

DARING TO LOVE

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DARING TO LOVE

By

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The phone rang just as Janice opened her front door. Dropping her purse and packages on the sofa she grabbed for the phone. "Hello," she said a little breathlessly.

"Hi Red. Hope you've been thinking about me," Hank said feeling that special tingle just hearing her voice. He hadn't seen her in over three weeks and missed her more than he would have thought possible. It wasn't as if they were even considered a couple by others. It was in his own mind that he saw them as belonging together.

"Hank, I had forgotten all about you," Janice lied.

He sighed heavily. "That sound you just heard was my heart breaking. Here I had been picturing you pining away for me; eagerly awaiting my return from the jungles of Los Angeles. I'm crushed."

Janice shook her head and couldn't keep the smile or laugh from her voice. "I don't see you as the type to be crushed by anything, Hank. And I certainly don't see you

devastated by any woman. That sound was probably your stomach rumbling. I bet you forgot to eat dinner.”

“How can you be so cruel as to doubt my words of longing, Red? And it was not my stomach. I haven’t had dinner yet, but I never make any unpleasant bodily sounds. Now if it was one of my brothers that would be a different case. I’m the only one with manners and good taste,” Hank laughed stretching out on the large bed. He had stayed at the Branchard estate until it had been sold three months ago. Since that time he’d rented a condo that was simply a place to sleep and change clothes. He couldn’t wait to get home and back to his small cluttered apartment. And get back to a full time courting of one Janice Rose Wright.

“I’ve told you not to call me Red,” Janice protested but it lacked force. Her bright red hair was long thick and curly; and there wasn’t much she could do with it except let it do its own thing. Her ex-husband had preferred that she wear it up in a more conservative style. But since she’d returned to Black Horse she’d kept it long and down.

“Guess I could call you sweetie or snookums if you’d prefer that,” Hank said with a smile.

“Don’t you dare Hank James! If those are the alternatives I’ll stick with Red. Maybe I’ll have to come up with a special name for you.”

“You can call me darling or sweetie anytime you like.”

“No...I was thinking more along the lines of Peter Pan, the child who won’t grow up, or how about Jamie?” She knew he hated Jamie. His older brothers used to call him that when they wanted to get to him.

“You know, you’re not doing my ego any good here, Red?”

Janice laughed. “I think your ego can take quite a bashing and still remain good sized.”

“It’s a good thing that I’m still in Los Angeles or I’d have to take you over my knee for being so rude to your elders. You just wait until I get home,” he threatened.

“So when is your next visit?”

“I’ll be home sometime tomorrow afternoon. But it’s not a visit. I’ve got everything wrapped up here so I’ll be coming home to stay. I will have to fly back once in a while to meet with Stuart and Jeffrey, but that will be all. We’ve got a good team in place and things are running smoothly.”

Daring To Love

Janice's heart began to race. Hank was coming home to stay! Suddenly she didn't know if she could handle having him around all the time. She licked her lips. She ignored that part about his coming home. "I know that Sunny is grateful for all the work you've done on her behalf." Shortly after Sunny had married Hank's brother, Zack, her grandfather had died. Since there were no other members of the family, she inherited his entire estate, much to her distress. Their relationship had been long and unpleasant and she hadn't wanted anything from him. That's when Hank, along with her attorney and business manager, had taken over the handling of the estate. And that was why Hank had been in Los Angeles for the past thirteen months.

Hank frowned but didn't comment. He was well aware of Janice's lack of enthusiasm about his homecoming. "Branchard had a large company built up that was comprised of many smaller groups. Once we sold off half of it, it was easier to manage. The new upper management teams are working out very well so that everyone from the janitors on up the ladder are happy. Jeffrey instituted some changes in the benefit packages for the workers that should have been done years ago. Needless to say, he's a favorite with many people in the company now."

"You know I still can picture Victor Branchard on the stand at the custody hearing. I don't think I've ever seen such a cold unfeeling person in my life," Janice almost growled. She had been so proud of Hank that day. He had come out on top over some expensive big city attorneys and stopped Victor from gaining custody of Sunny's children. Sunny's son Josh was to have been Victor's heir if her grandfather had his way. And sunny would have lost her son!

"There's no doubt that he was out for himself and his empire. Unfortunately there are many more like him in the corporate world. They don't care a bit about the people working for them or about their investors. As long as they make the big profit and reap the biggest share of the rewards, that's all that matters. Sorry, guess I should get off my soapbox," said with a laugh.

"Don't apologize. I feel the same way. I'm just glad that Josh and Kelsey didn't have to go to live with Victor. I can't imagine what it would have been like for them. Sunny and Zach are so loving and attentive. Oh Hank, you should

see Zoe. She's sitting up now and is so beautiful. Even at only six months old she has a head of thick curly dark hair. And she's going to have dimples. When she laughs, which she does a lot, these two adorable dimples show up."

"Is Zach still spoiling her?" Hank laughed. Zach had been a pushover where Kelsey was concerned and it was no different with Zoe.

"What do you think? He's started taking her out to see the horses and cows. Sunny just shakes her head in wonder, but you can tell she's really happy about it. I understand that her late husband didn't have much time or interest in Josh and Kelsey. Zach is completely different," Janice replied with a touch of envy because she would never share such an experience with a husband.

"There's no doubt that my brother is a hands on father," Hank agreed with a chuckle.

Janice grinned. "I bet if Sunny wasn't breast feeding Zoe, Zach would take over that task every chance he could. He doesn't even mind the messy diapers."

This last was said with such incredulity that Hank chuckled. "Hey, we James men are made of stern stuff. What's a little poop compared to building the cabin and hunting bears to feed our families?"

Janice groaned. "Well I know one James man who is full of..."

"Watch it woman! I'm not there to defend myself properly, but I have a very good memory for insults," Hank snorted with a hoot of laughter.

"This is a free country and I can say whatever I wish, Mr. James. And if you can't accept the fact that you're full of it, then too bad." Janice pushed her packages to one side so she could curl up on the sofa after slipping out of her shoes. No matter what her fears about the future, she did enjoy talking with Hank. He was one of the smartest men she had ever met and wouldn't be surprised if he had a photographic memory. But he never flaunted his intelligence. He could be crazy and lighthearted like now. She had never felt so comfortable teasing and clowning around with a man as she did with Hank, once she'd let him past the outer barrier she'd erected around her feelings. There were other barriers, stronger and she hoped impregnable, that he wouldn't be able to breach, as much for his sake as for hers.

Daring To Love

"I can see that when I get home we're going to have to have a long talk about your attitude towards me and how to show your adoration in a more proper manner," he said trying to sound pompous but failing miserably. Hank loved hearing Janice's voice and loved teasing her even more, so it was hard to keep the laughter out of his tone.

"Shall I meet you at the airport with a red carpet and champagne? Or would you prefer the Rolls Royce and a military escort?" she shot back.

"How about all four? You could meet me at the end of the red carpet and help escort me to the waiting car where we could share the champagne. We could have the driver take the long way home to give us time to finish the bottle or maybe two while we catch up on everything since I saw you last. I don't suppose you could pick me up at the airport tomorrow afternoon?" No harm in asking was his motto.

"Actually I really can't. I've got two showings tomorrow and a closing. I'll be tied up until after six." Janice was torn. Part of her would love to pick him up and have him to herself for a while. But she was afraid where that might lead. She realized that she was already more attracted to Hank James than was safe for her sanity, but there wasn't anything she could do about it now.

Hank sighed. "I didn't think you would. Guess I'll have to put up with Max and his talk about Megan. I would never have guessed that he would be the one to end up completely besotted with a woman."

"What do you mean besotted? He loves Megan dearly and I think it's beautiful. They make such a wonderful couple. She's so small and he's built like an Adonis," Janice said haughtily.

"Hey, I wasn't belittling my big brother. I was just stating a fact. Megan is great and he's one lucky guy. It's just that he's never been one to fall head over heels in love before."

"Guess he waited for the right woman to come along," Janice returned.

"What do you mean Max is an Adonis? What am I? Chopped liver?" Hank snorted as her remark finally registered.

Janice chuckled. "You're an Adonis with a Peter Pan complex."

“Think I’ll quit while I’m behind. And don’t think that I won’t remember this, Red.”

They spent the next ten minutes chatting about friends and neighbors. When the call ended, Janice replaced the receiver and sat back with a sigh. She’d promised to have dinner with him tomorrow night. Since she would be at the office until at least six, she’d agreed to meet him at the diner at six thirty. They would both be tired, but he wanted to see her and didn’t want to wait until tomorrow night.

Janice picked up her packages and purse to take them up into the bedroom. As she put her things away she thought about Hank. She hadn’t offered any information about her marriage and subsequent divorce and he hadn’t asked. She was pretty sure it was because he was waiting for her to broach the subject and that was something that she wasn’t ready to do. While living in Denver she’d lost touch with her friends in Black Horse. Steven hadn’t been impressed with Black Horse the one time they’d visited and discouraged any attempt on her part to keep her friendships active. Since she’d been busy with her work and then had to handle the entertaining for Steven and his business dinners, she really hadn’t had much time to herself during their three years of marriage.

Now that she looked back on it, she’d been a doormat. After getting to know Sunny she realized that they had a lot in common. Oh, Steven had never been physically abusive, but he had wanted things done his way and she had been expected to fall in with his wishes. It hadn’t been apparent at first since she’d been bowled over by his charm and good looks. The first two years of their marriage hadn’t been unpleasant. But the last six months had been a living hell for Janice and not something she would ever want to repeat. That was why she had to keep her relationship with Hank on a friendly basis. She’d had enough romance to last her a long time. Besides, she didn’t really have anything to offer him in the long run. *But enough about the past*, she muttered as she changed into a pair of shorts and over-sized jersey shirt.

She heard a scratching at the back door and knew that Flash was ready to come in to eat. She’d had the big yellow tabby for two years now and adored him. He was the most laid back cat she’d ever seen. When he walked across the room or jumped onto a chair he seemed to do it in slow motion. Thus he had earned the name Flash.

Daring To Love

Sure enough, he was sitting patiently waiting for her to open the screen door. Even after she opened it he just sat looking up at her. This was their usual ritual every night. “Well are you coming in or not?”

“Meow,” he said looking at the open door. Slowly he stood up, stretched and finally ambled into the kitchen and over to his dish.

“You know, Flash, I don’t mind this little game in the summer, but in the winter it gets old really fast,” she told him as she opened a can of food and filled his dish. He ate mostly dry food but once in a while she gave him a treat. She knelt to pet him while he ate before turning to the refrigerator to see what she could fix for herself. If only her life could be as easy and as uncomplicated as Flash’s!

After ending the phone call, Hank lay on the bed with his hands behind his head. Janice was an enigma. She was smart; she was beautiful, competent at everything she did, funny and compassionate. But there was sadness about her that he didn’t understand. He didn’t believe it was because she was still in love with her ex-husband and he couldn’t say why he felt that way. It was something deeper, something that was eating away at her and he didn’t have the remotest idea how to get her to open up to him. Maybe now that he was going home and would be able to spend more time with her, she would relax and confide in him.

He had never met her ex-husband. He’d been out of town on business the one time they had come to visit. His mom and dad and Max had met him though. While his parents had been reluctant to pass any judgment since they had only met him briefly, Max wasn’t as reticent. In his opinion Steven Wright was a first class jerk and Janice was much too good for him. All this he had told Hank about long after she and Steven had returned to Denver.

Since returning to Black Horse three years ago she had opened her own real-estate office and was doing very well. His parents had been friends with Mary and Lloyd Grange, Janice’s parents, so they had seen her grow up. She had renewed all her old friendships, but to his knowledge she had never discussed her marriage or the reasons why she and Steven divorced. Hank was pleased that she had become good

friends with Sunny, Chloe and Megan. Maybe she just needed more time to let old wounds heal?

Picking up the phone he dialed his brother's number. He didn't know if Max was working late, but he could leave a message with Megan if he wasn't at home yet. Max and Megan had been married four months and Hank had never seen his brother happier. For a short time they hadn't known if his dimwitted brother was ever going to propose to the lovely Megan. It hadn't been because Max didn't love her, but that he'd been a bachelor for so long that he wasn't sure if he was cut out for marriage. It had taken Megan's automobile accident to make him come to his senses and realize that he couldn't live without her. Now they shared the farmhouse she had bought from Sunny and were in the process of decorating and making it their own.

Megan picked up on the third ring. She sounded out of breath as if she'd been running. "Hello!"

"Hello lovely lady. You sound as if you've been running. I didn't drag you away from anything important, did I?"

"Hi Hank, not at all. I was just returning to the house from the back when I heard the phone ringing. What's up? Are you home?" Megan adored Hank for two reasons. The first being his brilliant handling of the custody case and the second was his marvelous sense of humor, plus he was a truly nice man.

"I was wondering if that nitwit of a brother was home yet because I need to ask a favor."

"He won't be home for another hour, but I can have him call you," Megan offered. "Or I can take a message."

"I need someone to pick me up at the airport tomorrow. I'm finally coming home to stay. Working out here has been a challenge, but it's taught me that I really do prefer life in Black Horse compared to the big city. I don't care if they have nightclubs and all night entertainment and fancy stores. Give me the simple life anytime," he said with a heartfelt sigh.

"I can understand that," Megan agreed. "I don't know if Max will be free to pick you up, but I can. I'll have him call you when he gets in though just so you can harass him long distance," she laughed shaking her head. The James brothers jumped at every opportunity to tease each other

Daring To Love

unmercifully, but if one was in trouble they formed a united front that no one could penetrate.

Hank hesitated. "Look Megan, I know Max is still a bit paranoid about you driving long distances. If he can't meet me in Akron, maybe dad can drive over."

"Max has to realize that it was just an accident, Hank. It was a freak accident and I don't believe in lightening striking twice. If I'm not afraid to drive, Max shouldn't put restrictions on me," she said firmly. But she knew Hank was right about her husband's reaction about her driving into Akron by herself.

"I just don't want to cause any trouble between you two newlyweds."

"As long as he agrees with me there won't be any trouble. But I understand what you mean. Let me call mom and dad. I know that they have been anxious for you to come home and will probably love to meet you at the airport. And then I can come along too. Max can't object to that," Megan chuckled proud that she'd thought of it.

"I'll leave the problem in your capable hands. It will be a surprise tomorrow to see who will be picking me up. I'll be landing in Akron about one tomorrow afternoon," Hank replied looking at his schedule.

"We'll see you then. And I'll still have Max give you a call when he gets in. Take care," Megan said ending the call.

Hank replaced the receiver. He realized that what he really wanted was for Janice to meet him so he could have the whole afternoon with her. But she had to work, so that was out of the question. He'd plan something special for this weekend; maybe a long ride up into the mountains where they could picnic and just lay around and talk. The more he thought about it the better it sounded. It involved some good food, a little fishing, a little wine and the company of a beautiful woman. Who could ask for more?

CHAPTER 2

“Are you sure Max was comfortable with you making this trip into Akron with us?” Nellie asked Megan as they made their way into the small terminal building where they would meet Hank. She knew her son well enough to know that he was still not over the scare he’d gotten when Megan had been involved in that car accident.

Megan couldn’t halt the light blush as she stretched the truth just a little. “I told him that I was going and he would have to learn to relax about me being on the road. There are times when I will have to make trips into Akron or Sterling and he won’t always be able to take me. You know that Sunny and Chloe and I love to take a day to shop now and then. Can you imagine Max tagging along behind us?”

“Well he’s big and strong,” Lucas laughed. “You could always use him as a pack mule.”

“Just lead the way Lucas and leave the intelligent conversation to us,” Nellie laughed. “And no, I can’t quite picture him on a female shopping spree. So he has calmed down and agreed with you about this trip?” Nellie pushed.

Megan sighed. “Well, not exactly. But I did tell him that I was coming and that I didn’t want to hear any more about it.” She loved her hulking giant of a husband, but he

Daring To Love

was smothering her with his fear about another accident. “I could fall off a ladder and get hurt worse than I did in that accident. And that could happen in my own house!”

Before Nellie could reply, Lucas began waving to someone off to the left. “Hank!” he hollered. “Over here!”

Hank waved back and turned in their direction. “Boy does it feel good to be home. Hi mom,” he said giving Nellie a big hug and kiss. Then he turned to Megan and grinned. “I see my big brother relented.” He gave her a kiss on the cheek and a hug.

“Hey, don’t I rate a hug and a kiss?” Lucas grouched but he ruined it with a grin as he pulled his son into a giant bear hug. “Welcome home son. It’s going to be good to have you around for a while and not running back to California anytime soon.”

“You have no idea how glad I am to be home, dad. All I have is the one suitcase since I’ve shipped the rest of my clothes and books. I didn’t want to have to deal with a lot of luggage,” Hank replied directing his small group towards the luggage claim area.

“Are you free for dinner tonight?” Nellie asked anticipating his reply.

“Actually I have a date with Janice. I’m meeting her at six thirty.”

“You’re meeting her? Why aren’t you picking her up?” Nellie demanded. She really did like Janice and hoped that something would eventually come of their relationship. She didn’t know anything about Janice’s divorce and it was none of her business. She and Lucas hadn’t been able to warm up to Steven Wright the one time they’d met him. There had been something about him that just rubbed them the wrong way. Maybe it was the way he expected Janice to be at his beck and call. The stupid man couldn’t even get up and get himself a drink of water. Nellie had brought her boys up to take care of themselves and not expect anyone to wait on them, not even a wife. But not everyone thought the way she did.

“She said she would be working late and this would work out better for her, mom.” Actually he didn’t feel comfortable about just meeting her either, but he hadn’t wanted to push the issue. Now that he was home, he would be able to really begin to court the lovely lady.

"If you say so, just don't make a habit of it in the future," Nellie reprimanded gently. "It would be nice if you could bring her to dinner Sunday. We're eating our big meal at six instead of one because Max is on duty until five."

"That sounds great. I'll ask her tonight," Hank said hefting the one heavy suitcase. If he could arrange it, he and Janice could spend the day riding and then he could be with her that evening also. The more he thought about it the more the idea grew on him. He couldn't curb the formation of a grin as he anticipated a whole day with Janice to himself...or mostly to himself anyway.

Megan chuckled. "Why do I have the feeling that Janice Wright's life will never be the same now that you're back in town?"

Nellie and Lucas exchanged a knowing look. Hank let his grin widen. "Once your life has been touched by a James man it spoils you for all others," he gloated.

Megan choked and her eyes widened in mock astonishment. "Is that so? Maybe it's the women in your lives that spoils you for all other females?" She winked at Nellie. "Honestly, I don't know how your sons can find hats big enough to fit their fat heads?"

Nellie leaned closer to whisper loud enough for the men to hear. "It's genetic. They get it from their father."

Hank was all geared up for a rebuttal when Lucas slapped him on the back. "Might as well save your breath, son. Quit while you're behind before you really get decked. Now let's get you home."

They were about halfway home when Lucas noticed that an on coming police car had turned on its lights. He was bit puzzled since there were no cars in front of it and they hadn't passed any traffic in the last ten minutes. Then he recognized it as the car Max drove. "I think we're about to have company," he said slowing and pulling to a stop on the side of the road. The police car passed them then made a u-turn and came to a stop behind their vehicle.

"I'll kill him!" Megan grumbled crossing her arms over her chest. "I will slice him to ribbons!"

Max was out of his car and opening the back door where Megan sat defiantly. "Sorry dad, but I'll retrieve my property." Then he looked down at Megan. "I thought we had decided that you wouldn't make this long trip?"

Daring To Love

"It has been six months, Max. I don't have to be wrapped up in cotton wool for the rest of my life. And I would like to have a life away from the house from time to time, if you don't mind?" They had gone all over this last night and she honestly thought she'd finally gotten through to her big hardheaded husband.

"We'll discuss it when I get you home," Max said holding out his hand to help her out of the car.

"Max," Nellie began but was interrupted.

"Leave them be Nellie. This is something that they have to work out themselves," Lucas chuckled softly.

"I'm not leaving!" Megan announced with her arms still crossed across her chest.

"We'll see about that," Max muttered. He reached into the car and picked Megan up and out of the car. She sat stiff as a board in his arms staring straight ahead. "We'll see you at dinner Sunday," he called back as he carried his wife to the patrol car. Gently he placed her on the front seat. When she made no move to put on her seat belt. He did it for her before walking around to get in behind the wheel. "You can be mad at me all you want, but at least I'll know that you're home safe and sound," he grumbled starting the car. He knew he was being ridiculous and he had tried to fight it once he'd learned that Megan had gone with his parents. After an hour and a half of pacing the office and not being able to concentrate he gave up the fight.

"I was perfectly safe with your parents. Dad is a careful driver. You should know that, Max. You've taken yourself off the job just to come out here to escort me home. And it wasn't necessary!" Megan fumed but with less vigor. She knew and understood his reasons, but was at a loss to know how to make him ease up on his worry about her every time she got into a car.

Max pulled back onto the road. He waved to his parents and brother as he passed. In the rearview mirror he watched his dad pull out to follow. "Look Slim, we'll talk this out tonight. I love you so much that I can't imagine my life without you. When I think about what an idiot I was..."

"Max," Megan interrupted laying her hand on his on the steering wheel. She sighed. "I know that you love me. And you're right. We'll have a nice quiet dinner tonight and talk about this problem you have with cars and me. You

might be an idiot, but you're my idiot and I adore you," she told him softly now, all fight gone out of her.

"Hank is probably laughing like hell," Max conceded with a shadow of a smile.

"Probably. And you can be sure that this will be the topic of conversation at dinner on Sunday."

Now Max groaned. "I'll never hear the end of this little escapade."

Janice pulled into the parking lot. She spied Hank's blue-gray pickup immediately. She was more nervous than she would like to admit even to herself. Hank was home to stay; home where there was a very good possibility that she could run into him every day. She and Hank had known each other most of their lives, but it wasn't until just before Sunny and Zach had gotten married that they had actually gone out on a date. And then, she'd only gone to shut him up and hopefully keep him from calling. But it hadn't worked out that way. They had gone on seeing each other, not as much as he would have liked she was sure, but much more than she had ever planned on doing.

When she'd found out that he was relocating to California she had been almost relieved thinking that her life would return to the quiet safe mode it had been before. But to her amazement, she'd found herself missing him, his teasing and his easy laughter. For the first couple of months she would be walking down the street and start to look around to see if she saw him anywhere. At that point she was ready to admit that Hank James had made an impression on her. It wasn't something she had planned happening and she knew that she could never let him know just how much he had made her feel.

Now stepping out of her car, she took a deep breath before heading toward the diner. He must have been watching for her because as soon as she entered he was at her side. "You look more beautiful than I remember, Red," he said taking her arm to guide her to the last booth in the back. And she did look beautiful. He loved her red hair; the way she left it hanging loose down her back in a riot of curls. His fingers ached to run through her hair to see if it was as soft as it looked.

Daring To Love

"You clean up pretty well yourself, Hank. I like that shirt," she told him fingering the pocket on his yellow-checked shirt.

"It was present from Kelsey. I'm just glad there aren't any flowers on it," he said letting her slide into the booth. As much as he wanted to slide in next to her, he restrained the urge and sat across from her.

Janice was aware of Kelsey and her preference for the color yellow. "Or goats?" she laughed.

Hank looked aghast. "I hadn't even thought about that."

"Don't worry, I'm sure that Sunny will monitor any gifts. That's probably why you've only got checked."

"I'll have to be sure to thank her properly Sunday at dinner." He was interrupted when the waitress came over to take their drink orders. After that, as if by mutual consent, they concentrated on the menu. "I'm having the chicken and dumplings," Hank announced pushing his menu aside. "It's my favorite dish. And do you think I could find anyplace in Los Angeles that could fix it like the diner here or my mom? Not even close!"

"That does sound good. I'll have the same. Is it just chicken and dumplings, or do you like other chicken dishes too?" Janice asked leaning back in her seat to study the man across from her. There was so much that she didn't know about Hank even after living in the same town with him most of her life. He was handsome as sin with that black hair, dark brown eyes and tall muscular build. His nose looked as if it might have been broken at some period in time, but that only added to his rugged masculinity.

Hank waited until the waitress had taken their orders before he replied. "I love anything chicken. And if it has homemade biscuits with it, that makes it all the better."

Janice tilted her head to one side in contemplation. "I would have thought you would be a steak man. You know, steak and potato and salad."

Hank shrugged. "A steak is good once in a while, but chicken and fish are my favorite dishes. And speaking of fish...do you fish?"

She blinked. "Fishing? Well, I used to fish years ago with my dad. But I haven't been in a long time. Why?"

"I've spent the better part of the last thirteen months trapped in the big city and I'm in dire need of the relaxation of the country. I was hoping that Sunday you could come riding with me up into the hill country. We could fish and have a picnic right there by the river. The soothing hand of a beautiful woman to wipe my fevered brow will do wonders for my recuperation," Hank stated with mock drama.

"Soothe your fevered brow? What a load of buffalo chips!" Janice laughed. She couldn't help it. Hank was an idiot.

"Well, help me relax and catch fish then. I know your office is closed on Sunday and don't tell me that you have to wash your hair because I'll wash it in the river if you ask me nicely."

Janice studied him for several long seconds. She should keep their involvement at a minimum. She shouldn't encourage him to think she was truly interested. She should find some excuse to decline. "I'd love to go fishing," she astonished herself by saying. The connection between her heart and her brain must have been severed because that was definitely her heart answering.

Hank's smile was beaming. "I'll pick you up about eight Sunday morning and we'll drive out to Zach's to borrow a couple of horses. It will give us a chance to see the kids too. I can't wait to see all of them, especially Zoe. She's six months old already and is changing so quickly."

"She's a little charmer. Your brother already has a horse for her. She was born a week before Zoe so he figures that they belong together," Janice laughed as she recalled Sunny's face when she told them about it.

Hank frowned. "She won't be able to ride for a long time. I know Josh now has his own horse, but what about Kelsey?"

"Kelsey just got her pony last week. His name is Sid."

"Sid?"

Janice laughed. "You have been away. Sunday you'll have to get the kids to watch *Ice Age* with you. It's the best movie and one of the characters is called Sid."

"If you say so. But I don't know if I'm into kids movies," he said somewhat reluctantly. "I've seen the same ones so many times that I can almost quote them word for word."

Daring To Love

“Well this movie is really great. I even went out and bought a copy for me.”

Hank grinned. “You? The real-estate tycoon is into kids movies?” This was a lighthearted side of her that he found interesting. He knew she liked kids and they seemed to be drawn to her as if sensing she was their friend. But that she would actually watch a cartoon by herself was something else.

“So, tell me about Los Angeles. Did you meet a lot of interesting people? I hear that the women out there are gorgeous.” Now why had she added that little bit? She didn’t want to hear about any women he might have known or was still seeing. Or did she?

Hank shrugged. “Sunny had me stay at the Branchard estate when I first went out there. You would have loved to handle that sale, Red. It was like a small palace, beautiful and full of expensive furniture and paintings. But it was cold and almost forbidding. A hotel room has more comfort and warmth than that place did.”

“Why did you stay there then?”

“Victor had a lot of papers in his office there and it was closer to his company office than it would have been in a hotel. The only good thing was the Olympic sized swimming pool. I swam every morning and night,” he told her thoughtfully. There was a tennis court and racquetball court that he had used from time to time...mostly he played racquetball.

“Sunny said something about you finding jobs for his staff at the house. Did everyone get placed?”

“Two retired and are getting a very good pension. I’ll give that to Victor; he took care of his butler and housekeeper. It was probably the only way he could keep them. We helped all the others find jobs and gave them hefty bonuses when they left. After all they had put up with, they certainly deserved them,” Hank snorted.

“The people who bought the estate didn’t need any help?” Janice asked sipping her water. She knew Hank was being modest. He hadn’t been required to help anyone get new jobs but had taken it upon himself to be sure no one was left stranded. In her eyes that said a lot about the man across the table from her.

Hank shook his head. “They were moving down from San Francisco and bringing their staff with them. The

gardener was the only one staying on although he's getting near retirement age. He loves working outside with his plants so he'll probably keep working until he drops. That's enough about me. What's been happening around here and in your life that I should know about," he asked casually, but it was a serious question.

Janice pretended to give it some thought. "Well, I do have a new man in my life. His name is Galen Sean Winters and he's handsome and funny and I adore him."

Hank's heart almost stopped beating. He just stared at Janice.

"And he's sixteen months old and lives next door," she told him with a laugh. "He's a new foster child that Marion and Les have taken in. I go over everyday to see him. He's such a beautiful baby."

