed first one breast, then the other. Nothing could feel better at the moment, except if his hands were on her naked skin. She felt a hundred different sensations careening throughout her body like the infinite number of snowflakes falling to the earth outside. But not even a blizzard packed as much punch as David's kiss where she was concerned.

"Oh Annie..."

Please don't talk, she thought, feeling so wonderful inside.

"Annie...when I realized I'd only been worried about you all this time-" He sneaked his hand beneath her shirt, lifting her bra enough to free her waiting breast.

Oh please be quiet, David.

"I don't mean to go on..." He leaned over and took the tip of her breast with his lips.

Then don't go on, damn it.

He circled her nipple with his tongue, teasing her into sheer delight. She moaned in pleasure but didn't miss him say between breaths, "It's just that I-" He pulled up and kissed her on the lips. "I don't want you to get hurt."

Annie moved back. She'd expected him to go on about her ruining the workroom, or spending money on supplies for her Stayput, or anything except that he worried about her. Damn it. This meant he cared about her.

And she wasn't ready to hear that.

David pulled her close, despite the confusion wracking her brain. Currents of ecstasy still played havoc with her emotions, but now his worrying about her sent her mixed up thoughts swirling like the snow that kept them secluded in the old house. Secluded and ready to make love again.

But they couldn't.

"Kiss me, Annie," he whispered. "There is no better time. He glanced at her, with caring and concern

touching her heart from his warm brown eyes. He started to lean forward when a scraping sound outside caused him to pause.

Annie froze beneath David's hold.

"What the hell is-" he asked.

She knew. She knew the sound had saved her from doing something so foolish as to make love to David. As if an outside force knew to knock some sense into her, since she obviously couldn't make the right decision. She turned toward the window. David looked to the side. From their seats on the floor, they watched a giant yellow snowplow, ripping their seclusion from them as it scrapped a path along the old road like one of Maxi's giant Tonka toys.

"Maxi and Popi will be here soon," she whispered.

"Damn it!" David shouted. He looked into Annie's eyes for a sign of whether to ignore the plow and continue, and, to his dismay, a steeliness had frozen the warm depths of blue. She was right, though, they had nearly lost their minds and made a mistake. Although, right now, he was having a hard time convincing his body that making love to Annie could ever been a mistake. He swallowed so hard, she gave him a look of concern. He took her hand and pulled her to stand. "Let's get your Stayput finished. I want to help." Before she could protest, he grabbed a nearby hook and asked, "What do I do with this?"

** * **

Annie leaned against the kitchen windowpane and watched two birds flutter about in the yard. The newly fallen snow blanketed the property, making a winter wonderland setting outside her window. By the sound of it, Popi was puttering about the kitchen. Maxi, elated that school was canceled, was somewhere with David. Both Popi and Maxi had made it back safely after the roads were plowed yesterday. She could rest easy about that, anyway. But David...

David.

It seemed like a million years ago, another lifetime, when they had nearly made love. Amazing how the mind works, clouding thoughts, hiding visions to protect one from the pain of remembering. Remembering how wonderful it could have been. "Get a grip, Hamilton," she murmured.

"What's that, pumpkin?" Popi asked.

Annie turned to see her grandfather mixing a bowl of his special chili. "Oh, nothing..." She walked closer and scooped a fingerful from the bowl before Popi's wooden spoon rapped Annie's knuckles. Even though it wasn't Wednesday, he'd offered to help cook after she'd told him about her Stayput order needing to get done. Thanks to David it was complete.

"You seem preoccupied today," Popi said.

Annie forced a smile and licked her finger. "More than usual?"

Popi raised a silvery-gray eyebrow and clucked his tongue. "I didn't say that." He held a spoonful out so Annie could sneak a bit more.

The tangy chili tickled its way down her throat. "Perfect as usual, Pops. Yeah, I'm a wee bit preoccupied today." She licked the last of the chili from her finger and chose to ignore the knowing look Popi gave her. The old man had been a traitor to her from day one when it came to Annie and David getting back together. But, right now, Annie didn't feel up to discussing her love life with her grandfather-actually, she'd never discuss that with him, nor the possibility of reuniting with David. The thought scared her too

much.

"I'll go get the mail," Annie said, knowing it was a cop out. She could feel Popi's blue eyes boring into her as she shoved open the kitchen door and bolted out before he went on about Annie's behavior. Right now, she knew Popi had to be on at least his third, "Oh, Lordy."

Annie started to open the front door when a flash of blue zooming past the staircase caught her eye. Maxi had been told a million times not to run through the house. She made a mental note to reprimand him when she saw her son coming down the stairs. Actually, he was tiptoeing down the stairs like some super sleuth. If Maxi hadn't run by, then who.... "Holy...crow!"

"Shh, Mommy!" Maxi warned.

She knew her exclamation had taken Maxi by surprise, but she had every right to holler out when she'd seen her ex-husband, an Air Force officer no less, run behind the couch, nearly knocking over a lamp, and land on all fours behind the stuffed chair.

David had on his blue sweater.

"Sorry, slugger," she mouthed. Annie eased from the doorway, heading toward the living room as Maxi turned down the hallway. "David," she called through clenched teeth and a forced smile. "Will you get up, David?"

"Shh!"

Annie leaned against the chair, leaned down and said, "Are you nuts, Grainger?"

"Quiet, Annie!"

"What are you doing running around like a madman? I've told Maxi a hundred times not to run in the house."

"Where's Maxi?" David whispered.

Annie looked across the living room to see the little imp, his back to her, leaning against one kitchen door before shoving it open as if he knew David was on the other side. She knew Maxi's "Ah ha!" had to have startled the bajevers out of Popi and quite possibly had caused the kitchen walls to be splattered with chili. "He's in the kitchen-"

David stood, grabbed her arm and pulled her down the hallway. Her son could be heard whining to Popi that Maxi thought his father was in the kitchen. Before Annie could free herself, David yanked her into the hall closet. He grabbed the pull-chain of the light, causing a golden glow to fill the tiny room as the door shut. Oh well, Maxi would have to fend for himself, she thought, knowing full well, right about now, Popi would be pouring the little imp a glass of milk and telling him he could only have one cookie before lunch, then serving him three on his dish.

"I didn't want him to find me," David said.

Annie blinked, hoping the action would clear her confused thoughts, but all it did was paint a hazy glow around David while the darn light bulb shed a beam of gold directly down on him as if he were some god. Wow. Now she could see how years ago the natives could assume some golden haired Yankee, who landed on their shores, was a god of some sorts. Although David wasn't blond, she'd buy his godlike image in a heartbeat. Speaking of hearts, hers was jumping faster than David darting behind the couch.

"Maxi had twenty seconds to find me-"

Suddenly Annie's mind cleared. "He knows not to run around in here."

"He didn't run."

"Yeah...right." Suddenly she needed more air. She pushed at his chest to give herself more breathing room. What a mistake. A woman shouldn't make contact in close quarters with a man whom she'd just been fantasizing as a god. The sensation started at the very tip of her finger-the one pushing against the hardened muscles of David's chest. Muscles she knew were covered in a feather softness of chestnut curls. She swallowed hard but didn't budge her finger.

On the breath of a sigh, she managed, "True, and no one else should be running...." Oh geez, he must have shaved only a short time ago because his spicy cologne just wafted to her nose, capturing her thoughts in a net of aroma.

"You...were...saying..."

He deliberately dragged out his words, and darn it all, he managed to use the most raspy, sexy tone she'd ever heard him speak. Besides his purposeful tone, he leaned closer. Their hips met. Hers turned to Jell-O. His remained rock firm. She stumbled backward with only a few inches before the wall stopped her. David stepped forward.

Oh, hell. She yanked at his collar, pulling him within lip's reach. When she planted her kiss on his mouth, she forgot why the heck they'd ended up in the closet in the first place, but couldn't think of anywhere else on God's snow-covered earth she'd rather be right now. He moaned and kissed back.

Nope. Nowhere else on earth.

"Gotcha!" Maxi shouted as he flung open the closet door on a startled David and Annie. "Hey, you said you would play with me, Daddy, and you're playing with Mommy."

David stumbled away from Annie. Even in the dim closet he could see her rosy complexion cover her smooth cheeks. Hell, he wanted to kiss her again. But their son's pout had him scooping up the child and snuggling a kiss behind his neck, inhaling chocolate and milk instead of lavender. "I was just letting you take a cookie break, slugger. Come on." David held Max in one hand, leaned for a quick kiss on Annie's cheek, and grabbed the closet door in the other hand. Annie, tugging at her shirt to straighten her disheveled appearance, gave Maxi a peck on the nose and slipped to the side. David watched her scurry out, her snug gray corduroys sending his imagination into high gear. If it wasn't for Maxi's chubby hand grasping David's shoulder, he would have yanked his ex-wife back into the closet.

"Okay. Now that you found me, what do you want to play next?" he asked the boy. Maxi slipped from his hold, landing on his stocking feet. "Hey, no wonder you were able to sneak up on me like that. You don't have on shoes, you little devil!" He tickled beneath his son's arm, sending the child into a fit of laughter.

"Stop...Daddy..." he managed between giggles that warmed David's heart with a heat that could rival any fire. "Let's build something."

"Show me the way." David followed Maxi into the small family room Annie had sparsely furnished. The room sat opposite the main living room. David settled on the floor, legs folded and crossed under him, while Maxi proceeded to pour a bucketful of red, yellow, and blue blocks around him. "What shall we make, Maxi?" David grabbed a handful of blocks while the boy landed within inches of the pile.

"Hey, Daddy, you called me 'Maxi' just like Mommy does." He grabbed two yellow blocks, and before David could reply, Maxi rattled on about building the base hospital where David was commander.

Two blocks fell from David's grasp as his son's words sunk in. When had he started calling his son Maxi? He'd always used the more formal "Maxwell," but now the shorter form rolled off David's tongue without a thought. Obviously people can change, he mused. In the time he'd been at Skyview, he'd done some major changes in his behavior. If only Annie would see them and realize they should try to make their relationship work. Still, she did seem to be coming around, albeit slowly. The warmth of her sweet lips on his pulled his thoughts to their son who now had about thirty blocks piled into a tower. "They're going to fall if you put anymore on top, slugger." The boy shoved on two more. The tower remained standing.

"You make the ground floor, Daddy. I can make the second floor all by myself."

"But if you put too many on top, they'll-"

Maxi set one more on the swaying tower. David watched, ready to say "I told you so" when the blocks collapsed, but the tower swayed, then settled.

"See, Daddy. I have to learn by myself," Maxi said as he set one more on top-and the tower collapsed.

"You should have quit while you were ahead-"

Maxi scooped up the blocks and started again. "I know. But it's more fun seeing how many I can stack."

David started to say they'd never get the hospital done like this but paused as he watched his wise little kid rebuild the second floor. The idea was to play, not construct a perfect building. Maxi was learning how far he could push gravity, and at the same time, David realized the boy needed to learn-on his own.

David set his blocks down and settled back against the wall. Maxi built the tower with vigor, and each time it fell down, he squealed with delight, and David would shake his head in amazement. The little imp, as his mother fondly called him, sent a nostalgic thought to David's mind. As a child, he often played with blocks while Nanny Windsor sat in a nearby rocker-telling him how to play. She'd meant well, he was certain as he lovingly remembered the elderly woman, but looking back now, he realized that she always interfered with his and Julie's play. They had to do everything right, perfect, befitting a Grainger. Never could they have smudged faces or dirty hands. Never could they create a masterpiece like the one tottering on its foundation as Maxi added yet another block only to have his work collapse. Never did he remember childhood squeals of laughter from when he and his sister had played.

And, never had his father ever built a damned thing with him.

"Daddy!" Maxi was tugging at David's shirt while the boy nearly ripped the material in his excitement.

"Holy cow, slugger!" David's throat tightened as he looked at the creation his son had built, all on his own, and blinked back the stinging in his eyes, confirming the thought that he wanted to be with his son-and the child's mother-forever.

"I told you I needed to learn-" The boy released his hold on David and rolled across the floor on his side, careening into the tower and sending blocks scattering across the room. He laughed and finished, "-on my own 'Cause I'm six now, Daddy. Six-year-old kids don't need help." He winced as his arm landed on a pile of blocks. "Ouch! It hurts, Daddy," he said, tears forming in his brown eyes.

David scooped him onto his lap, placing a kiss on the soft part of Maxi's neck. "Nope, six-year-olds don't need help too much anymore." He held the boy protectively until his sobs quieted and he squiggled from his father's hold. As David watched Maxi attempting to build a round building out of the square blocks, he suddenly admitted that the boy had the same desire to learn and create as Popi and Annie.

Annie needed to be left to let her towers fall, her round building look square, and, he sighed, her inventions succeed or fail. He'd been trying to protect Annie from hurt and failure just as Nanny Windsor had done to him, as he'd attempted to do to Maxi. Learning from the wisdom of a six-year-old, David realized that Annie had to learn by herself.

He and Annie had changed some since their divorce, and of course maturity had to play a big part in that. But what had happened since he'd come here was, well, they'd started to accept one another "as is." Something they'd never done in the past. In all their years of marriage, each one in their own way had tried to rebuild the other into their own liking. Maybe they had each grown enough to understand that they had to live their lives the way they wanted. He knew now that Nanny Windsor's upbringing had some flaws, but he was who he was because of her. He was also the man he'd turned out to be despite his father's absence in his life.

He looked at a happy, squirming Maxi, now building a tower of blocks on his stomach, and knew his influence on his son hadn't been too bad. When he saw Annie's desire to create something mimicked by their son, he also knew she'd done a hell of a job raising their boy-on her own. The thought stung, but the desire to correct that part of their lives had him up and brushing the dust from his pants. "Hey, slugger, I'm gonna take a break. All this building has me in need of a cup of Mommy's coffee."

"Go ahead, Daddy. I'm fine." The tower collapsed as Maxi laughed, sending his tummy into an earthquake of squirming muscles.

"I know you are." David headed toward the door and turned, murmuring, "I know you are, Maxi. I know you are."

** * **

"How about a cup of coffee?" David asked.

Annie looked up from her pile of bills on the table. "As in go out for one or make it?"

He pulled out the chair next to her and said, "I thought you might fix us some."

She laughed. "I could use a break, but are you certain you want to take a chance on my coffee?"

David touched Annie's arm. "I'm certain." He knew he'd taken her by surprise, but he couldn't help himself. They'd been getting along so well lately, he barely could stop his hands from touching her every minute of the day. "You know, Annie, I have to go down to the base tonight- "

She filled the coffeepot with water and turned. "Something wrong?"

He guessed she meant that he couldn't ignore work even while on leave but nothing could put him in a bad mood. "Nope. Remember Colonel Martin, one of the flight surgeons?"

She tapped a finger to her lips. "Tall with reddish curls?"

David stood and walked toward her. "That's the one. He's retiring and there is a going away party for him tonight. I wasn't going to go to it-"

"Why? You and he were always good friends."

He couldn't tell her that he guessed he would need all the time he could get to win her back so he'd told the colonel that he wouldn't be attending. Now that things were working out a bit with Annie, David wanted to test his plan out and see how she'd do amongst the barracuda officers' wives. Oh, there were plenty who didn't fit the category, but the few who did always seemed to feed on Annie. "No date." She

turned to ladle the coffee grinds into the pot. He flinched at the amount she hefted in, but would drink mud if she'd agree to go with him. "How about doing me a favor and coming with me-"

Annie swung around. "Oh, David, I don't think that would be a good idea-"

He touched his finger to her lips. "Don't think, Annie. Let's do something on the spur of the moment."

"It is tempting to see you do something that isn't written in stone on your calendar."

"Then, you'll go?"

"I don't think-"

"Popi already said he'd stay with Maxi. We'll leave at seven-fancy dress." Before she could argue, he hurried out of the room.

"Popi's an interfering...hey, what about your coffee?"

** * **

David looked at his watch. Six fifty-five. Knowing Annie she'd be late, but he didn't care. So far she hadn't come to say she'd changed her mind, and the excitement building inside him would rival a pressure cooker. He straightened the tie of his Mess Dress, the Air Force's version of formal wear, as he passed his mirror and laughed. The long walk downstairs would at least give Annie more time.

At the foot of the stairs, David froze. "You...look beautiful." Annie stood near the front door waiting. Her hair was piled on top of her head with ringlets of curls cascading down towards her chin. Maybe they'd fallen out of the clip she'd used, but the style gave her the sexiest look he'd ever seen. Of course the black slip of a dress she'd chosen helped-a lot. When she bent to wipe a speck off her high-heel shoe, David grabbed onto the banister. The creamy skin of her back shone in the dim hallway light-all the way down to her waist. Must be what they call a backless gown.