Hank was sure his sigh of relief could be heard all through the diner. He reached across the table to take Janice's hands in his. "That was cruel, Red. For a moment there I thought I'd been shot down and out of the running. My heart is still trying to get back to its normal rhythm." He tried to make light of it, but he had been shaken for a few seconds.

Janice looked down at their hands; hers lost in the warmth of his large ones. When she raised her eyes to look at him, the intensity of his gaze rendered her speechless for several seconds. "I'm sure there are plenty of beautiful willing women in Los Angeles waiting to give you mouth to mouth," she said breathlessly. Now why had she said that? It brought up all sorts of pictures to mind. She remembered very well the one time Hank had kissed her. It had rocked her to her toes. She'd put it down to the fact that she hadn't been kissed in almost four years. At least not like that. A peck on the cheek or a little kiss on the lips was one thing. The way Hank had kissed her went way beyond friendly and straight into passionate.

"There is only one beautiful woman that I'm interested in, Red. Even when I was away, *you* were on my mind. If I had to have a partner for some social occasion I would take Marty who works in the accounting office. Her husband travels a lot and if he were away she would accompany me. That's the end of my wild life story in California. It's really kind of sad to think about a terrific hunk like me pining away all alone in my room."

Daring To Love

“Buffalo chips! You had me there until the part about the terrific hunk,” Janice laughed. “I can’t see you pining away for anyone.” But was he serious? Did he miss her as much as she missed...? No, she did not miss him while he was gone.

“You missed me too, didn’t you?” he asked slowly rubbing the back of her hands with his thumbs.

“I was much too busy to miss anyone, Hank James. And will you please stop that?” she stated trying to pull her hands from his. His mere touch was sending messages to her brain that she didn’t want to hear or acknowledge right now.

Hank was mesmerized by the slight flush to her face. He read in her eyes what she wouldn’t say aloud. “What would you say if I told you that I’d rather have you for dinner than the chicken, Red?”

Janice licked her dry lips unconscious that the action drew his eyes to her mouth. “I’d say that you’ve probably gotten too much California sun and heat. It can do funny things to the brain. In your case, there isn’t that much to work with.”

Hank reluctantly released her hands as the waitress appeared with their orders. He remained silent as she placed the dishes on the table. But when she left he looked across the table at a still flustered Janice. His smile was sexy and full of mischief and promise. “You did miss me,” he said smugly before delving into his chicken and dumplings.

CHAPTER 3

Hank pulled up in front of Janice's house promptly at eight Sunday morning as planned. He'd been up extra early this morning since he couldn't sleep thinking about the day ahead. So he'd gotten some things done around his apartment. Now he got out of his truck and made himself walk and not run up the front steps. He rang the bell and stepped back to wait. Seconds later he heard her unlatching the door.

"Hi! Come on in. I have a visitor that I want you to meet," Janice said holding open the screen door. "Go on into the living room."

"I've been looking forward to this day," Hank told her entered the house. He stopped short when he saw her company. "Hello Marion. How are you and Les doing?" His eyes were drawn to the cute little boy playing by her feet.

"We're doing great, Hank. You should go by the barbershop and say hello to Les when you get a chance. I know that he'd love to see you."

"I'll have to do that this week."

"Hank, I want you to meet the man in my life. This is Galen Sean Winters," Janice said indicating the little boy.

Daring To Love

He looked to be about two years old and was as cute as he could be with his dark brown hair and big blue eyes. Those eyes were leveled at Hank now with some uneasiness. Without giving it any thought, Hank lowered himself to the floor to sit cross-legged in front of Galen. The child leaned back against Marion's legs before he stood up and made his way over to Janice. He held up his arms asking to be picked up.

Janice scooped him up onto her lap giving him a hug and a kiss. "Galen, this is Mr. Hank," she said pointing to the man sitting on the floor.

"He's a little skittish of strangers. We got him four months ago and he's come a long way in that time," Marion said softly.

"He's one of your foster children?" Hank asked not taking his eyes off the child. Les and Marion had taken in any number of children since he'd known them. Two they had adopted themselves and the others had been placed in adoptive homes.

Galen seemed to give Miss Janice's words some thought for a few seconds before he scooted off her lap. Picking up his plastic truck he cautiously approached Hank. Stopping in front of the man, Galen held out his toy. "Ruck."

Hank smiled. "That's a pretty nice truck. Do you like trucks and cars, Galen?" Galen grinned showing small white teeth and Hank's heart seemed to lurch in his chest.

Galen nodded his head. "He handed the truck to Hank who took it to examine as if it were a treasure.

"What color is your truck, Big Guy?"

"Red," Galen said deciding that he liked this big man. The baby stepped closer to perch on Hanks knee.

Janice and Marion watched in amazement as the two dark heads bent over the truck discussing how wonderful it was. Marion was almost shocked. "In all the time we've had Galen with us, I have never seen him take to anyone like that...except with you. He's normally shy of strangers."

Hank heard. "It's the James charm," he told her with a grin. "Gets to women and children all the time."

"Ignore him, Marion. He had these delusions of grandeur from time to time. It's really because he has the mind of a child that he can relate easily," Janice said with a straight face. "He's the Black Horse version of Peter Pan."

But seeing Hank with Galen did funny things to her equilibrium and her heart rate. They looked so right together. She knew that he would be a wonderful father. He'd grown up with a fantastic example in Lucas James. That was plain when you watched his brothers with their families.

"Tinker Bell here just doesn't understand about us guys and our vehicles, Galen. We can play all we want," he told the little boy who turned to grin up at him. Hank knew that he didn't understand but apparently he trusted the voice.

Marion laughed as she stood up. "Well, it's time for this young man to go home and get some breakfast. We just came over to show Miss Janice his truck. He didn't get to see her yesterday and he was asking about her before he got out of bed."

Hank stood when she took the little boy in her arms. "It was nice meeting you, Galen. Hope we get to see you again soon." He ruffled the boy's dark hair earning him a wide grin. He watched as Janice walked them to the door.

"That's one cute little boy," he commented when she returned.

"He is isn't he? And he's so smart and loving. I think I fell in love with him the first time I saw him," Janice said giving away more than she realized.

"How long will he be with Marion and Les? Will he be going back to his own family again?" The longer he stayed the more attached Janice would get to him. He didn't want to see her get hurt.

"Galen doesn't have any family; at least none that the authorities can locate. His parents were killed in a car accident. He was in the back seat and somehow escaped serious injury. Marion hasn't told me a whole lot but I get the impression that his parents were quite young and had drug problems. So he's to be adopted." This last was said with a catch in her voice. She knew she was courting disaster, but she couldn't help herself. In four months she had managed to become quite attached to Galen Sean Winters and didn't know what she was going to do when he went away.

Hank heard what she hadn't said and decided it was time to change the subject. "I don't know about you but I'm ready to go fishing. Zach has horses ready and waiting for us and I've ordered perfect weather."

"And I made a batch of peanut butter cookies to take along," Janice told him more than willing to get this day

Daring To Love

started. She knew they were his favorite and called herself all sorts of names while she baked late last night.

“Well, don’t just stand there, woman. We’ve got fish to catch and cookies to eat!” Hank laughed rubbing his hands together in anticipation. “If you’re good and don’t scare the fish away I just might let you have one of my cookies.”

“Your cookies! I’m the one in possession, Peter Pan. So you better treat Tinker Bell here with a little more respect,” Janice chuckled. Suddenly the day seemed bright and the future not quite so bleak. But she tended to feel that way when Hank was around. He could become habit forming and she wasn’t sure if that was good or bad.

Hank parked his truck next to the barn. Zach left the corral to come over to greet his guests. “Janice, it’s good to see you again,” he said giving her a hug. “I see you brought the renegade of the family with you!”

“Watch how you talk about me in front of my girl, Zach. You’re supposed to be helping me here. She thinks I’m a wonderful catch besides being smart and good looking,” Hank laughed.

Janice looked around the yard with a questioning look on her face, but her eyes were twinkling. Hank was so fun to tease. “Who is this *she* who believes such drivel?”

Hank placed a hand over his heart. “I’m crushed.”

“I wouldn’t worry, Peter Pan. You have the constitution of a mule,” Janice laughed.

“Not to mention the stubbornness of one,” Zach said jumping into the fray. He was delighted with Hank’s growing relationship with Janice. It was pretty obvious that Hank cared a great deal for the lady. But Zack wasn’t sure about Janice’s feelings for his brother. She kept her feelings to herself and hadn’t opened up to anyone since she’d returned to Black Horse. She was warm and friendly, but not as open with her emotions as most women he knew. But then Sunny had been that way too until he’d gotten to know her and she had learned to trust him.

“Uncle Hank!” Kelsey screamed running forward to throw herself into his arms. “You have to come and see Henry! He’s really cute just like you. And he’s smart too!”

“Henry the goat?” Janice asked trying desperately not to laugh.

“You’ll like him too, Miss Janice. He’s white with big floppy ears.”

“Just like Uncle Hank. Right?” Janice commented straight-faced.

Kelsey giggled. “Uncle Hank doesn’t have floppy ears. He has big feet though.”

Hank jumped in before Janice could comment further. “If you ladies are through discussing my finer qualities, I’d like to see my namesake,” he laughed. If Max could have a goat named after him he would be happy to share that honor. Over the past thirteen months Kelsey and Josh had completely accepted the James family as their own and the family doted on them in return. He noticed Janice smiling fondly down at Kelsey. Janice would make a wonderful mother. Briefly he wondered why she and Steven hadn’t had a child.

Kelsey took Hank’s hand to lead him over to the fenced area where six goats were lazily spending the day. As they approached the fence, the smallest goat raced over to greet them. Kelsey reached through the fence to pet the white head. Hank reached over to scratch the top of his namesake’s head. “He’s a handsome one, Kelsey. Are you taking good care of him?”

“Oh yes! Everyday I do my chores. Daddy helps me now, but when I get bigger I’ll be able to do it all by myself,” she stated eagerly.

While they chatted and admired the animals, Zach led the two horses over to the fence. “If you two don’t get out of here, Kelsey will talk you into the ground,” he laughed patting the top of her head. She turned to look up at him with a big smile. It was apparent she adored her daddy as much as he adored her.

Hank and Janice rode out to the north range where the river cut through a forest of white barked aspen trees. Janice helped Hank secure the horses and unload the fishing gear. She felt exhilarated by the ride and the wide-open spaces. The smell of the trees and the river only added to her feeling of freedom and peace.

Janice took a deep breath as she raised her arms over her head. “This is so wonderful. I haven’t been out in the country like this in a long time. The sound of the moving water is almost therapeutic by itself.”

Daring To Love

“Wait until you taste my fried freshly caught trout. You’ll think you’ve died and gone to heaven,” Hank said grinning. He was having a hard time keeping his eyes, to say nothing of his hands, off the delectable lady. Today she was wearing jeans, a long-sleeved red shirt and boots and she looked fresh, natural and lovely.

Janice raised a brow questioningly. “You have to catch the fish first, Peter Pan. I might not have fished in quite some time but I used to be pretty good. We just might be eating *my* catch.”

“I believe it’s the man’s job to put the food on the table, Tinker Bell.”

“Oh my! I never would have thought Henry James was a chauvinist. I’m surprised you didn’t say that I had to cook the fish since I’m the female,” Janice commented soberly. Inside she was laughing.

Hank’s eyes narrowed as he studied the woman by his side. Then he grinned. “How am I supposed to show you how strong and wonderful I am if I don’t slay the beast and drag in the food for you? You weak woman...me big strong man”, he exaggerated flexing his arms. “And must I remind you that men make the best cooks?”

Janice laughed. “This weak woman is going to push you into the river if you don’t stop being such an idiot. I thought we were here to fish? Or maybe you’ve been spending too much time in the big city and behind a desk to remember how to do it?” she asked cheekily.

Hank’s smile turned sexy. “Oh I remember how to do it, Red.”

Before Janice could react, Hank folded her in his arms close to his broad chest where she could hear his heart pounding. Any protest died on her lips as his mouth covered hers. His lips brushed hers softly, caressing and warm. Her senses came alive by the feel of his big body pressing against hers; by fresh masculine scent that was Hank; and by the gentle touch of his mouth on hers. Janice raised her arms to circle his neck in her need to get closer to him.

Sensing her need Hank’s mouth opened over hers deepening the kiss. His hands moved to cup her pert little bottom bringing her body up tight against his growing need. His body was quickly growing hard as she arched into his hips in an unconscious movement of desire. Hank tore his mouth

from hers, trailing hot kisses down the side of her neck, the feel of her soft skin driving him on. His mouth moved back up to cover hers once again as his tongue gently traced the line of her full bottom lip. When her lips parted, his tongue dipped in for a full tasting.

Janice was drowning in an ocean of feeling. This unexpected physical need that Hank aroused in her had never been part of her marriage to Steven. That part of their marriage hadn't been unpleasant, but she had never been completely fulfilled; had been left with the feeling that something was missing but not sure what. But when Hank kissed her or touched her, she came alive with a driving physical need that was quickly becoming uncontrollable.

"Red," Hank groaned against her throat. He was quickly losing control.

His hoarse exclamation penetrated Janice's sexual mental fog. She wasn't ready for this. Was she? She wanted Hank with a longing that knew no equal in her experience, but to give in would mean crossing into territory that she wasn't sure of at this time. Her body stilled as she tried to slow her breathing. "Hank, please...I", she ground out softly.

Hank stilled before resting his chin on the top of her head. If she hadn't brought a halt just now he wasn't sure how far things would have progressed. Hell, whom was he kidding? He ached to make love to her, to hold her against his naked body. He leaned back a little to look down at her. When she didn't immediately look up at him, he placed a finger under her chin to lift her face so he could see her eyes. They were wide and questioning and filled with surprise. Then she blinked shuttering whatever had been there. "You drive me crazy, Red. I've never felt this way about any woman before," he admitted slowly.

Janice swallowed hard. She could be coy and pretend not to understand or tell a lie and pretend it hadn't been that important. But she wasn't one to hide from an issue. Her smile came slowly, tentatively. "I want you too, Hank. But I'm afraid," she told him honestly.

"I would never do anything to hurt you. I hope you understand that, Red?"

"I know. And I wouldn't want to hurt you in any way either, Hank."

Hank's smile was sensual once again. "I don't think you could ever hurt anyone, Red."

Daring To Love

“You’d be surprised,” Janice said pulling away from the haven of Hank’s large warm body.

Hank frowned at her reply. “I don’t understand.”

Now it was her turn to smile. “Never mind. I thought you said we were going to catch some fish? I’ll hold you to the cooking part too, Peter Pan. I know we’re having dinner with your family later, but that is hours away. I’ll be requiring nourishment long before we get back to the ranch.”

“We could always live on kisses!” Hank said hopefully rolling his eyes.

“If I don’t get to fish, you don’t get any more kisses,” Janice laughed reaching down to pick up one of the fishing rods.

Hank grabbed the other rod and the tackle. “Come on woman, don’t just stand there. We’ve got fish to catch. If I don’t get my regular doses of your kisses I could expire before the afternoon is over,” he replied leading her downstream.

Janice shook her head. “You’re an idiot but I...” she let the rest of what she was about to say trail off into the wind. *Way to go, Janice. Why don’t you just tell the man you love him to distraction, she thought miserably? Don’t lose sight of the fact that you really don’t have all that much to offer him in the way of a future together. He deserves a whole woman not just a shadow of one.* Apparently he hadn’t heard her because he was busy checking out a good spot to fish. For this she was grateful because it gave her time to take a deep breath and get back into a more festive mood once again.

Hank was the first one to get a hit. He strained and worked the line to bring in his catch. “This must be the granddaddy of all fish,” he groaned as he reached down to lift it out of the water. The brook trout he lifted up was no more than three or so inches long. He just stared at it as if it had grown wings.

Janice burst out laughing. “You’re out of shape, Peter Pan. I’ve seen gold fish bigger than that! You better get out from behind that desk and do some gym time to get back into shape.”

“He might be on the small side but he’s strong and put up one heck of a fight,” Hank replied in his defense. “Bet you couldn’t have brought this guy in.” Hank put the fish back into the water.

"That's one bet you would lose. And I could have done it without breaking out in a sweat too," she declared watching her line. Something was about to strike. She felt it and set the hook. Then she began to reel in her first catch of the day. After reeling in the excess line she felt it tighten. The muscles in her arms tightened as she began to strain to reel in her fish.

"Get him closer to the shore and I'll get him," Hank told her.

Janice pulled back just as Hank reached down to lift the fish out of the water. "Ha!" Janice squealed as he held up her catch. It was a beautiful brook trout almost eight inches long. "I've got my lunch," she cooed rocking on her feet in delight.

"Beginners luck," Hank muttered handing her the fish. "You caught him, you take care of him."

Her smile was smug as she took the line. "That's one for me."

"I'm just warming up, Red. Watch a pro and learn," Hank told her with more confidence than he felt. Hell, he could care less if he caught anything as long as he could spend time with Janice.

They had been fishing for about two hours when Hank declared it was time to make a fire and fix something to eat. He hadn't been fishing in a long time and had truly enjoyed it. Or maybe it was watching Janice that had made it really enjoyable.

Janice held up her string of five beautiful trout. "I believe the cook needs to clean these," she said gleefully.

"Red, did anyone ever tell you that you're a bad winner? It's not polite to gloat," he told her as he held up his stringer with two smaller trout.

"Oh, but you're so much fun to tease, Henry James. Too bad we don't have a camera so I could have a picture to show your brothers how we did today."

Hank's eyes narrowed in mock anger. "I forgot to mention that mean streak you have too."

Janice laughed as she helped to pick up their gear and head back to where they'd left the horses. Soon Hank had a small fire going, three of the fish cleaned and ready to cook. To her surprise he removed a bottle of wine from one of his saddlebags along with some cheese and biscuits. She already had a plastic bag of cookies lying on the blanket.

Daring To Love

“You brought all that and all I have are the cookies,” she commented.

“I told you that...”

“You big man who puts food on the table...yes you told me,” she laughed. “Can I do anything to help?”

“There are two plastic glasses in the other bag. Get them and we can have some wine and cheese while the fish cooks,” Hank said placing the fish over the fire.

Janice retrieved the glasses that he promptly filled. They sat across from each other on the dark green-checkered blanket with a soft breeze whispering through the trees and the relaxing sound of the river. “To friendship,” Hank said raising his glass to hers.

“To friendship,” she echoed.

He sat closest to the fire to keep a close eye on the cooking fish. After taking a drink of the sweet white wine, he studied the woman across from him. “How did you like living in Denver? You haven’t said much about your life there,” he said wondering at her apparent reticence to talk that part of her life.

Janice hesitated. No one had ever come out and questioned her directly about her marriage. “It was okay, I guess. But now that I’m back here in Black Horse, I don’t think I could ever move away again. I like the friendliness and quiet of smaller towns.”

“I know what you mean,” Hank agreed. “There is something so impersonal about big cities.”

“Steven loved it, but then he’d lived in the city all of his life,” Janice said quietly. “And I guess when you’re involved in the buying and selling of companies, that’s where the action is going to be.”

“Is that what he does for a living?” Hank asked. He knew next to nothing about her ex-husband. For that matter, he didn’t think anyone knew much about him. They had only visited Black Horse once during their marriage.

“He’s very much into the wheeling and dealing and big money. From the last I heard he’s moving up the ladder very quickly with the firm he went with shortly after we were married,” Janice told him. She looked at Hank and made her decision. She was willing to tell him about some parts of her marriage, but not all. “We did a lot of entertaining. You

know, the lavish dinner or cocktail parties. Steven had to be seen in the right places and with the right people.”

“Doesn’t sound like your scene though,” Hank commented. “I see you more as the family dinner and country picnic type.”

Janice shrugged. “Steven was my husband. It was my duty to take care of the entertaining part of his life. Actually, the planning part of all that was kind of fun and I did enjoy it. It gave me a great sense of satisfaction to see a dinner party all come together. I’m a stickler for details so maybe that’s why.”

“What about the people at those parties? Did you like them?”

“No, not really. They were usually so superficial. The men were there to make contacts or to make passes at the other women. And the women were there to show off their latest jewels and designer clothing. None of them worked and I did, so we had nothing in common.”

“You didn’t haul out your diamonds and rubies to impress the ladies?”

Janice snorted. “I’m not particularly fond of jewelry and as a rule don’t wear much. Oh, Steven bought me some diamond earrings and several other pieces of gold jewelry and I thought they were nice. But to spend an evening with it as the main topic of conversation is a bit much.” She hadn’t made any real friends within the group of people Steven had associated with. Any friendships had been with the people she worked with at the real-estate agency in Denver.

When the fish was ready they ate in companionable silence. The biscuits were warmed over the fire and Janice couldn’t remember anything tasting so wonderful. Finishing the last piece of her fish, she licked her fingers. “I have to give you credit, Hank. That was delicious.”

“Was there ever any doubt?” he asked with raised eyebrow.

“We won’t go into that right now. Since you did such a splendid job, you can have a cookie,” she laughed extending the bag across the blanket.

“Only one?” he asked downcast.

“I’ll take one and you can have the rest. Is that okay?” She laughed at the change in his expression.

“Cookies and pies are the way to my heart, Red. And with peanut butter cookies you’ve earned my life long

Daring To Love

devotion,” he said laughing. He took a bite savoring the flavor and closed his eyes in gratitude to the cookie gods.

With his eyes closed he didn’t see the flicker of pain that came and went in Janice’s eyes. She didn’t know if she believed in devotion like that, at least in her case. Maybe living in Denver had turned her into a pessimist. “I can’t see baking as an object of devotion,” she said more sharply than she’d intended.

Hank frowned. “It’s only one aspect of a much larger picture, Red. Why does that upset you?”

Janice jumped to her feet and began to pack up. “Devotion is just a word that gets bandied about too much. It no longer has any meaning in our society.”

“Whoa! I was only talking about us...you and me, Red. I didn’t mean to get embroiled in a deep philosophical discussion.” She had suddenly gone stiff and he didn’t understand what has caused such a change.

“Then don’t talk to me about devotion,” she snapped. “I’m sorry, Hank. Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea.” She picked up the blanket to shake out the crumbs then started to fold it. She wasn’t aware that her hands were shaking too.

Hank gasped her hands to still them. “I don’t understand what has set you off like this, Red. But I would appreciate it if you would tell me. Something is eating at you and I’d like to help if I can.” His long fingers rubbed the backs of her soft hands. He took the blanket from her and tossed it over onto the saddlebags. “Talk to me, Red. Why do I have a feeling that this has something to do with Steven Wright?”

Janice felt tears forming in her eyes. She tried willing herself not to cry, but it was a losing battle. “Let’s just say that as a wife I was a resounding failure in almost every aspect. The house wasn’t quite right; the entertaining wasn’t quite as it should have been; and apparently I wasn’t woman enough to keep my husband interested in the bedroom.” She looked up at Hank now with tears filling her eyes. “He found someone to devote himself to rather than me.”

Hank pulled her into his arms crushing her against his chest. “He wasn’t good enough for you, Red. The man had a precious jewel in his possession and he threw it away. That makes him the loser, not you,” he told her huskily. It tore at his heart to see her so upset. A thought flashed through his

mind that he was reluctant to give voice to. But he had to know. "Are you still in love with Steven?" he asked hoarsely.

Janice looked up at him her blue eyes shadowed. She shook her head. "No. It died such a quick death that I sometimes wonder if I was ever truly in love with him. It's just that..." she trailed off unable to continue.

"Look at me, Red." Hank raised her chin so he could study her beautiful face. "If you let his betrayal dictate your life, then he wins. Don't let him do that!" Hank told her cupping her face in his large hands. "Don't let him do that to us!"

Janice tried to smile through her tears. "You James men are something, do you know that? I just need time, Hank. We need to talk but not now. I'm just not ready." She placed her hand against his cheek.

Hank turned her hand to press his lips to her palm. "I'm not going anywhere, Red. I'll be right here when you're ready."

She smile was warm. "How about we mount up and head back to the ranch. I believe there is a little girl waiting there. We have a movie to watch."

"Only if you stay by my side."

"Now that I know you can actually cook, I won't be far away," Janice said turning to pick up the blanket. "And maybe I'll bake you a coconut cake next week!"

"For coconut I'll camp on your front doorstep," he laughed reaching for the saddlebags. It was a good thing that Steven Wright wasn't anywhere around Black Horse or he'd have to throttle the man. What kind of an ass was he? Hank would give everything he had to be married to Janice and Steven had thrown his marriage out with the trash. But Hank was a lot smarter and he was a patient man. All he had to do was wait.

CHAPTER 4

Preparations for dinner were well underway by the time Hank and Janice returned from their fishing trip. This Sunday dinner was being held at Sunny and Zack's. Everyone took turns so that Nellie and Lucas didn't have to shoulder the burden of the family dinners each week. Nellie led Janice to the master bedroom where she could shower and change into clean clothes. Hank was using one of the other bedrooms to clean up.

Now as Janice descended the stairs she could hear the loud chatter of the children in the great room. She stopped in the doorway surveying the people. Her smile was warm and welcoming as Kelsey jumped down from the chair running forwards to greet her.

"Come on, Miss Janice. We're gonna' watch *Ice Age*." Kelsey pulled Janice by the hand leading her over to the long brown and blue sectional sofa.

Zach laughed. "Come on so we can begin. The kids are driving us crazy waiting to start." Precious little Zoe lay sleeping peacefully on his broad chest.

As she passed Hank to sit on the sofa he took her hand. "Sit with us kids, Red. You can't truly appreciate the movie from up there."

"Okay, Peter Pan. But my butt better not go to sleep from sitting on the floor."

Hank's grin turned sensual. "If it does...."

“That’s quite all right Henry James,” Janice said folding her legs to lower herself next to him. Kelsey plopped onto Hank’s lap with a satisfied grin.

The doorbell rang just as Zach reached for the remote control to start the movie. “I’ll get it,” Adam offered getting out of the brown leather recliner. He returned seconds later followed by Marion and Les with Galen and their other two children, Jack and Emily.

As soon as Les put Galen on his feet the little boy spotted Janice sitting on the floor. His face lit up with a big grin as he ran to her side wrapping his arms around her neck. Les smiled. “Galen sure has taken to Janice.”

Janice held the small body close to her chest inhaling his warm baby scent. His arms were warm as he buried his face against her neck. When she kissed the top of his head of dark hair, he looked up at her adoringly.

“Hey there, big guy,” Hank said smiling at the picture they made. He was rewarded with a smile. “Are you ready to watch the movie?”

Galen didn’t reply but looked up at Janice. Les found a place to sit while Marion went out to the kitchen to help with dinner. As soon as everyone was settled, Zach started the movie.

Janice didn’t know what she enjoyed more...the movie or the laughter and giggles filling the room. At some point Max joined their little group and his robust laughter joined theirs. She was amazed that Hank apparently was enjoying this kids movie as much as the younger ones. By the end of the movie, Galen was sitting on Hank’s lap with Kelsey clapping and giggling.

When Zach clicked off the VCR and television there were protests from the children. “Daddy, can we watch it again? Please?” Pete pleaded.

“Yeah, please,” the others joined in.

“I wouldn’t mind seeing it again,” Hank added a bit sheepishly. He really had enjoyed the movie. But even more so, curiously enough, having Janice by his side and little Galen on his lap had made him feel whole somehow. He was well aware of the affection Janice felt for the little boy. No, make that love for Galen. He was momentarily concerned that she would be hurt when Galen went to a new home. As much as she loved children he wondered why she and Steven had never had one. But then it was none of his business.

Daring To Love

Considering the outcome of their marriage, it was probably best that they hadn't had a baby.

Janice rose to her feet in one lithe movement and held out her hand. "Come on, Peter Pan. You lose brain cells proportionate to the time you spend in front of a television set. And you don't have that many cells to lose!"

Max, who was in the process of getting to his feet, toppled over with laughter. "Boy does she have your number!"

"Thanks, Tinker Bell. I thought you were my friend," Hank groaned getting to his feet with Galen in his arms. He looked at Max rolling on the floor and at his other two brothers who were grinning broadly. "You could have a little sympathy for me here guys. This woman has a mean streak and has dented my fragile ego."

"We don't get involved, little brother. You're on your own here," Zach laughed as he turned to carry Zoe from the room.

Janice put a hand on her hip, tilting her head to one side as she looked up at him. "A bulldozer could run over your ego, Henry James and not put a dent in it."

Before he could reply, Sunny called from the hallway. "Dinner is now being served. Everyone get washed up and into the dining room." She was almost run down by the stampede from the great room as bodies rushed forward to get ready to eat. She shook her head as the last person dashed up the stairs. Her life was so full now. She had Zack and the children and his family and good friends. Her marriage to Zach had erased all shadows from her eyes.

Later that night when Hank walked Janice to her door she was reluctant to end this wondrous day. She didn't know if she was doing the right thing so she didn't give it much thought. "Would you like to come in for coffee?"

"I sure wouldn't turn down a cup of hot chocolate."

Flash was sitting on the arm of the sofa when they entered the living room. Janice scratched him behind the ears on her way back to the kitchen. Hank followed close behind. Flash followed at a much slower pace to take his place under the heavy oak table.

Janice set to work making the hot chocolate. "Do you like marshmallows in yours?" she asked. Hank was

sitting at the table when she turned. Her breath caught in her throat. She'd always thought her kitchen was fairly large but now it seemed dwarfed by his presence. He was a big man like his father and brothers. He sat with one long leg resting on the other knee as he relaxed in the wooden chair. His black hair was slightly disheveled from playing with the children earlier, but it only made him more appealing. He was quite the most handsome man she'd ever met and combined with his intelligence, humor and gentleness this made him all that much more attractive.

His smile was slow and sexy. "Whatever you want, Red."

Janice gulped turning away from the sight of the big sexy man in her kitchen. The memory of his kisses by the river stirred up longings she'd long thought dead. Asking him in had not been a good idea. It would have been fine if her body hadn't chosen this time to come alive again; to crave the closeness that only Hank could provide. She tried to concentrate on fixing the two cups but her hands felt clumsy. The kitchen had become almost claustrophobic. Picking up the two mugs she turned. "Why don't we take these into the living room?" Without waiting for a reply she hurried from the room.

Hank followed. He really didn't care if he had hot chocolate or not. He was still full from the huge dinner at Zach's. But he would grab at any excuse to spend more time with Janice. After setting the mugs down on the coffee table she sat on the sofa so Hank took the seat next to her. "I really enjoyed today, Red."

"I did too. I'd forgotten how much fun fishing could be." She smiled trying to relax but his thigh was pressed against hers. "Those minnows you caught should be big enough to keep in another year or so," she laughed in an attempt to lighten the mood or, more to the point, take her mind off the man sitting so close to her.

Hank took a sip of the rich hot chocolate. "It was beginners luck, Red."

"I'm not a beginner!"

"No, you're not," Hank agreed as he lowered his mouth to hers.

His lips were warm and sweet from the hot chocolate. Janice knew that she should pull away but her body simply would not acknowledge the message her brain was frantically

Daring To Love

trying to transmit. She felt the hardness of the muscles in the arms holding her and eagerly placed her hands against his broad chest where she could feel the pounding of heart beneath her fingers. This was madness. This was asking for trouble, but she was unable to stop as she lifted her arms to encircle his neck.

When his tongue traced the fullness of her lower lip, she sighed with pleasure. "Red, you drive me crazy with wanting you," Hank groaned before his open mouth closed over hers.

"We shouldn't be doing this, Hank," Janice gasped as he slowly kissed his way to the tender side of her neck. Her words said one thing but her fingers were busy working their way inside of his shirt. She quickly unbuttoned all but the last button before placing her hands flat against his broad chest, the mat of dark hair tingling against her palms. Her hands traced the contoured muscles on his chest. He drew her mouth back to his lips, as she pressed closer to his hard body.

In one quick movement he pulled her astride his lap, pressing her against his hardness. She could feel his need, glorying in her ability to arouse him this quickly. Her own breathing was labored as she shifted her weight against him. When his hands went to the hem of her shirt, she made no move to prevent him from pulling it over her head revealing her rounded breasts encased in a soft pink lacy bra. The bold appreciative gleam in his deep brown eyes gave her courage as she pulled on his shirt to remove it completely.

"You are even more beautiful than I imagined," Hank groaned as he leaned forward to kiss the valley between her breasts. Her sigh of approval drove him on to cup the pink lace rubbing at the dark nub visible. When she arched her back he laved the top of each creamy orb. "Help me to go slow, Red. I need you so much but I don't want to hurt you."

"You can't hurt me, Hank. I want you too. I missed you so much when you were away," Janice gasped as he deftly removed her bra. He cupped her breasts with his large hands bringing them closer to his mouth. As he laved on nub Janice groaned. It had been so long since she'd made love. Only now could she admit how much she'd missed it. Or was it because this was Hank? It didn't matter. All that mattered was the sensations he was arousing in her; feelings that seemed more intense than in any other experience in her life.

The physical side of her marriage to Steven had been nice, but with Hank, well explosive was the only work she could think of to describe it.

Hank pulled them down until they were lying side by side on the sofa. Her legs were clasped between his long thick ones as he pressed her down on the cushions. For long minutes the only sounds in the room were the sounds of discovery and gasps of pleasure.

"I don't want to make love to you here on the sofa. I want this to be special for you, Red," Hank said hoarsely. It was difficult to think straight and if they didn't move soon it would be too late.

"Upstairs," Janice gasped.

Hank stood to take Janice in his arms. Long impatient strides carried him to the stairs that he took two at a time in his haste to get to the bedroom. Once there, it was a race to see who could undress the other first. Clothing flew in all direction in their urgent need to be together. He laid her gently on the double bed not bothering to pull back the comforter. His eyes feasted on her creamy slender body from her mane of thick red hair, over her full rounded breasts, to her flat stomach and down her well-shaped legs to her small feet. She was lovely and loving and he couldn't wait much longer as his body became almost painfully hard.

Janice had only been with one other man and that had been her husband. She had always though Steven had been in good shape...until now. There was no comparing the two men. Hank was big and well muscled with not an ounce of fat on his body. The sight of his thick arms and legs caused that coil of pleasure to tighten. When she looked at his arousal her eyes widened. *Oh my!*

Hank cupped her head in his hands as he lay on top of her. "You're beautiful," he whispered as his mouth closed over hers. She ran her hands up his chest to cup his broad shoulders, digging in her nails as his tongue caressed her lips into giving him entry. He tasted of hot chocolate. She arched up giving him her silent approval, her body not able to lay still under his much larger one. A few seconds later when he slowly pushed into her, she was ready. It didn't take long for her to realize just how much bigger he was than her former husband. By the time he was buried deep inside her, she was gasping with myriad sensations all building to an explosive release.

Daring To Love

She was so tight that Hank was afraid he would harm her. He tried to go more slowly but her avid response was quickly driving him beyond all reason. When she arched up to meet him, he drove in all the way reveling in the feel of her warmth and tightness surrounding him. He lay still for several seconds just kissing her swollen lips and her throat. When she began to move he met her movement for movement until they were both gasping and groaning their pleasure into the darkened room.

Janice felt that coil of pleasure begin to release as never before spasms of delight tightened her body as she began to tremble. She felt Hank's own release begin as she clung to his body never wanting this pleasure to end. When all was quiet in the room, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders to keep him from moving. "Not yet," she whispered against his cheek.

"I don't think I could move if the house was on fire." He did manage to push up on his arms so he could look down into her face. There was just enough illumination from the street light outside the house so he could see. Her gorgeous blue eyes were wide with the pleasure as a soft smile curved her swollen lips. "I love you, Red!"

Janice was floating down on a bubble of happiness. She hadn't realized until this moment just how much she had come to love Hank James. His declaration of love startled her back to reality. He deserved someone who could give him children; someone with whom he could build a future. She knew how much family meant to him. You simply had to see him interact with the various members of his family to understand that. She had been a liability to Steven and it would be no different with Hank. She couldn't bear to see his disappointment when he discovered her one major drawback as a woman. She had to keep their relationship light and free from commitment.

"I bet you say that to all the women in your life?" she said as lightly as she could and hoped he didn't hear the slight quiver in her voice.

Hank frowned. "There haven't been as many as you might think, Red. And this is the first time in well over a year that I've made love."

Now it was her turn to frown. "You lived in Los Angeles surrounded by thousands of beautiful women. I can't believe you didn't get involved with someone."

"I carried around this picture in my mind of a beautiful redhead with big blue eyes and a figure that any model would envy. I wasn't interested in anyone else." Gently he caressed her cheek before running a finger along her bottom lip. "It's been a while for you too, hasn't it?"

She turned her head to look out the window. "There was only Steven and that part of our life was over several months before we separated."

"And no one since?"

She shook her head. "It was time to rebuild my life and get the business going which left no time for developing any relationship. Besides, I haven't met anyone."

"Until now?"

Janice licked her lips. "Hank, we're both adults. Sometimes, adults can get carried away by the romance and passion of the moment. Please don't read more into this than there truly is. I like you a lot, but I'm not ready for any intense relationship. Not right now anyway," she amended.

Hank was man who could read people. He was also a man who wasn't afraid to face up to the truth no matter how much it might hurt. He sensed now that Janice was lying about her feelings for him and it had nothing to do with his ego. He'd seen the way her eyes had burned with desire; the way her body had responded to his; the way her lips parted when she looked at him. He was also a patient man. Whatever was making her afraid to face up to her true feelings was something he would discover in time. And he had to give her that time to come to trust him completely. He wouldn't settle for anything less. But he had to be honest with her too. "I want more than an affair with you, Janice Wright." He placed a finger against her lips when she tried to speak. "You need time to get to know me better and to accept me in your life. I'll try not to rush you. But I'm not going anywhere, Red. For now I'll accept whatever you have to offer."

Janice was at a loss for words. Here she was with her body still joined with Hank and she was telling him not to take it seriously. And he was telling her that he wanted a life with her! As he stared down at her she was amazed to feel his body swell once again. Her lips parted to speak but nothing came out.

Daring To Love

Hank knew that instant she became aware of his new arousal. He began to move against her slowly, rhythmically. This was new for him, this need so soon after making love. He grinned. "I don't think you're going to get rid of me as quickly as you think."

"No?"

"Definitely not," he groaned lowering his mouth to hers.

CHAPTER 5

Janice grinned at Galen as they sat in the restaurant. The waitress had given him a placemat covered with various animals. Hank was pointing to each animal and saying the name. Galen would watch Hank's mouth as he said the word then he would try to repeat it. Many of the names he already knew such as cat and dog and cow. She didn't know who was enjoying this little game more, Hank or Galen. It was obvious Galen was delighting in Hank's attention.

"Dinosaur," Hank said slowly.

"That's quite a big word for him, Hank."

"Not for this big guy," Hank said ruffling Galen's dark hair. He said the word again as Galen studied his lips as they moved.

"Dinor," was his first try.

"Dinosaur," Hank repeated slowly.

Galen grinned showing small white baby teeth.

"Dinoso."

Hank repeated the word once again.

"Dinosaur," Galen said plainly.

"Good job," Hank laughed leaning over to give him a hug. "See, I told you he could do it!"

Janice smiled with pride, her eyes bright with happiness. She adored Galen and was as proud of him as if he were her own child. A day didn't go by that she didn't spend

Daring To Love

some time with him. It had become a ritual that each morning she would throw on some jeans and a shirt and go next door to see him while he ate his breakfast. From what Marion told her, Galen looked forward to seeing her too. Today Marion had to take the other children to the doctor for checkups so Janice had quickly volunteered to keep Galen for the morning. When Hank had found out he asked her to join him for lunch before taking the baby home.

Now as she watched the two dark heads bent over the placemat it wasn't difficult to imagine them as a real family. Hank could easily be mistaken for Galen's father. With this thought came a stab of pain. Hank might have a family some day but she wouldn't be the mother. Pushing this thought to the back of her mind she tried to concentrate on this moment and get as much enjoyment out of it as she could.

"I was the one who told you how smart Galen is. Marion says that she has never seen a child so young who can say as much as he can already. And he remembers everything you tell him. So if you tell him you're going to do something, you had better do it because he'll let you know about it," Janice stated proudly.

Hank looked over at Janice. She was looking at Galen with such longing that it tore at his heart. He was afraid that she was becoming too attached to him and he didn't want to see her hurt when the baby was adopted. That thought didn't sit very well with him either. "He sure has a way of getting to your heart," Hank said softly.

Janice looked up at him startled for a second. *Could he read her mind?* She knew she was in for a very difficult time when Galen moved away, but there wasn't a thing she could do about it. When she'd first realized how much he was in her thoughts she'd tried to stay away but that hadn't worked for very long. She had to see him every day even if it was for a few minutes just to see that he was okay. Or was it so that he could see her and know that she was still there?

"He is a sweetheart, isn't he?"

Before Hank could reply the waitress arrived with their food. Janice cut up Galen's food in small pieces then gave him his little fork. He still used his hand from time to time but he was doing pretty well with the child-sized fork.

An older couple approached their table on their way out of the restaurant. "We just wanted to tell you that your

little boy is absolutely adorable and so well mannered. You should be very proud,” the older woman said smiling down at Galen.

“Thank you,” Hank said in acknowledgement.

“Why did you let them go on thinking that he’s our son?” Janice asked as the older couple walked away. It had been no more than she’d been daydreaming herself but to hear it voiced aloud was another matter. It almost made the truth hurt all the more.

Hank shrugged. “They’re strangers just passing through town. There was no need to go into Galen’s family history. Besides, I kind of like the idea of them thinking I’m his daddy. Pretty foolish, huh?”

Janice’s heart filled with love for man and child. “No, not at all. It would be wonderful to have a child like Galen.” She wasn’t aware of the note of utter longing in her voice.

But Hank heard it. He was becoming more and more aware of how much Janice loved children, especially Galen. “Why didn’t you and Steven have a child?” The question was out before he’d realized he was going to voice what he’d been thinking.

Janice looked startled for a moment.

“Forget I asked. It’s none of my business,” Hank amended.

“No, you just took me by surprise I guess. There was always something to do before starting a family,” she told him. It was only half of the truth. “Steven had wanted us to be in our own house and have a certain amount of money in the bank before we had children.” But they had accomplished that in the first six months of their marriage. After accomplishing all that, they had tried to have a child but Janice had not become pregnant. “I guess under the circumstances it was a good thing that we didn’t have any children.”

Hank studied her intently. He was sure there was more to the story than she was telling him. He shrugged. “Maybe. But if you had, that child would be loved. You’re going to make a terrific mother when you do have a child.”

Janice directed her attention to wiping Galen’s chin and mouth with the napkin to avoid looking directly at Hank. Of course he had no way of knowing how much his words hurt nor how much a lie they were. She would never have a

Daring To Love

child of her own. Steven had been disappointed when she hadn't become pregnant after a year of trying and had blamed her for not being able to give him a son. When his lover became pregnant almost immediately, it only served to prove that he had been right. Janice apparently was not able to conceive.

When Janice didn't make a reply Hank knew that something was wrong but didn't know what to do next. This wasn't the place to delve into the matter anyway so he changed the subject. "How you doing big guy?" he asked picking up Galen's little hand giving it a kiss.

Galen grinned basking in the attention. "Cow," he crowed proudly pointing to the black and white animal on his place mate.

"Good boy! What's this?" Hank asked pointing to another animal.

"Dinosaur!"

"Come here, big guy," Hank said laughing. "You sure are one smart little boy, do you know that?" He undid the strap to the highchair and scooped Galen up into his arms.

The baby wrapped his small chubby arms around Hank's neck as if it were the most natural thing in the world. He sighed before laying his head down on Hanks' broad shoulder.

"I think someone is ready for a nap," Janice commented as she watched the two favorite men in her life. "He's had a long morning and it's past his naptime." No wonder those people had thought Hank was Galen's father. Seeing them like this, so close together, they did look like father and son.

"He'll be asleep in seconds," Janice smiled.

"I'll just hold him while we finish our coffee. So, what do you have on the agenda for this afternoon?"

"I'm driving out to the Kelly house to check it out."

"Are they selling up? They haven't been in Black Horse all that long," Hank commented slowly.

Janice nodded. "They're moving to New Mexico to be near their daughter since the colder weather here is hard on Tom's general health. I understand that the daughter just gave birth to twin boys. Since she already has two other children, Barbara wants to be closer to be able to help out."

Hank whistled. "They just built that beautiful log home." It was a big two-story log house set on twelve and a half acres. An idea began to take form in his fertile mind.

"I'll find out today just what they want. When I talked to Barbara on the phone she said that they were going to take most of the furniture with them. They have already looked at a property in New Mexico. It's smaller than the place here so they will be selling off some of the furniture also."

"Call me later tonight when you have all the particulars. I'm really interested in that property myself," Hank told her.

"You!"

"Why do you look so shocked?"

"I don't know. I guess I just assumed that since you work in town that you would want a place here."

"It's only about five miles from town. And I love it in the country. That way I would have a place to keep my horse. He's at Zack's now but it would be nice to have my own home."

"I don't think there's a stable," Janice said thoughtfully. "But that would be just a small setback for you. I thought you liked your apartment? You've been in it for years now."

"It's okay. But I think I've outgrown it. My books alone take up half the room. I've got them stacked on the floor and all available flat surface space. Maybe it's about time that I expanded my horizons...and my living space. That house would be great for raising a family," he added softly.

Janice felt herself go cold. The look he gave her was definitely warm and inviting. She knew that getting involved with Hank James wouldn't be a good idea but it had happened anyway. Hell, when he was away, she had waited for his phone calls just so she could hear his voice. What did she expect when he came home? She'd had a crush on him in high school even though he was four years older. After her disastrous marriage she was ripe for a wonderful man like Hank. His tall muscular frame and dark good looks didn't help any either. But it was his intelligence, humor and compassion that kept her captivated. And his kisses! That first night when they'd become lovers, she'd all but crawled into his pants. She should have ended things that night but that had been impossible. If a woman could become addicted

Daring To Love

to a man, she was now a Hank addict. On one level it thrilled her, but on a saner level it terrified her because she realized she was going to be hurt again. But even more importantly, Hank was going to suffer. And she didn't know how she was going to live with the knowledge that she was the cause of his unhappiness.

She tried to ignore the unsaid question he had voiced reverting to her business tone. "The house is certainly big enough to accommodate quite a number of people. Barbara said they plan to leave for New Mexico as soon as possible. They'll fly back for the closing if it's not sold before they leave."

"Has anyone else shown any interest in it?"

"It won't be listed until tomorrow. So no, it hasn't been shown yet. I don't even know how many people in town realize that they're moving away. Tom and Barbara didn't get very involved with anyone so there hasn't been a great deal of contact." The older couple was friendly enough. They just were very quiet people who preferred to stay home rather than spend much time in town.

"Mom and dad like them okay," Hank replied thoughtfully. "Look, I'm serious about looking at the place. The more I think about it, the more appealing it becomes. Call me as soon as you find out their asking price. You just might have made a sale and you didn't even have to work to do it. I can take a walk through anytime it's convenient for you and the Kelly's."

Two day's later Janice and Hank pulled up in front of the Kelly house. It was exactly four and three quarter miles from town which was great in Hank's scheme for the future. As he sat in the car studying the large log house, his resolve to buy the place hardened.

Janice smiled as she watched Hank's reaction to the house. If pressed she would have to admit to falling in love with the place herself. She'd only seen it briefly once before, but from what she could remember about the floor plan it was something she would choose if in the market for a new home. But it was way out of her income bracket so she would have to be content with what she had.

Tom Kelly greeted them at the front door. Although he and Barbara had lived in Black Horse for almost six years,

Hank had not spent much time in their company. They spent a great deal of traveling and hadn't really gotten involved in the small town or with their neighbors. "It's good to see you again, Janice," he said stepping aside so she and Hank could enter.

"You remember Hank James?" Janice said as the two men shook hands.

"So you're interested in buying?" Tom asked studying the younger man.

"Yes, sir."

"Well you just take your time and look around. Barbara left yesterday to stay with our daughter for a few days. The new twins are wearing her out," Tom told them. "I'm in the kitchen sorting through everything to see what we can get rid of."

Janice saw the look of confusion on Hank's face and jumped in before he could ask any questions. "Tom is the cook in this family."

"That's right. Ever since I retired I've done the cooking. Barbara can watch but she can't touch," Tom laughed. "I've always been interested in cooking but never had the time when I was working. Now I do have the time and I'm having a ball."

"And I bet Barbara loves it too," Janice laughed.

"No complaints so far," Tom chuckled as he headed for the kitchen and his packing.

"Where would you like to start?" Janice asked watching as Hank surveyed the great room in front of them.

"You lead and I'll follow. This room is wonderful and I love that fireplace. That's one thing that I've missed in my apartment. There's something really warm and soothing about a fire burning with the lights turned down low."

Janice looked away quickly because the picture that brought to mind almost made her blush. She had immediately envisioned Hank naked in front of that fire. She swallowed hard twice before she spoke leading him off to their left. "This room is an office and I'm sure you'll really like it. There's plenty of room for bookcases or shelves."

Hank whistled in appreciation when they entered the room. "Another fireplace! This room is big enough for a large desk. I've had my eye on one but don't have room for it."

Daring To Love

“The master bedroom is across the hall. It has two bathrooms and large closets,” Janice said trying to get into her professional mode. But it was difficult when everywhere she looked there was something that brought pictures of Hank to mind. Especially when the large room was filled with a huge oak four-poster bed with matching mirrored dressers.

Hank leaned over to whisper in her ear. “We could get lost in that bed, my darling red!”

Now Janice did blush because that was exactly what she’d been thinking. She nudged him with her elbow. “This is business so please stick to the matter at hand.” She tried to sound business-like but failed miserably. A small smile played around the corners of her lips.

“Know where I’d like to stick my hands?” Hank asked with a wicked grin.

Janice rolled her eyes. “I know where I’m going to stick my fist if you don’t behave.” She turned to leave the room but Hank stopped her by taking her into his arms. Before she could protest his mouth covered hers. His hands fanned across her firm bottom to press her closer to his body. This was madness when Tom could walk into the room at any time. But even as her mind gave voice to the thought she was wrapping her arms around his neck.

When he lifted his lips to kiss the side of her neck she thought she would never be able to get back to being blasé about her relationship with him. His kisses warmed her, filled her as none in her past experience. She longed to be with him. When she realized her hands had strayed to pull up his shirt, she stilled as some semblance of common sense penetrated the sexual haze engulfing her. “Hank,” she gasped.

He cradled her close to his broad chest. “See what you do to me, Red? I can’t think straight when we’re alone,” he rasped. “Maybe we had better see the rest of the house.”

“Maybe we should have an escort?” Janice laughed straightening her clothing and hair.

Hank laughed. “That might be a good idea. Let’s go find Tom. I want your opinion on the kitchen anyway.”

They spent the better part of the next hour with Tom exploring the rest of the large house. Hank was truly impressed with the overall layout of the house. There were three bedrooms upstairs each with its own bathroom and a large room that could be turned into a playroom for kids. This

was the perfect house in which to raise a family. As he glanced over at Janice who was discussing something with Tom, he knew that filling those bedrooms with children would be a joy. He'd finally met the woman of his dreams and now he'd found the dream house to give to her.

As soon as he and Janice got into the car to return to town he turned to her. "What did you say the asking price is?" he asked her thoughtfully.

She told him waiting for his reply as he started the car. It was a great deal of money and she really didn't know that much about Hank's financial situation, but then it was none of her business.

"Okay," was all he said as he started down the long drive to the main road back to town.

"What do you mean okay? That's a lot of money. You should make a bid on it."

"Don't you think it's worth the asking price?"

"Yes, of course. It may be worth even more."

"I want that house and the property," Hank insisted. "If I make a bid someone else might come in behind me. It's a fair price and I'd like to be able to complete the deal before the end of the month." The money was no problem. Hank had a healthy trust fund that had been set up when he was born. His practice had been doing very well the past few years and the last year in Los Angeles had added considerably to his financial stability. He wouldn't pay cash for the property, but he could put a large chunk of money down on it so the payments wouldn't be that high.

"I'll call Tom as soon as we get back to town then. He and Barbara were prepared to let the house stand empty for a while since they thought it would take a while to sell."

"If Tom agrees, can you get all the paper work done quickly? Now that I've made up my mind about moving, I can't wait to get going," Hank asked glancing over at Janice.

"I'll put a rush on it for you. But it will still take at least ten days to get everything ready."

"Good. I'm looking forward to dinner tonight. I hear from Sunny that your lasagna is the best she's ever tasted." They were eating in tonight. It was nice to take Janice out somewhere, he couldn't deny that, but it was more relaxing to spend a quiet evening alone so they could talk or watch a movie together.

"Was there ever any doubt?" Janice asked smugly.

Daring To Love

Hank laughed. "I wouldn't touch that question for any amount of money.

"Coward!"

"As an attorney you learn that there are some questions that shouldn't be asked or answered."

"Like what?"

"Oh, like how much does a woman weigh? Which dresses do you like best? That question can get you into a whole heap of trouble and usually no matter how you answer, you're wrong."

Now Janice chuckled. "Sounds like you have first hand experience."

"When I was in college I had a date with this raven haired beauty. We were supposed to go to a dinner theater to see a play. When I went to pick her up she was wearing this sparkly shocking pink dress that must have been painted on her."

"Bet your eyes almost popped out of your head?"

"I don't know about that but my mouth must have hit the ground. She twirled around and asked me if I liked her dress. Well, I didn't know what to say. I'd never been out with anyone who dressed like that. To tell the truth she looked like a hooker on the prowl but I couldn't tell her that. So I coughed a couple of times and finally came up with what I thought was a good answer. Told her that I'd never lose her because she'd sure stand out in a crowd." Hank grimaced as he recalled that incident.

"You smooth talking devil," Janice laughed. "Did she slap you?"

"No, but she showed me the door and left me in no doubt that I was not to bother calling her again."

"Did you?"

"Hell no! But I sure learned to guard my answers after that. I'm now a master of evasion when it comes to question of that nature," Hank stated proudly.

"So I won't know if you truly like my cooking tonight?" Janice asked with raised brow.

"With you I promise to be completely honest. I always will you know, Red. You mean far too much to me to ever lie to you about anything. Hell, I could develop a taste for charcoal if that was the best you could do in the kitchen. Either that or frozen dinners!"

Janice looked away afraid that he might see something in her eyes at that moment. She certainly hadn't been honest with him. Oh she hadn't exactly lied. It was more of a lie by omission. But the bottom line was that she hadn't been completely honest with him. She was going to have to talk to him soon; should have done it as soon as they had become lovers. But she was afraid of what her admission would bring and she was hoarding away every memory with Hank that she could get for the future.

"I think I can do better than charcoal or frozen dinners," she replied trying to make her voice light. Janice couldn't comment on Hank's feeling for her without giving away how she really felt about him. So she looked straight ahead.

When they reached her office, Janice called Tom making an offer for Hank to buy the property. The older man was delighted and quickly accepted the offer. After chatting a little longer she hung up the phone before turning to Hank. "He's going to call Barbara, but as far as he's concerned the house is yours," she told him with a smile. "You're about to become a land owner. I'll get everything in the works this afternoon and let you know how things are progressing."

"I'll bring a bottle of wine to celebrate this evening. You don't suppose the world would collapse if I kissed you here in your office?" he asked softly rounding her desk to gently pull her into his arms.

As kisses went this one was gentle but full of promise. Hank raised his head to kiss the tip of her nose. "Think of me until tonight, Red. I'll see you at six thirty."

Janice stood staring at the door minutes after Hank had departed. He was everything she had ever dreamed of in a man...and more. She was desperately in love with him and already adored his entire family. It would be heaven to be a part of a family like his. He had so much to bring to a marriage while she had so little. She sighed turning to her desk. Work was what she needed right now to keep her mind off her personal life and the future.

CHAPTER 6

The next ten days flew by quickly. Hank had to fly to New York on business for three days. It seemed the longest three days Janice had ever endured. This just went to emphasize just how much he had come to mean in her life. While he had been in California for that year or so, they had talked on the phone and that had been enough, at least in the beginning. Then she had begun to look forward to his monthly visits home. Now that she had been seeing him on an almost daily basis, a day without him seemed empty. The closing on the house was set for ten this morning and Janice went through the paperwork one last time to be sure that she had everything in order.

At five minutes to ten Tom and Barbara arrived followed less than a minute later by Hank. It took close to an hour to go over all the paperwork and get everything signed. When the deal was completed Hank shook hands with the older couple.

"We shipped out the last of our furniture and things yesterday," Tom told him. "The house is ready for you to move in whenever you're ready. Can't thank you enough, Hank. We're really anxious to get to New Mexico."