Annie looked up. "Thanks. You look dashing, Major."

For a second David readied to change his mind. He'd much rather stay here with Annie, and see if she needed help slipping the snug dress from her slender form. But he reminded himself that any woman with a figure like Annie's and her spunk had to be able to fend off the barracuda wives. He knew she could do it.

"I've never seen that dress before." He stepped near and helped with her coat.

"Okay, I borrowed it from one of the waitresses at the Do Drop Inn. I have very little occasion to go formal around here."

He smiled at her and resisted the urge to nibble her earlobe where a long silvery earring dangled. "That dress was made for you. Come on." He had to get out into the cold air soon, or his pants would become too tight to walk in.

The drive to the base whizzed by as Annie kept the conversation going. At the front gate, an airman saluted and waved David through. He thought the poor airman's eyes would drop to the concrete as he ogled Annie. Others had been court-martialed for lesser offenses. But tonight nothing bothered David.

In the parking lot of the Officer's Club, David shut off the car and walked around to open Annie's door.

She hesitated before getting out. "It has been so long."

David took her hand and pulled her close. "Nervous?"

"A bit," she admitted.

With his arm around her shoulder, he said, "Don't be, Annie. You're miles above all of them."

Annie felt the fear that had built up inside her since David had mentioned this event seep to the ground. Protected by David's hold, she knew the past would not repeat itself. She was no longer the immature woman he'd married, and if she ran into any of her old "friends," she had the years of managing to survive alone to get her through this. "Thanks."

As Annie had feared, the room was filled with women whom she and David had been stationed with. Most came and greeted her with looks no more disapproving than when she and David were together. Promptly she would correct them, and slip out of the conversation.

"I'll get us a drink. What'll it be, Annie?"

She fought the urge to scream, "Don't leave me alone!" but she said, "Something strong," and chuckled.

David squeezed her shoulder and smiled. "Champagne sounds good."

It had been years since she'd had champagne. "I'll be at our table." She walked to where they had been seated and slipped into her chair as best as the borrowed dress would allow. Luckily they'd missed the first few courses of the dinner or she'd never be able to bend.

"Annie Grainger?"

Annie thought better than to ignore Margaret Porter-Filburne, Lt. Colonel Filburne's wife. There was no mistaking the voice, though, shrill and loud. Annie turned and was glad to see Margaret had put on several pounds in the past few years. "Hi, Maggie-"

"Margaret."

"Sorry." But she wasn't. The woman had led the coffee-klatch crowd in making Annie feel like a failure when she was married to David. "How are you, Margaret?" Other than overweight. She stood and pulled the dress down. Margaret's gaze followed Annie's action, and the look of envy in the woman's eyes made Annie glad she'd come tonight.

"Just fine. We'll be pinning on full colonel soon."

Annie stifled a gag. How she hated the way these women acted as if they were military instead of their husbands. "Give my congratulations to your husband."

"So, what have you been up to. Still making your...thingamabobs?"

Heads turned at Margaret's question and a few of her cronies chimed in with, "Hello, Annie. Yes, tell us about your latest gadgets."

Annie pulled herself taller and hoped that her cleavage showed. Suddenly she realized she didn't give a damn if she might look good or what these women thought. The pain and desire to defend herself was no longer there. She knew how well she'd succeeded so far-and all on her own. Not on the rank of her husband or any man.

"Annie has just finished production on one of her inventions that will be shipped off soon," David said, obviously thinking he was coming to her rescue.

But she didn't need rescuing any longer-maybe never had. All she could think of right now was how sweet it was of David to care. She leaned near his ear and said, "Thanks, and you know darn well that my order hasn't been bought yet."

He took her hand and tightened his hold as if to share the joke with her. The women collectively mumbled something and as if in a cartoon, shuffled off to their respective tables. Annie looked at David and both broke out into hysterics.

The evening was wonderful from that point on. David held her like old times while they danced and he'd even attempted fast dances that she loved and he'd never tried before. When the band announced the last dance, Annie felt like Cinderella having to watch the clock. "It's nearly midnight, " she murmured against David's cheek.

"Tired?"

"Wonderfully." They headed to collect their coats and, once out in the parking lot, David leaned over and kissed Annie. "If you're too tired to drive, we can stop somewhere-"

"My place."

She was going to say for coffee, but feeling so wonderful in David's embrace right now, his place sounded like a great idea. "Um."

David's base house looked like a typical bachelor's pad, furnished in expensive chrome and black leather. Annie inhaled the tanning scent of the fabric and some animal urge stirred inside her. While David poured two glasses of champagne that he'd brought from the party, she thought of how touched she was by his gallant attempt at saving her from the officer's wives'. He used to admonish Annie for trying to fit in. She wanted to do something nice for him. He slipped off his jacket and the formal white shirt stretched across his chest as he leaned over.

Now she knew how to thank him.

David turned to hand Annie her glass and froze. The dim recessed lighting cast a hazy glow on her as she slipped one spaghetti strap off her shoulder, then the other. "I wanted to thank you for tonight...."

He dropped the glass on the nearest surface, not caring if the cabinet stained, and mumbled, "This beats the hell out of a Hallmark card."

Annie's throaty laughter hypnotized him as her dress slithered to the floor like a desert snake. She stepped forward in nothing but her black garter-belt and, oh God, he had no idea what they were called, but some kind of lacy undergarment that pushed her breasts up like creamy mounds and sent his hormones into a whirlpool.

Some would consider Annie's seduction of her ex-husband shameful, but right now, as David nibbled at her neck, she realized she didn't care what anyone else thought. She was a grown woman who worked hard to get what she wanted, and damn it all, she wanted David.

Now.

As he reached his hands behind her to unsnap her bra, she noticed several boxes near the bookshelf. David had started to pack for his remote tour. She couldn't go on with this-knowing he'd be out of her life soon.

Chapter Ten

The next morning Annie stood in front of her mirror and glared. Her eyes were puffy from lack of sleep, but she'd run freezing water on them in this morning's shower. She and David had made it back to Skyview in record time, before Popi and Maxi woke-and she'd have to explain where she'd been.

She looked at herself and smiled. She'd had this navy suit with white piping across the collar and cuffs for several years. Actually, the last time she'd worn it she was to attend yet another officers' wives function. A tea, again, yet the thought no longer made her shudder. Right now, with her hair scooped up into a French twist, a bit of makeup, and heels that she had to squash her feet into since she'd grown accustomed to sneakers, she looked like a real businesswoman.

Good thing, since Forster Carter would be here any minute. The butterflies in her stomach wouldn't land so she chose to ignore them while she tried desperately to convince herself that she had nothing to worry about. She'd be a hit with her invention, make some money, and not have to deal with David since she'd conveniently, or deviously, however you chose to look at it, had sent him and Maxi to town for a "special lunch."

The doorbell chimed. Annie took one more look in the mirror-and smiled. She hurried down the stairs, peeked through the window and opened the door to see a man who looked older than Popi.

"Yes?" she asked, hoping the poor elderly gentleman was lost and seeking direction.

He held out a trembling hand with paper-thin skin covered with enough liver spots to make a connect the dots game and said, "Ms. Hamilton? Forster Carter, ma'am."

She stepped to the side, not certain if she should help him over the inch high doorstep, saying, "Come in, sir. Very nice to meet you." Annie settled Forster in the closest chair to the fireplace and thought better than to offer him an afghan for his legs. No sense insulting the man. The butterflies inside her dive-bombed to the pit of her stomach. This man obviously wasn't going to be her ticket to fame and fortune.

"Would you like a cup of coffee or tea?" she asked when she wanted to offer warm milk or extra strength Maalox.

"No thank you. I've got other appointments today and with the diuretics I take...Well, you know."

She certainly could guess what he meant.

"Well, I must say, Ms. Hamilton, your invention has come along at a most opportune time."

Annie sat on the edge of the couch, pulling her skirt over her knees although at Forster's age, seeing a little knee could either not phase him in the least, or send him into cardiac arrest. "Oh?"

"Yes. I have a new catalogue coming out and a few companies that are already interested in your work. If we come to an agreement today, your Stayput will be featured in that catalogue." He rubbed his hands as if he were still cold.

She leaned near, letting his good news sink in and without a thought said, "Afghan?"

"Excuse me?"

"Well, it is rather chilly in here-" She tried not to look at the fire blazing in the hearth a few feet away from him and continued, "-so I wondered if you would-"

"Yes, thank you. At my age, one doesn't ever get too warm."

She stood to get the afghan, handed it to him, and resisted the urge to tuck it around his legs as she would with her grandfather. Forster was an adorable elderly gentleman, and she loved the way his eyes sparkled when he spoke of his business. Maybe you couldn't judge a book by its cover.

He slipped a paper from his briefcase and started to explain the terms of his contract when a gust of cold air swept into the room like an unwelcome guest. And, not far behind was a true unwelcome guest-David.

"Excuse me, Annie, I didn't know Popi had company," he said, offering his hand to Forster.

Annie shut her eyes for a second, hoping David was a frosty mirage and would disappear when her vision cleared. When she opened them, he stood there pumping poor Mr. Carter's bone- thin hand. "David, this is Mr. Forster Carter." Please don't break his hand off, she thought.

"Hello," David said.

Forster slid his hand back and tucked it under the afghan. "Seems you may have mistaken me for someone else, son. I own Forster Catalogue. I'm here to do business with your wife."

David did a good job of hiding his embarrassment and, she figured, all out amazement.

"Oh, that is great," he said and sat on the couch near Annie.

She figured it wouldn't look too good to shove him onto the floor, so she tried to ignore his presence, as difficult as that may be, and said, "Ex-wife, Forster. David is here to visit with our son." She glared at David. "Just where is our son?"

"The movies. Since school was canceled, the theater opened to give the kids something to do. One nice thing about a small town."

Annie shot him a keep quiet look, turned to Forster and said, "Now, back to business." She gave David a glare, hoping he'd get the hint and leave, but he merely smiled and crossed his legs.

"Well, if those terms sound fair to you, Ms. Hamilton, you can sign the contract-"

"Contract? May I see it before you sign-" David interrupted.

"No!" Annie couldn't help herself. She forced a smile toward Forster that she knew looked as if she had swallowed a lemon-whole-and said to David, "I have already reviewed it."

"But, I have business knowledge-"

"Are you a businessman, sir?" Forster asked.

"No, he's a doctor," Annie interrupted.

"May I speak to you, alone, Annie?" David stood and took her arm.

Damn him. She couldn't pull away and throw a pillow at him without looking too un- businesslike. And she looked so impressive in her suit. "I don't think that is necessary-"

"Go ahead, Ms. Hamilton. I'll just enjoy the fire while you talk." Forster leaned back and closed his eyes.

David smirked, and Annie gave him a swift kick on the shin. He yanked her toward the door and into the kitchen.

"Ouch! Why'd you do that?"

She shoved his hand away. "Because you had no right to interfere." She had no idea she could actually holler through clenched teeth.

"I'm only looking out for your best interests, Annie."

"I don't need that, David. I've told you before. You've never given me the support I needed with my inventions-"

"But now I know why-"

"So do I! You've never thought I could amount to anything on my own. You've always thought I was some absentminded professor. And you have never, ever-" Her voice grew weaker. "-ever supported me." He opened his mouth, but she pushed him back and ran toward the door. With a quick tug on her jacket to make herself presentable, she headed back to the living room. Unfortunately, the doors pushed open, and she could feel David behind her.

"Keep your mouth shut," she warned over her shoulder.

She thought she heard Forster snore. Oh God, why couldn't I have at least had someone else be interested in my work? The kindly old gentleman taking a catnap near the fire only made things worse. She could just hear David howling inside at the sight.

"Mr. Forster?" She didn't want to startle him, so she gently touched his arm.

"Hmm? Emily?"

Oh great, he's confused on top of everything else. "No, it's me, Ms. Hamilton, the inventor."

He pulled himself upright and smiled. "Oh, yes." He patted her on the hand. "Emily's my granddaughter. Hair same color as yours. Seems I dozed off. Not too uncommon at my age."

She couldn't help herself and asked, "What age is that, sir?"

He chuckled. "Eighty-one next month."

Annie groaned and hoped his hearing wasn't up to par. "That's wonderful."

David stepped forward and said, "You know, sir, you should be proud of yourself for still working at your age. But I'm not certain if Annie should do business, that is, not many folks in their eighties can-"

In a surge of strength, Forster shoved off the afghan and stood, one bony finger shaking in David's direction. "Now look here, you young whippersnapper! I started this company and have run it as I see fit near sixty-five years. I do all the hiring, firing and travel three days a week. Sure, I go to bed at six each night-and the damn family turns the thermostat to freezing once I'm asleep- but last year my company posted a profit of sixty-two million."

"Wow," David muttered.

Annie smiled to herself and watched.

"Wow is right. Three sons, two grandsons, and one granddaughter work for me. And I may get colder,

tired faster, and have to watch how much I drink, but they can't hold a candle to the amount of knowledge and experience I have."

David stood mute while Forster spied off statistics for his three companies while Annie reached for a pen on the table.

"I'm ready to sign, Forster. Please forgive David-"

"You don't need to apologize for me, Annie. I am sorry if I have insulted you, sir. I meant no harm."

"None taken, son." Forster collapsed back into his seat.

"It is just that I worry... about Annie-"

Forster waved his hand in the air, and thankfully David knew enough to be quiet. "That's the business world. Need a thick-skin to survive the ups and downs."

"I understand, but I'm not sure if she can handle it, and I still-"

Forster stood and slipped on his overcoat. As he tucked his scarf around his neck, he said, "I know you do. And I'm sure Ms. Hamilton appreciates your concern. I can see you really care- "

Annie couldn't listen to this any longer. She was too confused at what David had said. Had he always been worried she'd fail and didn't want to see her hurt? That could answer a lot, but...she wasn't convinced, and Forster was leaving! "I'll sign now, Forster."

"Good." He handed her the contract she'd already reviewed and with David glaring over her shoulder, signed Annie Hamilton-Gra...her hand stopped. She'd nearly forgotten that she'd legally changed her name. "Seems I've made a mistake."

"Go ahead and cross it out, initial it, and I'll have my lawyer take a look. In the meantime, I'll need your first shipment in two weeks. If that old fuss-budget attorney needs a new contract, I'll fax you one." With that, he reached for David's hand, shook it, and Annie wasn't sure if the smoke had bothered his eyes or if the old man had winked at David.

** * **

David leaned against the wall and watched Annie walk Forster Carter to the door. The old man was something else, and David said a silent prayer that he was going to do right by Annie. When she turned, David wished that Forster had hung around longer. By the fire burning in her eyes, David was going to need a chaperone-or a referee. "Before you start, let me explain-"

"You had no right-"

"I know, not technically, Annie-" "Not legally either!" she shouted. Before he could finish she shoved off her shoes and sighed.

"Feet hurt?"

She opened one eye and glared at him.

"Look, Annie, it's just that I don't want to see you fail-"

She slipped off her jacket and before he started to lose his concentration, he pulled his gaze from her silken white blouse that opened to a V at her neckline and allowed just a hint of lace from her bra to

show. He swallowed hard and...lost his concentration.

"You don't want to see me fail. Hmm, seems you are awfully confident that I will fail." She slung the jacket over her shoulder and started toward the stairs.

As she stepped up, he said, "That's not it. I mean, I worry, but I hope-" She'd continued up the stairs, as he focused on her legs. The higher she went, the more leg showed beneath her navy skirt. He wasn't certain if she even had on a slip, but one thing he knew right now, he had no idea what he had been talking about. It'd been years since he'd seen his ex-wife's legs from this angle.

Right now he didn't care what he had been saying.

** * **

A few days later, Annie carefully set the last packaged Stayput into the box. Her entire shipment was ready to send off to Forster Carter, and it was only one day late. She planned to hustle to the post office with a dish of homemade fruitcake for Harry, the postman for the last forty years, to encourage him to get her order off right away.

The excitement she felt at actually selling something off had to rival her first kiss. She lifted two boxes at once and remembered Clifford Stasuski kissing her full on the mouth in first grade. Okay, a root canal would rival that first kiss. But the first really exciting one came in the back of a white Valiant when Steve Lacrosse, captain of the swimming team, showed her how the French do it the night of her junior prom. Now that had been exciting. She imagined David's cherry tobacco scent and corrected herself. Nothing could rival his kisses. Anyway, she thought, walking out the door and shoving the boxes into the back of Popi's station wagon, selling her Stayput was exciting.