"I'll start moving my things in tomorrow. You have a safe trip and enjoy those grandchildren," Hank told the departing couple.

After they left, Janice turned to Hank. "Do you have much packing left to do?"

He shrugged. "I haven't packed anything yet. But I've got a dozen or so boxes ready to fill up."

"You've got to be kidding? You'll fill those up with just your books and that will just empty a couple of shelves. You'll need a bunch of boxes for the kitchen and your desk to say nothing about what you must have in your closet."

He glanced at his watch. "Look, I have a meeting in ten minutes. We'll talk about this over dinner. I'll provide the food and you can direct packing. See you at my place at six," he grinned hurrying out the door.

"But you need more boxes," Janice yelled after his retreating form. She shook her head. Men! He thinks he's ready to move tomorrow and he doesn't have a thing packed! She looked at her watch, put the out to lunch sign on the door and walked two stores over to the local grocery to see if they had boxes they could let her have.

At six that evening Janice pulled up in front of Hank's apartment. She had an array of folded boxes in her trunk and the back of her car. And she'd bought a large roll of sealing tape that she handed him when he opened the door.

"Thanks, but shouldn't this be a bottle of wine or some flowers?"

"Cute, Peter Pan! That is for the boxes that I have in my car. So do you want to help me haul them inside now or after dinner?" she asked him cheekily. He was barefoot, wearing a pair of faded jeans and a white t-shirt. *No man should look this good at the end of a long busy day*, she thought to herself.

"Let's get them in now before it gets dark. I was going to find some in the morning, Red. But thanks for your help." It made him feel good that she'd taken the time to do this for him. He couldn't seem to stop grinning as he hauled the folded boxes out of the trunk.

"After dinner we're going to start packing too," she stated firmly. "Honestly, you men have no idea what's involved in a major move like this. You're going to be surprised when you see how many boxes you finally end up with when we're done."

"Whatever you say, Red. Dinner will be here in about twenty minutes so you can look around and tell me

Daring To Love

where to begin.” He leaned the last of the boxes against the side of his faded brown sofa.

“I thought you said you were cooking?”

“Me cook?” He shook his head. “I said I would provide the food. The diner is sending over a couple of chicken dinners and a whole pecan pie. I hope that’s okay?”

She gave him a saucy grin. “You mean there’s something that the great Hank James can’t do?”

“I didn’t say I *couldn’t* cook. I just don’t much care for it unless it’s over a grill.”

“Why do I get the feeling that it’s the mess in the kitchen that’s the real reason for your reluctance to cook?”

Now it was his turn to smile as he pulled her into his arms. “You sure are getting to know me pretty well aren’t you, Red? But the way I figure it tonight, if we don’t have to clean up the kitchen that leaves more time for us to be together.”

Janice wound her arms around his neck. She kissed him on the chin. “Tonight we are going to be working after dinner. That will be our togetherness.” That wasn’t quite true but she had to make him squirm just a little.

Hank cocked his head to one side as if listening to something. “That sound you hear is my heart breaking, Red. My hopes and dreams dashed on the rocks of despair!”

“Buffalo chips! You are so full of it tonight” she laughed delighted at his humor.

He pointed to his lips. “You can kiss it and make it better.” Without waiting for her to reply, he dipped her over his arm and lowered his mouth to hers.

Janice gasped at Hank’s sudden movement, and then dug her fingers into his shoulders as his mouth covered hers. His tongue softly traced the fullness of her bottom lip sending chills cascading down her spine. Her mouth opened to his as he deepened the kiss.

Slowly he lowered her to the rug in front of the sofa. Cushioning her head on his arm he threw one leg over hers. The feel of his hard body and the weight of his leg on hers were exquisite as she arched closer to him. She ran her hands under his shirt to feel muscles tighten at her slightest touch. “Why do you have this effect on me?” she whispered looking up into his hooded dark eyes.

"It's only fair, Red. Feel what you do to me," Hank groaned pressing against her side. "All I have to do is see you walk across a room and I want you."

Janice blinked. This was almost exactly what she'd been thinking about him. Before she could think of a reply, the doorbell sounded shattering the sensual cloud threatening to engulf them.

"Damn!" Hank swore slowly getting to his feet. "The diner has never been this fast on their delivery before."

Janice stretched but didn't get up. "Maybe they're looking out for my welfare. You know, keeping me from being ravished by the handsome prince"

Hank chuckled. "You're not out of the woods yet, Red. The night is still young."

"Promise?"

"Oh yes...that's a definite!"

But in that Hank was wrong. It was almost eleven before they finished packing his books and some of the other odds and ends in the living room. Janice had to be up early to get to her office. He had wanted to follow her home but knew that he would keep her up late so he didn't press the issue.

"We can have a quiet dinner at my place tomorrow night, if you're free," Janice said turning to him once they reached her car. She went eagerly into his open arms.

"A peanut butter and jelly sandwich would give us more time upstairs," he offered with a comic leer.

"You're impossible! But I like your train of thought. How early can you get there? We could tour the upstairs while dinner is cooking?"

Hank grinned. "You have the most delicious ideas, Red. Call me when you get ready to leave your office and I'll meet you at your place. After moving all these boxes tonight I'll probably be in the need of a good rub down tomorrow. I'll bring the cream."

"Make it whip cream and you have a deal!" *Now where had that come from*, Janice groaned inwardly. "Forget I said that. I don't usually make suggestive remarks like that."

"Hey, if you can't make them to me, who can you make them to? Sounds like a great idea to me, Red. You're blushing!"

"Thank you for pointing that out, Peter Pan. I think and do the strangest things when you're around. I don't know if you're a good or bad influence on me," Janice moaned. She

Daring To Love

pressed her forehead against his broad chest hiding her face. She felt his laughter.

“Just goes to show how good I am for you. You laugh a lot more and it comes easier lately. Stick with me kid, and I’ll have you rolling in the aisles.” Hank pressed a finger under her chin forcing her to look up at him. “I do love you, Red. This isn’t a game or an affair. I’m in for the long haul.” He lowered his head to press his lips to hers. He had to keep it soft and simple or he would forget about everything and carry her back inside. Then he stepped back and opened her car door. “Be careful, Red. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

Janice drove home in a daze of delight and trepidation. It was fortunate she lived only a few blocks away because her mind definitely wasn’t on driving. Hank with his gentleness and good humor filled her thoughts. Hank loved her...or so he thought now. How would he feel when he discovered that she wasn’t capable of giving him a child? Would the tenderness she’d come to treasure in his dark eyes turn to disappointment? The thought scared her more than anything in her previous experience.

She had to tell him. She had to do it soon before their relationship became too involved. *Yeah right! How much more involved could we get?* Janice thought unhappily. Not only was she sleeping with him at every opportunity, she was now openly inviting his lovemaking.

She was no closer to finding the courage to tell Hank the truth as she readied for bed. Just as she climbed under the covers her phone rang. “Hello?” she asked tentatively. No one called this late.

“Hello, Janice. How are you?” a deep familiar voice asked.

“Steven?”

“None other,” he replied lightly.

There was a moment of silence. “Did you call just to hear my voice or is there a purpose to this call?” she finally asked breaking the silence. Janice hadn’t had any contact with her former husband since they signed the divorce papers.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about you lately and wanted to reassure myself that you are okay. We made a great team, you and I,” Steven told her softly.

Janice frowned but he couldn’t see that. What team? He was married to Sharon and they had a son. “Whatever we

had is in the past, Steven. We're leading completely separate lives now. And I'm doing just fine so you needn't be concerned on my behalf."

"Where are you working? There can't be much opportunity in that small town."

"I have my own real estate agency here in Black Horse," she said ignoring his dig about her hometown.

"A small town like that can't generate all that much business," Steven quickly commented. "You could do much better here in Denver."

"You'd be surprised," Janice snapped. "My business also encompasses some other areas as well. And I much prefer Black Horse to Denver." She could hear Steven sigh and wondered when he would get to the real point of his call.

"You never did quite adjust to Denver, did you?"

"No, not really. Guess I'm just a small town girl at heart."

"I tried calling earlier but you were out," he commented changing the subject.

Janice wasn't about to tell him about Hank. "I was out with friends," which wasn't exactly a lie. Hank was a friend.

Steven laughed but it sounded hollow. "I thought everything closed down at dusk out there?"

"No, there are some places that actually stay open until ten at night. Sometimes our movie theater stays open until almost midnight on the weekends. Steven, I don't mean to sound rude, but I have to be up very early in the morning," Janice said on a yawn. She really was tired. She'd been up early this morning to get over to Akron on business. Tomorrow she had to make a trip into Sterling and had to leave by seven.

"You work too hard. You always were one to throw yourself into a job. What you need is someone to take care of you. I'll call back later in the week when we can really have a chat," he told her with practiced ease.

"Steven, I..." The line went dead. She sat looking at the receiver as if it had grown arms or something. "Now what was that all about?" she muttered replacing the phone on the table. He wanted something. Steven never did anything without a good reason and one that usually benefited him. She sighed. If he did call back maybe she would find out then. She wasn't about to lose sleep over it. The last thing she

Daring To Love

thought about as sleep overtook her was Hank and seeing him tomorrow night.

Janice checked on the lasagna bubbling in the oven. Another fifteen minutes and it would be done. The salad was ready and her special garlic bread would go into the oven just before they were ready to eat.

She'd had this uneasy feeling all day and didn't know why. It had begun this morning when she had felt as if she were coming down with something. That feeling had quickly passed but not this feeling of unease. She shrugged it away when she heard her doorbell. Glancing at the clock above her refrigerator, she noted Hank was punctual as usual.

When she opened the door Hank greeted her with wide sexy smile, a dozen roses and a bottle of wine. "For my lady," he said stepping close to her side. His lips were warm as they brushed hers in a quick kiss.

Janice took the flowers breathing in their wonderful scent. "Thank you. But what is all this for?" she asked taken aback by his generosity.

"A man doesn't need an excuse to get gifts for his woman," he told her pulling her into his arms. "I've missed you today. Maybe we should think about combining our offices so that I can see you all the time." Careful of the fragile flowers in her arms he bent his head to cover her lips with his.

Janice was drowning in the feel and scent of this man. No one had even made her feel this longing that Hank could arouse with just a look or a simple touch. She raised a hand to touch the side of his face. "I don't know if that would be such a good idea. The temptation to lock the door would be too great," she grinned up at him.

Hank pulled her closer to his long hard body. "Why would you want to lock the door during the day, Red?" he asked with a cocky grin of his own. He knew exactly what she meant, but he loved to tease her and it gave his ego a boost to hear that she wanted him as much as he wanted her.

"To scrub the floor! Why do you think, Hank James?"

"I wouldn't mind scrubbing your gorgeous body," he suggested with a comic leer.

Janice shook her head. "Only if I get to scrub yours," she laughed pulling away before rushing for the kitchen. She could hear his laughter as he followed close on her heels.

"If dinner isn't ready we can practice upstairs and forget about the office."

"Sorry but dinner is almost ready to go on the table." Janice laid the flowers on the sink before removing the lasagna pan from the oven replacing it with the garlic bread.

Hank looked down shuffling his feet. "Shucks!"

"Cheer up, Peter Pan. There is always later. Meanwhile, how about getting that glass vase from the top shelf for me," Janice laughed pointing to the cupboard behind him.

Dinner was a pleasant affair as Hank praised her cooking and they discussed his moving. So far he had only moved the boxes of books and some things from his hall closet.

"So when are you going to move your furniture," Janice asked pushing her plate aside. She wanted another piece of garlic bread but knew it would be too much.

"I think the only thing I'm going to move is my desk. The rest of my stuff is old and in need of replacement. I was hoping that you could help me out there. Maybe we can make a trip to Sterling to pick out what I need."

"It's your house, Hank. You should pick out what you want," Janice protested. The house she had shared with Steven had been decorated to his status and desires. It had been a showpiece and not what she had really wanted in a house. The house that Hank was moving into was as close to her dream house as she had seen. It would be a labor of love to decorate it, to fill it with furniture and make it a real home. But she couldn't let herself get that involved because it would only bring her pain.

Hank frowned. "You know me well enough to have a very good idea about what I would like. Besides I don't know that much about buying furniture. That's a woman's area of expertise."

"Now you're being chauvinistic. There are many men who are interior decorators."

"And you're evading the issue. Let's say that I need your expert opinion. I'm an idiot when it comes to things like this, Red. I need help!" Hank could feel her drawing away from him and didn't understand why. Now was the time for

Daring To Love

him to ask her the big question. Maybe she was reluctant because this was his house and not hers.

"Well, I think we can agree on your being an idiot," Janice grinned trying to lighten the mood, to get back to light-hearted banter.

Hank moved his chair closer to hers and reached for her hand. "I'm an idiot who loves you, Red." He pulled a small blue velvet ring box out of his pocket. "Would you do me the honor of becoming my wife? This house will be *our* home, Red. A place to raise a family and have animals like Sunny and Zack's kids."

The ring was beautiful. It was a large pear-shaped diamond with two smaller ones on either side. Janice couldn't say anything for several seconds. Hank had told her that he loved her but she hadn't expected a proposal of marriage...at least not this soon. She wasn't prepared for this. She shook her head as her worst fears came surging into the forefront of her mind. "I can't marry you, Hank. I'm sorry." She watched his expression change and wanted to cry.

Hank felt as if the floor had just given way beneath his feet. Janice had turned him down. The one woman who made his life complete didn't want to marry him. "Why? We belong together, Red."

Janice swallowed hard. "Marriage is a big commitment, Hank. I don't believe I'm ready for that again. One failure is enough for me."

"I'm not Steven," Hank replied more harshly than he intended but he couldn't hide his disappointment. "We're lovers. That's a commitment!"

"That's different."

"How? You'll sleep with me but you won't make us a legal couple. Why? And I don't buy your excuse about not being ready. You've been divorced three years now. It's not as if you'd be jumping from one marriage into another." Hank stood to pace around table.

This was more difficult than Janice ever dreamed it would be. She did love Hank and would like nothing better than to be his wife. But it wouldn't be fair to him. Not in the long run anyway. Not when she knew how much children and family meant to him. "You have never been married, Hank. I don't expect you to understand how it feels to love someone; to build a life with that person only to have everything

crumble down around you like a playing card tower. It affects you in ways you can't imagine."

Hank sighed. "I realize you went through a difficult time. But you've survived and grown over the past three years, Red. You've put that part of your life behind you," he said trying to be reasonable. Or at least it made perfect sense to him.

"Are you sure? Do you think you know me so well that you can honestly say that I'm completely over my relationship with Steven?" Janice grasped at the straw Hank had unknowingly thrown her. She would do anything to keep from telling him the true reason for not agreeing to marry him.

Hank's breath caught in his throat. "But we made love, Red. You can't tell me that wasn't real!"

"Now you're talking about sex, Hank. Being with you *is* wonderful. But there is more to a relationship than sex." Janice was crying inside. How many lies was she going to tell before this was over?

Hank's eyes narrowed. "I hope you're not trying to tell me all this," he waved his hands between them, "is just because of sex? Because if that is all we had we could just meet somewhere, hit the bed and go our separate ways. We have more than that and you know it, Red," he snapped. Anger was slowly replacing the hurt.

Janice licked her lips. "We're friends too... and" was as far as she got because the phone rang. "Excuse me," she told him moving to the side of the cupboard to take the call on the wall phone.

Hank stalked over to the doorway to lean against the door. He was completely at a loss as to what to do or say now. That damned Steven must have done a pretty good number on her to have her this afraid of commitment. It was easier for him to believe that than to acknowledge the fact that she might not love him, might not feel as strongly about their relationship as he did. His attention riveted on Janice as she spoke into the phone. A shiver of dread slithered down his spine when he realized who was on the other end of the line.

"Steven, this isn't a good time. I have company," Janice told him firmly. She was about to cry. Hank was scowling at her from across the room while Steven was making a pest of himself.

Daring To Love

"I just wanted to talk, Janice. You were always a good listener," Steven said trying to coax her around. "Who do you have visiting in the evening anyway?"

"He's...just a friend, Steven. But as you said it is late. We can talk another time." With that Janice replaced the receiver. Hank was no longer by the door.

She caught up to him as he headed for the front door. "Are you leaving?" she asked stupidly. What did she expect after all that had been said?

Hank whirled, his eyes narrowed and his body taut with anger. "What? You want some sex before I leave?"

"You don't have to be so vile, Hank," she told him stiffly.

"Well, we're just *friends* anyway, Red. Isn't that what you told Steven. Why didn't you tell him about me?" That had hurt. He would gladly shout to the world about his involvement with Janice. And here she seemed reluctant to let her ex-husband know that she was involved with him.

"Because it is none of his business."

"He seems to be making you *his* business. Is this the first time he's called?" Hank wanted to know as a ball of dread began forming in his stomach.

"He called a few days ago. It's the first I've heard from him since the divorce," she said sticking out her chin. "That is part of my life that has nothing to do with you...or anyone else."

"So, what does he want? Has he discovered he made a mistake in letting you get away from him?" Hank snorted. He balled his hands into fists to keep from hitting the wall.

"I don't really know why he called. If he calls again maybe I'll find out what's on his mind." Just then the phone rang again.

Hank glared. "Better not keep lover boy waiting. While you're talking to him, remember this," he all but snarled as he pulled her into his arms.

His kiss was not gentle. It was hard and demanding, but Janice clung to him as if she never wanted him to leave. Then he pushed her aside before slamming out of the house. She stood staring at the door for long seconds as tears formed and glistened in her blue eyes. The insistent ring of the phone drew her back into the kitchen. "Hello," she snapped.

"That's no way to answer the phone, Janice," Steven said laughing.

His amusement was almost her undoing but she held on to her tears if not her temper. "Do you have any special reason for interrupting my evening twice in a short time?"

"Don't snap at me if your evening isn't going as you would like," he replied shortly. "I called back because you sounded funny. Is this friend giving you a difficult time? You're not involved with someone are you? Somehow I can't see you with one of the locals out there," he said as if it would be degrading in some way.

"I am not involved with anyone at the moment. Even if I were, it would be none of your business."

"I still feel responsible for you, Janice."

She sighed. "You forfeited that duty when we divorced. What I do and with who is my concern and mine alone. Now are you going to tell me why you called or do I have to hang up again?"

This was a side to Janice that Steven had never seen and he didn't think he liked. Shrugging off his discomfort he went on as planned. "I was wondering if you were coming to Denver any time soon? There's something that I would like to discuss with you."

Now Janice frowned. "What? Why can't we discuss it on the phone?"

"That's not a good idea. It's personal and we need to be together to talk it out," Steven said doing his best not to divulge too much.

"Well, I have no plans to make a trip to Denver. I suggest that if you have something to say to me, you just say it. It's late and I'm really very tired."

Steven was getting nowhere. What he had to say had to be said in person. Evidently he had caught her at a bad time but he could remedy that quickly enough. "Look, I'll check my schedule for the next couple of weeks and make room for a trip to Black Horse to see you. I'll be in touch, Janice."

"That's not a good..." Before she could respond the line went dead. Great! That's all she needed now was for Steven to come to town. Suddenly her life seemed to have become very complicated. After replacing the receiver she worked mechanically as she cleaned up the dinner dishes and put the leftovers in the refrigerator. When she'd finished and hung up the dishtowel she was surprised to find tears running

Daring To Love

unheeded down her cheeks. Turning off the kitchen light she walked through the dining room to the foot of the stairs.

Each step up the stairs was an effort. Flash followed her up and jumped up on her bed before laying down staring up at her as if he sensed her turmoil. She quickly slipped out of her clothes and into an oversized tee shirt before crawling under the covers. At last she gave vent to her grief as sobs shook her slender body. It was a long time later before her sobbing ceased and her body stilled and even longer before sleep claimed her.

CHAPTER 7

It had been almost a full week and Hank was still miserable. He'd been avoiding everyone in his family because he didn't want to answer any questions. They would naturally ask how Janice was and he wouldn't be able to hide his disappointment or his anger. He assumed Janice had not talked to any of them either because if any of them knew about the state of their relationship, they would be hounding him for answers. Since he didn't have any, this was just as well.

His secretary had been gone about ten minutes when Max entered his office. "Haven't seen you around town," he stated taking a seat by the side of Hank's desk.

"I've been pretty busy," Hank replied trying to bluff.

Max looked at his brother with a keen eye. "Uh-huh. Is that why you look like hell?"

Hank shuffled papers and some folders in an attempt to make his words look like the truth. He had been busy but not busy enough to keep his thoughts from returning to Janice. Nor was he busy enough to keep his memories of their time together at bay. He had replayed the good times over and over in his mind since walking out on her that evening.

When Hank didn't answer, Max leaned back in the chair crossing his long legs at the ankles. There was only one thing that would make a man look like his brother did right now, and that was a woman. Now that he thought about it, he'd only seen Janice once this week and that had been from a distance. He hadn't had any chance to talk to her and Megan

Daring To Love

hadn't mentioned any conversations. But then she had been busy. His mother was teaching her how to knit so she was working on something for the baby. "How's Janice?" he finally asked. Hank's scowl was answer in itself.

"She's fine...I guess," he replied with a sigh.

"I take it things are not going well on the romantic front?" Max guessed rightly.

Hank's scowl deepened. "You could say that. Damned women are a pain," he muttered shoving some folders into his briefcase.

"Care to talk about it? I've been down this road if you remember. Megan and I had our bumps in the road in the beginning," Max offered.

Hank slumped back in his chair as he ran a hand through his dark brown hair. "I just don't understand women. I thought Janice felt something for me, but now I don't know what to think. I asked her to marry me and she turned me down flat."

"Did she say why?"

"Oh she rattled on about not being ready for such a commitment and not wanting to have another failed marriage behind her."

"That doesn't sound like her," Max said quietly. "There has to be more to it than that. You're the only man she's been involved with since her divorce."

"Are you sure of that?" Hank asked then immediately regretted voicing the words.

"This is a small town little brother. Someone passes gas and everyone in town knows about it. I'm surprised you even question that fact after the hard time she gave you before you wore her down."

"Yeah, well I guess I didn't wear her down enough." He took out the velvet box with ring from his pocket. "I bought this just for her," he said opening it to show Max.

"Nice."

Hank laid the box on his desk as he leaned back in his chair. "Her ex-husband called while we were having our discussion."

Max raised a brow. "How long has he been back in the picture?"

Hank shrugged. "She said he'd called once before. When I asked what he wanted she all but told me it was none of my business."

"Guess it's not really. It surprises me though because she seemed to take their divorce pretty hard. I know he remarried almost before the ink was dry on the papers. That must have hurt too. I can't see her getting involved with him again," Max mused aloud.

"You can't be sure though," Hank stated roughly. It hurt like hell to think of Janice back with Steven or with anyone but him.

"No I can't. But I give her credit for being smarter than that. She's a smart lady and it's my guess she learns from her mistakes," Max snorted. He sensed there was more to the story than Hank was telling him or was aware of here. But in this case it wasn't up to him to solve that mystery. Only Hank could do that.

"It's difficult to believe that she's the type of woman who would be with me while pinning away for her ex-husband," Hank admitted slowly. "There has got to be more to her refusal than she was telling me. I don't know what to do next, Max."

Max stared hard at his brother. "Are you just going to walk away or are you willing to fight for her? If she means as much to you as I think she does, you're not going to give up this easily. Mom and dad raised us to get to the bottom of an issue and to look at things from more than one angle."

"I know you're right. Guess I've been licking my wounded ego. And I had to simmer down in order to start thinking clearly."

"So what's your next move?"

"I have to leave for New York in the morning. I hate to leave things like this between us while I'm gone," Hank sighed.

Max glanced at his watch. "No time like the present to tackle a big problem. She's probably home from work by now."

Hank smiled slowly. "Yeah, but will the lady let me in the door?"

Max got to his feet. "You'll never know unless you get off your duff and go see her. Use your meager amount of charm and see what happens," he laughed turning to leave.

Daring To Love

“Meager? This from a man who thinks charm is something on a bracelet.”

“Watch it brother or I’ll tell Janice about your collection of dried bugs you have left over from high school biology.” Max shuddered. “Why you kept that is beyond me.”

“If that’s the worst thing you can come up with, I don’t have much to worry about,” Hank laughed. “Thanks for listening and caring,” he said placing a hand on Max’s shoulder.

“You were there for me. I’m just returning the favor. Now go see Janice.”

“I will. See you later.”

But things don’t always turn out as you would like as Hank discovered a short time later. Janice was not home. He waited almost half an hour before going home. It was just after nine when he walked over to her house, but there weren’t any lights on and her car was not in the driveway.

A phone call to Sunny wasn’t any help. Janice hadn’t told her about any business trip she had planned. But then Sunny hadn’t seen her for over a week. To add to his concern it was beginning to snow. The forecast called for a light snow with more to follow over the weekend. “Damn,” he muttered replacing the receiver.

His plane left at eight the next morning so he had to be at the airport by six thirty. He’d have to leave the house by five and that was way too early to stop by to see Janice...if she was home. The thought of where she might be and with whom tormented his dreams that night.

He drove past her house on his way out of town and driveway was still empty. Now as the plane lifted off, Hank vowed to call her from New York as soon as he had a chance. He wasn’t going to wait until he returned to Black Horse to talk to her.

Janice was miserable. She’d made a trip to Akron to talk to a potential customer and that had gone perfectly. They asked her to handle a large property they were anxious to sell. She’d gotten a bite to eat after taking care of the paperwork. It wouldn’t be that late when she got home but she knew she

wouldn't feel like cooking. It had begun to snow when she returned to her car only to find that it wouldn't start.

She'd had to have it towed to a repair shop only to be told that it was the starter and they couldn't have it fixed until the next morning about eleven o'clock. So she'd found a room in a motel nearby and spent the night. She worried about Flash but knew that he had plenty of water and dry food. But she missed his company. Somehow he sensed when she was unhappy and stayed close by her side when she was home.

And she missed Hank so much it was almost a physical pain. Even with everything Steven had put her through, she had never felt this lonely. Janice sensed that a part of her was missing and only Hank could fill that void. And she was extremely tired. It was true she hadn't been sleeping very well and assumed the current turmoil in her relationship with Hank was the reason. There were some days when she felt as if she were still trying to come down with the flu. It didn't interfere with her work, but was more of a nuisance feeling.

As soon as she got back to Black Horse she drove straight to her office. It was going on one in the afternoon. Thankfully she hadn't scheduled any viewings for today. But she did have several messages. There was one from Sunny. She returned all the calls except that one. Sunny was bound to mention Hank especially if she knew about his marriage proposal. She wouldn't be as easy to put off as Hank had been. No, that wasn't quite true. Steven's phone call had helped there.

Janice sat back in her chair staring at the phone. Sunny was her friend. It wasn't right that she not talk to her. Taking a deep fortifying breath she dialed the number. It was Emma who answered the phone. "Hi Emma! It's Janice. Is Sunny there?"

"Hello Janice. No, I'm sorry but Sunny and the kids are out in the barn with the goats. We're due for a heavy snow soon and they want to be sure the animals are going to be okay."

Janice laughed. "I bet Kelsey would like to bring them into the house."

"When she saw the snow last night that was her first thought," Emma snorted. "Can you imagine six goats bedding down in the living room? She wanted to take blankets out to

Daring To Love

them until Zack had a talk with her. He's checking the heating now and showing her how comfortable they'll be. Can I have Sunny call you when they're done?" Emma offered.

"That's fine, Emma. I'll be here at the office until six, then I'll be home." Janice hung up the phone and tried to settle in to work, but it was difficult to keep her mind focused.

The work that had been her lifeline before didn't seem to have the same affect now. It took concentrated effort to get through the afternoon. Two people came in to see her and that kept her occupied for over an hour.

It was a few minutes before six when the phone rang. "You sure are a busy lady," Sunny sighed into the phone.

"From what Emma told me, you've been busy too. Do the goats get to come into the house? Or did you manage to convince Kelsey that they'll be fine in the barn?" Janice chuckled trying to sound upbeat.

"They definitely stay in barn. Her second suggestion was that she be allowed to sleep out there with them. Zach squashed that idea really fast," Sunny laughed.

"I'm surprised he didn't offer to stay out there with her," Janice commented. Zach adored his daughter and it was common knowledge that Kelsey knew how to work her daddy to get what she wanted.

"He knew he'd have to answer to me if he even thought of agreeing to that! I have a feeling Zoe is going to be just as bad. All she has to do is bat those big blue eyes at her daddy and he's ready to pick her up," Sunny told her trying to sound stern.

Janice knew better. She knew her friend was pleased with Zach's attention to little Zoe. He was very protective of his two daughters and she knew Sunny loved him all the more for it. "I hear Zoe is teething," she asked hoping to steer clear of Hank.

"She drools all the time. Last week she cut a tooth on the bottom. You can see the one next to it but it hasn't broken through yet," Sunny told her proudly. "Look Janice, I know it's early but I wanted to invite you to Thanksgiving dinner. It's going to be out here at the ranch this year. Everyone will be here even Stuart and Victoria and Jeffrey. Please say you'll come." She didn't know what was going on between Janice and Hank, but she would see to it that they were together during the holidays and maybe help their cause along a bit.

Max had filled Megan in on his conversation with Hank the other day. They were very concerned about the growing relationship between Hank and Janice, or rather the stall in the growth of their relationship.

Janice hadn't even thought that far ahead. Well it wasn't that far...it was only two week away. She knew Hank would be there and suspected Sunny of match making. Since she didn't have any family in Black Horse, she didn't have any good reason to decline. Maybe this would show Hank that they could be friends. She adored his family and didn't want to do anything to upset that friendship.

"I'd love to come. What can I bring? And don't tell me nothing. That's a great deal of cooking for you and Emma," Janice told her firmly.

"Well, Emma and I are doing the meat and main dishes; Megan is bringing dessert; Mom is doing salads. Why don't you bring some rolls or biscuits?" Sunny suggested.

"I have a recipe for some cheese and garlic biscuits that melt in your mouth. I'll plan on those and some homemade dinner rolls." Thanksgiving dinner had been at Nellie and Lucas' house last year. Janice had been almost over whelmed, but had enjoyed herself very much. She had never been with such a big family before and was amazed at the obvious love and friendship.

"Great!" Sunny replied. "Maybe we can get together for lunch later this week. Megan and I are going shopping for maternity clothes for her."

"I don't know if I can get away," Janice stalled. "But call me and I'll let you know."

"Talk to you soon," Sunny said replacing the receiver. Zach had just returned from outside and was washing his hands in the sink. She walked over to stand by his side. "There is definitely something wrong. Janice sounded strange just now and didn't seem too keen on having lunch with Megan and me."

"This is between her and Hank, darlin'," Zack said drying his hands on a small yellow towel.

"I know that. But Hank is miserable and I have a feeling that Janice is just as unhappy. And before you say anything more, I know that she loves him. You can see it in her face when she looks at him. Are you sure Hank hasn't done something stupid to make her mad?" Sunny questioned looking up at her husband.

Daring To Love

Zach pulled her into the circle of his arms. "I know as much as you, darlin'. Hank proposed and she turned him down flat. He has been interested in Janice since before he went to California."

"It just doesn't make any sense, Zach."

"Apparently she's been talking to Steven Wright on the phone," he told her nuzzling her neck.

"When did that start?" Sunny gasped moving her head to one side to give him easier access to her throat. It still amazed her how much she loved this husband of hers and how easily he could make her forget everything but him.

"Hank doesn't know. She became very defensive on the subject. You will not interfere."

"We're just going to have lunch," Sunny said reaching up to kiss his chin. "And if she wants to talk, that's fine. Megan and I are very good listeners."

"Right! Why do I get the feeling that poor Janice is in for an interrogation?"

Sunny pulled out of his arms to put some distance between them. She gave him a saucy smile. "We do not interrogate. We discuss." With this parting shot, Sunny flounced out of the kitchen with Zach in pursuit. She was pretty sure he did not have talking on his mind and that suited her very well.

Later that night Janice had just curled up on the sofa when the phone rang. Her first instinct was to let it ring but then thought better of it. "Hello."

"Hi, Red." Hank didn't realize he'd been holding his breath until he heard her voice.

"Hank?" Her voice sounded breathless and odd to her ears. Was it possible to miss just the sound of someone's voice? Janice missed hearing his voice almost as much as she missed seeing him or being held in his arms.

"I tried to call you last night but you weren't home," he began. "I wanted to talk to you before I left."

She sat up straight. "Where are you?" she asked in alarm.

"I'm in New York for a couple of days. Look I want to apologize for the other night. I had no right to say what I did." Lord how he missed her. Hearing her voice was not

enough. He needed to hold her in his arms. He needed to make love to her so that she forgot everything but him.

Janice relaxed back against the cushions. "I wish I had been here. My car broke down in Akron and I had to spend the night. I didn't get home until early this afternoon. And I'm sorry too, Hank. We do need to talk but not over the phone." She wasn't sure what she was going to tell him, but she had a couple of days to think about it. She should tell him the truth. Maybe that would be best. Then he would understand why she couldn't marry him and wouldn't be so hurt by her rejection of his proposal.

"Will you have dinner with me when I get back? I'll be back Friday afternoon at the latest. We could have dinner at the Appaloosa and dance afterwards." If they were in public he might not make such an ass of himself. And...the dancing would give him an excuse to hold her in his arms. As much as he wanted to make love to her, he didn't think it would be a wise move until they had talked things out. It bothered him that she thought of their relationship as a sexual one. It was true they were lovers, but there was much more to it than that.

"That sounds wonderful. I've missed you," Janice said in a rush before she could give her words any rational thought. Once out of her mouth there wasn't anything she could do to take them back. But it was the truth.

"I've missed you too, Red. Remember that picture Max took of us out at the ranch? I had an enlargement made and slept with it on my pillow." His heart was racing. It wasn't only the sound of her voice; it was the knowledge that she had missed him too.

Janice felt tears forming and fought to keep them at bay. "Oh, Hank," was all she could manage for several seconds. "He gave me a copy of that picture too." She was to going tell him that she'd had hers enlarged also, but stopped herself just in time. That would be too telling and she wasn't ready. After she told him the truth about herself it might not even matter anymore. Make that *if* she told him. She wasn't sure she had the courage to face him with it.

"I love you, Red. And I'm ready to do whatever you want as long as I can be a part of your life." Hank had given this a lot of thought the past couple of days. He had been sure of his feelings for so long that he hadn't stopped to consider that she hadn't felt the same way for as long. For that matter,

Daring To Love

he wasn't sure he knew just how she felt about him. Deep down he was sure she did love him, but for some reason was afraid to tell him. At least that was what he had convinced himself.

"Oh, Hank!"

"You must be tired. You're repeating yourself. I can wait, Red. I'm patient and I'm tenacious so I won't let you go. Now get some sleep and I'll see you tomorrow." Hank took a deep breath. Maybe now he could sleep himself instead of tossing and turning all night.

"Yes, I'll see you tomorrow," Janice replied quietly. She felt a sense of relief that was almost overpowering. She would see him tomorrow night after a long lonely week.

"I'll call you to let you know that I got back to town okay. Good night, Red."

"Good night, Hank." Janice slowly replaced the receiver and sank back on the sofa. Flash jumped up to sit beside her, looking at her questioningly. She gently stroked the yellow fur. "You'll see Hank tomorrow night, Flash. Did you miss him too?"

The cat made a meowing before settling down close to her thigh, laid his head on his paws and closed his eyes.

Janice laughed. "Nothing ruffles you does it, you big old cat." With a pat on his head, she picked up her book and actually managed to read a chapter and remember what she'd read before going upstairs to bed.

CHAPTER 8

Janice had been in her office since eight that morning. She'd only had a piece of toast with a dab of peanut butter for breakfast and now she was feeling hungry. Instead of bringing something from home as she usually did, today she was going to treat herself to something from the café. She had just placed her purse on the desk getting ready to leave when the front door opened. She looked up to see Sunny and Megan carrying several covered plates and wearing large smiles.

"We hope you're not going out on business right now," Megan declared staring at Janice's purse.

"I was just on my way out to get a bite to eat," Janice said eyeing the plates.

"Well put that purse away because the James catering service has provided lunch," Sunny told her placing the covered dishes on the desk. Megan added a large canvas shopping bag.

"What is all this?" Janice asked eyeing everything.

"Three large salads with grilled chicken, tomato and and boiled eggs. You have your choice of dressings and garlic bread and soft drink," Sunny chuckled uncovering their offerings.

"And my salad also has some chopped bologna and a jar of olives on it," Megan said rubbing her hands together as if she could hardly wait get to it. She was now four months pregnant and feeling wonderful. She hadn't had one day of morning sickness but her appetite was undergoing some changes much to Max's dismay.

Daring To Love

Janice looked over at Sunny. “Bologna on a chicken salad?”

Sunny shook her head laughing. “Be thankful that its not cooked cabbage or your office would smell all afternoon. If she keeps this up Max won’t be able to look a cabbage in the face ever again.”

Megan didn’t look the least bit upset. “I believe that when a pregnant woman craves a certain food it’s because her body needs something in that food. You wouldn’t want me to deny my baby would you?” She pulled two chairs closer to the desk so she and Sunny could sit.

Janice raised her hands in defeat. “I wouldn’t think of it. You really look terrific.”

“I feel great too. Although I do take a nap now and then which is something that I never did before.”

“After lunch we’re going to shop for more maternity clothes for the garbage disposal here,” Sunny chuckled handing Janice her knife and fork. She was trying to keep everything light for now, but she was quick to note the dark circles under Janice’s eyes. The last time she’d seen Hank, he hadn’t looked much better.

Megan tried to look offended but failed as she took a bite of salad. Laying her fork down she patted her stomach. “I bought one pair of slacks and top a couple of weeks ago. Yesterday I could barely get into my jeans so I have orders from Max to buy a new wardrobe. I’m already into the maternity slacks,” she said pulling up her top to show the elastic insert in the slacks. “Max doesn’t want me to cramp the baby.”

“I don’t think there’s much chance of that,” Sunny laughed.

They chatted while they devoured the salads. Sunny brought Janice up to date on all the happenings with her four children and the fact that Zoe was scooting across the floor on her own.

“Zach is such an idiot. You’d think she had discovered a cure for cancer or something, he’s that proud of her,” Sunny laughed.

“How has Kelsey taken to sharing you and Zach with another little girl?” Janice asked noting the happiness reflected on Sunny’s face. All of the strain and stress of her life before

Black Horse was completely gone from Sunny's life and it showed. She loved and was loved in return.

"She's as protective of Zoe as she is of her animals."

"Knowing how much Kelsey loves those animals of hers, I guess that's good," Janice replied.

"Did Hank tell you that she now has her very own chicken?" Megan offered.

For a moment Janice's features reflected an inner pain before she schooled them into a smile. "No but I'm not surprised."

Megan shook her head. "They all look the same to me, but Kelsey can pick Daisy out of the group."

Janice cocked an eyebrow. "Daisy?"

Megan nodded.

Sunny sat back sipping her soda. "So what's with you and Hank?"

"He's in New York but due back today," Janice said slowly.

"I know that. I also know that you haven't seen each other for over a week," Sunny persisted.

"We're fine. Really," Janice began. "He coming home today and..." she burst into tears. From out of nowhere came this huge bubble of pent up emotion. Maybe it was listening to Megan and Sunny talk about their husbands and children and Megan's pregnancy. Or maybe it was because she knew they truly cared about her and about Hank. What ever it was it opened a floodgate of tears.

Megan quietly got up, turned the sign on the door to closed and locked it while Sunny hurried to Janice's side and put her arms around her friend.

"This...is...so ...unlike me," Janice tried to say around her tears. It was true. Normally she wasn't one to cry easily except during a sad movie. Now here she was in tears for the second time in as many days.

"It's okay, Janice. Let it all out. You'll feel better. Take it from one who knows," Sunny told her patting her back. Once the tears seemed to be ebbing, Sunny resumed her seat.

Megan leaned forward placing her hands on the desk. "You can tell us to mind our own business, but we care, Janice. We care about you and Hank. You're both miserable. We can all see that."

Daring To Love

"If there's anything we can do?" Sunny offered giving Janice an opening to talk.

"He asked me to marry him," Janice said wiping her eyes with a tissue. "And I had to say no." At this confession tears filled her eyes once more.

"Buy why?" Megan asked. "You love him. I know you do so don't dry to deny it."

Janice shook her head. "It's because I love him that I had to say no."

"That doesn't make any sense," Sunny replied softly.

Janice looked from Sunny to Megan. She took a deep breath. "You have to promise me that you won't repeat a word of what I'm going to tell you. Not even to Zach and Max. And definitely not to Hank."

The two women looked at each other then nodded to Janice.

"You know more than anyone how much family means to the James men. To the rest of us outside the family they seem to adore their wives and children. And Hank would be no different. He loves his nieces and nephews and would do anything for them," Janice told them biting down on her bottom lip.

"What does that have to do with you and Hank?" Megan coaxed. Why did she have the idea she wasn't going to like the answer?

"Steven and I were married for three years and I never got pregnant. We both wanted a child so we didn't use any precautions. And in all that time I never got pregnant. Then he...he found someone else. She was pregnant within a couple of months from what he told me. Don't you see? I can't have a child."

Sunny had suspected another woman that been involved in the breakup of Janice's marriage, but not this. "I'm sorry, Janice." She didn't know what more to say. She could relate to Steven and another woman because Jonathan had had several different women during their marriage. But none of them had gotten pregnant, at least none that she was aware of.

Megan felt terrible. Here she had been talking about her pregnancy and Max. It must have been almost unbearable for Janice under the circumstances.

Janice looked at her two friends. "Don't you see? I could never give Hank the children I know he wants! I can't do that to him. I just can't." Tears filled her eyes once again.

"Don't you think you need to let him make that decision, Janice? You're right about feelings running strong in the James family. The men tend to be extremely protective of their women and children. But we know we're loved for ourselves and not for our reproductive organs," Sunny replied quietly. She felt confident now in Zach's love for her that she could speak with confidence on the matter. Before meeting him, she had felt much the same as Janice.

"Sunny is right, Janice," Megan said. "This is something you need to discuss with Hank. If I know him half as well as I think I do, it won't make any difference to him. He loves you and has for a long time."

"But what if it does make a difference to him? I know you're right...but the thought of seeing the disappointment on his face scares me."

"Okay, you might see disappointment. That would be a natural reaction. Hank wants to make a life with you and to make a home with you. Children would just be an added bonus. There are a lot of children out there that need homes, Janice. Give that some thought too," Sunny told her giving her arm a squeeze.

"What did the doctor say is the reason why you can't have a baby?" Megan asked thoughtfully. "I mean it's none of our business so you don't have to tell us if you don't want to."

Janice looked blank for a moment, and then she shook her head. "What doctor?"

"You did consult a doctor about your condition? Didn't you?" Sunny asked with a questioning look at Megan.

"Well, no...I never thought about it. If I didn't get pregnant in three years and another woman does in just a matter of weeks, it's obvious who is at fault here. I guess I should have seen a doctor. But then Steven had already left me so there didn't seem to be any reason anymore," Janice admitted slowly. It had been plain to her that it wasn't Steven who had kept them childless all that time. It *had* to be her.

Megan shook her head. "I do not believe this! You have tortured yourself all this time about not being able to have a baby and you haven't even seen a doctor about it?"

"Janice, there are many reason why you and Steven didn't have a child," Sunny said. "You could have been too

Daring To Love

tired since you worked and did a lot of socializing. I've heard that if couples try too hard that it can keep the woman from conceiving."

"There have even been cases where the woman is allergic to the male sperm. At least I think I read that somewhere," Megan added. "The point is that you should have a complete workup by a doctor. I bet Hank would even go with you if you wanted him to."

Janice stood to pace around the office. "I don't know what to do. What you say makes sense, but what if I'm right and I can't have a baby?" Listening to Sunny and Megan was like throwing her a life preserver. She *had* been stupid not to seek medical advice, but after Steven left their marriage she had been so wrapped up in self-pity that she hadn't give it any thought.

"If, and that's a big if, it turns out that you can't have a child, then you and Hank will have to decide where you go from there. You have to face up to it, Janice. You can't just hide in your office and devote yourself to your work the rest of your life. You love children and will make a terrific mother whether you have one of your own or you adopt one," Sunny said resolutely.

Janice immediately thought of Galen or a child like him. She took a deep breath. "I guess I have been hiding, haven't I? Maybe I was afraid that people would pity me if they knew. But I don't have to worry about that. I've been doing enough of it for myself. Maybe it's time I stepped into the real world again."

Megan grinned. "Good for you!"

Her talk with Sunny and Megan had boost up her spirits until she got into the car to drive home. Then all her insecurities came flooding back. The bottom line was that she was terrified of seeing the disappointment, or worse yet, the abhorrence on Hank's face when she told him. She knew how Steven had felt about her lack of fertility and had suffered by his verbal attacks about her being less than a real woman. She didn't know if she could stand seeing the same look in Hank's eyes. He wasn't the type to condemn her for it, but it might make him see her in a different light.

She hadn't even had time to put her purse down before the phone rang. It was Marion next door. It seems that

Galen had been asking for her. He had a new toy and wanted her to see it. "He's been going over to look out the window for the past hour to see if your car is in the drive," Marion said.

"I'll be right over," Janice told her with a smile. Galen was such a darling. He loved books and loved to be read to. She had picked up three books for him while she was in Akron and hadn't seen him that morning to give them to him. This would be the perfect time. "Hold the fort, Flash. I won't be too long."

Marion opened the front door. As Janice stepped into the living room Galen came running from the dinning room. His face was spit with a grin showing small white teeth. He literally flung himself into Janice's arms as she scooped him up into her arms. "How's my big boy?" she laughed hugging him close. He smelled of soap and baby powder, fresh and wonderful.

"Puter," he said holding her face in his small hands.

Janice looked at Marion.

"Hank got him a baby computer. It's the cutest thing and he loves it."

"Hank got it for him?" Janice asked following Marion into the dining room. Les had built a cushioned window seat that concealed a toy chest. This was just the right height for Galen to play.

"He brought it over before he left for New York. Galen has really taken to him and I think the feeling is mutual," Marion laughed. "Show Miss Janice your computer, Galen?"

When Janice put him down he ran to the window seat. She sat on the floor next to him to study the computer. It was blue with red, yellow and green buttons. "My but that's a great toy, Galen. Can you show me how it works?"

"He has the color card in it now," Marion informed her.

Galen pushed the red button and a voice said "red. Can you say red?"

He grinned up at Janice. "Red," he said plainly.

"Very good," she laughed giving him a hug. They played for about fifteen minutes going through the various instruction cards. There was even a CD player on the side that played a series of children's songs. She sang along with the

Daring To Love

music and was rewarded with a big smile from Galen. Then she showed him the books she'd brought.

Immediately he took the one that had fire engines on it and sat turning the pages. "Red," he said pointing to one of the trucks. As soon as he'd finished he picked up the one of the family on a picnic.

Janice sat with him pointing out the trees, flowers and animals. When she came to the people she indicated the baby, momma and daddy.

He looked at the picture then up at Janice, then down at the book again. Galen was sitting on her lap and twisted around to see her. He stood up to wrap his little arms around her neck. "Momma," he said plain as day.

Janice's breath caught in her throat. She couldn't have said a word for anything at that moment. She just hugged Galen to her loving him as if he were her own. She knew this wasn't good for him so she composed herself. "Miss Janice," she said pointing to herself.

"Momma," Galen insisted.

Marion could see the conflicting emotions flash across Janice's face and jumped in to end this. Her smile was full of apology. "I think it's time for Galen to get ready for dinner," she said reaching out to pick him up from Janice's lap.

Janice swallowed hard. "Hank is coming to take me out to dinner so I really should be getting home," she stammered getting to her feet. She saw the distress shadowing Galen's face and knew she had to get out of the house before he became truly upset. "I'll see you tomorrow." With that she gave the baby a quick kiss and headed for the front door.

The last thing she heard as the door closed behind her was a plaintive cry, "momma!"

Janice all but ran across the lawn to her own house. Once inside all composure deserted her as she flung herself down on the sofa and gave vent to her tears. Her body shook with despair as Galen's little voice calling after her echoed in her mind. It wasn't fair. I just wasn't fair!

There was beautiful little Galen and others like him who had no parents or ones that were unable to care for them. And she adored children. As a child she had always played with baby dolls and knew that one day she would have babies of her own. But it wasn't to be. She cried until her chest

ached with the pain. Even after the tears dried on her face, she lay on the sofa staring across the room at the bookcase.

Finally she managed to sit up glancing at her watch. Hank would be there any minute now. She was in no way ready to go out, but she hurried to go upstairs anyway to see if she could repair the damage to her face. Or at least that was her intention before the doorbell announced Hank's arrival. Wiping her face as best she could with her hands and straightening her hair she went to the door. She'd let him in and then planned to run upstairs for a moment.

"You're right on time," she said before quickly turning around. "I just have to run upstairs for a minute. I won't be long."

Hank could tell something was wrong the minute Janice opened the door. She turned away fast enough but not before he'd seen her reddened eyes and nose. If he was right, she'd been crying. Before she'd taken two steps he was at her side taking her elbow in his hand to turn her around. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just have to put on some lipstick," she improvised knowing full well that he wouldn't buy her story.

"Develop a bad allergy that has your nose and eyes red?" Normally he wasn't good around crying women but then what man was? Crying unnerved him, made him want to run and help all at the same time.

"No, but I don't want to talk about it. I'll just freshen up a bit," she said needing to escape for a while. Hank's immediate concern caused her eyes to fill with tears once again. What was the matter with her? Maybe she was overtired. She hadn't had a vacation since returning to Black Horse three years ago. It had been important that she got her business up and running and that took time. Things were going so well now that maybe she should consider hiring an assistant. Then she could get away now and then for some needed time off.

When Hank saw the shine of fresh tears he pulled her fully into his arms holding her close against his chest. "Talk to me, Red. You're not one to cry just for the sake of it. Something must have happened to set you off."

She muttered some thing into the front of his shirt that he couldn't make out.

"I can't understand you, Red," he told her raising her face with a gentle hand.

Daring To Love

She sniffed. "He called me *momma*!"

"Who?"

"Galen. And he cried when I left the house," she cried burying her face against his broad chest. "It's just not fair!"

Hank sighed. He could imagine what that had done to her. He'd become quite attached to that little boy himself. Being a woman it must be even more upsetting to see him cry like that. He wondered if Marion was upset about their growing attachment. This certainly wasn't fair to Galen. The poor little guy had had enough upheaval in his young life already. He felt a pang of guilt because he was contributing also by his visits. "Maybe we shouldn't visit as much," he suggested softly not liking the idea any more than he knew she would.

"You don't understand...it's...I can't...we," her voice trailed off as she cried harder. "If we...you would hate...not worthy."

Hank had never seen Janice like this. She had always been so much in control and seemed to have her life in perfect order. "Red, I can't understand what you're trying to say," he sighed rubbing her back for comfort.

She pulled out of his arms and braced herself by the armchair. Eyeing him warily she rubbed at her wet cheeks and her eyes. "I don't feel like going out to dinner."

"I had already come to that conclusion, Red. But we can talk here and now. Then I'll fix us something to eat."

"I'm not hungry."

"You're stalling. What is this all about?" He had a feeling that it was more than Galen, but didn't know have a clue what it could be. He wished he knew more about her marriage to Steven because that might give him a hint as to what was going on in her mind.

She pursed her lips then gave him a sad smile. "Can't fool you, can I counselor? I'm trying not to say something and that's not right. It's not fair to you."

"Suppose you just say it and let me be the judge of whether it's fair to me or not?" Hank said stepping close to her again, but she moved out of reach to stand by the stairs.

"You know that Steven and I were married for almost three years. During that time we tried to have a baby. We never used precautions after the first six months of our

marriage because we agreed that we wanted a child right away.” A single tear ran down her cheek.

“You don’t have to tell me about Steven, Red. I...”

“Yes I do, Hank. I failed him so he turned to someone else. And guess what? Sharon got pregnant right away. I found out about it when Steven asked for a divorce. He’d found a real woman and was delighted to tell me that he was going to be a father.” She jumped as Hank uttered several coarse phrases as to what he would like to do to her ex-husband.

“No wonder you left the son-of-a-bitch. How could he do that to you?” Hank snarled pacing in front of her.

“Hank, *he* left me. But the point is that I was the one with the problem in our not being able to have a child. I can’t give you a family. If you stay with me, you’ll never hold your child in your arms nor get to watch your child play in little league or ball games,” she finished in a rush as she turned to run upstairs.

Hank was faster as he anticipated her move, stepping around to clamp his arms tightly around her trembling body. “Why didn’t you tell me all this before when I proposed to you? We could have talked about it then,” he demanded angry about the time they had spent apart.

“I couldn’t because I didn’t want to face you with the news. Sunny and Megan made me see that I was doing you an injustice by not telling you.”

“You talked to them but not me? Why?”

Janice shrugged. “You could say they bullied me into it. It wasn’t something that I intended to tell them, Hank. But once I got started, it all came out.”

A small smile played at the corners of his mouth. “Yeah, my sisters-in-law can be quite intimidating when they set out on a cause.” He pulled her against his hard body. “Janice Rose, I love you. I want us to build a life together. Children would be great but if we can’t have them...then we’ll look into adoption. But it’s you I want to spend the rest of my life with. You! My brothers have enough children already to see to the continuation of the family name. It’s not imperative that I contribute.”

“Oh, Hank!” Janice wrapped her arms around his waist hugging him close.

“Besides, you’ll have your hands full with me. Remember? I’m Peter Pan...the kid who won’t grow up,” he

Daring To Love

told her with mock seriousness. His dark eyes were warm with love.

She placed her hand on the side of his face. "I do love you, Hank!"

His smile could have lit up the room. "That's all I need, Red," he replied as he lowered his head to claim her lips.

When she could breathe again she looked up into his face. "Sunny and Megan made me understand how foolish I've been about another thing. I've never seen a doctor about my problem. I'm going to do it, Hank. I need to do it for myself and for you."

"You mean you never..."

Janice pressed her finger against his lips. "I know it was stupid, but now I'm ready to remedy that. I plan on making an appointment first thing Monday."

"Steven's desertion must have really been hard on you," Hank observed slowly. "But I'm with you, Red. All the way. Do you want me to go to the doctor with you?" *If* the results proved that she couldn't have a baby, he didn't want her to be alone.

She shook her head. "I appreciate the offer, but this is something that I have to do myself. Hank, until I find out one way or another, can we just keep our relationship simple? I can't make any promises right now. Before I can move on this issue has to be resolved. Can you understand that?"

He nodded. "I can appreciate that. It doesn't mean that I like it, but I understand. But there's something that you have to understand too, Red. I once said I was in for the long haul, and I mean it. If we can have a baby, that's great. But if not, then there are other avenues open to us. Think about that too."

Janice managed a small smile. "You really are a nice man, Hank James. I don't deserve you." How had she ever been so lucky as to have someone like this wonderful man become interested in her? Maybe when Steven closed the door on their marriage he was, in essence, opening another door for her with a man she could really love. Vaguely she wondered what he would say if she told her ex-husband that scenario? Laugh probably.

Hank hugged Janice close reveling in her floral scent, the softness of her long red hair and the tender curves of her body pressed lovingly close to his own. He would do

Autumn McCullah

whatever she wanted as long as he could be a part of her life. If that meant that they had to go slow, well, he could do that. It would be one of the most difficult things he'd ever attempted, but he could handle it. "You set the pace, Red, and I'll follow. You're not going to get rid of me that easy. Now, why don't I fix us one of my gourmet omelets and you can try not to burn the toast?" he asked kissing her nose.

"I don't burn toast," Janice protested but it was said with the ghost of a smile.

CHAPTER 9

Janice couldn't get in to see Dr. Polk until the week after Thanksgiving. The wait was difficult but Hank was making things easier for her. He wasn't demanding and he hadn't said another word about marriage. He still told her that he loved her when he left her at her front door but didn't push the issue. She knew this waiting was hard on him too, but there didn't seem to be anything they could do but wait.

Today he was picking her up at eleven to drive out to Zach's for the family Thanksgiving dinner. She'd been up since six this morning preparing her dinner rolls. The biscuits she had just taken out of the oven. Her house smelled of fresh baking. Since it was so cold outside the windows were steamed up in the kitchen giving it a warm homey feeling.

Flash looked up from his place by the dining room door before getting up to saunter into the living room. Janice knew from experience that this meant he had heard Hank pull up. Sure enough, when she followed, Flash was sitting in the window meowing. The doorbell rang just as she reached for the knob. "Hi! You know that Flash can tell your truck from any other vehicle. It's uncanny but I know it's you before I open the door," she told Hank holding the door so he could come in.