"Need some help?"

Annie nearly dropped a box as she swung around to see David standing behind her, smiling. For a few seconds, she just stared. She really hadn't imagined his cologne. "Uh, no, I've got it. They're not too heavy." She shoved the trunk door closed.

He stood there grinning.

"You feel all right, David?" she asked, making her way to the driver's side.

"I'm fine. Where are you headed?"

"I'll be back in a few minutes-" She jumped in, but he held the door open.

"Let me come, too."

"You don't even know where I'm going. And, besides, aren't you supposed to be playing with Maxi?" She turned the key in the ignition.

"I don't care where you're going, but by the excitement in your eyes and the boxes in the back, I'd guess the post office. Popi is with Maxi, and the last time I saw him, he was in sheer delight as a tower of blocks collapsed across his stomach. He's got your inventor genes, Annie."

She ground the engine, turning the ignition key when the motor was already running. Don't start, David. She didn't want to get into any argument, not here, not now when she needed to get to the post office before Harry left for his two hour lunch break. But, she never had a decent amount of self-control that could keep her out of trouble so she asked, "My genes? What the heck does that mean?"

David shut the door, but ran around the front of the station wagon as if she'd try to zoom out of the parking lot without him. She pulled her hand from the gearshift, and foot from the gas pedal in time for him to jump into the passenger side. She would have made a clear break if he'd gone around the back.

"Go ahead," David said, waving his hand for her to drive.

Reluctantly she shoved the car into "drive" and slammed her foot on the gas pedal. "So? Are you going to tell me what you meant or would continuing that conversation endanger our lives when my anger inhibits my driving skills?"

David grinned, again. Geez.

"I won't go into the 'skills' you possess when it comes to driving, but what I meant was, Maxi likes to build things with blocks. It's wonderful to see."

"Check your forehead for a fever, David. You're rambling. I'd do it myself, but my hands are busy."

"I'm not sick, Annie. It's just that Maxi shed some light on us, you and I that is, while he and I were playing."

"The kid's got his mother's brains," she joked, but David nodded in agreement.

"Yes, he has. He told me he needed to learn by himself as I tried to instruct him on how to build a tower of blocks."

"Smart kid." The car nearly slid into a snow bank along the roadside, but she yanked the steering wheel to the side.

"He really is, thanks to you, Annie."

She wanted to turn and see if it was in fact Major David Grainger next to her or some impostor, but his tone said he was sincere and a catch in her throat kept her silent for a second. But only for a second.

"Thank you," she managed and nearly missed the turn into the post office parking lot.

"So, you're mailing off your Stayput. How exciting."

She hit the curb, sending the old station wagon bouncing back a few inches. Turning, she stared at David. "You remembered the name."

"Annie, we need to talk."

She could barely move. The serious look on David's face had her ready to scream "about what?" but behind the golden letters of the post office window, she could see Harry putting on his coat. She couldn't miss him! "I guess we...David, Harry's leaving...but we do need to-"

"Come on!" David shoved open his door and ran to the back of the car.

Annie jumped out of her door, but she could see Harry slipping out the back of the building. Oh God, would she ever be able to get something done on time?

"Wait, sir!" David shouted and ran toward a startled Harry. The two boxes were precariously balanced in David's hold.

Annie leaned against the car and blinked. She'd never seen David act so impulsively. It dawned on her that he didn't even have on a coat! A warm feeling surged from her heart, heating her so that she felt

like ripping off her own parka. Looking at the man whom she'd loved from the moment she knocked him down on the streets of Denver, suddenly she couldn't care less if Harry left, never returned, and her boxes never got mailed.

"Excuse us, sir, but my wife needs these mailed immediately," David pleaded.

Annie became stuck on the "wife" part. It sounded so right. Harry gave her a wave and turned back into the post office with David in trail. A snow shower, that she knew wouldn't amount to anything, began to rain down upon her, ivory flakes dancing about in the wind, and all she could think about was-David needs his coat.

** * **

Forster Carter gave Annie a break even though her boxes had arrived two days late and didn't cancel her contract. It seemed even old Harry at the Post Office couldn't get the mail to move fast enough to get the Stayput there on time. But, right now, Annie couldn't care less.

She held her check up to her lips and kissed it.

She'd finally managed to earn some money off one of her inventions. Sure it was a measly amount, but she knew it was a start. Finally, her plan to support herself wasn't such a faraway dream. It could be a reality over time. She let the check flutter to the carpet.

Alone.

David would leave and be gone from the country for so long. Even when he returned from his remote tour, there wouldn't be any reason for her to see him. He'd visit with Maxi on base as usual. The thing she had wanted from the day her snow-remover had knocked him into the pile of freezing white would be here soon. Then why did she feel so horrible?

Because you still love him, you jerk. You still love your hus-your ex- husband.

The last few days since David had helped her get her Stayput mailed off had left her with some free time. Time she and David spent together. They'd had their little talk about how, without even trying, they'd started to accept each other. Neither had worked so hard for the other. David had become her friend, her supporter in her inventions. No longer in his commander mode, he even helped her package the remaining Stayputs in the hope that Forster Carter would order more. David acted as if they were married, but they no longer had the tension of the past-the same tension that had led to the numerous arguments that had ended their marriage. They really had matured and...changed.

Annie bent down and looked at her check on the floor. A droplet of water hit the surface, and when she wiped her hand across her eyes, she knew where the droplet had come from-and why. She tried to fight the feeling of doom that crept around her heart like the frozen ice encapsulating the branches of the trees outside the window, but the thought that David's leave would soon end, and he'd drive down the mountain back to his base, back to his life, left her heart breaking. Funny, she'd forgotten that David came from another life. Things had started to go so well lately, that she'd put it out of her mind that he needed to get back to the hospital and the Air Force.

Years ago, she'd always felt as if David belonged more to the military than to her. Not that she owned him, but his behavior fit so well into his commander mode that she seemed as if she didn't belong with him. With a shudder, she thought of how many long boring ceremonies she'd attended with David, so smartly dressed in his black mess-dress, the formal Air Force attire, and how many nights she waited up for him when some hospital emergency kept him on duty.

She thought of how while attending formal functions with David, her mind would really be back at her workbench, thinking of how she could get the paper clips to come out of her contraption or the hats to land on her head from the hat rack.

And now that she was on her road to success, she would give anything to turn back time. After attending Colonel Martin's going away party, she felt confident that she could handle the officer's wives-with David's help.

"Hey, Hamilton, have you gotten that wealthy that you can afford to throw money around?" David asked.

Annie sucked in her tears and quickly bent to pick up her check. "Hardly," she forced the words out along with a false laugh. Turning so David couldn't see her reddened eyes, she wiped her hand across them again, and shoved the check into her pocket. "So, what's Maxi up to now?"

"He's...are you all right, love?"

Oh God, why did he insist on calling her by that nickname? "Fine. I'm fine. What did you say Maxi was doing?"

"I didn't say, but he's helping Popi in the kitchen. They're cleaning up. We baked cookies for his class bake sale."

"He's been having a ball with you around, David." She sucked in the sweet scent of chocolate chips mixed with cherry and wished her nose had been too stuffed up to smell. Unfortunately she could smell, and was clearly reminded of how wonderful the scent was when David took her into his arms.

"I came to tell you lunch was ready." He kissed her briefly, turned and left.

Watching David leave, she tried to tell herself that a few weeks of getting along were not a good indication of how their marriage could be. Why the heck was she even considering the term marriage? The check for her Stayput seemed to burn a hole in her pocket so she forced all qualms about her relationship with David aside and decided to go cash her first earnings right after lunch.

** * **

"Don't play with your food, son," David corrected Maxi as the child held a spoonful of noodles to his forehead while asking Annie to think of her favorite color as if the noodles were magic.

Brown, like your father's eyes, sat on the tip of her tongue when David's words silenced her answer. She didn't think playing with a spoonful of noodles was such a bad thing. Shades of Nanny Windsor were sneaking up on David again.

"Okay, Daddy, I won't while you're here," Maxi said as he shoved the spoonful into his mouth.

Annie smiled to herself and caught David smiling, too, from across the table. He finished his meal without any more corrections from David. Annie realized that Maxi, at the ripe old age of six, had his father down pat. Maxi knew enough to agree to behave the way David would insist while he was here, and she had no doubt that once David was gone, she and Maxi would be playing with spoonfuls of noodles once again.

It dawned on her that Maxi also knew her pretty darn well, too. He'd learned at an early age to leave her alone when she worked on her inventions, and when he could interrupt her. He also knew when Annie would give up on an idea and spend hours playing with him. What a wise son they'd spawned.

"May I please be excused, Mommy, Daddy?" Maxi asked.

"Sure, kiddo," Annie said at the same time David nodded his approval. The child gave them each a macaroni-flavored kiss as he bounded out of the room.

"He's something else. Isn't he?" David said.

"Um." Annie wiped at her cheek with a napkin and noticed David didn't touch his cheek. He really loved Maxi so much. It pained her to think of them separated. Once again the thought of how Maxi was going to handle David's absence sent a chill to her heart. Children are very resilient, she told herself over and over.

"Annie?"

She looked up to see David staring at her.

"I asked what you had planned for this afternoon."

"You know I don't plan, David." She was glad the words brought a smile to his lips instead of starting a lecture about how absentminded she could be.

"I promised Maxi a skate. How about a threesome?"

Annie readied to agree then remembered her check. "Go ahead. I have some errands to do." She stood and took some dishes to the sink. David followed with a handful, once again amazing her that a Grainger would help clear a table. His father would die if asked to lift a finger. "Thanks." She took the dishes and piled them in the dishwasher. "I'll catch up with you later for hot chocolate."

David surprised her with a kiss to her cheek. "That's a deal."

She watched the kitchen doors swallow him up in their usual swinging motion and touched a hand to her cheek. Popi came near with a tray of mugs.

"I'd think whatever 'errands' a body had could wait."

Annie turned to her nosy, well-meaning grandfather and said, "Well, this body can't wait." Cashing her check was by no means so important that she should miss a skating expedition with David and Maxi, but her heart needed a little break. She had to be alone to settle things in her mind-to face the inevitable. "I'll be back in a few hours," she said to Popi who stood by the dishwasher shaking his head full of white.

"Oh, Lordy," floated on the currents of heat produced by the old radiators as Annie slipped out the back door.

She leaned against the cold surface, shutting her eyes. "Nothing would make this body happier than to be with her ex, Pops, but I can't. I just can't."

** * **

Despite the pain from tight skates, David forced his feet to move as he chased Maxi through crowds of neighbors on the lake. The sun glistened like a giant light bulb today, highlighting the sparkling white snow. Icicles hung from tree branches like glass ornaments on a Christmas tree. Nature was at its beautiful height today, and David's emotions were at an all time low.

He merely had to look at the old house to see it sparkle in the golden sun's glow and realize that he'd

accomplished what he came here to do. With Annie's invention sold, he could return to base knowing he'd helped. Looking at his son he realized he had spent some of the best days of his life lately. The pain in his feet worsened, or so he imagined, when he shouted to Maxi, "I've got to sit for a while."

"Go ahead, Daddy. I'm going to race Tommy under the bridge." Maxi took off with his friend while David landed on the nearest bench as if he were years older than Popi. Truthfully, he wasn't that uncomfortable because of the skates-it was the idea of having to leave soon that had him collapsing like an old man. "Damn," he muttered and noticed Popi's old station wagon pull into the driveway. Annie had to be back. She'd taken over her grandfather's old car. The old man insisted he needed the exercise so he now walked to town, a short distance, granted, but David suspected Popi had given the car to Annie because she'd sold her own. That's where she must have gotten the money to buy all the plastic hooks and mesh netting she needed for the Stayput. A feeling of pride surged through him when he thought of Annie actually making money on her idea.

The pride didn't last when the thought that she could support herself and Maxi was now a real possibility. David shoved himself up and walked nimbly across the frozen lake to the bench where his and Maxi's boots sat. "I'm heading back, slugger," he shouted to Maxi who brushed him a wave as if to give him permission to leave. David laughed at the child and unlaced his skates.

Once on the porch David hung the skates on the hook and headed inside. A fire crackled and roared in the hearth, warming him down to his shoeless toes. He'd taken to leaving off his wing tips as Maxi left off his shoes. Wiggling his toes to churn up the blood, David walked past Annie's office. Luckily, she always left open the door. "Errands all accomplished?"

She looked up from her stack of papers and nodded. "Yep. How's the ice?"

"Slippery. Hard. Cold."

She laughed and stood to removed a handful of papers that had fallen onto the chair opposite the desk. "Here, sit down and rest your cold body."

David touched her arm. "I'm feeling much hotter now."

Annie seemed to hesitate a few seconds before turning toward her desk. She stopped when David walked closer instead of sitting down.

"You getting warmer?" she teased as he touched her shoulder.

"Hotter." He lifted her braid off the collar of her shirt and twirled it a few times in his hand. "Hotter still." He leaned forward and kissed her neck.

With her foot, she shoved the door closed and stood still. "And now?"

"Where's the nearest fire extinguisher?" He followed along her neckline with soft kisses that had her moan with each one. Before she could turn, he reached his arms around her, cupping each soft, full breast from behind and pulled her closer to his chest. A sound of pleasure seeped from Annie's lips. David pressed his hands into the hardened tips he could feel beneath her shirt. Actually, she'd worn a rather silky pink shirt, one that he didn't recognize, but he appreciated the tactile pleasure it allowed Annie.

Slowly he turned her around until his mouth closed in on hers. Annie returned his kisses as she ran her hands up along his chest to fondle his ears and push the hair from his forehead.

"What's this?" he asked as a white tag of sorts dangled from beneath Annie's sleeve.

In a dreamy state, she looked downward and scrunched up her face. "Oops. I left the sales tag on."

David felt as if he'd slipped beneath the ice of the frozen lake. The damn sales tag hung there, reminding him that Annie had purchased some new clothes-something she obviously hadn't done in a while. But she could now afford it. With the sale of her Stayput, Annie had stepped into the world of independence.

There was nothing she needed from David any longer.

He lifted a pair of scissors from her desk and touched her hand before she pulled the tag and ripped the material. "Here. Let me." The snipping of the string, the only sound in the room, finalized David's fears. Annie no longer needed him.

"You are a real independent woman now, Annie. I hope you sell a lot more so you can buy lots more beautiful tops like this one." He brushed his finger across the silky material and felt Annie tense beneath. "You don't need me hanging around anymore." The scissors landed with a thud on her desk. With a kiss to her cheek, David grabbed the door handle and turned. "Please tell Maxi I'll be in my room when he comes back."

Through blurred vision, Annie watched him leave-and knew he'd gone to pack.

Chapter Eleven

Annie opened the letter from Forster Carter that held yet another check. Her Stayput invention had taken off, just as she had dreamt it would. Forster had sold it to several overseas catalogues and even old Mrs. Hinneker stocked them in the hardware store.

Annie was what some might consider a success. But an emptiness, which she knew came from David's leaving, filled her gut not allowing room for happiness. How she missed having him around. She missed his scent, his touch, having someone special to share her success and, most of all, having him be there to help raise their son.

During the time he'd been gone, old feelings, and, oh God, how she hated to admit it, old needs stirred by David's presence brought home the fact that-she had never stopped loving her husband. Ex-husband she corrected herself as she set the check on the cluttered desk. It didn't matter right now if the sea of papers sucked the check under and she was never able to find it again. What good was money when your heart felt as if it tore in two? She wanted financial autonomy but never realized how painful emotional independence would be.

"I need you more than ever, David." She'd dug in the old shoebox of his love-notes. Picking one up, she inhaled and allowed the tears to flow freely. With her newfound success came the death, the final life's breath of their relationship.

After proclaiming Annie an independent woman, David made up some excuse to get back to base. He had taken Maxi with him to spend a few final days before David left for Korea. Since then, he called Maxi nearly daily and sent him little gifts in the mail. Annie would read the return address, fearing that it would be from overseas. But, as yet, the letters still came from New Mexico. She couldn't help hoping against hope that David would have tucked a little note inside one of them for her.

But he never had.

Obviously he was back commanding his hospital in all his glory. Keeping every airman in line, just as he'd used those same skills to get her house repaired and her Stayput off to Forster Carter. "Just look at

yourself, Hamilton," she said, glancing down at her clothing. She'd taken to wearing suits when having a meeting with a potential buyer. Suits. Black ones with white blouses and shiny patent leather pumps. Annie Hamilton had slipped away into the night only to be replaced by a businesswoman. No more flighty inventor. No more absentminded professor.

No more wife, she thought, feeling hopelessly alone and empty.

Her life with Maxi continued on the same course, now with more time to spend together since she'd loosened up on inventing several different things at once to concentrate on the Stayput. She'd climbed to a new level in her life, pushed forth by her success. Yet, the joy wasn't as rewarding as she'd dreamt it would be. Something...no, someone was missing.

She held up one of the love notes. "You are the balance I need in my life." Carefully tucking it back into the box, she whispered, "I love you, Major Grainger."

** * **

"Major Grainger, there is a phone call on one for you," the disembodied voice of Airman Shackly said through David's intercom.

He glared at the newspaper in front of him one more time. Annie looked so happy. Even in black and white he could guess how her azure eyes glistened as the president of the Skyview Chamber of Commerce presented her with a plaque for BusinessWoman of the Month. Annie had made it. She'd reached the height she'd strove for all these years despite his attempts to squash her success. A feeling of shame mixed with the loss he now felt.

"Sir? Did you hear me?"

"Thank you, Airman Shackly," David said, holding the button to the intercom. He looked at the phone as if there were a chance Annie would be calling to ask him to come back. He could remarry her and have the entire family move to Korea until he finished his remote tour. The buzzer sounded once again and David grabbed the phone before Airman Shackly came rushing in to see if her commander had fallen off the deep end.

"Major Grainger here." David's heart sunk as he listened to Mrs. Winters go on about how poorly the food was when General Winters was a patient on the surgical ward. "I'll look into it," he heard himself say, not giving a hoot if the general had to eat TV dinners. His heart wasn't in his work right now. He looked at Annie in the newspaper and let the phone rest on his shoulder.

"McCann Air Force base has always had such terrible food. And sick people shouldn't be subjected to it!" Mrs. Winters argued through the phone.

"Yes, ma'am. I'll look into it."

"See that you do. My husband will appreciate it. You know, no one should have to accept things as is, Major."

David held the receiver out as he groaned. How he hated pushy officer's wives who thought they wore their husband's rank. But Mrs. Winters was wrong. Sometimes people had to accept the ones they loved "as is" and not change them. He looked down and smiled. He'd learned that the hard way. At least Annie never fell into the typical officer's wife mold. She was a civilian through and through. But he knew in his heart that he could make her happy now-now that he realized what had caused all their problems. And she'd managed so well at Colonel Martin's party- and afterward, too.

David really always wanted her to be happy but went about it all the wrong ways. It took their son to show him the light. Annie's need for financial independence was just like his need to refuse his families wealth. He set the phone receiver down, shaking his head about Mrs. Winters and realizing he could have chosen to run his father's business, have a swanky office in downtown Denver, live the good life with servants galore, and spend his trust fund as if it were an endless supply of water. But he'd given all that up to choose what he wanted to do. To become a doctor and join the military. He'd grown up with the notion of serving his country and helping people. Thanks to Nanny Windsor, he had chosen correctly, knowing money would never have brought him happiness.

Not like a family could.

He lifted the paper and said, "You've grown into a successful business woman, but you're still my 'love.'"

** * **

"Bye, Mommy!" Maxi shouted on his way out to get the school bus.

Annie looked down from her perch on the ladder and shouted, "Hey, don't I get a kiss, kiddo?"

"Here." He blew her a sloppy kiss from his mouthful of bubble gum.

Annie reached out to catch the kiss, nearly toppling off the ladder. "Get rid of that gum before you get to school." She yanked at the pulley to see if it were strung high enough. Visions of David being pelted with whiskbrooms sent a smile to her lips and a pang to her heart. "And don't stick it under the seat on the bus!"

Maxi giggled as she watched him step onto the bus. She looked up to see a leaf cascade from the giant Aspen near the driveway. It would be months before the rest fell but she had the time to work on her leaf-remover invention before the summer got too hot. Nothing was more of a waste of time and energy to her then raking leaves or shoveling snow. The pulley looked taut enough so she headed inside to flip the switch.

Clang. Thud.

"Oh geez!" Annie ran to the open front door.

Across the lawn the pulley clanged and moved the cupped plastic scoopers that were to lift up the leaves and drop them into the woods. Unfortunately, a wire dangled from the pulley, blocking the flow of the scoopers. Annie ran forward before the entire pulley system collapsed. Just as she reached to pull the loose wire, her hand got tangled lifting her from the ground to land on the softened green grass. The scoopers thudded against her head. "Double darn."

A pair of strong arms lifted her from behind. Her body tensed at the scent, the feel....

"I see nothing's changed, Annie."

She pulled free, causing her foot to tangle in the wire, landing her smack dab in the arms of David.

"Thank God nothing has changed, Annie Hamilton." He kissed her, and she nuzzled against his chest-right where she belonged.

"No, and I still love you, David."

"Good, then that makes it easier to ask you-" He shifted away from her to reach into his pocket. "I've never felt like this before. So optimistic about life. Annie, you've instilled that in me."

"Oh, David. I've hoped every second since you left that you would come back. What do you want to ask?" Her heart sped with worry. What was David up to? She had just re-professed her love to him, but, he hadn't returned the sentiment. Oh God, did David really still love her? She knew she never wanted to change a hair on his head. She wanted him exactly the way he was, and would always be. Gingerly, she repeated her question almost afraid to hear his response. "Ask me...what?"

"This-" He held out his hand. The sunlight sparkled on the object as if a beam of light shone down on his palm like a spotlight on a Broadway star.

Annie squinted against the glare. She leaned near until she realized what David held. "Oh my God, David...you...you bought it-" This time she let the tears flow, not caring if the cold air froze her cheeks. The tears came from her heart, came from her love, came from being touched by David's sentimental act. He took the ring, her pawned wedding ring, and placed it on her hand.

"How...when did you?" She sucked in a breath and smiled toward her outstretched hand now sporting the sparkling ring.

"It wasn't easy to convince old Mr. Harper to sell it back to me without the pawn ticket. I had to call Popi to vouch for my integrity on my way over here."

"The interfering old coot." She kissed David smack on the lips. "I'm so glad he interfered."

"Hey, wait a minute." He slipped the ring off as an astonished Annie watched.

"But-" He silenced her with the tip of his finger. "You'll get it back, Hamilton...er...soon to be Grainger if you answer yes to my question."

Annie watched David, his eyes warmed with his love for her as he slipped the ring back on her finger. Her heart slowed, a lightheaded feeling overtook her as she focused on David, the golden trees a blur against the azure sky.

"Annie Hamilton, do you take this man...again?"

In as far back as her memory could recall, Annie never remembered being speechless...until she looked into the face of the man she had never stopped loving and unable to reply...nodded her agreement

Makeshift Family

by

Lori Avocato

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Chapter One

"Who the hell..."

The gruff voice pierced Lani Cabot's sleep. It was a deep voice, almost sensual, reaching into the haze of her mind. In her twilight sleep she thought it had to come from a male. A man! Suddenly her eyelids flew open. It wasn't a dream!

In the darkened shadows above the bed, a huge, blurry figure loomed. Her heart froze. A burglar in her new house! Paralyzed by fear, she held her breath. The figure moved closer. A hint of cologne and the size of the silhouette indicated it had to be a man. If she remained still he might leave. But suddenly her grogginess cleared, and she remembered - she was not home alone.

She had to get past him and check on her girls.

She reached out to clutch whatever she could find. Cold metal touched her palm. She clenched, yanked and walloped the intruder with the bedside lamp.

A heavy thud - a sickening sound of hurting someone - filled the room. She told herself that she had no choice. Dropping the lamp, she thrashed her hands about in the darkness. She couldn't find another light. A sliver of white came from the doorway. She jumped up and stepped over the body. One foot landed on some soft part. "Oh God, please help me!" She stumbled toward the light, felt for a wall switch, and shoved it up to see she stood in a strange bedroom. That's right. She wasn't home. She didn't even know where this place was!

That didn't matter now. He was out cold, so she ran from the room.

The door to the spare bedroom remained partly shut, as she'd left it before going to bed. With a sense of relief, she peeked in to see both girls safely snuggled and asleep. Thank you, God, she thought. But her prayers were soon interrupted with the thought - who was the intruder and what was she going to do about him?

It took several seconds for her feet to move. Not that she didn't want to, but more she couldn't. She swung around to make sure he wasn't behind her. She'd heard no noise; that had to be a good sign. Summoning every ounce of courage she could muster, she forced herself to head back to the room where he still, hopefully, lay on the floor.

The dim ceiling light shone in the master bedroom of the mountain house she'd broken into earlier that night. Sprawled across the floor was a giant. Golden brown hair tousled across his forehead; his eyes

shut. Oh God! She'd killed him!

She grasped one hand with the other, over and over, but they still shook. It had been self-defense, she told herself. But her mouth still dried, sweat trickled down her forehead and her heart galloped inside her chest in a marathon. How could she have killed someone? Even in self-defense?

The man spread across the wooden floor, his brown climbing boots parallel with the foot of the bed. A small bump formed below the widow's peak on his forehead, but there was no cut. His shoulders, as wide as the cross-board on the door, lined up near the pillows and, maybe she imagined it, but his head came up to the headboard. He had to be tall, at least six feet.

Oh gosh! She should start CPR, but she wasn't trained. Nine-one-one. That was it. Oh damn, oh damn, she thought. Last night she'd searched the place from top to bottom for a phone and never found one. She looked down to see if he'd moved. Visions of her search last night popped into her head when she looked at him. Even with eyes closed, she recognized his face from the display of photographs she'd seen on a table in the living room.

Well, at least he wasn't a burglar.

He belonged here. She was the intruder. Her hands shook so she had to shove them into her pockets to think clearly as she looked down once again.

He remained still. Her heart dropped in her chest like an elevator whose cable had snapped.

Well, she'd make an attempt at CPR anyway, she thought, as she bent near. If not, how was she going to carry a six-foot tall dead man outside?

On shaky legs, Lani leaned closer, readied to place her hands on his chest, then thank goodness, saw the man's chest rise. Thank you, God. With a sigh, she leaned against the wall for a second, then ran out of the room.

"Jeez!" Nick Hunter shouted. Cold, no, damned frigid liquid splashed across his face. He gasped. "What...the hell are you doing - "

Pain bombarded the top of his head. Damn, his dreams had never been this vivid before. He even felt wet. With a swipe of his hands, he cleared his damp eyes enough to see the blurry culprit standing above him, holding his grandmother's cast-iron frying pan in one hand. Rounded emerald eyes stared toward him.

This time it wasn't Donna haunting his dreams.

No, this woman looked like a slender statue with creamy rose skin. He blinked and rubbed his tongue across his wet lips. Below heavy eyelids, he took one more look at her to be sure she wouldn't soak him again. Despite the fear in her eyes, she was beautiful. Some dream he'd conjured up.

His head pounded as if someone kept slamming the stupid frying pan into it. He managed to run his hand through his hair, but refused to force his eyelids open. He'd never had such a vivid dream before. All the times he'd dreamt...those dreams...had distressed him, but this time he actually felt wet, and in pain. He damn well didn't need a new version of the nightmare - the old one was effective enough.

"Don't hurt me or I'll hit you," she threatened. She waved the frying pan toward him.

He flinched. By nightmare standards this one was a doozie, he thought. "I'm not going to touch you." He growled and touched his forehead. "Go away. Disappear. Beat it." He must have a concussion to be

talking in his sleep.

A baby whimpered, a distant yet familiar sound. Sorrow clenched his heart. Even the sobering pain in his head couldn't hurt as badly. So many nights he'd heard similar cries, but tonight, tonight was different. It was too real. He shut his ears, the sound intensified. In his groggy state, he reached for a pillow to cover his head and block out the sound. He grasped at nothing. With a groan, he squinted against the light to push himself up on his elbows. What the hell was he doing on the floor?

"Are you all right?" the statue asked.

"Oh great, now my hallucination talks."

"I don't know what you're talking about, but I asked if you were all right?" it repeated.

This dream was too real. He dropped down. "Jeez!" The hardwood floor thudded pain into the back of his already throbbing head.

"Don't do that! You're going to hurt yourself even more."

"What do you mean more?" He tried to un-jumble his brain. Where was he? A throb on his forehead reminded him. How did he get hurt? A faint memory flickered. That's right, he'd come to the mountains to spend his usual three months. Rain, wind, he remembered. Oh yeah, the storm had fought him the entire trip from Albany through the Adirondack Mountains. He rubbed his head again. A lump the size of a walnut and sore as hell was on the top near his forehead, but he didn't feel anything sticky. No blood.

Now he remembered coming into the cabin and seeing her, this emerald-eyed statue, sleeping in his bed. She must have whacked him with the pan. She stood there holding a glass in her other hand. Obviously, empty.

His blood surged in anger. What was she doing in his cabin hitting him on the head? Despite the pain, he opened his eyes and forced himself to sit. Dizziness nearly knocked the wind out of him. Nausea welled up in his throat, but he forced it down. He'd be damned if he'd get sick in front of her - whoever the hell she was.

"Who the hell are you, and what are you doing here?" he asked.

"Please let me help you up."

She touched his arms with a soft grasp. A scent, like someone who'd just showered, hovered around her. He inhaled, then cursed to himself. Who cared what she smelled like? She didn't belong here and had no damn right to hit him - or throw water on him. He whacked her hand away. Her widened eyes caught the light, sparking like brilliant gems. He growled again. What the hell was she looking so surprised about?

"You don't have to be so rude!"

"Look, lady, statue, whoever-the-hell you are, I can get up by myself." The groan that slipped out of his mouth made him angrier. Glaring at the innocent look on her face, and the slight pout to her coral lips, he cursed inside. Why he didn't curse out loud he didn't know, and it made him furious. Maybe the warm innocence of her eyes... "Why the hell did you soak me?" He decided he wasn't going to watch his language in his own cabin - no matter how she looked.

"I...I thought you were dead - "

"And you thought freezing water would raise me from the dead?"

"No...I just wanted to be sure...I mean, when your chest moved, I realized you were alive." She looked at him with doe eyes. "Maybe you should rest there a few minutes."

Just to spite her, he stood by himself. The room spun making his attacker a blur. Rebellious legs wobbled, he stumbled, heading directly for her. She reached out and steadied him. A baby sound, soft cooing, filtered through his cloudy thoughts. His eyes shut, and he willed the memory to leave. He couldn't take it much more...

"Maybe you should sit - "

He shifted away from her. "I can stand - " He swayed, grabbed for the end table, and flopped onto the bed. "Why the hell did you clobber me with that frying pan?"

"I...I"

"Hell, you're not going to start crying are you?"

She pulled herself away from the wall. "No, I am not. And I didn't hit you with this pan - "

"What the hell'd you use?"

"The lamp. Look, I thought you were a burglar - "

"In my own cabin?" He looked to see his bedside lamp sat on the floor, the bulb shattered. The lady had an arsenal of household weapons.

"Well, how would I have known this was your cabin?"

"You knew it wasn't yours!"

"I'm sorry about...your head. I was in such a deep sleep, I thought I was home." A slight pout gave her a damned adorable look. She shuffled her foot as if a little child.

"I wish you were home, then I wouldn't have this egg on my noggin." It angered him that he kept noticing her. Her eyes, her hair, her slender form. Hell, she could have killed him. He rubbed his head, but never took his eyes off her hand - the one with Nana's pan.

"I said I was sorry. I wouldn't have hit you, if I weren't confused and you didn't shout at me."

"Hey, I didn't ask to get whacked, lady."

"My name is Lani. Lani Cabot and - "

He snorted at the way she pulled her shoulders straight. It still didn't make her look any taller. "Lani? What the hell kinda name is 'Lani'?"

"It's Hawaiian and - "

He looked at her head. "Your hair's too light for you to be Hawaiian."

"Actually, I'm Polish - "

"Cabot is Polish?"

She glared at him, one eyebrow rose. "We dropped the 'ski,' and if you'd let me finish a sentence, I can explain why I'm here."

Nick lifted his legs onto the bed and waved his hand for her to continue then crossed his hands behind his head.

"My parents met in Hawaii, that's how I got my name. It means sky."

"Interesting." He reached into his pocket and pulled out his cigarettes.

"I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't smoke inside - "

He ignored his throbbing head and let out a hoot. "I own this place, Lani Cabot. I'll damn well smoke where I want to." He lit the cigarette and blew an extra puff of smoke into the air. Who did she think she was?