He gave her a kiss on the lips before reaching over to pet the big cat. "You and I are buddies, aren't we Flash. We both adore this lovely lady."

Flash arched his back telling Hank where he wanted to be scratched. Having his itch satisfied, he meowed before

slowly jumping from the windowsill and left them to lie by the television.

“What smells so good?” Hank asked taking a deep breath.

“Biscuits and home baked dinner rolls. They’re all packed in containers on the cupboard. If you get them, I’ll get my coat and we’ll be ready to do,” Janice said with a smile. She had relaxed over the past week and much of that had to do with Hank. He had accepted her with all of her flaws and that meant a great deal to her.

“Can I have a taste...just to be sure they’re okay to eat?” he asked hopefully.

“Just one. The butter is in the fridge.” When she returned with her coat a few minutes later, Hank was leaning against the cupboard with a look of delight on his face as he took another bite of the dinner roll.

“This is so good! I plan to put in my claim to several of these when we sit down to eat,” he said with determination.

“I made three dozen of those and three of the biscuits, Hank. I think there should be plenty for everyone,” Janice laughed. “Didn’t your mother teach you to share when you were a kid?”

“Yes, but some things are too good to share!”

“Be good or I’ll tell Nellie and she won’t let you have anymore. Now get those containers and lets get going. I have something I want to give to Megan.” Janice picked up the package of butter and left the kitchen with Hank on her heels.

“You wouldn’t really tell mom, would you? I’ll be good, I promise.” Hank was laughing as he held the door open for her.

“You never know, Peter Pan. You’d better listen to Tinker Bell.” Janice laughed at Hank’s scowl as she walked past him to his waiting truck.

“So Hank, are you all moved into your new house?” Adam asked as they sat around the table. The smaller children were sitting at Kelsey’s play table and the bigger ones at two card tables set up in the dining room.

“All moved. My old apartment is now ready for someone else to rent. I thought it might be hard to leave but it hasn’t been. I love that house though,” he said helping himself to a mound of creamy mashed potatoes. “It has such character and potential.”

Daring To Love

“That’s a large house. Don’t you find yourself rattling around in it all by yourself?” Lucas wanted to know. In a way he was surprised that Janice hadn’t moved in with him. He knew they were close and getting closer all the time. He wasn’t naïve or blind as to believe that his sons wouldn’t anticipate their wedding nights. He and Nellie had done much the same thing not being able to wait another two weeks before their wedding.

“I’m so busy that I’m only there later at night. But the place is pretty empty. I bought the bedroom suite they had in the master bedroom. Tom said the bedroom in their new home was much smaller.” He glanced over at Janice sitting across from him. “I was hoping that I could persuade a certain lady to give me a few hours of her time to help me pick out furniture for the rest of the house.”

Several pairs of eyes turned her way. Janice felt herself relenting. She hadn’t been able to stop thinking about how *she* would furnish that house. It was becoming clear that if she didn’t go along with Hank that house would remain empty for a long time. “I give up. I’ll do it,” she said pointing at Hank. “But you have to provide lunch because this will take more than a few hours.”

All the women laughed.

“Men have no idea what’s involved, do they?” Nellie asked with a chuckle. Over the years she’d had to drag Lucas kicking and screaming to go shopping with her. He still didn’t understand why you couldn’t just go into a store, point to a piece of furniture and have it appear in your house.

“I know one man who may regret he ever suggested a shopping trip,” Janice said taking a forkful of turkey dressing.

“I hope you have deep pockets, brother, because that’s one big house you have to furnish,” Zach laughed. Sunny had taken him shopping once for new furniture for the great room and he’d been amazed at the prices.

“She can have whatever she wants,” Hank replied staring at Janice. “I have confidence in Red’s decorating abilities. The only thing I refuse to relinquish is my recliner,” Hank said pointedly.

Max snorted. “That broken down brown piece of junk!”

“Hey, it’s just broken in and very comfortable.”

“Broken...period!” Adam and Zach echoed as everyone laughed.

“Don’t worry, Peter Pan. We’ll see if we can’t find one like it. That brown duct tape on the old one doesn’t quite match.”

Hank sighed. “Okay but the moose lamp stays!” he stated adamantly.

“Janice, just put it in his office out of the way,” Nellie suggested. “That way it will be out of sight for the rest of the house.”

By the time the desserts were ready to serve it had been determined that Hank and Janice would leave for Sterling in the morning for furniture.

When the desserts had all been set in front of everyone, Max pounded the table to gain everyone’s attention. “Megan and I have an announcement,” he said placing an arm around her shoulders. “We went to the clinic yesterday for an ultra sound as requested by Dr. Polk.” He reached into his shirt pocket and took out a piece of paper. “This is a copy of the results,” he said handing the paper to his mother.

Nellie looked at it for several seconds, then she gasped. “Twins?” she laughed giving Max a hug and Megan’s hand a warm squeeze.

“Twins,” Megan said smiling around the table as everyone began to talk at once.

Sunny jumped up to give embrace Megan. “I am so happy for you. Gosh, we’ll have to do everything in sets of two now.”

Lucas and Hank were studying the picture with puzzled expressions. It didn’t look like much to them but then they weren’t familiar with what they were looking at. “Were they able to tell you if they’re boys or girls?” Lucas wanted to know.

“This one is a boy,” Max said pointing to a white blob on the picture. “The other is positioned so they can’t see well enough. “We’re going to have two babies. I can hardly believe it!”

“I can,” Megan sighed. “No wonder I’m in maternity clothes already. I thought I was gaining and getting bigger rather fast, but never gave any thought to the fact that I could be pregnant with twins. As far as I know, there are no twins in my family.”

Daring To Love

“Well they have to start somewhere,” Adam said. “Congratulations. Do you have any names picked out yet?”

“We’re working on that. I guess we’ll have to come up with two boys and at least one girl’s name just to be prepared,” Max said thoughtfully.

While all the conversation about babies was going on Hank watched Janice. He realized that this must be difficult for her but, to give her credit, she didn’t seem upset. She appeared truly happy for his brother and sister-in-law. But then, she would be. She wasn’t a jealous or vindictive person. He smiled across the table at her and was rewarded with an answering smile.

The next day on the way into Sterling Hank noticed that Janice was rather quiet. “You’re not regretting this trip are you, Red?”

“No. Now that I’ve agreed to do it, I’m really looking forward to spending your money,” she said giving him a wicked little smile.

“Why so quiet? Trying to figure out what you want to buy?”

“Not really. Hank, I’ve been thinking about hiring an assistant for the office.” She’d already made up her mind but she would like his opinion.

“Is business that good that you can afford it?”

“I wouldn’t even be considering it if things weren’t right, Hank. As things are now, I might as well move into the office because I have to spend so much time there six days a week. This would give me a break from time to time.” Janice had actually first thought about this while Hank was still in Los Angeles. If there had been someone else working in her office, she could have taken a couple of days to fly out and spend with him. But then, would she really have had the courage to do that back then? She’d never know now. But the idea of an assistant really appealed to her after giving it serious consideration.

“You going to put a notice in the local paper?” Hank asked making the turn that would take them into Sterling.

“No not locally. I thought I’d look for someone in Sterling, Akron and maybe Denver. Whomever I hire will have to be licensed and have some experience if I’m going to

leave them in charge while I'm away," she replied thinking aloud.

Hank frowned. It sounded as if she planned on taking some trips. That tiny atom of insecurity and jealousy over Steven fanned into life. Why? Where was she planning on going?

"I mean, if I wanted to take a trip I could go and not have to close the office."

"Do you anyplace special in mind?"

"No, not really. I'm just thinking about the future. A vacation is something that I haven't had in over three years. Financially, I'm pretty secure. I used the money from my divorce settlement when we sold the house to set up the agency and it's doing very well. I'm not getting any younger and need to start doing some of the things I thought about when I was younger." There were a number of things that she had wanted to do both before and after her marriage, but most had gone by the wayside.

Hank relaxed a bit. "What things?"

"Oh, I don't know. I'm just thinking about making some changes in my life, that's all. What about you? You've made a big change by buying a home."

Hank shrugged. "That's just moving my residence."

"And investing a considerable amount of money to furnish that house," Janice reminded him dryly.

"I'd like to furnish it with a wife too," he said taking his eyes off the road for a second to look at her. He'd promised himself that he wouldn't press, but it was difficult when he loved her to distraction. He wasn't kidding when he said that he wanted the house to be hers also.

"Hank, you said we could go slow," Janice reminded him. She sat straighter in the seat.

"Sorry but I can't help how I feel, Red."

"Neither can I, Hank. Neither can I."

He decided it was time to change the subject. "Did you see Galen this morning?" He was aware of her usual morning routine of going over to spend a few minutes with him.

Janice licked her lips. "Just for a couple of minutes. I talked to Marion about him too."

"About his growing attachment to you?"

Janice nodded her head. "She assured me that he hadn't cried very long after I left the house. He was easily

Daring To Love

distracted and didn't say anything more." She gave a small hollow laugh. "I guess I should be happy about that but..." her voice trailed off as if she couldn't find the words to finish her sentence.

Hank reached over to squeeze her hand. "When did you say your appointment is with Dr. Polk?"

"Next Friday at nine thirty. Why?"

"I can go with you if you want company," he offered.

"That's nice of you, Hank. But not necessary. This will be a preliminary visit where he will probably set up some tests and things like that. I won't know anything for a while yet. I appreciate the offer though." She had no idea what was going to be involved in this testing but was realistic enough to know that it would be a while yet before she knew anything. Waiting patiently had never been one of her virtues.

"Maybe I could be there with you when he gets the results then?" he persisted.

"I don't know, Hank! This is my problem and I have to face it alone."

"You're wrong, Red. There *may* be a problem with your plumbing, but you're not alone in this. I won't desert you. I hope you realize that? It's you I want and need in my life. Whether or not you can have my child is a side issue and doesn't affect my love for you." He could see her rationale in his not going with her for the tests. But, if anyway possible, he wanted to be with her when she was given the results. If it turned out to be bad news, there was no way he was going to have her get it without him being present. She would need him even if she couldn't admit it now.

Janice felt a shine of tears. If he kept this up she would start believing in love again. She didn't know what she had done to deserve someone as wonderful as Hank. She'd never experience anything like this before; deep down she wanted to accept it; to be able to return it back ten fold. The vision of Steven's face as he told her of his coming fatherhood still haunted her. While he enlightened her about the baby on the way, he'd made it plain how much she had disappointed him by not getting pregnant. He'd made her feel inferior and inadequate. She couldn't face that again with anyone, especially Hank. He kept saying that a baby didn't matter, but she found that difficult to believe, knowing his family the way she did.

Autumn McCullah

Hank glanced over to look at Janice. He frowned when she wiped at her eyes. *Damn, way to go Peter Pan. Make her cry why don't you?* he derided himself. Before he could say anything more, Janice abruptly changed the subject.

"I have some ideas for the great room that I hope you like," she began.

Hank let her talk during the rest of the trip into Sterling.

Later that night Janice thought about her day as she prepared dinner. Hank had to check in at his office and make some calls as soon as they returned to Black Horse, but he would be back soon. She had actually enjoyed the shopping once they had gotten into Sterling. He had kept the conversation light and centered on the furniture they were seeking, something she greatly appreciated.

It had been fun shopping with Hank too. She didn't know if he was serious or not but some of the sofas and chairs he'd pointed out had been terrible colors or just plain ugly. She'd laughed at his expression when she'd made her opinion on a particular piece known. One sofa had been covered in a gray-blue striped fabric that closely resembled old pillow coverings. That one had simply earned a raised eyebrow. At that point, Hank threw up his hands to declare that he was leaving himself completely in her care.

By the end of the day they had furnished two other bedrooms, the dining room and the great room and updated his linen supply since they needed to get more bed sheets anyway. Hank had insisted that she choose what she liked and surprised her by saying that her final choices would have been his too.

She glanced at her watch. Hank should be back shortly, but she had to wait for him before she could put the fish on to cook. The salad, baked potatoes and fresh broccoli were almost ready. The batch of freshly made biscuits had another eight minutes to bake.

As if on cue a few minutes later, Hank appeared at her door. "Something sure smells good," he commented following her into the kitchen. Janice had changed into jeans and a green shirt and looked young and fresh and totally delectable. He wanted her for dinner, not the damned food! But the day had gone so well and Janice was once again relaxed in his company so he didn't want to do anything to upset the status quo.

Daring To Love

But once dinner was over and the kitchen cleaned up he couldn't resist the urge to press a kiss to the nape of her neck. He'd expected her to pull away but when she didn't he wrapped his arms around her waist pulling her back against his body. Resting his chin on the top of her head he breathed in her soft feminine scent, the floral shampoo she used tantalizing him. Before she could protest, he turned her in his arms, lowering his head to press his lips to hers.

Janice was drowning in a sea of conflicting emotions. She'd promised herself that they would go slowly; that they would keep their relationship casual for a while. But all it took was one small touch and she was awash with longing to be back in Hank's arms. She might have talked big about their relationship being a purely sexual one, but it went far beyond that and she knew it. She loved him desperately and wanted to be with him whether it was a casual outing or sharing his bed.

She pressed against his tall frame feeling his immediate arousal. It still amazed her that she could apparently arouse him so easily with just a slight touching of their bodies. When he lowered his head, she was more than ready for his kiss. Her lips opened beneath his wanting and needing this contact. "Oh, Hank," she breathed into his mouth not able to hide her desire.

"I've missed you, Red," Hank rasped moving his lips to the tender side of her throat. "I could sink into you and never tire of the feel of your skin next to mine."

"I need you too!"

Hank needed no more invitation as he swung her up into his arms to carry her upstairs. Once in the semi dark quiet of her bedroom he made himself slow down. Slowly he pulled the shirt over her head before sliding the jeans down her legs. Then it was her turn to unbutton his shirt and toss it aside before reaching for the waistband on his jeans. He's already kicked off his shoes so he quickly stepped out of them as Janice drew his jeans down his long legs. He stepped out of the rest of his clothing before pressing her down on the bed, his hands and mouth rediscovering her soft womanly body.

Janice writhed beneath Hank's lips, his hands deftly removing her bra and panties. When his tongue laved the hard nub of one breast she arched her back in heady approval. They touched and kissed as their love surged them beyond any and all doubts or uncertainties about the future. Only this

time, only this moment mattered right now. She couldn't get enough of the feel of his skin, the feel of the matt of dark hair on his broad chest or his weight pressing against her.

She reached down to take him in her hand feeling a sense of womanly pride at his indrawn breathe. His dark eyes shone brightly with his own sexual longings. His lips caressed her breasts as if they were treasures to be worshipped as she continued to hold him, stroking and reveling in the growing hardness in her hand as he pressed feverish kisses to his neck and shoulders.

Hank reached down to pull her arms over her head as he positioned himself above her before slowly thrusting into her. He hadn't realized how much he'd missed this joining until now as he groaned his pleasure against her lips. Their breathing became labored as he quickened his thrusts, grinding his body against the cradle of her hips.

Janice gasped, her body going taut as that elusive coil of pleasure readied, finally bursting as it released a flood of joyous ecstasy pulsing throughout her body. "Hank! Hank!" she called out her body shaking in the throes of her climax.

His body went rigid mere seconds after hers as he continued two more deep thrusts before collapsing on top of her. His large hands cupped her head forcing her to look at him. His kiss was long and hard as if stamping his ownership, his possession. Finally he lay still with his head on her shoulder too spent to even think about moving. It was always this way with Janice. She always made him feel so complete, as if she had been made especially just for him.

Janice never wanted to move again. After Steven she hadn't given any thought to another relationship because she didn't think she would ever be able to feel again. But Hank had changed all that with his humor, gentleness and persistence. Especially his persistence she thought with a slight smile curving her swollen lips. If he hadn't gone to Los Angeles for that year, she wondered if she would have let their relationship develop? It had taken his being gone for her to realize how much she had missed seeing him if only to pass the time of day.

Slowly Hank rolled off of her pulling her into the curve of his shoulder. He pushed her hair away from her face as he looked down at her. His smile was sexy and definitely satisfied. "You are some woman, Red! And I mean that in all areas, not just the bedroom."

Daring To Love

Janice reached up to trace the line of his jaw. She slowly raised her eyes to meet his. "You're pretty special yourself, Peter Pan. No matter what I say, don't ever grow up. I like you just the way you are."

"Hot and sweaty, huh?"

She grinned. "You don't hear me complaining, do you? I'm kind of sweaty myself."

"Not hot?"

Her smile was slow and lazy. "Not at the moment. I'm completely satisfied and content and warm and wonderful!" It was true. She had never felt this complete before in her life. Suddenly she realized that she felt loved for the first time in a very long time. And it was all due to Hank. Wonderful, crazy, intelligent Hank!

Hank pulled her closer against his side. "That's okay. I can wait a while," he told her with a sexy grin.

"You think so, huh?"

"I believe that on other occasions I've proven that you need a second dose to hold you through the night," he whispered against her hair.

"We are confident, aren't we?" Janice giggled against his bare shoulder. But he was right. When they made love it was usually twice. That had been a first for her also, and surprising because she hadn't been aware of this side of her own nature. Apparently she couldn't get enough of this man.

"Not confidence, just plain fact, ma'am," he tried to say with a straight face.

Janice laughed and shook her head.

"I wish I didn't have to leave this bed; that for once we could spend the entire night together," he said softly.

Janice looked up at him because she'd been thinking the same thing. "This is a small town and your truck would be recognized outside my house, Hank. People probably suspect that we're lovers but it is another thing to..." she was halted by a finger against her lips.

"I understand, Red. We must be throwbacks from another era. People openly live together in this day and age, and here we are concerned about appearances."

"But Black Horse isn't Los Angeles or New York. This is a small town, and let's face it most people here have a slightly different outlook on life. Maybe that's why I love living here so much more than a bigger city. People care about

their neighbors and with that comes knowing their business and what goes on in their families. Sounds rather old fashioned, but I like it,” she told him with a thoughtful smile.

“I hadn’t really thought about it like that, but you’re right. But I don’t have any neighbors, Red. There wouldn’t be anyone to see your car at my place. Will you come out and stay with me once in a while? I’ll even do the cooking so you can just lay around and relax,” Hank asked hoping he wasn’t throwing a spanner into their relationship.

Janice looked up at him for long seconds before she smiled. “I do make trips out of town now and then. Maybe I could manage to stay over once in a while. But if I do, I’ll do the cooking. You can handle the grill, but I get the kitchen.”

Hank’s smile was full of happiness and tenderness. “You can have whatever you want, Red. As long as I get to be with you.”

Before Janice could reply, the phone rang. She looked at the clock on the dresser and saw that it was after ten thirty. Who could possibly be calling this late? She rolled over to pick up the receiver. “Hello?” she asked half expecting it to be someone looking for Hank.

“Janice, I’m sorry to call so late but I just got back into town,” Steven said as if it were the most casual thing in the world.

“Steven? What do you want? We don’t stay up all hours of the night here in Black Horse,” she told him with a backward look at Hank. To her surprise he was pulling on his clothes. She frowned. “You don’t have to leave,” she quickly assured Hank.

“I don’t want to eavesdrop on a private conversation,” he informed her coolly.

“Who is that?” Steven demanded. “If it’s so late, why are you entertaining a man?”

“Must I remind you that is none of your business?” she hissed watching in dismay as Hank stalked out of the bedroom. “This is not a good time, Steven.”

“Apparently there is no good time to call you, Janice. But we have to talk.”

“I can’t think of anything we have to talk about. That ended over three years ago. But if you have something to say, why don’t you just say it and get it over with?”

“You still haven’t told me who this man is and why he’s at your house this late!” But Steven had a pretty good

Daring To Love

idea just what was going on and he didn't like it one bit. If she was getting involved with someone it could be a problem for him.

"And I'm not going to tell you!" *What part of I'm not going to tell you didn't he understand*, she thought testily.

"Have it your way, but when I come to Black Horse, I hope he won't be setting in on our private conversation? This is between you and me, not you and me and some local yokel!"

"You can't come here!" Janice exclaimed. "Just say what you have to say and be done with it!"

"What I have to discuss with you can't be done over the phone. I'll see you soon," Steven said before disconnecting the call. He knew she was gearing up for a protest and didn't want to give her time to launch an argument.

Janice stared at the receiver and sighed. "Great, just what I need," she muttered throwing back the covers and reaching for her robe. She frowned remembering Hank's expression as he'd left the room. She found him standing at the front window staring out at the darkened street.

"Hank?"

"Does he call regularly? Did you explain why I was here? Or am I still just a friend?" Hank knew he was being unreasonable but couldn't stop the words from spewing forth. Jealousy was a difficult thing to control especially when you weren't too sure of the ground beneath your feet.

Janice heard the anger in Hank's voice. "He does not call on a regular basis and, no, I did not tell him who you are simply because it is none of his business. He relinquished any right to know what goes on in my life when he walked out on me."

Hank turned to stare at her. "Are you ashamed of our relationship?"

She gasped. "No! I care a great deal about you, Hank. You must know that?"

He knew that she had taken her divorce pretty hard and wondered about her feelings for her ex-husband. If he hadn't been so insecure about his own relationship with Janice, maybe her feelings for Steven wouldn't have been an issue with him. But she had never said anything about love; just that she cared about him. You care about friends and

neighbors; he wanted her to love him. "Are you sure about your feelings for Steven, then? He was your husband and you lived together. Maybe you're not over him completely," Hank stated hating the sound of his own voice as he said the words.

"That is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard come out of your mouth, Hank James! Do you honestly think that I could make love with you and still be carrying a torch for Steven?" Everything had been so wonderful tonight before that damned phone call. Hank had immediately jumped to the wrong conclusion about it too. Her former pleasure was quickly turning into anger.

"I don't know what to think anymore," he snapped raking his fingers through his hair. "Maybe I would have felt better if you had told him about our relationship."

"Why does that make any difference? Our relationship is about us and has nothing at all to do with him," Janice snapped close to tears.

"I don't know?" Hank shouted.

"You don't have to yell," Janice said more quietly.

Hank started for the door. "Look, it's obvious that we can't talk about this tonight." He stopped to retrace his steps back to where she was standing. "I'm sorry I yelled. I'll call you tomorrow." He gave her a kiss on the lips before hurrying out the door before he said anything else to add to the situation.

Janice slowly followed to lock up behind him. She'd noticed that he hadn't answered her question about sleeping with him but still caring about Steven. Did he really think she was capable of something like that? It hurt to believe that might be the case.

She turned out the lights before going back up to bed. Hugging the pillow that still bore Hank's scent, she cried herself to sleep. She was angry at him and hurt that he obviously thought so little of her. If that wasn't bad enough, she now had to be on the lookout for Steven. What had happened to the quiet uneventful life she'd carved out for herself in Black Horse? If only Hank hadn't made her feel again. If only he hadn't made her realize that she was still alive, then none of this would matter. But it did and somehow she had to deal with it.

CHAPTER 10

Hank did call Janice the next afternoon. He wasn't quite sure what to say after last night. He was a man who worked with words; depended on them in his job. But last night his frustration had fueled his anger and his words. When he was with her he felt like he was the only man in her life. That was how *she* made him feel. Then why did he have this nagging insecurity? He knew why. All she had to do when Steven called was tell him that she was romantically involved with Hank James. That's what he would do if an old flame of his reappeared on the scene. But then he had admitted his love for Janice. That was something she had not done for him.

She had told him about her doctor appointment Friday with Dr. Polk but hadn't mentioned it since. He'd offered to go with her but she assured him that this visit would be routine just to set up the necessary tests. That had made sense to him at the time, but now he wondered if she really didn't want him with her. He was getting nowhere with this thinking and wished that they could have dinner tonight to talk. But he had some research that had to be done by tomorrow morning and she had an interview in Akron in the morning.

Hank sat in the café scowling over his lukewarm cup of coffee when he became aware that someone was talking to him. He looked up to see Zach standing by his booth.

"Are you still on this planet or has your mind gone off into another zone of existence?" Zach laughed sitting

across from his brother. He'd known as soon as he walked into the café and seen Hank that something was troubling him.

"Sorry, I was just thinking." He lifted his cup signaling Ruth for a refill.

"There is only one thing that will make a man look like you do, and that's a woman," Zach guessed rightly. He knew that from first hand experience. But Sunny had changed his life and he couldn't believe his happiness. This is what he wanted for his younger brother too.

"Tell me about it," Hank snorted. He looked directly at Zach. "I'm a fairly intelligent man, right? Then why do I make an ass of myself with Janice?" he continued before Zach could reply.

"Love seems to turn the brain to mush, little brother. We've all been through it. Want to talk about it?"

Hank slumped back in his seat. "Steven Wright called last night...again."

"What does he want?" Zack asked beginning to understand Hank's dilemma.

"Damned if I know! That's the second time he's called that I know about and Janice won't talk about it. And she won't tell him about me."

Zach raised a brow. "Well, her relationship with you is none of his concern as far as I can see."

"Whose side are you on here?"

"I'm not on anyone's side, Hank. But I sure as hell wouldn't discuss Sunny with Elaine if she turned up again. I don't see that as anything to worry about," he tried to assure his brother.

"I love her," Hank said simply.

"I know you do."

"But she hasn't told me that she loves me. Oh, I know she cares about me, but I need to hear the words. She has this problem and it's colored her view of love and marriage," Hank said slowly. It wasn't his place to tell Zach about Janice's conversation with him. He didn't know if Sunny had divulged anything so he wasn't going to elaborate.

"Sounds like you and the beautiful redhead need some time alone to talk...really talk about what you want in the future," Zach offered. "I've been married to the wrong woman, Hank, and believe me, it's no fun. I had no idea how completely wonderful and fulfilling a relationship could be until Sunny filled that empty place in my life."

Daring To Love

Hank smiled for the first time that day. "Yeah, you two are a walking billboard for the institution of marriage. That's what I'd like with Janice."

"You've always been a good talker, Hank. It's part of your job and you're one of the best in the business. When it comes to love, you just have to work a little harder at it. I have a feeling that everything will work out in the end. I don't know what her problem is, but don't give up on the lovely lady," Zach ordered sliding out of the booth.

"I won't give up until she tells me she doesn't love me," Hank assured him. "Thanks for listening."

"That's what brothers are for. Are you bringing her to dinner at mom and dad's Sunday?"

"I'll have to pass on dinner because I don't know when I'll get in. I leave for San Francisco Friday, then Los Angeles for a day or so. It might be late Sunday before I get in," Hank said.

"Not a good time to be leaving town. But I know you'll handle this with your usual charm and intelligence," Zach laughed trying to sound more upbeat than he felt about this situation. He would say something to Sunny about it when he got home. He didn't believe in interfering, but women had some way of talking to each other that completely baffled men.

Janice left early the next morning for her nine o'clock interview for the position as assistant at the agency. She'd talked to Judy Cochran on the phone twice now and was impressed with her qualifications. She sounded perfect for the job.

The meeting went fine but Janice left with some reservations. She couldn't put her finger on why, but she wasn't quite as impressed as she had been initially over the phone. Judy was an attractive blond who dressed professionally and appeared to be very knowledgeable about all areas of real estate. There was something about her attitude that left Janice uncomfortable. Arrogance! That was the feeling she engendered during their talk. She had moved from Chicago to Akron four years ago. During their talk it had become apparent that she wasn't all that thrilled with "country life" as she kept referring to it. Janice could just imagine what her reaction to Black Horse would be.

Her next interview was at three that afternoon back in Black Horse. Jean Harrison was in her late forties, widowed with two grown married children living in Utah. She had no close ties in Sterling and seemed eager to move.

That interview turned out much better than Janice could have hoped. She took an instant liking to Jean who was outgoing but not pushy. She'd been in real estate for over twenty years and loved working with people. She had a ready smile and her gray eyes seemed to have a permanent sparkle as if she was always laughing on the inside.

Since Janice had already checked Jean's references and was delighted with the outcome of the interview, she immediately offered the older woman the job. They discussed the money that would be a little less than she had been making, but Jean had come prepared for that eventuality.

"I sold my house a while back and with what my late husband left me, I can afford to earn less," Jean told Janice. "I'm just so thrilled to be moving back here."

"You've lived here before?" Janice asked surprised.

"When I was a child. We moved to Denver when I was twelve. But my fondest memories are the times spent here in Black Horse. My father had a small farm just outside of town. I came by on my way in and the old house has been replaced with a larger one. But that's progress even in a small town."

"Well there may be some people here who remember you and your family," Janice assured her. "Do you remember Nellie and Lucas James?"