"Well, at least don't smoke around my babies."

He stopped his hand midair. Babies. He'd heard the familiar cries and thought he'd dreamt of his children. Oh God, she had babies in his cabin.

What a perfect topping to this mess.

"Would you please not smoke inside?" she repeated.

He looked toward her. She'd painted this pleading look across her face while re-tucking her honey blonde hair into a blue ribbon behind her head. With her slender fingers, she didn't have any trouble getting the errant strands back into place. He knew she did it on purpose to show off the beseeching look she aimed at him. All it showed off was her high cheekbones, and the fact that she didn't have a blemish on her velvety skin, and those lush green eyes.

"I asked if you would please - "

"Please what?" he snarled, not caring about his irate tone. All he wanted was three secluded months in his cabin, and now he had to deal with this intruder. The last damned thing he needed here was a woman -

"Please don't smoke around my girls."

- Or girls. The cigarette tasted foul. He added it to the pile of butts in the ashtray near him. It wasn't hard to put out; he could care less about smoking. He only did it to test fate. After what he'd lost...what the hell difference did it make what happened to him?

"Thank you. Please excuse me. I'm going to check on the babies again."

Before he could think, she spun and left in a wake of that damned clean scent.

Nick steadied himself against the doorframe of the spare bedroom. Lani Cabot sat with not one but two tiny figures, both brown headed, one straight, one with wisps of curls, wrapped in her embrace. She'd helped herself to his afghan that now packaged the pair in a fluff of color.

He slammed his eyes shut and forced the old pain deep inside.

"These sweeties are my daughters, Alexandra. I call her Alexa - " Lani nodded toward the baby with curly hair, then the other, " - and Ana, for Anastasia."

She didn't look too comfortable holding both sleeping babies at once. He could see her arms straining as if she thought they'd tumble to the floor and her hands shook. She shifted in her seat, and one baby

looked as if she'd fall.

"Watch out!" He grabbed for her.

Lani pulled her baby tightly. "I have her."

"Maybe you should only hold one at a time."

He'd never guess a snippet of a woman could scowl like that. Okay, so he had no right to tell her what to do with her kids, but damn it all, this was his place and he didn't want any lawsuit. He turned to leave.

"What is your name?"

"Hunter, Nick," he said over his shoulder.

In the living room, Nick grabbed a bottle of scotch and filled the closest glass that he could reach. He should be shoving down aspirin, but this golden liquid would do the trick. It'd numb the pain of his headache, but each time he heard a soft cooing sound - nothing could ease that pain.

"They're still asleep. Thank goodness." She spoke with a nervousness that he assumed came from being found in his cabin. "Alexa usually takes much longer to put down. She's...well, she requires more attention. Cries more than poor Ana."

He looked over his shoulder and wanted to say he could care less what her kids did but kept his mouth shut. When he turned back, he took a huge sip of scotch and stifled the urge to cough. Reflected in the mirror, she stood in the doorway behind him. He hadn't noticed before, but she wore a green flannel shirt. It looked surprisingly like his green flannel, including the engraved "NH" on the pocket. This broad, no, she had a different air about her, she couldn't be classified as a broad. This female had nerve. And long legs. His shirt fell just above her knees, like a dress.

He turned and headed toward the fireplace. "How long have you been in my cabin?" With his glass tucked into his hand, he slumped down into the wicker rocker. Jeez, his head hurt.

"I'm sorry. In all the confusion I haven't explained everything."

Against his better judgment, he watched Lani Cabot as she told how she came to be here. He knew he was missing parts of her story because he focused too much on her damned eyes, full lips, and the way the light sparkled on her teeth when she smiled. And she smiled a lot.

A tightness squeezed inside his chest as if a fist grabbed his heart when he watched her. Damn the pain. Damn the rainfall, and damn her beauty. He'd worked hard at and had been successful in secluding himself from women - until now.

"So you see, the girls and I had no choice. When the deer had darted out in front of my car, I lost control. Luckily the boulder caught under the wheel before we landed in the lake. When I heard the flood warning on the radio, and the rain had started, I packed what I could carry and hiked up to the road." She smiled, again.

He swallowed a huge gulp down to an empty glass.

"It amazed me that no cars came by to help."

"December isn't tourist season up here, not much traffic." He stood and poured himself another shot glass full. "Where were you headed?"

"Like I said - " she cocked her head and glared at him. "Maybe you didn't hear me before..."

The silence of the mountains intruded into his thoughts. Here he sat in his cabin with a beautiful woman, desperately trying to ignore that fact. He wanted to look past her, but the light seemed to illuminate her face. Was that a tiny dimple to the left of her lips or just a shadow? Oh jeez. He mentally shook himself. This was pathetic like some junkie at a drug buffet.

"I'm from Utica and was going to visit my mother in Plattsburgh. The rain made seeing awfully difficult, and I lost my way."

She lifted her hair from her shoulders as if the weight were too much. His gaze followed her movements and didn't miss the smooth whiteness of her slender neck. He swallowed hard and took another sip.

"When I crossed a bridge, I saw a building - this...your house. We could have drowned in the river, or froze. Nick?"

"Um?"

She gave a soft laugh. "I wasn't sure you were listening again. We were so cold. The girls...they were like ice when we finally found your place. They're so small...and well, I was so scared that they'd...I'm afraid I turned the thermostat over eighty. I'll pay for the heat - "

He waved her words away. "It won't bankrupt me."

"But I insist."

"At least the kids got warm."

"Yes, their little bodies were shivering so..."

He could remember holding tiny babies like that, so long ago. Fingers, no bigger than a few inches, wrapping around his...

"Nick? I asked if I could call my mother. I tried to find you phone last night, but you have it hidden pretty well. We were going to surprise Mother, but - "

"No."

"I'll call collect - "

"You couldn't find a phone because I don't have one."

He could see the firm muscles of her legs as she moved. Lani must jog, he told himself, pissed that he even noticed. She dropped onto the sofa opposite him. Like a little girl, she folded her legs beneath her and rested one hand on each knee. She tugged at her shirt with both hands obviously trying to cover her legs from his eyes. Her shirt? His, and damn, it looked a hell of a lot better on her. She rocked gently in her seat, not much, actually, he would barely notice if he weren't staring at her. When he started to wish he wore a size small shirt instead of an extra large, he pulled his focus to the deer's head on the wall.

"No phone? Oh my. Then how am I going to call the Triple A?"

He chuckled, not because it was funny, but her innocence...and the slight curve to her lower lip when she asked the question struck him. This ogling was ridiculous. He needed to hide his interest in her. He slugged down the rest of his second drink and got up for a third. Normally one would do, but tonight was unusual. It wasn't every day he found a woman, damn, a beautiful woman in his cabin. Urges he

hadn't felt for so long reawakened when he looked at her. An uncomfortable air filled the room. A man. A woman. Jeez, he couldn't wait until morning when she'd leave. "I'll take a look at your car tomorrow. Probably can tow it out with my Jeep."

"That would be wonderful." She looked to the pictures on the end table of his parents, grandfather, and one of him with his dad that he'd allowed to remain in the cabin. The others, he couldn't keep out any longer. "You know, I remembered seeing you in these pictures and when I...that is after I hit you, well, at least I knew you weren't a robber."

He shrugged as she watched him pour another scotch. By her questioning look, she didn't approve. Hell, with the way he'd acted when they met, it wouldn't surprise him if he frightened her. But despite her expression, she had the appearance of someone pretty confident. It sounded as if she was level headed in getting her kids safe. One thing he couldn't take was an airhead of a woman.

"I...hope I can find my car." She gave a nervous laugh. "And, I do appreciate being able to stay here tonight, but I don't want to put you out any longer."

The ceiling light was by no means bright, but her eyes had a way of capturing the slightest ray - and sparkling. He couldn't say don't worry about putting me out, because she was. She was intruding on his seclusion, and he didn't need that. All he wanted were peaceful days of hunting, fishing, and reading - alone. No woman around - and, oh God, he couldn't take hearing their sweet sounds - no children.

Even beneath the flannel, he could see the form of her breasts, full and round, and he imagined, soft, as she raised her arms above her head with a yawn. Damn it! He really didn't need a woman around.

The hand grasping his heart tightened - he downed his scotch in one throat-burning gulp.

"Good night, Nick."

He raised his empty glass toward her and inhaled the clean scent that wafted toward him in the slight breeze of her departure. And cursed.

Lani couldn't go to sleep without checking on her daughters. She knew she overdid seeing if the babies were all right, but she couldn't help it. They'd needed extra attention each in their own ways. Alexa often cried non-stop while Ana remained so silent it often broke Lani's heart to see her. Thank goodness, though, that they were twins. Lani had already noticed a bond between the girls. Often she thought Alexa did all the communicating for the both of them because she knew exactly what her sister wanted. Lani sighed. Motherhood was overwhelming enough, but the car accident, hitting Nick, oh gosh, Nick, then ending up in this cabin added to her worries.

The light from the hallway cast a dim glow on the girls as they slept soundly. She tiptoed near to cover Alexa. The baby stirred, Lani pulled back. Would she ever learn to leave sleeping babies alone? The temporary cribs she'd fixed for them on the floor, with large dresser drawers and plenty of blankets for cushions, seemed to be comfortable enough for the twins. Luckily the girls were small enough to have plenty of room in the old drawers.

Pushing the pile of diapers, clothes, and her how-to care for toddlers book aside, she collapsed onto the bed. Despite her exhaustion, she knew she couldn't sleep right now. What a day. What a week.

What had she gotten herself into?

Looking at the girls, she wondered if she'd made the biggest mistake of her life - and theirs. Reaching for the book about taking care of babies, she held it to her chest with one hand and picked up Alexa's yellow sleeper with the other hand. Inhaling the wonderful scent of baby, she rested her head against the

pile of the clothes and said a silent prayer.

Tomorrow she'd straighten the mess she'd made by dumping everything out when she was so exhausted and only wanted to get the girls to sleep.

She whispered, "Mommy loves you two," and shut her eyes and bit her lip. How close she'd come to losing these babies she'd only brought to this country a few days ago. The long trip from Russia, where she'd adopted them from, seemed like ages ago after this frightening day. She had no idea where she'd summoned the energy to hike through the mountains in the rainstorm today, but she knew she'd do anything to protect her daughters - she was all they had.

When Lani opened her eyes to see a beam of light across their tiny faces, all the years of frustration and longing vanished as quickly as a breath snuffs out a candle flame. When the call had come from Kathy Scott, her caseworker, that a set of one-year-old twin girls was available in an orphanage in Russia, Lani vacillated between excitement and hysteria.

What did she know about taking care of two babies? What did she know about taking care of one baby? Nothing. She'd never even had a brother or sister to practice on. No nieces or nephews, and too busy in high school with cheer leading, swimming, and boys - she never even baby-sat!

No, she knew nothing about taking care of babies, but she took every parenting class available. Now it was on-the-job training. She set the book and sleeper on the bed and stood to place a kiss on each girls' forehead. No way could she have separated the two. Looking at them, she whispered, "I'm going to learn to be the best mother I can."

Since the house had three bedrooms, she went to sleep in the other spare one. It looked similar to the master bedroom with beamed ceiling and log walls. All the furnishing appeared antique, mahogany bed and dresser, ivory washbowl and pitcher on a stand near the window. Quaint but unusual for a bachelor's place. Nick must be married, she thought and collapsed on the bed, wrapping herself with the blue patchwork quilted bedspread. Her heavy eyelids closed until a knock sounded on the door. She hugged the bedspread to her chest. "Yes?"

The door opened with a creak. Nick's hair tousled over his forehead as he leaned in. As if he didn't want to enter the bedroom, he hovered near the door, pushing back the strands of hair.

"Look, it's getting kind of hot...er...warm in here. Think the girls warmed up enough so I could at least drop the thermostat down?"

"Of course. I'm sorry I was so tired, I didn't think of it." He turned to leave. "Nick, thank you." He grumbled something and left.

Lani sat up and smiled. How cute that curl on Nick's forehead looked. She ran her hand across the quilt, back and forth as if she would have liked to push the hair back for him. A faint scent of cologne made its way toward her. She inhaled and suddenly a weird feeling, as if a chill sped throughout her had her wide-awake. But it wasn't a cold chill, she realized, it was warm, no darn hot, and it started at her toes. She collapsed into the soft pillow. How weird being alone in a stranger's cabin, a handsome stranger. Yet, she didn't feel any physical threat from him. Well, there was something she felt seeing a gorgeous man like Nick, but it wasn't fear. She had to be sensible, someone that looked like him had to be married.

Good thing Nick was turning the heat down.

Nick tossed and turned beneath his brown afghan for the hundredth time. He threw both pillows on the floor. Lani's scent, kind of sweet, kind of spicy, clung to them, keeping him from sleep. Each time he'd breathe, he could smell her, see those emerald eyes, and imagine what it would feel like to touch her full

breasts. Damn it! He'd been doing fine staying celibate all this time. As a bag of potato chips calls out to a dieter from the pantry, beautiful Lani Cabot called out to him from the spare bedroom - at least his damned insomnia had him imagining she called out. With a tug of the afghan, he covered his head.
"Damn horny jerk!"

A crash sounded.

What was that fool woman up to now? Nick flew out of bed and clutched the footboard. The sudden movement sent the bump on his head throbbing, but he had to see what caused the noise. It sounded much louder than something falling would. Sucking in a breath, he yanked open the door and ran head into Lani in the hallway.

"Damn it!" he shouted.

"Sorry! Did you hear that?" What was it?" Lani asked frantically.

She stood in the dimly lit hall, her honey blonde tousled. At least she looked as if she'd been sleeping - then what was the noise?

"I thought you - " His glance caught hers, and they darted toward the twins' room.

"Shh. They're both asleep," Lani whispered as she and Nick stood in the doorway of the spare bedroom.

With a gentle push, she guided him toward the living room. Why the hell did he insist on sleeping shirtless? She'd only touched him for a second, probably less than a second, but the spot burned as if her hand were a fiery ember on his back. Morning couldn't come too soon.

Lani followed Nick's silhouette into the darkened living room. The only light came from the small lamp she'd left on in the bathroom in case she needed to tend to the girls during the night. Thank goodness for the dark, or he'd see her crimson complexion. Just because she touched his naked back, she didn't need to have heat burn up her cheeks like this. She'd have thought he would be freezing without a shirt, but by the warm sensation on her palm, his skin wasn't cold at all.

She had to stop noticing him.

Nick flipped on the overhead light. He pushed strands of hair from his forehead and made soft clicking sounds with his lips, like someone just wakening. But his eyes looked red surrounding the deep dark brown, as if he hadn't slept a wink.

"Must have been something outside. Stay here - " he said.

"I want to see too - "

"Black bears are partial to brunettes with emerald...with green eyes." He grabbed a brown leather aviator jacket from a hook by the door, shoved his feet into climbing boots, and took a flashlight from the shelf overhead then stepped onto the porch.

Bears! Lani thought horrified. He'd said that just to scare her even though he couldn't know about her childhood fears. Nick Hunter was rude, handsome, not very social, and shoot, handsome.

She waited in the living room. A stale smoky scent, from long ago burned embers, filled the air. In her attempt to warm the girls when they arrived, she hadn't really looked around the cabin. She had hurried through the room so fast it was as if she were looking at it for the first time now.

Huge wooden beams supported the ceiling, running down the sides between walls of logs. Heads of deer

and moose glared at her from their perches on the walls. An air of mustiness mixed with the embers. In one corner, a wrought iron staircase circled around. Newspapers, magazines, and clothing covered the tops of most of the rustic furnishings. No sign of anything female. And the only woman in the photographs looked much older, his mother, Lani guessed.

She walked toward the couch to get an afghan and gasped. Along the floor near the stone fireplace rested a hideous bear rug, complete with head. It was fanned out with its eyes open, glaring at her. Although its claws were short, to Lani they looked horrifying, and her heart raced at the foolish fear knowing full well this bear wasn't going to hurt her or the girls. Early childhood memories of the stories her father had told her surfaced. She cautiously stepped to the other side of the couch, grabbed the afghan and followed the hallway into a kitchen.

Although the cabin was made of logs, it was modernized inside with black appliances and a wooden countertop. Beams ran along the ceiling, sporting copper pots and pans from metal hooks. By the mess on the counter, she was fairly certain this wasn't a woman's kitchen. Pulling the afghan tightly, she leaned to look out the window. As if a shade of blackness covered the glass, she couldn't see a thing.