"The name sounds familiar. I can't wait to get settled and really have the time to look around and meet people. The first thing I need is an apartment,"

The first thing to come to mind was Hank's, the one he had recently vacated. "I might have just the thing for you, Jean. A friend of mine has just moved and I know that his apartment is available." She wrote down the address and the name of the woman who managed the building.

"I'll go directly from here to see her. I'll ring you to let you know how it goes. If it's all right with you, I can get moved next week and be ready to begin work," Jean beamed.

"That will be wonderful, Jean. Welcome aboard," Janice said standing and extending her hand. "Let me know if you get the apartment, although I don't see any problem there."

Daring To Love

And if you need any help moving, please don't hesitate to let me know."

"That's very kind of you but my son will be helping me with the move. I don't have a lot of furniture, but what I do have is heavy."

"If you're settled by the end of the week, why don't you stop by and we can go over the setup here and discuss the territory."

Jean quickly agreed before leaving to search out new living accommodations.

Janice sat back in her chair after the door closed behind Jean. She felt confident that this was a good move. She just wished she felt this way about her personal life. She hadn't talked to Hank since yesterday and now had this compelling urge to call him. But she wasn't sure what she would say.

Yes she did. She'd told him that this first doctor's appointment would be routine and that was true. But she was nervous and would really like some moral support. He'd offered to go with her. She wondered if he would still be willing after last night. The more she thought about it the more she wanted him with her, or at least in the waiting room. She'd ask him before she lost her courage. But just as she reached for the phone, it rang startling her.

"Wright Realty," she said a bit breathlessly.

"Janice, it's Sunny. You sound out of breath, I didn't catch you on the way out, did I?"

"No, not at all. As a matter of fact, I was just reaching for the phone when it rang."

"You must be busy so I'll get to the point. I know that Hank is leaving for New York Friday and wondered if you would like to come out and have dinner with us that evening. Megan and Max will be here too."

Janice's heart raced. Hank was going to New York? He hadn't said a word to her about it, but then they hadn't talked much. Maybe something came up suddenly that required his immediate attention. She was glad now that she hadn't been able to make her call. But did she want to spend the evening with her friends or sit home and feel sorry for herself? "I'd love to come, Sunny," she said hoping she concealed the disappointment in her voice. "What can I bring?"

“Just yourself. We’ll be eating at six thirty. It’s a bit later than we normally eat because Max doesn’t get off until six. Oh, and be ready for Kelsey’s new book. This one is about a family of pigs,” Sunny laughed recalling the look on Zach’s face when he’d been presented with the book.

Janice couldn’t help it she burst out laughing. “When does Kelsey get her pet pig?”

“If I have anything to do with it she won’t.”

“All she has to do is bat those big blue-green eyes at her daddy and she’ll have a whole litter in no time. If Zoe has the same affinity for animals when she gets bigger, Zack will have to buy more land just to house all the critters you’re going to adopt,” Janice teased.

“Bite your tongue,” Sunny stated. “We have enough now. They can share what we already have on the ranch. Kelsey has decided that she wants to work in a zoo when she gets bigger. Then she can be around all kinds of different animals.”

“Where did she get that idea?”

“From a book,” both said in unison.

Sunny and Zach were avid readers and encouraged their children to appreciate books. Kelsey was especially fascinated with them and even had her own library card from the small library in town. Fortunately or unfortunately as the case may be, the library had quite a selection of children’s books that contained stories about animals.

They talked for a few minutes longer before ending the call. Janice sat back in her chair. She would call Hank later and see if he mentioned this trip.

As it turned out he called her almost as soon as she walked through her door. He knew it was short notice but he wanted to take her out to dinner. He explained that he was leaving Friday and wanted to see her before he left. And he wanted to make up to her for being such an idiot the other night.

As she waited for him to pick her up Janice wondered if they could have any future together. He had told her that he loved her, but would that be enough? He had some misgivings as evidenced by his reaction to Steven’s phone calls. Did he have doubts and was reluctant to voice them?

Over dinner Hank explained about his trip to New York. “I wish you could come with me.”

Daring To Love

"I can't. When you have a business to run you can't just pick up and take off any time you want. Besides, I have that appointment with Dr. Polk Friday." If it had been at any other time Janice would have been tempted to go with him. Now that Jean would be working with her, she would be able to leave the office from time to time.

"I wish this trip hadn't come up now," Hank replied frowning. "I know you said this visit is just routine but I'd still like to be here in case you want to talk about it." In his opinion Janice had already spent too much time shouldering everything in her life on her own. He wanted to be sure that he had a place by her side during this latest upheaval. She was not going to be alone any longer.

"But your business does necessitate a trip so we have to deal with it."

"Look, I want you to call me and let me know what Dr. Polk says. I know what you told me," he said raising a hand to still her protest. "Just humor me, okay? I love you, Red, and if I can't be here in person, then I can at least talk to you about it over the phone. I'll be home sometime Sunday so don't make any plans for the afternoon or evening. That time is being reserved in advance." He told her the name of the hotel where he would be staying.

"Let's compromise you stubborn man. *If* Dr. Polk finds something during his exam, I'll call you at your hotel. If he doesn't, you can wait until Sunday to hear the boring details about my office visit. Being a man you wouldn't understand that this type of visit just doesn't make for thrilling conversation material. Besides, I'm having dinner with Jean and showing her around town."

Hank scowled but didn't argue. "I guess I'll have to be content with that. But you have to promise to call me if he does find anything!"

"You have my word," she laughed happy that she'd had the last word on that subject.

They lapsed into silence as the waitress brought their main course. As soon as she walked away Hank looked across the table at Janice. "When does this Jean start work?"

"She'll come in for a while on Monday. I forgot to tell you. She's rented your old apartment and is moving in already. She'll be moving the rest of her things Saturday." She knew Jean would be tired after the moving and with

Janice taking her out to dinner she wouldn't have to worry about cooking. And it would help to keep her thoughts off Hank for a while.

Hank frowned. He had hoped she would miss him a little but apparently this wasn't going to be the case. *Stop it*, he thought to himself. *She's being a good neighbor by helping this Jean and you're acting like a spoiled brat.* He had always been so sure of himself, his abilities and the direction his life would take. But one beautiful redhead had him in a muddle. "I hope she's as comfortable there as I was," he commented without enthusiasm.

Janice put her fork down on her plate. "Don't pout, it doesn't suit you."

"I'm not pouting. Well, maybe just a little. I guess I'd like a little indication that you're going to miss me," he admitted.

She reached across the table to place her hand on his. "Of course I'll miss you. But it's only for two days, Hank. Not two months. We'll both be busy and the time will fly and then you'll be home again." She wondered if he was still concerned about Steven, but was hesitant to broach the subject. Surely she was entitled to talk to whomever she wanted or had to on the phone? It would be another matter if she planned to go to Denver to see him or something like that. She hadn't even been the one to initiate the phone calls.

Hank drew her hand to his lips. "I'm discovering that I'm a very possessive man. That's never happened to me before, Red. The rational part of my mind tells me that I have no right to demand your undivided attention, but the emotional side of me clamors for you like nothing before in my life. I need you in my life."

"I need you too, Hank. I'm just scared of getting hurt again, so caution is the only way for me to go."

"Okay, but one of these days I'm going to fly you off to Neverland and from that day forward you will belong to me," Hank stated in his most formal oratory tone.

Janice couldn't help it, she laughed. "To the future, Peter Pan," she said holding up her glass of ice water in a toast.

CHAPTER 11

Janice sat on the examination table in Dr. Polk's office. The white paper gown and sheet didn't offer much warmth or comfort. She knew this was something she had to endure, but that didn't mean she had to like it. She wondered about the battery of tests that would be involved and half suspected that Dr. Polk would refer her to a specialist in Akron or Sterling. That was fine but she really didn't feel at ease with strange doctors. She didn't even like going to the doctor if she was sick. It was just something you had to do now and then. Thankfully it wasn't very often in her case.

She'd filled out several forms before being taken to the small examination room. As Janice pretended to read some of the posters on the wall Dr. Polk entered the room carrying her chart. He was a tall thin man with thick gray hair, warm brown eyes and an ever-present smile.

"It's good to see you again, Janice," he said shaking her hand. "You're a little past due for your yearly checkup."

"I know. I've felt great so it's an easy thing to put off. But I'm here for more than a check up as I told your nurse." She went on to tell him about her history as best she could. Since she'd kept much of this bottled up inside for so long, it wasn't easy or comfortable to open up. But Dr. Polk appeared interested and paid close attention to everything she told him as he made notes on her file.

Dr. Polk studied his notes before flipping back through her file. "Janice there can be any number of reasons why you didn't get pregnant, but that doesn't mean that you *can't* conceive a child. First I'd like to give you a thorough check up and then do some routine testing. Those results will tell us if other tests are required or what they will have to be.

I'll send my nurse back in to get you started. I'm going to do a quick pregnancy test as part of this exam."

"Pregnancy test? Why?"

"Just a precaution because some of the tests you might have to under go shouldn't be done on a pregnant woman."

"Oh."

The nurse came in and took several vials of blood before having Janice step into the bathroom with a small plastic bottle. Janice wondered if doctors ever had to go in that small container. If they did she would bet the bottles would be much larger.

Next Dr. Polk prodded and poked her from head to toe before he began the pelvic exam. His nurse returned with some paperwork that he studied for several minutes. He quirked a brow but said nothing as he began the final exam.

Janice lay there trying to relax. Yeah right! She tried counting the ceiling tiles to distract her from the exam. Finally it was over and the nurse helped her to a sitting position.

"Get dressed and just come into my office when you're ready," Dr. Polk instructed her on the way out of the examination room.

Janice dressed in record time. Now that she had taken the first step she was anxious to get on with whatever tests the doctor would set up for her. A few minutes later she found the doctor in his office making notes on her chart.

"Come in and have a seat, Janice," he said as he continued to write.

She sat looking about the office but not really seeing much. She was too anxious to think about anything except this coming conversation. What if he had discovered something that ruled out the possibility of her ever having a child? The what-ifs formed one after another in her mind until she forced herself to stop.

Finally the doctor laid down his pen as he leaned back in his chair. "Everything looks fine and you appear to be in excellent health," he began. "And we have no reason to do any further tests, Janice."

She frowned. He had found something. "But why? Could you tell what my problem is just by the pelvic exam?" Hope flared for an instant. If he'd found something this easily maybe it could be fixed.

Daring To Love

Now he smiled. "You don't need tests because you're already pregnant, Janice."

She stared at him as if he'd been speaking another language. Her mouth worked, but no sound came out. She took a deep steadying breath. "That's not possible! I mean it's possible. But it's not possible!"

Dr. Polk sat forward in his chair clasping his hands on the desk. "I don't know anything about your ex-husband or your life with him. But obviously your life has changed since your divorce. Stress and tension can play a large part in a woman's problem with getting pregnant. My guess is that your current relationship is a good one and that you haven't been thinking about having a baby while making love." He knew that she had been seeing a great deal of Hank James, but it wasn't his place to bring up his name.

Janice just stared in astonishment. It was as if the wind had been knocked out of her. "I honestly didn't think I could ever get pregnant. I don't understand how this happened. Well I know *how* it happened. But why now?"

"I've seen this before. Forget all about trying to have a baby and some women turn up pregnant very quickly. Now, I would like you to start on some special vitamins and a moderate exercise program if you don't already have one. Walking is one of the best."

Janice managed a small laugh. "I do a great deal of walking almost everyday. I still can't believe that I'm actually going to have a baby," she said awed by the knowledge. She lay a hand protectively over her still flat stomach.

"My guess is that you're about five or six weeks pregnant. When was your last period?" Dr. Polk proceeded to ask her a variety of questions.

Twenty minutes later Janice left the doctor's office with a sample bottle of the vitamins he wanted her to take and a stack of pamphlets on pregnancy and childbirth. She was still so astounded by the news of her pregnancy that she turned right then had to retrace her steps to the left to get to her car.

In a daze of utter happiness she drove the short distance back to her office. How was she ever going to concentrate on work when her mind was filled with the glorious news about the baby she and Hank had created? Hank! Should she call him tonight with the news or wait to tell him Sunday? She had promised to phone him at his hotel

if the doctor found anything. “Boy, did he find something?” she laughed aloud.

Once in her office she paced back and forth behind her desk. She would call him tonight. This wasn’t something she wanted to tell him over the phone, but she was so happy that she couldn’t wait until Sunday. And there was her promise to call if the doctor found anything. Boy did he find something!

Then she thought about her promise to have dinner at Sunny and Zach’s tonight. She would have to be careful not to let anyone suspect because she wanted Hank to be the first to know. Slowly she sat back down in her chair. She and Hank weren’t married. How was his family going to take this news about their baby? “You’re just being foolish,” she chided herself as she began pacing once again. “His family is wonderful and will be happy for Hank...and me.”

Her chest tightened as she anticipated Hank’s reaction. He would be so pleased. Now she was free to tell him she loved him, something that she’d held inside for so long now. “Ask me that special question again, Hank James,” she whispered aloud.

She could still hardly believe that she, Janice Wright, was going to have a baby. This was something she had given up on several years ago. But now it was real. Dr. Polk had assured her that it was true. She placed her hand over her abdomen. It would be a boy. Somehow she was sure of it. He would have dark hair and eyes just like his father. She smiled as she picture Hank with their baby.

Her mind raced with plans for the future. She was so glad that she’d hired an assistant because she wanted to be free to take care of her baby after he was born. She would still work, but only on a part-time basis. It might even get to the point where she would appoint Jean as office manager and let her run the office. And there was baby furniture to buy and clothes and so many other things.

Hank would be such a wonderful father. Lucas James had set a perfect example to all his sons who were doing the same for their children. And Hank would be no different.

Somehow she got through the rest of the afternoon and even managed to get a small amount of work accomplished. All she had to do was get home and shower and change clothes before heading out to Zach’s ranch.

Daring To Love

It turned out much easier than she had anticipated since the children demanded so much of her attention with stories about school and their animals. At least that was what she thought until Sunny and Megan cornered her upstairs in Zoe's bedroom.

"She is positively glowing," Megan said walking around Janice. Her expression was thoughtful as she studied the other woman.

"I see what you mean," Sunny told her looking up from where she was changing her daughter's diaper. "We know that you saw Dr. Polk today. What did he say, if we can be so bold as to ask?"

Janice didn't know how to answer for several seconds, but her blush must have spoken volumes.

"She's pregnant!" Megan laughed rushing forward to give Janice a hug. "I'm right, aren't I?"

"I..."

"That's wonderful, Janice," Sunny gushed. "Have you told Hank yet?"

"No, not yet. And I do want him to be the first to know. Please understand?"

"Of course we understand," Megan assured her with a wide grin.

Now Janice couldn't keep the smile off her face. "I'm still finding it difficult to believe its true. When Dr. Polk first said that I was pregnant I told him it wasn't possible. But he assured me that I am definitely going to have a baby." She felt tears start to form in her eyes and wiped at them with the back of her hand.

"When will you tell Hank? I'd love to see his face when you tell him the news," Megan chuckled. She knew how happy she was to be pregnant and could empathize quite easily with Janice. She'd waited a long time to find a wonderful man like Max and then to get pregnant herself.

"I'm going to call him at his hotel tonight after I get home. I know it will be later in New York, but I can't wait until Sunday to tell him. And I know that he's worrying about the visit to the doctor today." She figured if she could get home by eight o'clock that would make it ten there. If Hank weren't in his room yet, she'd just leave a message for him to call her.

“He’s going to positively elated,” Sunny said putting the finishing touches on Zoe’s new one-piece sleeper. The baby was kicking and giggling as her mommy tried to zip up the front.

“Since Hank and I aren’t married, how do you think Nellie and Lucas will take the news?” she asked voicing her one main concern about the situation.

Sunny held Zoe in her arms. “Don’t worry about them, Janice. They’re going to be thrilled about another grandchild. Besides, I have a feeling that there will be a wedding in the not too distant future, if I’m not mistaken?”

“I guess that depends on Hank,” Janice said hoping it was true.

“If it’s up to him, I know you’ll have a wedding soon,” Megan laughed.

“Listen, I really don’t want anyone else to know about the baby. Hank will want to tell his family himself,” Janice cautioned.

“No one will hear a word from us,” Sunny assured her as they left the bedroom. “But I can hardly wait until everyone hears the news.”

All three women were composed as they re-entered the great room where a replay of *Ice Age* was in progress. Janice said her goodbyes claiming she had some work to do at home and escaped to her car.

Now at home, she was nervous about calling Hank. As a stall tactic she had gone upstairs to change into her pajamas and robe. She’d paced back and forth by the phone for the past five minutes. Flash jumped up on the sofa to settle down watching her as she walked from one end of the room to the other. “I’m scared,” she told the cat.

“Meow.”

“You’re right. I’m just putting it off. It’s after ten in New York, but Hank shouldn’t be asleep and even if he is, this news will sure wake him up.” Picking up the pad of paper with the number of his hotel, she dialed the number. When it rang through she asked to be connected to his room and in seconds the phone was ringing. The phone rang four times before it was answered.

“Hello,” a laughing feminine voice responded.

Janice was momentarily taken aback. “I’m sorry I had requested room 410.”

Daring To Love

“This is 410. Hank is changing his clothes so we can go out. Want me to get him for you?”

Janice’s heart began to race as she gripped the receiver in a bone-crushing grip. “No, that won’t be necessary.”

“Any message?” the woman asked making it obvious she really wasn’t interested.

“No!” Janice replied before disconnecting the call. Her legs almost gave way beneath her as she groped for the sofa to sit down.

Her face crumpled as tears formed to flow down her cheek. “Not Hank too!” she cried clutching at a pillow, holding it against her chest rocking back and forth. This same thing had happened to her before. This was how she had found out about Sharon and Steven. She’d called him in San Francisco about an urgent matter that had come up and a woman had answered the phone.

How ironic! Both times involved a pregnant woman. The first time it had been Sharon and this time Janice was the one with child. But Hank wasn’t her husband and she had no legal hold over him. He had told her that he loved her. And to her that meant loyalty and honesty. Now she didn’t know what to think. Had he been with other women on his business trips? Or was this a special woman who met him whenever they could arrange it?

What was she going to do? The more she thought about it the madder she became. How dare he pretend love for her when he was seeing someone else on the side? Well she didn’t need a husband to have this baby! She had a business and was self-supporting. She’d taken care of herself for a long time and didn’t see any problem with raising this child by herself. Hank might be the father, but he didn’t have to be a part of their daily lives. She would never prevent him from seeing his child, but damned if she would marry him just to give her baby his name. One miserable marriage was enough for her.

These thoughts carried her upstairs to bed but didn’t ease the pain as she pictured Hank with someone else. Her imagination ran amuck as she tossed and turned in her big bed. It wasn’t until the early hours of the morning before she finally managed to fall into a deep but restless sleep. Because

of this she overslept. It was almost eight the next morning before she woke up.

She bounded out of bed and rushed to the bathroom to shower. Her office was open from nine until three on Saturdays and Jean was going to meet her there at ten. After the office closed, she was going to show Jean around town and introduce her to some of the other shop owners. Then they were going to have an early dinner.

The way she felt as she walked to her car forty minutes later she would rather hide up in her bedroom for the remainder of the weekend, but of course she couldn't manage that. It was with a heavy heart and puffy eyes that Janice drove to work that morning.

If Jean noticed anything amiss with her new boss, she didn't say anything. And for this Janice was grateful. The older woman was an interesting and amusing companion during the day and helped to keep Janice's mind off of Hank. But it was difficult because almost everywhere they went around town, everyone asked after him. She gave a standard reply that he was in New York and would be home Sunday. If anyone noticed her lack of enthusiasm they didn't comment on it.

Dinner was more of an ordeal simply because Janice had no appetite so she forced herself to eat at least a small part of her food. Jean was eager to hear about the people in town whose names sounded familiar to her. Janice gave her as much information as best she could to fill the time before she could go home where she could languish in misery by herself.

It was almost seven when they came out of the café. And it had begun to snow, leaving a light dusting on the sidewalk and cars. If the news was correct, they should be getting some much heavier snowfall by latter this evening.

Janice and Jean parted company in the café parking lot. Janice's drive home took only a few minutes. Tonight she put her car in the small single car garage at the rear of her house. In the morning she would undoubtedly have to shovel a path to the garage and out to the sidewalk in front of her house. But she'd worry about that later.

Flash plodded his way up the stairs in her wake. She changed into a gray sweatshirt and matching pants before going back down to make a cup of tea. She had just turned on the television when there was a rapping on her front door.

Daring To Love

Glancing at the clock she noted that it was almost eight o'clock. Who would be coming to see her this late? Maybe Jean had run into a problem of some kind.

To her astonishment it was not Jean but Steven who stood on her doorstep. He was already covered in snow that was coming down quite heavily.

"May I come in?" he asked dryly. "This is not the night to be holding a conversation outside."

She couldn't very well leave him standing there in the cold so she held the door wide for him to enter. "What are you doing here, Steven?" she finally managed after closing the door behind him.

As he shrugged out of his overcoat he looked around the front room. He pursed his lips. "I was out this way on business and decided to come over and see you. I didn't realize that the weather was going to turn so nasty."

"They're predicting several inches of snow before morning. You won't be getting out of Black Horse this evening," she told him taking his coat to hang it up on the coat rack.

"I'm in no hurry. Is there a hotel nearby?"

"Sorry, no. Black Horse isn't noted for its tourism."

"That I can believe," Steven said a bit snidely. "Guess I'll have to bed down on your sofa then."

Janice sighed because he was right. There was nowhere in town for him to stay. There was a motel ten miles out of town, but in this weather it would be a dangerous drive. "Have you eaten?" she asked to change the subject.

"As matter of fact, I haven't. But I don't want to be any bother," he said strolling forward to look about the room.

"Come on into the kitchen and I'll see what I can fix. And you can tell me about this business away from the plush life in Denver," Janice snapped striding away.

Steven followed to lean against the door jam watching as she rummaged through the refrigerator. "Are salad and spaghetti okay?" she asked looking over her shoulder. He was dressed in a dark gray suit and as handsome as ever. Maybe he was a bit heavier than she remembered but still a good-looking man.

"That will fine. It is your own sauce?" he asked remembering what a good cook his ex-wife had been.

“Naturally. Please sit down. I’ll make some coffee. It won’t take but a couple of minutes.” They hadn’t seen each other in over three years and now they sounded so polite and proper. Janice wasn’t afraid of Steven but she was curious about his being here. He never did anything without a good reason and it usually was something to his benefit. Well, if the snow stopped in the morning there would be no reason that he couldn’t make it back to Denver or wherever he had to go from here.

“Tell me how your business is going. I was surprised to hear that you have your own company.”

“Why? Don’t you think I’m competent enough to run one?” Janice snapped for no good reason other than he was invading her space.

Steven glared for a second before schooling his expression to one of astonishment. “I don’t recall you being this touchy while we were married. Being on your own hasn’t been very good for you, Janice.”

“I’m just tired, Steven. I didn’t have a good night last night. And company was the last thing I expected this evening.”

“I was here earlier but you weren’t home. Out with someone?” he asked casually. He hasn’t been prepared for another man in her life and it could prove a problem with what he wanted to discuss with her.

“I had dinner with my new assistant, if you must know. She’s new in town and we took the grand tour before eating.” Janice placed a crisp salad on the table indicating where Steven should sit. As he began eating she dished up the spaghetti and put it into the microwave to heat.

“No gentlemen friends that I should know about?” he asked between bites of salad.

Janice eyes him suspiciously. “No one you need be concerned about. Why all the interest in my life all of a sudden? It’s not like you cared all the much about me when we were married.”

Somehow he managed to look hurt by her assertion. “I did love you, Janice. And I still care about what happens to you.”

She placed two mugs of coffee on the table and sat down opposite him. “If this is to be a trip down memory lane, I can tell you now that I’m too tired to make the journey. I know it’s early by your standards but by mine, it’s almost my

Daring To Love

bedtime. If it's okay with you, I'd just as soon postpone your talk until tomorrow." She really was tired too. Suddenly she felt as if all the energy had been drained out of her. *If* she could manage a decent night's sleep, she would be better equipped to handle whatever Steven was after. And he had to be after something. She didn't buy his story about being in the area and wanting to see her.

Steven sighed as he took a bite of the spaghetti. "To be honest, I've been up since four this morning and wouldn't mind an early evening either. As soon as I eat, I'll get my suitcase out of the car and bed down on the sofa."

"There's a small bathroom with a shower just off the kitchen. Help yourself if you want a shower." She went to the sink to pour out her unwanted cup of coffee.

"If it's okay with you, I'll wait and shower in the morning. I need sleep more than anything right now."

"Fine." Janice made sure that Flash's food and water dish were full just as the yellow tabby ambled into the kitchen. He stopped short when he saw Steven. Stepping forward he sniffed warily at his shoes and pant legs. Then stepping aside he went to his dish to nibble on some of the dry cat food.

Steven's look of distaste was plain. He didn't like cats or dogs. Forget birds too. Animals were messy and served no purpose as far as he was concerned.

Janice saw his look. "Don't worry about old Flash. He won't bother you, will you boy?" she addressed the cat as he wove lovingly between her legs. She gathered him up into her arms hugging him close against her chest. "He sleeps upstairs with me. Just put your dishes in the sink when you're done eating. I'll see you in the morning." With this parting shot she left the kitchen to retire to her bedroom.

Steven finished his dinner with a thoughtful expression on his face. He had the uncomfortable feeling that his mission wasn't going to be as easy as he'd expected. After three years alone he had assumed that Janice would be more than ready to accept him back into her life. Now he wasn't so sure. It was true that this house was nothing compared to what he could give her, but he had the feeling that she was comfortable here. And that made him think. Had he left this too late? He'd find out tomorrow. Surely she wouldn't turn him down. She had always been so sensible and eager to please him.

Autumn McCullah

As he stretched out on the sofa, spreading out the heavy comforter Janice had provided, he worked on his presentation for the next day. And that was how he viewed Janice, just as a business deal to be signed, sealed and delivered.

CHAPTER 12

By the next morning the snow had ceased and to Janice's relief the snowfall hadn't been as bad as predicted. Steven shouldn't have any trouble driving. Before going downstairs she dressed in jeans, a large warm green sweater and sneakers. It was seven-thirty and Steven was still sound asleep. She knew from experience that he was terribly grouchy if you woke him when he was this tired. It was one thing if he had an important meeting but another if it was his day off, not that he didn't usually work seven days a week, but it was usually done from home on Sundays. It was amazing how all of this information came back so easily after all this time.

Janice slipped into the kitchen to fix a pot of tea. The smell of the coffee last night had not set well with her. Maybe she was going to be like Sunny and have to give it up for the duration of her pregnancy? She really wasn't hungry so she put off fixing anything until Steven woke up.

As she sipped her tea, the phone rang. She only hesitated an instant before picking it up. She didn't want to talk to Hank, but on the other hand she wasn't ready to face her houseguest either. To her relief it was Megan.

"Hope I didn't wake you," Megan's cheery voice carried over the line.

"I was just enjoying a nice hot cup of tea. What's up?"

"Just curious about last night. What was Hank's reaction?" It had taken all of her willpower not to tell Max

about the baby. Everyone was so happy about her own pregnancy that she wanted everyone to be happy about Hank and Janice too.

Janice licked her lips. "Actually I didn't get to talk to him," she said. It wasn't a lie. She hadn't stayed on the line.

Megan could feel that something wasn't quite right. "Was he out? I thought you were going to leave a message for him to call you?"

Janice had to talk to someone. She could feel tears threatening to overwhelm her. "He wasn't alone, Megan. There was a woman in his room." There she'd said it.

Silence hung suspended on the line for several seconds. "Oh, Janice. There must be a good explanation for that. I don't for a moment believe that Hank would carry on with another woman behind your back. Why the man is besotted with you. We can all see it in his face when he looks at you or simply talks about you."

"She said he was changing so they could go out." Her voice almost broke on that statement.

"Well, were there other people in the room?"

"I don't know. I didn't hear other voices. It was after ten, Megan. I've been through this before with Steven. That's how I found out about *his* other woman."

"I'm sorry, that must have been painful. But I just can't see Hank betraying you like that. No! There must be another reason she was in his room. Just talk to him when he gets back. I'm sure it will be fine." If Hank hurt Janice, Megan would tear a strip off him that he wouldn't soon forget.

"You're right, I guess. Please don't say anything to Max about this. Hank and I need to talk. And I have another problem on my hands."