"Damn it!" Nick's shout from outside didn't sound as if a bear had knocked over a garbage can or had gotten into any minor trouble. His anger indicated something major had caused the noise. She couldn't stand it and ran out onto the porch.

"What the hell are you doing out here - " Nick aimed the flashlight toward her. " - barefoot?"

She shielded her eyes.

"I said to stay inside - "

"Stop that! I can't see."

"Fine. You want to see?" He moved the light away.

She followed his pointing of the light toward the left. "Oh no!" She had no idea which way they'd come from to find the cabin - until now. Through a veil of rain she could see torrents of river water ran several yards near the foot of the hill that the cabin sat on. It didn't take any knowledge of the wilderness to see there must have been a road under the water's path at one time.

A black Jeep scrunched against a tree near the bottom of the hill, and unless Nick was a reckless driver, which could be possible, the water had moved the Jeep. Without a word, he aimed the flashlight farther to the left. A gasp flew out of her mouth. What used to be the bridge, which she'd crossed with her babies, hung like a broken toothpick, dangling above the rushing currents.

She shut her eyes. "Is there another way out of here?" No answer. "Nick, can we get to the main road any other way? Maybe he didn't hear her again? She opened her eyes. Even in the dim light, she could see Nick's wrinkled brow, eyes blazing with anger, and guess that a litany of curses passed inside his head.

She had her answer.

Chapter Two

No, there is no other way out, Nick thought. I'm stuck here with you and two babies. And, oh God, how the hell can I live through this?

"Nick? Did you hear me?" Lani asked.

"See that curve at the bottom of the hillside?" He shone the flashlight, scanning the landscape. "The river bends around the bottom of this property. And that's the back - "

"Oh my God!"

He knew, even in the darkness, that she could see the mountain was the backdrop of the cabin's lot. It backed up to the base of the rocky wall. No way could anyone make it over that.

"What about...to the sides? Is there a way - "

He wasn't getting any pleasure out of the frantic tone in her voice. It grated on his nerves, reminding him of their predicament. "I said the river curves around. It makes a half circle, like a damned mote - "

She glared at him and he guessed his language was the cause. Seemed Ms. Lani Cabot had tender ears.

"Perhaps we could survey the situation in the morning, when it's light out."

"Survey all you want, Cabot. I know this land like the back of my hand. My grandfather built this cabin. Do you know how many summers I've spent here? How many times I've 'surveyed' this land?"

She huffed, wrapped the afghan tighter.

He smiled until he caught himself. The smile faded.

Lani looked at the raindrops at the foot of the porch pelting the earth, dancing like fairies, naughty fairies who insisted on keeping her and the twins marooned in Nick Hunter's cabin. Her mouth dried despite the humid air. "I'm freezing," she said, angry that her teeth chattered.

Nick aimed the flashlight at the door. She turned and went inside. As she walked into the living room, the kitchen door slammed. "Please don't wake the girls," she said, turning.

He looked at her as if she had two heads, but when he put the flashlight back, she noticed he laid it down gently.

Wrapping the afghan around herself, she willed the chill away. For some reason, shivering in front of Nick Hunter was embarrassing. He had a knack for making her feel like a bug under a microscope with the looks that he gave her. Also, she was fighting the urge to stare back at him. He was too easy to look at. She straightened her shoulders and started to leave.

"Only thing that's gonna warm you deep enough is a stiff drink and...the fire."

She stopped in the doorway. Over her shoulder she could see him make his way to the shelf and pour two glassfuls of amber liquid. Not that she was opposed to an occasional drink, but she didn't want to waste calories on liquor so she could have dessert instead. Truthfully, she had no burning desire to sit and share a drink or anything else with Nick Hunter, even if it would warm her. "I have to check on the girls - "

"You just did before. Babies will let you know if they need something."

He was right, but she turned toward the hallway. "You don't understand. Alexa is...never mind. I'll be right back."

The girls were fine. She hesitated about returning to the living room, but the cold chilled to her bones. Leaving the door to the room open enough so she could hear them, she went back to Nick. He motioned to a shot glass full of golden liquid on the coffee table.

Her empty stomach gripping her inside reminded her that she hadn't eaten in hours and said she shouldn't take a drink. With the trek through the woods after the accident, she had more important things on her mind besides food. She shivered and knew he was right. Lani lifted the glass and sipped at what she guessed was whisky. As it burned its way down her throat, she had nothing better to do, sitting on the couch, than watch Nick Hunter's back. Thank goodness he'd put on a shirt. A red plaid shirt, which fit snugly across his wide shoulders. He'd rolled the sleeves up above his elbows, so each time he reached for another log, she could see the muscles of his arms clearly defined. There had to be a lot of strength in those arms.

After another sip, the room grew a bit blurry. If she weren't sitting, she would swear it had swayed. This was not good. She'd embarrass herself if she got up and couldn't walk straight. The glass was nearly as full as Nick had poured so it wasn't as if she'd drunk too much. Obviously she was very sensitive to amber liquid.

When he bent, a part of the shirt pulled loose from his worn jeans. Lani swallowed her gasp as she eyed Nick's naked waist and held her glass in front of her eyes. Maybe seeing Nick through the amber would make him less appealing. Nope, she lowered the glass to her lap. She felt like laughing. Laughing for no reason - except maybe the fact that she'd just been staring at Nick through her drink. Luckily, he didn't notice or she'd sink to the floor in embarrassment. She knew she shouldn't have drunk any liquor on an empty stomach.

Having no idea what time it was, and caring less, Lani took her last sip. It surprised her that it went down much smoother. Obviously, the powerful drink had burned the nerve endings of her throat and she'd never be able to feel again.

The crackling of flames burning into the logs overpowered the stale smoky scent that had earlier lingered. It smelled of Christmas at her grandmother's in Plattsburgh. Christmas, a time to gather with family and friends. How the years had changed the seating arrangements at Grandma's long dining room table. First grandpa had died, then her own father when she was only nine. Being an only child, without any cousins, left a very small family to celebrate the holidays.

From that year on, she had promised herself that she'd fill the empty seats with children of her own - at least four of them. But when she married, the chances of even filling one seat became slim. When she had had to face a hysterectomy, then a divorce, she knew no children would fill those seats until God blessed her with Alexa and Ana. She should check on the babies again despite what Nick had said, but her body relaxed into the couch.

She knew she couldn't stand. Her muscles, which she'd put through a rigorous routine today, were finally rebelling. At least the babies were quiet - she needed to stop worrying about them. They'd let her know if they needed anything. Especially Alexa!

Nick poked at the logs, rolling them amid the sparks, until the blaze lapping toward the chimney sent its heat to warm Lani, deep inside, just as Nick had said. He took great care with the fire, checking the screen several times before leaving the hearth.

"Give me that glass before you drop it," he said.

Nick took the glass, half falling into Lani's lap, from her hand as she pulled herself from her thoughts. "That drink did warm me. Thanks."

The only seat facing the fire was the couch. She really didn't want him that near, but as if he read her mind, he deliberately seated himself next to her. She inched to the side, draping her arm over the plaid

brown couch's end so it wouldn't seem too obvious why she moved.

Nick remained near the other side. It wasn't a long couch, but at least they could sit on it without having any contact. She certainly didn't want any contact with Nick Hunter's broad shoulders, or the strong arms that made lifting a heavy log look as if he'd picked up a tinker toy. No, she didn't want any connection with any part of his body, despite the tingling sensation that surged throughout her. The darn whiskey was doing strange things to her.

A yawn sneaked out and before she could cover her mouth a hiccup followed, like the powerful ones Alexa produced. Lani tried to stand again - she needed to get out of here so she could crawl under the bed and die. But her muscles betrayed her, and she couldn't budge. She shut her eyes and leaned back to think about how to get out of the same room as Nick Hunter.

Nick swallowed back a curse and tried to ease his body to the right, thinking Lani fell asleep near him on purpose. She could have gone to bed, but she sacked out, trapping him, to annoy him. He shut his eyes. She must have been sent by fate. He tried to push her arm. It was no use. Lani Cabot looked like a delicate, slender beauty, but when the lady conked out, her slim body trapped him on his own couch.

He'd been forcing himself to study the fire, despite the feelings it invoked, and not think about the clean scented woman inches away from him on the same seat. Well, he managed to ignore her long enough for her to fall asleep, and now he couldn't move. Damn. His arm ached and prickled at the same time. The tips of his fingers had numbed. If he pushed against her, she'd probably topple onto the floor, so he snaked his arm between them and rested it on the back of the sofa behind her.

This day just got better and better he thought, shaking his head in annoyance.

Strands of spicy scented hair tickled his cheek. She must have showered and used his shampoo. The scent should have smelled wrong on her, a man's shampoo, out of place on a female head, but on her...it smelled nice. Oh hell. He forced his eyes to shut or else he'd flip Lani Cabot onto the floor and stomp off to his room. Instead of counting sheep, he counted all the different curse words he knew. Words that shocked even him, but fit the situation appropriately.

If he would have known this predicament waited for him, he'd have stayed in his sparse apartment in Albany. He knew he should have listened to the weather forecast and waited until the rain stopped, but there was nothing to keep him there. If he drove his Jeep off the mountainside, no one would miss him. The thought left an emptiness inside. It wouldn't make a damned bit of difference as long as no other car was involved. So as soon as he flew his last cargo flight, he packed up his Jeep and headed for his cabin in Huntersburg, north of Lake George.

What better place to seclude himself against society than the huge cabin his grandfather had built up there in the early 1900s. He fought the guilt that threatened to rise, knowing Grandpa would be disappointed in him. He'd never been taught to run from a situation, but to face it outright. And he always had, until the last two years. How could anyone deal with the past he'd been dealt?

Lani's warm body wriggled against Nick and an old wound - a wound that he'd never allowed to heal, tore open. It had been so long since he'd held a woman, the reminder made him remember. He remembered how he'd held Donna so many times...If he had to swim in the freezing river, he'd get Lani Cabot off Hunter property, soon.

Lani thought her muscles were sore yesterday from her trudge in the woods, but when she tried to move and wake up, every cell of her body clenched in pain. She settled back for a few seconds, allowing her eyes to remain shut. Warm sunlight touched her face, but even that didn't help relax those muscles. She sucked in a deep sigh, inhaling the sooty smell of cool embers that hung in the air. But nearby, another

scent lingered. She couldn't quite make the spicy fragrance out. Taking a deep breath, she concluded it was a cologne, a man's cologne. Musk.

With a sleepy stare, she turned to see Nick Hunter holding her on the couch! Oh no! She pulled free of his arm that had been wrapped around her. His fingertips brushed against her breast. She ignored the hardening of her nipples to stand as fast as she could manage.

"Morning," Nick mumbled.

His voice came out groggy, husky, shoot, someone who looked like Nick Hunter shouldn't be allowed to have a sensual tone to his voice along with those kinds of looks. She gave him a nod but stopped suddenly. Gosh how her head hurt. "I can't believe the girls are still quiet. Usually they wake with the first light, well Ana anyway. No, I mean Alexa, the one with the curls - " She heard herself babbling, and groaned, but apparently falling asleep next to a handsome stranger set her nerves on edge.

Her empty glass sat on the coffee table among the piles of magazines. Hopefully, the alcohol hadn't knocked her out so deeply that she wouldn't have heard one of the babies crying. "I don't usually drink whiskey - "

"Scotch."

"Oh, whatever. Not that I drink much else." She found herself headed toward explaining about the calories and dessert, but thankfully, she caught herself. "I'm sorry about falling asleep on you - " That sounded worse than the dessert explanation.

Nick stared at her not making it any easier. He ran his hand through his hair, pulling it off the tips of his shoulder where it'd rested. She pulled her gaze from him and stood. Her clothing seemed untouched. Oh jeez, the alcohol had knocked her out enough to fall asleep next to a stranger. Thank God he seemed to be honorable - well, maybe that word didn't quite fit. It was hard to describe Nick Hunter after only meeting him last night, but she knew he had never made any advances toward her. That, she would have remembered.

Although, there was an air of mystery about him. Actually, he confused her, and she was usually a good judge of character. He seemed bristly on the outside, but the way he ran into the girls' room when they heard the noise last night, and the way he had set the flashlight down on the shelf, lightly...hmm.

She headed toward the girl's room, and wondered again if Nick was married. Not that it would have made any difference, but she wondered what kind of woman would put up with the ill-mannered owner of this cabin.

"Good morning, sweetie." Lani scooped up Ana. The baby had been lying in the drawer, playing with her toes, one sock clenched in her chubby fist. After spending ten days in Russia with them, she'd gotten to know Alexa as the more "active" of the twins. She slept soundly. It was nice to enjoy a few minutes with Ana alone. Besides, she needed to work on bonding with this little one. Lani wondered who would be more the challenge, the reserved Ana or Alexa the attention-getter.

Lani felt dampness on her arm. The baby's diaper had to weigh several pounds. "Well, missy, we need to get you a dry diaper and change your pajamas." Thank goodness the diaper bag was waterproof or she had no idea what she'd do. She couldn't stand the clutter on the bed and planned to make a neat pile as soon as she fed the girls. Fed them? What kind of food would someone like Nick Hunter have in his cabin? Probably raw meat from some creature he'd hunted himself.

Lani followed the scent of freshly brewed coffee into the kitchen. A still sleepy Ana nestled on her

shoulder, tickling Lani's cheek with her sweet breath.

She stopped in the doorway. The wonderful coffee scent had been masked by the smell of burning tobacco. Nick sat at the table with his back toward her, a thread of smoke billowing above his head. His hair looked longer from the back, golden brown strands covering the nape of his neck. It was by no means a styled haircut. Although the length was much too long for her taste, it fit the rugged appearance of a man who might live in a log house.

"Good morning, Nick."

He shrugged. She could see he read a book, and by the little coffee left in the glass pot and the half empty milk pitcher, she guessed that's what his daily breakfast consisted of. Coffee and a cigarette - which he put out when he looked at Ana. Then, Lani noticed the window had been opened a crack.

Lani surveyed the rest of the kitchen. Where could she safely set Ana? Last night the babies were so tired, she set them on a blanket on the floor so she could watch them and feed them the rest of the snacks she'd brought, but surely Ana would start to roam if let loose today.

"Nick, I need to fix Ana some breakfast. Could you hold her?" No response. Maybe he had a hearing problem. This wasn't the first time he didn't answer her. "Nick, I asked - "

Without any offer to hold Ana, Nick mumbled, "There's an old highchair in the shed, it's wooden, but it'll keep her in." He shoved his seat back and walked toward the door but not before removing the filled ashtray from the table. He took it outside and Lani guessed he'd empty out there.

She watched him leave and thought he obviously didn't want to hold Ana. As Lani sat down near the table with the baby on her lap, Alexa gave out a cry. Now what? She hadn't fed Ana yet and Alexa needed tending to. The baby on her lap wiggled as if she wanted to see her sister. No doubt twins had their own form of communication between them. Lani grabbed Ana tightly. Her heart fluttered when she realized the baby could have squirmed off her lap. Mothering was much tougher than it'd said in the books. And mothering twins was a definite challenge, especially alone.

"Give me a second here, kid." She held the baby against her chest and shut her eyes. "Things are not going as Mommy had planned." The baby gurgled. Lani's heart leapt at the wonderful sound. It was a pleasure to hear any noise from Ana. With a tight squeeze, Lani leaned forward and kissed the baby's soft cheek. "No, things are not going well at all. I love you both though."

She needed strength to take care of the babies and get through being here. Luckily, she had finally passed out last night after the drink. Yet, she still felt exhausted. "Let's go get you're sister." Lani took Ana and went to get the other baby. She knew she'd be a few minutes changing another diaper.

Nick cursed as his hand shook when he shoved an inch of dust off the old highchair. His mother had used it for all four of her children and when he and Donna came to the cabin, his son and daughter. He hadn't seen it in a few years. Emma had used it last. At six months, her petite little body could barely sit without sliding out. Nick Jr. had to give up the seat of honor at an early age, but the wandering two-year-old didn't seem to mind.

He ran his finger across the wood and sucked in a breath. The air in the shed smothered him. Or maybe, it was really the memories. With a yank, he pulled the highchair loose from between the stacks of furniture. A wooden playpen lay hidden by an old rocker. He grabbed that, too, and carried both inside, leaving the playpen in the living room.

The kitchen was empty so he set the chair down near the table. He started to leave and pulled a

dishtowel off the rack, swiping it across the wooden tray top on his way out of the door.

Happy baby sounds filtered through the closed backdoor onto the porch as Nick dropped into a rocker. Trying to drown out the sound with the creak of the old chair, Nick sped the pace of his rocking.

The rain had stopped some time during the night, leaving the grounds around the cabin muddy. Cool air blowing through the dense pines was enough to warrant a jacket, but not enough to freeze the water - his only hope. He could never make it across the swollen river to go for help, but if the area to the west, where the water slowed and pooled, froze, he could get across it and hike into town.

"Oh dear, no, sweetie, don't do that. Alexa, please. Whoops!" Lani's voice sneaked through the log walls.

Nick rocked faster.

"Oh! Help!"

He bolted out of his seat. The door banged against the wall, toppling over a chair. "What the hell are you doing?"

Lani bent over with one twin dangling from beneath her arm, while the other squirmed between her knees and chest, a poor excuse for a lap. Both girls screamed, obviously unhappy with their mother.

"Give her to me!" Nick grabbed for the twin under Lani's arm. The baby quieted down in his hold. He wiped a lone tear from the chubby cheek as wide brown eyes starred at him. The same color eyes as Emma's. His heart twisted.

"Oh, thank you. I thought they were going to fall."

"Brilliant deduction. What the hell were you trying to do?" Nick set the baby into the highchair.

"That." Lani pointed to the baby staring at them from her seat. She refused to admit to him that she felt as exhausted now as if she hadn't slept for days. "I was trying to do that, but I couldn't get the tray loose and the girls squirm so - "

"Why didn't you just put one down?"

"I thought she'd get into trouble - "

"Not as much trouble as smashing into the floor would have caused."

A glassy film dulled the green of Lani's eyes. If she started to cry - he couldn't take it. Women's tears always got to him. How the hell did she get them to look so healthy and happy in what must have been about a year if she acted like this? Her husband must be the one with all the knowledge of kids.

"I wouldn't have dropped either girl." She stomped toward the table and held the baby as if looking for a place to set her.

Nick smiled to himself. She had no idea what to do with the other twin. He wasn't going to tell her about the playpen in the living room, yet.

The baby in the highchair tugged at Nick's shirt. He looked down and reached for the plump hand. She wrapped a tiny finger around his - he shut his eyes for a second and felt the warm softness. "Who's this one?"

Lani gave him a scowl. "Her name is Ana. They do look an awful lot alike, but Ana has the straight hair.

That's how I tell them apart."

Tell them apart? She sounded as if she needed to brand their foreheads to keep them straight. He'd have thought after living with her twins for a year, she'd know the difference by their personalities. Even after a few minutes, he could tell Alexa, pulling strands of hair from Lani's ribbon, was the more active of the two. And Lani didn't like her hair out of place. He watched her try to tuck the strands back while balancing the baby on her hip. The twins' started to howl in unison. Jeez, he'd been so busy studying Lani Cabot's mothering techniques, he forgot the babies hadn't eaten.

"There's a playpen in the living room," he said over his shoulder as he stepped toward the door.

"Playpen? Why didn't you..."

With the closing door, his voice faded - and his chuckle.

Lani placed Alexa in the wooden playpen. From what she'd read, the slates were a little too far apart, but her girls were big enough not to get a head stuck in between, a foot or hand maybe. That had to be safer than letting them crawl around in this cabin.

She dragged the playpen near the door to have both girls in sight. The refrigerator had been stocked with milk and plenty of food. Nick must have unpacked all of it last night before she...A pang of guilt stabbed at her when she thought of how she'd hit him with the lamp. Although he smoked, cursed, probably drank too much, and bordered on being un-hospitable, she never got the impression that he was any kind of threat.

There seemed to be something deep inside Nick Hunter that drove his actions, she was sure of it. He'd slipped a few times, like when he placed the flashlight down - gently. And she noticed him hold Ana's hand if only for a second. A pained look had filled his eyes when he'd opened them. She'd give him credit for putting out his cigarette when he saw that she had one of the girls in the kitchen with her. Nick Hunter was an interesting man.

But she had no interest in a man right now. None at all. Her plate was full enough with the girls.

She took out two eggs and found a bowl to scramble them in. Staring at one egg in her hand, she realized she should use fresh food sparingly. Who knew how long they would be stuck in this cabin?

Nick's cursing took Lani's thoughts from the eggs. She looked out the back window to see him kicking the tires of his Jeep. The poor car sat rim deep in mud while Nick swore a string of curse words as if that would get the Jeep to move. He wasn't going to be driving it for some time.

He turned and caught her staring. Lani set the bowl down and opened the window further. "Would you like to join us for breakfast?" His lips curled. She felt sure his raised eyebrows gave her the answer.

"Maybe tomorrow." She shut the window and returned to her job of feeding the girls.

Ana ate her eggs without spilling the dish. Alexa, well, the poor child was having a time getting handfuls of eggs into her mouth. Lani leaned forward to wipe the baby's mouth after each fistful. It seemed that annoyed Alexa even more. She only wanted her kept clean, but suddenly Alexa revolted and a wad of scrambled eggs sailed from her mouth, landing on Lani's chest.

Before she could register her complaint, a deep chuckle, skyrocketing to a hearty laugh filled the kitchen. Lani turned to see Nick, standing in the doorway. His shoulders shook, he clapped his hands a few times, and a sparkle glistened in his warm brown eyes - but only for a second. He continued to laugh.

"She's only learning how to eat by herself."

"Then let her eat in peace. Kids get messy when they are learning - "

"I know that."

Nick leaned against the doorframe and asked, "How old are they?"

"Thirteen months."

"Seems like a one year old should be able to handle finger foods, or have you babied them too much?"

Lani tightened her grip on the table, or she'd have slung a handful of eggs at Nick Hunter. "No, I haven't babied them. How could I have taught them anything in only a few weeks?"

He raised an eyebrow. She'd never told him the girls were adopted. Actually, it was none of his business. Not that she was ashamed of adopting her daughters, but her ex- husband's words still haunted her. Throwaway kids he'd called them. When Lani had her surgery, he said he'd never raise anyone else's throwaways.

Ana giggled. What a glorious sound. Lani looked into Ana's warm brown eyes and Lani's heart swelled with pride - and protection. Even though every minute with the babies was still a frightening experience, they were hers, and she'd never let anyone call them anything like that.

"What happened? Did you work since they were born and your hubby had to raise them?" Nick's words interrupted her thoughts.

Lani wiped her hands on a dishtowel. She stood and faced Nick. Her voice came out in a whisper as if she didn't want the girls to hear. "I've taken a six month leave of absence from my accounting job to raise my girls." She took a step closer. "I've only been their mother for two weeks."

Nick leaned back, looking more confused. If she could have scooped the girls up quickly, she would have, and left him with unanswered questions. Ana was busy eating, and Alexa had two fistfuls of eggs. She couldn't interrupt their meal.

"I've adopted my girls from Russia."

Nick froze. His expression was unreadable. Obviously, he was appalled that she had adopted someone's throw-always, too. "That's commendable, Lani."

Commendable! He made it sound as if she adopted them to get some brownie points or some consolation prize. His tone grated on her nerves and sent her pulse racing. If she thought she had a headache from the drink last night, now her temples pounded. "There's nothing commendable about it! I love my girls."

"I'm sure you do. And your husband must, too - "

"Ex."

Nick moved forward. "Hey, sorry." He touched her arm and she wished he hadn't. Although his touch was light, she could feel him through the material of her shirt - feel his hand on her arm as though her skin were naked. The sensation was too intense for a casual touch. Nick Hunter's contact could not be allowed to make her so aware of him, his musk scent, the fullness of his lips, and the slight arch of his right eyebrow.

She swallowed and forced her thoughts to clear as if erasing the sensations was as easy as pressing

delete on a computer's keyboard. But it wasn't, and she didn't even know if he was married. Not that it would matter. She could never be attracted to him. Well, physically, of course. Who wouldn't be captivated by the depths of his mahogany eyes? And the slight smug look, that most often came across as sensual and not conceited. No, Nick Hunter didn't look as if he realized or would care about how good-looking he was. Yes, she found him physically attractive, but that was only the surface.

She could never be attracted to such an opposite. He was messy, she knew she bordered on obsession when it came to cleaning. Their language certainly contrasted. She'd never heard such cursing, except maybe in the movies. Then there was his comment about adoption...Why was she even thinking of all that? In a few days, they'd certainly be rescued.

"So there's no Mr. Cabot in your life?"

"Cabot is my maiden name. I took it back after the divorce." He stared at her as if she were under a microscope, again. If she knotted her hands any tighter, she'd probably weld them together. She had to change the subject. Nick Hunter had no right to prod her like this and no right to her private life. "So where's Mrs. Hunter?"

"Dead."

Fat Chance

Terry Campbell

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CHAPTER ONE

"So long, good-bye, it's been fun, and you can forget ever getting between my legs again!" Lindsey Michaels' voice burst with self-confidence.

"Hey, that Thigh-Grasper will bring good money at the Trading Post." Sam Davis lunged for the cardboard box. "You could make a fortune off this stuff. Why're you giving it to the Salvation Army?"

Lindsey tossed her Crunch and Win Ab-aciser into the box next to the discarded Thigh-Grasper. "Get real. If I sold this stuff, I'd end up in court as an accessory to murder. And I'd deserve it, too." Her gaze drifted over Sam's figure. "You have no concept of what I've endured. You haven't gasped, grasped, crunched, and pumped, all in an attempt to lose extra pounds." She glowered at her best friend. "While I arched to Classics for Calves, you visited the Golden Arches. While I crunched sit-ups, you crunched bags of potato chips. And what do I have to show for it? Saddlebags and a big butt. What do you, Samantha Davis, have to show for being a junk-food junkie? A tiny waist and a model-thin body." She sighed and flopped onto the floor. "There's no justice in the world."

"Then why are you, an excellent paralegal, leaving the office and acting like some P.I.?"

"Not funny, Sam. This is serious. I'm going undercover so I can help trap a bunch of scheming, conniving crooks."

"Sure." Sam sat next to the box full of videos. "Like you've ever been able to keep a secret in your life."

Lindsey picked up the paper and pointed at the ad. "Look at what this promises. I may be naïve, but this time's different. This scam has me ready to do battle. Believe me, Sam, this is one thing I can keep secret."

"Bull. You're doing this because Kenny asked you, all the while praying it isn't a scam."

Lindsey mentally cringed. She hated that Sam read her so easily. She produced a nonchalant shrug. "There's always a chance Kenny's wrong. After all, FRAT, Incorporated has been in business over ten years." She grinned. "Besides, what's wrong with losing twenty pounds while trying to prove whether Kenny's on to something? It's a win-win situation."

"You don't need to lose twenty pounds." Sam picked up one of the discarded videos. "Did this Yoga for Youth tape do anything for you?"

Lindsey shook her head. "None of this stuff did any good. I'd lose five pounds, then pow! It was right back plus some." Of course, that was after two or three sessions with the Colonel and a half-gallon of cookie dough ice cream. She tossed the paper across the room to Sam. "Read this and tell me FRAT doesn't sound like a reputable company."

Sam fished her Ben Franklin reading glasses out of her pocket and stuck them on her nose.

"Have you tried everything on the market to get the body you want and failed? Are you still overweight? Or are you one of those who'd do anything to gain weight-to get rid of stick-thin 'chicken' legs? We have the answer. After ten years of research, the Fat Removal Transplant Institute, Inc. (FRAT) is ready to conduct clinical trials on a new fat inversion process. You may qualify as either a donor or recipient of healthy fat. 'Trust Your Fat to FRAT.'"

She threw the paper down laughing. "'Trust your fat to FRAT'? Oh, come on, Lindsey, you can't be serious. This sounds like the biggest scam on the planet."

Lindsey stuck her nose up in the air. She secretly wanted to believe the process would work. "I'm sure Kenny will be so happy you agree with him."

Sam peered into a box of discarded exercise equipment. "It'll be the first time I agree with him. Why do you keep dating such a loser? Kenny Kramer's a jerk. How can you let him use you this way? You're the one who'll do all the work, and he'll get all the laurels and be on his way to political office."

"He's a reputable lawyer." Lindsey thought of Kenny Kramer in his Armani suit and starched white shirt and smiled. "A mite stuck up, but reputable."

"Yeah. He'd never enter a fast-food hamburger place, go to Water World, or even barbecue on the back patio."

"Well, he asks me out." Lindsey looked down at the floor. "For God's sake, I'm thirty. I'm not getting any younger and, with my figure, you take the men you can get, especially if you want a sex life."

Sam let out another hoot. "Come on, Lindsey. You've told me he's the 'ninety-second man.'"

"At least he's honest. Besides, ninety seconds is better than no seconds at all."

"Now there's a romantic notion."

"I'm too old for romance. As for questioning Kenny's motives, you can't blame him for trying to improve himself. If we ever take our relationship a step further, it'll benefit me, too." Lindsey stared at the box of diet junk and sighed. She was reluctant to admit it, but Kenny wouldn't ever benefit anything or anyone except himself.

She glanced out the window and spotted the first star of the evening. Closing her eyes, she made a silent wish. Just once she'd like to find a man who was serious, but occasionally reckless. Intelligent and cautious, but ready for adventure. Someone who wanted her and could make her lose herself in the throes of passion.

Lindsey shook her head to clear it. It would never happen. She was asking for too much.

"Too much? You think I'm asking for too much?" Hal Randall yelled into the telephone receiver.

"Yes. Another hundred grand is out of the question," Jeff Drake growled. "This is a government project that's stayed hidden so far because it's buried in the military budget. Ask for another cent and Congress will be all over my ass and yours. I can just see The Washington Post headlines now, 'Secret Military Brainwashing Experiment on Civilians.' Forget the money. We'll be lucky if we don't end up doing time."

"It isn't brainwashing. It's behavior modification."

"Do you think the Post will care? They won't. They'll do everything possible to discredit the program. Behavior modification?" Jeff snorted. "Yeah, right! Why is the military testing behavior modification?"

"Hell, the military's nothing but one big behavior modification experiment." Hal collapsed in his chair. "Damn it, Jeff, if they want the experiment to succeed, it's critical that the operation look legit. How can we do that on a shoestring? We've almost shot our entire budget on the set-up. Construction on the building alone cost a mint. Of course, if you hadn't stuck us out in Dickens, Texas-the middle of nowhere-we might have had some money left."

"We put the project out there to avoid attention."

"Yeah, well, it worked. Why do you think the natives' town motto is 'Where in the dickens is Dickens?'" Hal glanced down at his wingtips and frowned at the dull spot near the toe. Have to polish that, he thought, then refocused on the conversation.

He felt a brief spurt of guilt at Jeff's sigh. He knew his boss meant well, but this budget crisis was driving him to distraction. He refused to allow ten years' worth of work to go down the drain without a fight.

"Look, Jeff, screw the original plan. The institute needs a 'spa-like' atmosphere. Otherwise, we'll never attract the right subjects."

"Do you honestly think the pigeons will care, especially if we're successful and they lose weight?"

"They're test subjects, Jeff, not pigeons," Hal said harshly. "Now, back to the problem. Aside from the large whirlpool, we need a decent low-cal chef. And it isn't like I can place an ad in the local paper and find someone who can be creative with tofu and bamboo shoots. We're in the middle of friggin' refried-beans-and-beef-brisket-with-plenty-of-fat country."

Jeff sighed again. "I'll try to scrounge up another fifty-thousand dollars, but that's it. If there isn't a chef out there who'll work for thirty-five- thousand, learn to make those cute little flower vegetables yourself."

"I'll do my best."

"Make it work. Otherwise, the Department of Defense will have both our heads for blowing ten million down the tubes."

"It'll work. This is my chance for a Lone Star Award. Aside from the fact that every scientist and physician in Texas dreams about winning it, it's one of the few prizes you can win, other than the Nobel, and still be running a government project."

"The Lone Star Award? Hell, Hal, we'll be lucky if ABC News doesn't use the project in one of their 'This is Your Money' segments showing how the government's wasting the citizens' defense dollars."

"If you think it's a waste of money, why'd you go to bat for the project?"

"Because it's a good one. What'll get our tits in a wringer is that the DOD is funding it."

"I told you to go to FDA or one of the science endowment agencies. But no, you had to get it from defense."

"I didn't notice you refusing when it was the only friggin' department with the cash!"

Hal glowered at the silent phone, then replaced the receiver in its cradle. Grim-faced, he rose from his chair. Pacing the office, he mulled over his options. There weren't many. The institute was supposed to be open for business in a week. The whirlpool was a cakewalk. But how in hell was he supposed to find a four-star chef and talk him or her into coming to Dickens, Texas? The yellow pages?

With a growl, he glanced at the stack of folders on his desk. The subjects still needed to be categorized in the limited time left before they arrived on his doorstep.

An hour later, Hal flipped open Lindsey Michaels' file. He stared open-mouthed at her picture. This woman could bring a man to his knees. He hoped the photo was an old one, and that she'd blimped up

since it'd been taken.

As he reviewed Marie's comments, he noted Lindsey Michaels' only fault, aside from overeating, seemed to be her acidic wit.

According to Marie, Lindsey was orphaned at fourteen and moved in with her overweight Aunt Sadie. Her main goal had been to please the aging woman. To that end, she'd studied hard, making straight As, and tried to participate in a variety of extracurricular activities.

Cheerleading had been out. She'd been too heavy and suffered from "innate klutzitis." Her Aunt Sadie had suggested the band, but that had also been out. Lindsey didn't play an instrument. Then the aunt had begged her to join the chorus.

Since she loved to sing, Lindsey had immediately tried out and been told by the choral director that her voice was her fortune. People would pay a lot of money not to hear it.

Spotting a star by this paragraph, Hal flipped to the back of the file to read Marie's side note:

I asked Lindsey to sing a song. She chose her favorite, "Summertime." In fact, she sang it twice, because the first time her voice "wasn't loose." To call her tone-deaf would be a kindness. Hal, whatever you do, never ask her to sing. She's the only person I've ever met who gets worse with each practice session.

Chuckling, Hal returned to the interview. Moments later, he frowned at the notation that Lindsey had joined her high school Latin and Debate Clubs. He had also. In fact, he credited the debate club with his triumph over his persistent stutter.

"What a shame," he muttered. Between her aunt's death during her first year of law school and a mountain of debt, she'd been forced to leave school and become a paralegal.

He quickly scanned the rest of the interview, pausing only at the section dealing with her sex life. This, he knew, as did all therapists, was important to a woman's self-image:

Her sex life is almost nonexistent. In thirty years, she's had three encounters. The first in college with an "arrogant jock" who stole her virginity as part of a bet with the football team that he could seduce the "ice princess." The second was an unconsummated infatuation with a married man, who'd initially said he was single. By this time, Michaels worked for an attorney and no longer trusted men at face value. (Wise woman.) She investigated the jerk, then dumped him. Her third relationship (?) involved a mysterious, nameless person, who "is true to his profession, mother, and lack of 'carnal desire'."

Hal frowned. How could Marie have approved her? What had happened to his assistant? Marie's expertise lay in finding the chink in a person's armor, yet with Lindsey Michaels, who needed intensive one-on-one therapy rather than their program, she'd given her seal of approval.

"This better be good." He turned to her justification for Lindsey Michaels' participation in the project:

This woman proves the nurture over nature theory. She passed all psychological examinations. She's one of the most well-adjusted humans I've ever interviewed. She's openly caring, affectionate in tone, and protective of those close to her.

"Where were you ten years ago, Lindsey Michaels?"

Too bad they hadn't met while he'd still believed love was possible. From the file, he'd say she was the woman of his dreams. Well, that is, if she were twenty pounds lighter.

As he set the file aside, his office door opened slowly and Marie Poppokowsky eased into the room.

"You can't procrastinate any longer, Hal. Sign the letters." She slapped a stack of mail in front of him. "It's past the deadline when we said we'd respond to the applicants."

"Maybe tomorrow, Marie."

"No. Now." She handed him a pen.

Hal grabbed it and then sped through the stack. As he reached the last one, Lindsey Michaels' name jumped out at him. "I'm not sure about her," he said, tapping the name.

"Why?"

"She's too good to be true."

"Are you talking as a man or a doctor?"

Gritting his teeth, he scrawled his name on the letter of approval. "There." He shoved the stack back at Marie, then rose and crossed to the window looking out on the flat dry land as sand blasted the window and a stray tumbleweed flew across the open countryside. "I've got less than a week to turn this place into a spa."

Marie pushed her glasses back up her straight narrow nose. "Good luck. It's more likely to be a mirage out here than an oasis."

He stared at the landscape. "The west Texas countryside is our best asset. Next to it, our interior will look lush."

"Once our female clients get a look at you, they won't care about anything else." Her gaze drifted from Hal's face, down his body and back up to his narrowed eyes. "Although, I can't, for the life of me, figure out what they see in you."

He exhaled. "I hate it when you're right."

"Of course you do. Between the number your former wife and your so-called lover did on you, you're entrenched behind a wall that screams 'stay away.'"

Hal rolled his eyes. "Sure I am. That's why women still come on to me." He winced at her disgusted snort.

"God save me from the male species. Don't you know anything? It's your air of emotional detachment that attracts women."

"Emotional detachment?"

"You're a human Mr. Spock. You know, from Star Trek? All logic, no emotion. There isn't a woman alive who doesn't want to be the one to make him feel. The situation's no different with you," she said with a small shrug.

"They're doomed to failure. I'm not interested in having another woman in my life. I refuse to deal with the whining when I get involved in a-

"Obsessed."

He sighed. "Okay, obsessed by a project. Then there're the killer tears they turn on when I'm gone for a week or two. God, I hate tears!"

She chuckled. "Your problem isn't women. It's meeting the right woman, as I have."

He glanced at Marie. "I don't understand how two women can-"

"They-"

He held up his hand in protest. "I don't want to know." His gaze narrowed on his assistant, then he snapped his fingers. "You can run interference for me. Be my decoy." Hal grinned at her suspicious gaze.

"What do you mean, decoy?"

"You can be my girlfriend."

"Forget it. That's a disaster in the making."

"Wrong. It'll keep me out of trouble."

She shook her head. "Leave me out of it. I have all the confidence in the world that you can handle a roomful of panting women on your own. You're a big boy," she said seconds before bursting into laughter.

"Can it. This experiment," he pointed his finger at her, "is as much yours as it is mine." At her scowl, Hal bit back a grin. He knew just which buttons to push. She loved her work. It consumed her.

Marie stepped sideways and sank onto the oversized leather sofa. "I may love my work, but I'm going to have to burst your bubble on this one, old boy. Wanda has a black belt in karate. Do anything she doesn't like, and she wouldn't leave enough of you to put into a trash compactor."

Hal had a momentary vision of a riled Wanda and self-consciously crossed his legs. "You're right, it was a lousy idea."

"That isn't fair!" Kenny Kramer stomped his Italian loafer. "It was my suggestion that you expose FRAT. I should be the one to take you to orientation."

"Stop being such a big baby." Lindsey placed the last few articles in her suitcase and zipped it shut. "Make yourself useful. Carry this." She shoved the luggage at him.

He grabbed the case and stumbled backwards. "My God, Lindsey. Do you have a dead body in here? It weighs a ton."

"I don't believe in traveling light." She lifted her chin. "According to FRAT, I need casual clothes: jeans, sweatsuits, bathing suits, and a robe. But I believe in being prepared." She grinned. "Who knows who I'll meet there?" She walked to the door of the bedroom.

"There you go again, cracking jokes," he said, trailing after her.

Without looking, Lindsey knew he was scrunching up his face, the way he did when he didn't get his way.

"That's why I should take you to the institute. It's not just a matter of seeing you on the right track, but of protecting my interests."

"Interests?" She stopped short, spun on her heel and stared up at him. Acid rose in her throat. Please Lord, don't let him suggest a commitment. She really didn't want to deal with his emotional outburst when she told him she'd never marry him.

"You're my only hope, Lin. You're smart enough to catch these creeps and expose their con."

"Oh, now I get it. You want to protect your business interests. Your political future." Her stomach calmed. Turning, she headed toward the hall.

"Well, it'll be good for you, too. Talk about the prestige. Think about the money. And then there's the power when you work for me as Aide to the Attorney General."

As they reached the living room, Lindsey plopped into her grandmother's old rocking chair. "Gee, and I've lived my whole life for such an honor, too."

His eyes widened as if the light bulb had suddenly flickered. "Of course, I want you next to me for other reasons, too."

"Of course. Put the bag down next to the door, come over here and sit." Lindsey gestured toward the sofa. She watched, amused, as he meekly followed her directions. Once he'd settled, she leaned forward. "I'd love for you to take me to FRAT." She held up one hand and Kenny closed his mouth on command. "But I don't want anyone getting wise to our plan. The fact is, you're well known as a lawyer. Someone may put two and two together. Once I'm there for a week or two, you can visit on the weekend. You'll be less visible then."

She watched as he absorbed her words.

"You have a point." He jumped up and puffed out his chest. "Everyone in this part of Texas knows me on sight or has heard of me. I wouldn't want to spoil the plan because I'm so well known."

He smoothed his sandy hair back with his palm and stood with his other hand inside his jacket. Lindsey stifled a snicker at his unconscious Napoleon impersonation.

"You're absolutely right, Kenny. Sam can attend orientation with me. Then, when you show up, you can pose as Sam's boyfriend." Lindsey smiled. With luck, she'd manipulate the staff at FRAT as well as she did Kenny. "I have everything under control."

"Control. That's the key." Hal looked at his reflection in the mirror as he shaved the last part of his lower chin. He stared at the dark circles. They were almost the same color as his blue eyes. "You look like you're in charge, all right. Of a morgue." Hal set down his razor and turned on the faucet. The project implementation phase had almost done him in. Talk about burning the midnight oil. He splashed water on his face. Now he had to go out to the auditorium and convince fifty hopeful fatties that he had the key to their future.

He'd become a psychiatrist because he'd wanted to learn people's motivations for lying, for loving, and a thousand different emotions. Too bad lying was something he did with the same level of success as maintaining a loving relationship. As he opened the door to his office bathroom, he straightened his shoulders. "Everything can be explained by Freud and Jung."

He continued to repeat the words as he walked down the corridor. As he approached a woman near the front doors to the auditorium, she dropped her orientation packet on the floor.

Suppressing a chuckle, he stopped to help her retrieve her scattered papers, then swallowed hard as she squatted and leaned forward to scoop up the sheets. His gaze locked on the tops of her thigh-highs peeking out from under her short black skirt.

"Everything can be explained by Freud and Jung," he muttered again. At the sound of his voice, the woman twisted and glanced up at him.

His jaw clamped shut. Lindsey Michaels! Damn! The picture hadn't done her justice. Her reddening face told him that his staring embarrassed her, yet he couldn't stop. At least, he consoled himself, his mouth wasn't hanging open with drool falling onto the floor.

"Excuse me, I didn't know anyone was behind me."

Hal mopped his forehead with his handkerchief, then shoved it back into his suit pocket. Projecting a calm he didn't feel, he held out his hand to help her up. "I'm Dr. Randall."

"Lindsey Michaels."

He knew he was in trouble. Big trouble. The moment they'd touched, he'd seen electricity arc between their fingers. In fact, he could still smell the ozone and hear the energy crackling in the air around them.

He watched Lindsey's beautiful golden brown eyes widen. Yup, this woman could destroy everything. Worse, he was on the verge of blowing the experiment of a lifetime.

"Hal, are you okay?"

He dropped Lindsey's hand and spun toward Marie's voice.

Saved.

He nodded to Lindsey. "I believe you've met?"

"Yes, we have," Marie said with a smile.

He watched as Lindsey raised her hand to brush her hair from her face and didn't know whether to feel relieved that her hand shook or even more unnerved.

Lindsey rose to her feet, her packet clutched to her chest. "Nice to see you again, Dr. Poppokowsky."

Hal almost groaned. In desperation, he grabbed Marie and pulled her against his side, then draped his arm around her shoulders. "I'm lucky to have Marie. Both as an assistant and as my wife." He mentally winced as Marie's body tensed against his. Afraid to look at her, he kept his gaze on Lindsey.

At her shocked expression, he wished he'd never blurted out the outlandish lie. He knew after Marie got through with him, he'd want to walk off the cap rock and never be seen again.

"I didn't know you were married."

"The world is full of surprises," Marie muttered through clenched teeth.

Hal jammed his fisted hand into the pocket of his slacks and tightened his grip on Marie, afraid he'd confess the truth in the face of Lindsey's intense gaze.

"Excuse us, Ms. Michaels, but I need to discuss a few things with my husband." Marie jerked him by the arm.

"Of course," Lindsey said before walking into the auditorium.

"We need to talk. Now." Marie dug her fingernails into his sleeve.

"After the opening session." He struggled to free himself from her ironclad grasp. "Can you believe it? That Michaels woman just proved one of Murphy's Laws: When everything's going well, a woman will screw it up every time."

"You ain't seen nothin' yet," she hissed.

"What happened to you?" Sam looked up as Lindsey sat beside her in the front row. "You were right behind me, then poof, you disappeared."

"I dropped my packet on the floor. Suddenly, there was this to-die-for all-male with jet-black hair staring at me. He's Mr. Perfect, except for one thing. He's Dr. Randall."

"Wow. You weren't kidding." Sam nodded at the man on stage. "That him?"

"Yessss."

"He's dynamite. Why is his being Dr. Randall a problem?"

Lindsey sighed as Dr. Poppokowsky joined Randall on the stage. "You'll find out. And, believe me, it's a major blow." Dr. Randall tapped the microphone. "This adventure may be more than I bargained for. I'll never make it. Hell, Sam," she glanced at her friend, "I'll be lucky if I last the day. No way I can see him every day and not reach for a candy bar. And now that I know he's-

"Shush. Be quiet." Sam reached as if she were going to throttle her. "I'm here as your 'family support.' I want to hear what 'to-die-for' has to say." With a wicked grin, she leaned over and whispered just before Randall began his speech. "Personally he's not my type."

"Hmm, how did I forget tall, dark and dangerous turns you off?"

"Knock it off, Lin. Make one mistake and no one ever lets you forget it."

"One? You wish."

"Keep it up and I'll-

"May I please have your attention?"

Lindsey stared at the stage and sighed. She'd died and gone to hell. Yup, that was the only explanation for being at a fat farm where the head man was someone who made her dream the impossible dream and, failing that, crave a candy bar so badly she'd sell out Kenny.

"For those of you who didn't see me during your pre-acceptance interview, my name is Dr. Halloran Randall. Please feel free to call me Hal."

"How about hunk?" Sam muttered.

"About twenty of you were interviewed by Dr. Marie Poppokowsky. For those of you who might not know, she's my wife."

Sam's eyes widened. "What? Lin, how could that man be married to that mousy little woman?"

Lindsey shook her head. "I don't know, but it's true. He told me so himself out in the hall."

"Well, so much for gorgeous. Wouldn't you know someone's already snapped him up."

Lindsey shrugged her shoulders, then put her finger to her lips. No way was she going to let Sam know how this development disappointed her. Okay, so they'd just met. Yet how often did a man's handshake leave you tingling from head to toe and wanting more? In her experience, never.

Randall cleared his throat. "Each of you was selected to take part in a special clinical trial involving the

revolutionary Ches-Wrap procedure. It's not cheese wrap as I've heard some of you call it. Ches-Wrap stands for chemical shrink wrap. It's a painless method Marie and I have perfected for removal of fat."

"Hallelujah! A man after my own heart. I wonder how long before he sucks out these fat cells and shrinks my boobs," Lindsey whispered to Sam.

Her shoulders shaking, Sam clapped a hand over her mouth, trying unsuccessfully to stifle her giggles.

"I see some of you find it amusing."

Lindsey looked up and saw Doctor Randall staring directly at her.

"All of you passed the entrance exam, although looking at some of you now, I'm not sure how. Just because you passed entrance doesn't mean you'll pass all of your tests tomorrow." Randall slammed his fist on the podium. "Only those who qualify and have the grit to see this through, will stay."

Lindsey gripped the arms of her seat. That remark had been personal, aimed at her. Why?

About The Author

After serving in the Air Force as a registered nurse, Lori Avocato decided to give up her nursing career to write fiction. After six years, she has six short contemporary romances published.

While raising two sons, she also decided to write books for children under the pen name Lori Lane. The experience of raising the boys has helped in the research of her fiction for children.

Lori lives in Connecticut with her husband, her two boys and their little dog. She's the past president of the Connecticut Chapter of Romance Writers and still serves on the Board of Directors. She is also a member of Sisters in Crime and writes full time. Lori has won numerous writing contests throughout her career and teaches fiction writing in the adult education system of two cities.

Visit Lori online at www.loriavocato.com.

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