"What? Are you feeling okay?" Megan asked concerned for her friend.

"I'm fine. It's just that Steven showed up on my doorstep late last night. It was snowing so hard that I couldn't turn him away. He's still sleeping on my sofa."

"What does he want?" Megan asked suspiciously. She'd never met Steven but she had met the type and didn't trust him one bit.

Janice sighed. "I don't have the foggiest idea. Last night it seemed as if he wanted to stroll down memory lane."

"Has he changed in any way? Maybe he misses you?"

Daring To Love

Janice snorted. "Megan, he's married with a little boy. He has the big house, the family and the prestigious job. I don't fit into that picture in any way. And I don't want to. My life is here in Black Horse."

"Well, I guess you'll find out soon enough. I'll let you go now. But promise me you'll give Hank a good hearing."

"I promise. We have too much at stake now not to be adult about this," Janice said feeling somewhat better since talking to Megan.

"We'll talk later," Megan, promise before ending the call. She wished she could talk this over with Max but she couldn't, at least not yet.

Janice was about to lose patience. Steven had not gotten up until noon and then took a long hot shower and ate a leisurely breakfast. Then he insisted on seeing her office before they toured the entire town. By five o'clock she was ready to explode, but had to sit through a long dinner at the Appaloosa restaurant when Steven discovered they made the best steaks in town.

It was almost six thirty before they returned to her small house. She was tired; she was anxious for Hank's return; and she was in desperate need to send Steven on his way. All in all, this had been one horrendous weekend as far as she was concerned. Nothing had gone as she had anticipated.

As soon as they were back at her house and taken off their coats, Janice turned to face Steven. "Okay, why don't you just tell me why you're here?" she asked shortly. "I can't believe you are all that interested in Black Horse or that it's just to see me after all this time. You're not a sentimental man, Steven." After listening to him rattle on about the different businesses and buildings in town, she didn't trust him one bit. If he was here in Black Horse there had to be a very good reason.

Steven was momentarily taken aback. Janice had never spoken to him like this in all the time they'd been married. And he thought he had softened her up by showing an interest in this little town. But he rallied quickly. "I need someone to talk to."

Janice raised a brow. "Oh?"

“You’re not going to make this easy for me are you?”

“Steven, we are no longer married and I wouldn’t exactly consider us friends. If you have something to say, just please say it?” He was after something but she didn’t have a clue as to what it could be. And she wanted him gone before Hank arrived.

“Sharon and I have separated.”

Janice stared open-mouthed at her ex-husband, her eyes wide with surprise. This was the last thing she had expected to hear. “Why? You’ve been married less than three years.”

He ran a hand through his hair. “Our marriage was a big mistake. I should never have married her.”

Janice wasn’t quite buying that. Sharon was a beautiful young woman and had held down a responsible job until her marriage to Steven. He had been eloquent in his praise for her intelligence and social skills when he’d asked Janice for a divorce. Things couldn’t have changed that quickly in less than three years. “Why was it a mistake, Steven? When you asked for a divorce, you said that she was everything you had ever wanted in a woman. As I recall you were very explicit in your description of her virtues.”

“You want your pound of flesh, don’t you? Okay...leaving you was the worst thing I could have ever done. You and I had a good marriage going. You are an excellent hostess and homemaker. I was a fool!”

Janice frowned. “From what you said before, so was Sharon. And she is younger and much more beautiful,” she reminded him shortly. That part had only added more hurt to the other reason for his wanting out of their marriage three plus years ago.

Steven began pacing the living room. “You are a beautiful woman, Janice. I never said that you weren’t. You’re even more beautiful today.” And it was true. Why hadn’t he appreciated her natural grace and beauty before?

“If you don’t cut out the crap and tell me the real reason for your separation, I’m going to toss you out of here so fast you won’t know what happened?” He was laying on the charm and trying too hard to play the downcast husband.

“All right! I made a mistake about having a family; about the importance of kids. It’s not all it’s cracked up to be!”

Daring To Love

Janice just stared at him not sure she was hearing correctly. "What!"

"You wouldn't know what I'm talking about," he snapped. "The kid makes messes and is into everything. And Sharon spends so much time with him."

"She's his mother...of course she spends time with him. What did you expect, Steven? Babies grow up to be toddlers who are curious and do get into things. That's how they learn, by exploring," Janice said with a hard edge to her voice.

Steven snorted. "This from someone who has no children! If you had to live with it day in and day out, you'd be singing a different tune. It seems that everything revolves around the boy. He was sick running a fever and Sharon wouldn't go to the business dinner that had been planned for a month. The sitter could have taken care of him just as well. Sharon is my wife and her first duty should have been to my wants and needs."

It was all Janice could do to hang on to her temper. "It sounds to me as if Sharon is a loving and caring mother to your son. And I believe he does have a name, Steven. He's not *the boy*! His name is William I believe."

"Look, Janice. I didn't come here to argue with you or discuss the merits of Sharon's maternal skills. That part of my life is over, or will be once the divorce goes through." Steven stepped forward to take her hands in his. "I want what we used to have. I want you back in my life, Janice. I want it to be just the two of us together again with a big house where we can entertain. You used to love to cook and play hostess."

Janice tore her hands away from Steven. "Let me get this straight. All those years and I was considered a liability because I couldn't give you a child. But now that has transformed into an asset? I'm acceptable since a family is no longer a priority or a good thing?"

"Damn it, Janice. We belong together. You and I make a great team. Everyone always liked you...even the wives of all my business associates."

"Well excuse me if I don't feel flattered! Do you have any idea what you did to me when you told me that Sharon was pregnant with your child? Did you give that any thought at all? You have some nerve coming into my home now and expecting me to jump for joy at the prospect of being

allowed back into your life.” Janice paced the length of the room and back. She was so angry she wanted to hit something, that something being Steven.

“Don’t come onto me about being the injured party! You got the house in the divorce and sold it for a pretty bundle I’m sure. I admit I made a mistake. That’s a lot more than most men do,” Steven huffed in his defense.

“You’re not a man, Steven, you’re a weasel! You have a wonderful wife and son and you have just walked away from them because they no longer fulfilled your idea of the executive lifestyle. What did you have in mind when you talked about children? Were they just to be had to haul out to show off at the proper time and then hurried away to some unseen room until they were needed again? Children need parents who love them and give them not only clothes and food, but also their time. You have to give of yourself to be a parent, Steven. And I don’t think you’re capable of that!”

“What in the hell do you know about being a parent? I don’t see or hear any kids running around your house,” he bit out angrily.

“I have friends who have children and I see how they are with them. And I have a little more compassion and feeling where *kids* are concerned. You don’t have to have given birth to like or understand children.”

“No, but it sure helps to know what you’re talking about. How many times has a screaming kid wakened you during the night? Or how many kids have spit up all over a new shirt?”

Janice shook her head. How in the world had she ever been attracted to this man? How had she lived with him for over two years and not seen this side of him? “Maybe you’re doing Sharon a favor by divorcing her. I have a feeling that she and William will do just fine without you in the picture.”

“She won’t be doing as well as you think. She’s pregnant again and quite happy about it. Even my moving out hasn’t bothered her all that much. But I sure as hell won’t be there to hold her hand when this next kid is born. I might have to support it, but I don’t have to play the doting father,” Steven roared waving his hands in the air.

“Get out of my house! And don’t bother to come back. Ever. You won’t be welcome!” Janice had to grind her teeth together to keep from saying more. She walked to the

Daring To Love

front door but before she could open it the doorbell rang. She yanked the door open to find Hank standing there.

"I got in later than planned," he said ready to take her into his arms.

Steven walked up behind her placing his arm around her shoulders. "I'll stop in and see you when I'm in the area, sweetheart. Thanks for the accommodations," he said kissing her on the cheek before hurrying down the steps to his rental car.

"Who the hell is that?" Hank asked shortly. He had a sinking feeling he knew but didn't want to believe it.

"That is Steven...and it's not what he wants you to believe," Janice sighed stepping aside so Hank could enter.

Hank felt a building anger in the pit of his stomach. So that was Steven. Not on the phone again, but here in person. His first impression was that he was a nice looking man but getting a little soft around the middle. That was just a fleeting impression because all he could see and remember clearly was Steven's arm around Janice's shoulders. Everything else seemed to have receded from view. "Why is he here? Did his cell phone die so he made a flying visit to see his first love?" He was being unreasonable, but couldn't seem to stem the flow of angry words from his mouth.

Hank had never talked to her in this tone before and it momentarily shocked her into silence. But it didn't last long. She had done nothing to warrant this treatment. "He was in the area on business and stopped in to see me. He was part of my life, Hank. I can't just erase it as if it hadn't existed."

"Who does business on Sunday around here?" he snapped running a hand through his hair.

"He arrived last night if you must know." She had been about to ask him to sit but turned to face him instead. What was he implying?

"I assume that he didn't spend the night in his car and since there isn't anywhere close for him to stay, that could only mean that he spent the night here?" *He* hadn't been able to spend the night here, but her ex-husband could? Hank was livid. Part of him realized that he was being irrational but he couldn't seem to control his anger.

If he had not made it sound like an accusation it might not have angered her, but he had made it sound suspicious as if something might have been going on between

them. Or at least that was the impression she got from his tone and the look on his face. "As a matter of fact he did. The snowstorm had begun and it would have been too dangerous for him to drive. I hope you're not implying that he and I slept in the same bed. Because if you are, you're way out of line, Hank James."

"I only have the evidence of my own eyes, Red. What am I to think? You don't call me all weekend and then I come home to find old Steven sneaking out of the house," Hank hissed stalking about the room as if he wanted to hit something.

"What evidence? And he was not sneaking out of the house! He was leaving when you arrived. And this is *my* house. I will have whomever I choose stay here."

"Why didn't you call and tell me that he was here?" Even to his ears this sounded unreasonable, but Hank was beyond reason right now. It was one thing to say that he could be patient and wait for Janice to open up and tell him how she felt, but another to put it into practice, especially when there was an ex-husband back in the picture.

"It is none of your business," she stormed at him. "I couldn't leave him out in the storm. I couldn't do that to anyone."

"You could have called mom and dad. They would have taken him in for the night," Hank yelled back.

Janice just stared at him. "You would expect me to disturb your parents when I have a perfectly good sofa for him to sleep on? Besides it was quite late when he got here."

"How would you like to come home and find a woman leaving my house? You're the only woman in my life, Red."

Janice balled her hands into fists at her sides. His last comment brought back the reason she hadn't talked to him all weekend. He had the nerve to question her about Steven when he had a woman in his hotel room. "I don't want to argue with you, Hank."

"We are not arguing. We're having a discussion. And how long has this been going on with Steven? I know you haven't been sure of your feelings for me, but the least you could have done was tell me that your ex-husband was back in the running," Hank said louder than he had intended. He was hurt; he was angry; and he was afraid that his relationship with Janice was crumbling.

Daring To Love

“How long has what been going on? Just what did you think happened here last night?”

“How the hell should I know? But I can use my imagination. You’re a beautiful and passionate woman. That’s quite a lethal combination. Steven’s a man or so you’ve led me to believe and not one to pass up an opportunity.”

Now Janice was getting truly angry. How dare he imply something like that? “Let me get this straight. Just because a man may fancy me that automatically means I’ve gone to bed with him? That doesn’t say much about me, does it Hank?”

“So you admit that he fancies you?” Those words were all Hank had to hear to set him off on another tangent. “I don’t suppose it’s too much a stretch of the imagination to see that you two could have been meeting when you were in Sterling or Akron? Did you ever tell him about me? Or am I to be kept on the sidelines in case old Steven takes a walk again?”

“You’re way out of line, Hank,” Janice shouted. “I thought love meant trust, but you obviously don’t have any in me. But then maybe you should take a look at your own activities before you go placing blame!” She was almost shaking with anger and hurt. How could he possibly think she would be having an affair with both men at the same time? It was degrading and hurtful in the extreme.

“What the hell does that mean? You have been the only woman in my life since I left for California over a year ago. More fool me!” he said heading for the door.

She had to tell him about the baby. He was upset now but if he found out about the baby from Megan or Sunny, she didn’t know how he would react. “Aren’t you going to ask me about my doctor’s visit?” she said stepping forward.

“I have a feeling it’s no longer important.”

“I’m pregnant, Hank. I’m going to have a baby,” she said the words slowly watching closely for his response. What she got was nothing she had ever imagined.

Hank’s heart skipped several beats before he whirled to face Janice. He just stared at her for several seconds as the hurt and pain formed a large rock in his chest. “I suppose congratulations are in order. Steven must be pretty proud of himself and pretty happy about finally succeeding!” With

these words he slammed out the door, stomping through the snow to his car. Even as he pulled the car door closed behind him, he regretted his harsh words. Leaning forward he banged his head repeatedly on the steering wheel. "Way to go asshole!" he muttered into the cold silence of the night.

Hank opened the car door to return to the house when he saw the lights go out leaving the night darker than before. He sighed sitting back down in the car. Janice probably wouldn't open the door to him even if he pounded on it. And he couldn't blame her. In the past, like most other people, he'd made some really dumb mistakes. But this went beyond dumb into the realm of insanity. He needed a drink. He needed several drinks. With this thought, Hank started his car and drove to the other end of town.

Janice stood in the darkened living room. Tears streaked down her cheeks as she waited for the sound of Hanks return. She'd turned off the lights because she felt compelled to be covered in a blanket of darkness. Part of her mind willed Hank to return so they could really talk instead of throwing accusations back and forth. But the other part of her mind wasn't ready to deal with another confrontation right now. It was with a sinking heart that she registered the sound of his car as it drove away.

For years she had longed for a baby. Now she was pregnant and the father apparently didn't want her or the baby. "Way to go, Janice. You sure know how to pick your men," she cried hurrying up the stairs to her room. She had no idea how she was going to face tomorrow. But one thing she did know and that was she and her baby would do just fine...the two of them.

CHAPTER 13

Max was almost ready to go off duty when the call came in from the tavern at the south end of town. Webster's Bar had been there for as long as he could remember. If you wanted a beer, a game of pool or someone to talk to, Web's place was it. Ben was about the same age as Lucas James and had watched all the boys grow up into men. It was Ben on the phone now.

"Max, you got a problem here," Ben stated getting right to the point.

"Fight?" Max asked reaching for his hat.

"No, not yet anyway. Hank has been here for the past two hours. I've never seen that boy put down so much beer. He's going to need a seat belt to keep him on the bar stool pretty soon. He's not fit to drive, Max."

Max frowned. "What drove him to drink?"

"What else? It's a problem with his lady as far as I can make out. He's not too coherent," Ben chuckled.

"Don't let him go anywhere. I'll be there in a few minutes."

"I already have his car keys. He ain't going nowhere," Ben assured him.

"Thanks Ben. Willy, follow me over to Webster's. It seems that Hank is in no condition to drive," Max said picking up his hat from the file cabinet. "You can drive his car back here for the night."

“Sure thing.”

It only took them ten minutes to drive to the tavern. Max immediately spotted his brother slumped over the bar. This was not like Hank at all. Something was really wrong for him to drink like this. Ben tossed him the car keys as he approached and Max passed them on to Willy who gave him a salute before turning to leave.

Instead of taking a seat, Max stood next to Hank. “You trying to drink the state dry, little brother?” he said placing a large hand on his shoulder.

Hank turned to look up. He gave Max a sloppy grin. “I’m sure going to give it a try. Another drink for me and my brother, Ben,” he ordered his words slurred, his eyes slightly unfocused.

“I think you’ve had enough, Hank,” Max said quietly. “It’s time you went home.”

“Can’t go yet. I can still feel.”

Max put an arm around the younger man and pulled him to his feet. “The bar is closing and it’s time to leave. I think you’re numb enough for surgery without an anesthetic.”

Hank tried to pull away but he was too drunk to fight his bigger sober brother. “Don’t want to go back to that empty house,” he protested sagging against Max.

“You’re not going to your house. I’m taking you home with me.”

“Noooo... can’t face Megan!”

“Would you rather I took you home so mom can take care of you?” Max threatened.

Hank took a deep breath. “Megan,” he agreed and let Max lead him out of the tavern. “Mom would kill me if she saw me like this. You wouldn’t want that, would you brother mine?” he asked throwing his arm around Max’s neck.

It took Max several minutes to get Hank strapped into the car before he could get in himself. He had never seen Hank like this before. What in the hell could have happened to drive him to do this? As they pulled out of the parking lot, Hank’s head rested on the door window but Max knew he wasn’t asleep. He probably just couldn’t hold his head up anymore. Tomorrow he would undoubtedly wish he could get a head transplant.

“You going to be okay until we get to the farm?” Max asked. “Let me know if you feel sick.” He’d had to

Daring To Love

clean out the patrol car once before after hauling in a drunk and it wasn't one of his favorite pastimes.

Hank's head rolled to the left as he tried to focus on Max. He licked his lips. "I'm going to be a father," he announced. He blinked several times trying to keep the man at the wheel from moving. Or was he moving? He felt like crap.

"You're what?"

"Red and I are having a baby. You know, one of those tiny people that grow up big."

"So what in the hell did you think you were doing? Is this your way of celebrating the news?" Max snapped. There had to be more to it than Janice being pregnant. If he knew Hank, and he did, news like that would put him on cloud nine.

"I don't feel good."

"Big surprise. You haven't answered my question."

"NO! I don't feel good!" Hank grabbed at the door.

"Shit!" Max muttered as he quickly pulled the car off the road. He rushed around to the other side of the car to help Hank. They had no sooner cleared the car than Hank began toretch, his body becoming taut with each contraction. Max held him by the shoulders and placed a hand on Hank's forehead to keep him from falling. After a few minutes the retching stopped as Hank drew in large deep breaths.

"You ready to get back into the car?" Max asked rubbing Hank's back.

"Yeah," came the tired reply.

When they were back on the road, Max looked over at his brother. "What's going on Hank?"

"I made an ass of myself." The words were slurred and not very loud as Hank's eyes closed.

Max blew out a loud breath. "You'll get no argument from me on that point." The rest of the drive was made in silence except for the light snoring from the right side of the car. He picked up his cell phone to call Megan.

"Hello?"

"Hi Slim."

"Hi yourself, cowboy. Are you on your way home?"

"I'm about fifteen minutes away. And I'm not alone. I have Hank with me and he's in a bad way."

Megan frowned. "Is he hurt?" she asked concerned.

“Not the way you mean, but he’ll be hurting in the morning,” Max snorted. “He’s drunk as a man can get and in no condition to be alone.”

Megan was astounded. “Hank? Drunk? He hardly ever drinks. What set him off?” she wanted to know.

This was something Max preferred to tell her in person. “Believe me, Slim, you don’t want to know. I’ll fill you in after we get home. Get some dry clothes ready because I’m going to put him in for a long cold shower as soon as we get there.”

“Okay. I’ll get one of the spare rooms ready for him. Be careful,” she told Max as they ended the call. She had a horrible feeling that she wasn’t going to like the reason behind Hank’s drinking. If she wasn’t mistaken, it must have something to do with Janice. She frowned as she went to get things ready.

A short time later Max pulled into the drive. Megan had thrown on a coat and came out to help him get Hank out of the car. It took a couple of minutes before they could wake him up enough to get him to walk with them on either side to hold him upright.

Once inside, Max pulled off his overcoat, then his shoes and socks before removing his wallet from his pants pocket. Then he took a chair and placed it in the shower off the kitchen. He came back and placing Hank’s arm around his neck he half carried and half dragged him into the shower. When he was seated, Max turned on the cold water. Hank began cursing and thrashing around but Max wouldn’t let him out.

Megan was in the kitchen fixing some strong black coffee. She knew she had to let Max handle this, but she was dying to know what was going on. It was almost fifteen minutes later before Max came out of the bathroom leading a pale but somewhat less drunk Hank. As soon as he was seated at the table, Megan placed a hot mug of black coffee in front of him.

“Thanks,” Hank said without looking up. He felt miserable.

Max was so wet he might as well have gotten into the shower with his brother. “Can you watch him while I run upstairs and change?” he asked Megan who had taken a chair next to Hank.

Daring To Love

“Sure. He’s in no condition to go anywhere,” she said gently rubbing Hank’s back. It upset her to see him like this. He was one of her favorite people especially since he’d been so brilliant during the custody hearing with Victor Branchard right after Sunny and Zach had married.

“Something sure set you off,” she commented. “Want to talk about it?”

Hank shook his head. Now that some of the effects of the liquor were wearing off, memories were coming back; memories that he wasn’t quite ready to face just yet. He’d tried to numb himself so that he didn’t have to think, but it had been short lived. Now he glanced over at Megan noting her expanding abdomen. He gave her a lopsided grin. “I’m going to have a baby. But I’m an ass!” he confessed dragging his hands through his hair.

“Janice told you about the baby? I would think you’d be happy, Hank,” she told him totally confused.

“You knew?”

“She had dinner with the family Friday night. Sunny and I guessed. She was glowing, Hank. It wasn’t hard for us to miss.”

“Does the rest of the family know too?” Did everyone know before he found out?

“No, just Sunny and I. Would it matter?” Megan wanted to know. Something was very wrong here.

Max came back into the kitchen just then. “Would what matter?” he asked getting a cup of coffee.

“That the family knew about Janice’s pregnancy. Hank and Janice are having a baby.”

Max scowled looking down at his brother. “I know. He told me in the car on the way out here. He also said he was an ass.”

“You feel more like talking now, little brother?” Max asked taking a chair across the table from him.

Hank tried to raise his head but only managed slightly. He took a sip of the dark liquid. “Steven was there,” he stated as if that answered the question.

“He ex-husband was where?” Megan asked pointedly.

“At her house. He’d spent the weekend with he...at her house. What was I to think? He was calling her on the phone all the time too.”

“What happened?” Megan wanted to know. She sat back in her chair with a stern expression darkening her big brown eyes.

“We argued over Steven. When she told me she was pregnant I...I told her that Steven must be pretty happy. Not too bright, huh?”

“You did what?” Megan shouted. “Hank James, you must be the biggest ass to ever walk around on two feet! Do you have any idea what that must have done to Janice?” She pushed herself out of the chair to prow around the kitchen. She wanted to hit something and Hank was her prime target right now, so she had to keep her distance.

“Megan, love. This is between Hank and Janice.”

She stopped to glare at her husband. “You can’t believe that this is one of his more brilliant moves, I hope? Janice loves this idiot! Why should he think she’s been messing around with her ex?”

“How do you know she loves me? She’s never told me she loves me,” Hank said sullenly.

“Hank, it’s written all over her face whenever you’re together. When you walk into the room, she has eyes only for you. Her face is a walking billboard of her love,” Megan said a bit more softly.

“I’m going to die,” Hank groaned dropping his head into his hands. “It’s no more than I deserve. I couldn’t blame her if she never speaks to me again.”

“Neither could I,” Megan agreed.

“You know what mom and dad say? You broke it, you fix it,” Max told him. “The sooner you talk this out, the better for both of you.”

“But will she talk to me? Maybe I should call her now,” Hank said as he attempted to get out of the chair.

“Hold on, you lush,” Megan said pushing him down. “It’s too late to be calling anyone. And you’re in no condition to talk, especially to Janice.”

“Tomorrow will be better,” Max agreed with a grin at Megan.

“But will I be alive tomorrow?” Hank groaned.

Megan looked thoughtful for several seconds. “I have a remedy for hangovers. I think I have everything I need.”

Max moved to sit by Hank talking quietly as Megan worked at the kitchen counter. Neither man paid her much

Daring To Love

attention until she placed a glass with a green frothy concoction in front of Hank.

"You have to drink it all for it to work," she said softly.

Max looked up at her not sure why her brown eyes held such a wicked gleam. He was about to ask her when Hank picked up the glass and began to drink. He got about three quarters of it down before he replaced the glass on the table. He licked his lips a few times as if not sure about something. Then his face took on the same greenish hue as the drink.

"Oh...Oh...bathroom," he groaned.

Max helped him to his feet and into the bathroom just as Hank emptied the contents of his stomach into the porcelain bowl. When he was finished, Hank dragged in large gulps of air. "I think your wife just tried to kill me," he gasped. "If I'm ever stupid enough to do this again, take me home to mom."

Max laughed. "If I ever do this, *you* take me home to mom. I don't think I'd want to face Megan. Let's get you upstairs so you can get some sleep. You should feel a little better in the morning."

When they came out of the bathroom, Megan was leaning against the sink. She had a smug smile on her face as she munched on something out of a jar.

"Does a condemned man have a right to know what he just drank?" Hank asked with narrowed eyes.

"It's just a remedy I read about once."

"What was in it?" Hank pressed.

"Oh not much."

"What!"

"Three anchovies and a cup of pistachio ice cream. Nothing lethal," she shrugged before grinning broadly.

"You have a nasty mean streak, Megan James," Hank muttered as Max led him out of the room.

"Maybe, but you'll feel better later. We'll talk in the morning," she yelled at their retreating backs.

Hank looked at Max. "Why does she make that sound like a warning?"

Max grinned. His Megan might be small, but she was some woman. "I'd watch my back for a while if I were you, little brother."

CHAPTER 14

Hank warily made his way downstairs the next morning. His legs felt like they were made of jelly and his head had to weigh fifty pounds. He didn't know how his neck could hold it upright. Any sudden movement made him feel as if he was walking on a moving surface. He vowed never to touch another drop of liquor as long as he lived. If he lived, that is. That issue seemed still open to debate.

The smell of coffee drew him to the kitchen. The room was empty, but a mug stood by the coffee maker. Just as he sat at the table Megan came out of the laundry room carrying his freshly laundered clothes.

"You didn't have to do that," he said pointing to the clothes.

"Yes I did. We can't have Hank James walking around looking like a derelict. How are you feeling?" Megan had already talked to Sunny and the two of them were going to meet in town later to see Janice. She hadn't told Max because he would only tell her not to interfere. But Janice was her friend and she would need someone right now.

"Actually not as bad as I had anticipated. I've got the headache to end all headaches, but guess I'll live," he said watching her move around the room. "Did you try to kill me last night?"

Megan laughed. "No, but the idea did cross my mind," she said taking a loaf of bread from the cupboard before slamming the door.

Daring To Love

Hank winced at the sound. "Where's Max?" Fine brother he was leaving him alone with Megan like this.

"He left for work an hour ago. I'll drive you back to town later. Do you feel up to some breakfast?" she asked opening the refrigerator.

Hank shook his head. "I'll just have some coffee."

"How about a piece of dry toast?" she offered. "Hope you don't mind if I fix myself something to eat? I seem to be hungry all the time anymore," she commented as she pulled out a cast iron skillet and slammed it down on the stove.

Hank winced again. "A piece of toast sounds okay." Actually he was a little hungry, but not sure if he trusted Megan to cook for him. After that goop she gave him to drink last night, he was going to be a little cautious for a while around his sister-in-law."

"So, when do you plan on talking with Janice?" Not giving him time to answer she continued. "I cannot believe that you thought what you did! You are supposed to be an intelligent man. Did your brain go into hibernation last night? She was so happy about the baby and thought you would be too."

"Megan, I was jealous...okay?"

After removing her eggs from the pan she slammed it down on the stove again. "Janice is so crazy about you that she would never look at another man. You had no right to be jealous, especially over Steven. If she had been carrying a torch for him she would never have moved back here to Black Horse, but would have stayed in Denver to be near him."

"Then why has he been calling her? And why was he here in town?" Hank snapped. Deep down he knew that there was no way he could justify his actions last night.

"I don't know. But I do know that *he* was calling her, not the other way around. As to why he was here, you'll have to ask her about that. Maybe that was something you should have asked last night instead of flying off the handle," Megan said glaring at him as she sat at the table pushing a plate of dry toast in his direction.

Hank picked up a piece of the toast, turning it over in his hand to inspect it.

Megan allowed herself a small smile as she watched him before digging into her scrambled eggs. "It's just plain toast."

Hank glanced at her warily. "Can't be too sure around here," he said taking a bite. "What did you give me last night anyway?" There was a vague memory about ice cream, but he wasn't sure.

She swallowed a bite of egg. "Are you sure you want to know?"

"No, maybe it would be better to forget the whole thing."

They ate in silence for a while each lost in their own thoughts. Hank carried his plate to the sink and got another cup of coffee. He did feel a little better. Maybe he would live after all. "I really do love her," he said resuming his seat. "I think I drank last night to try to forget the hurt she must be feeling. And it's all because of me. I knew before I'd reached my car that everything I'd said was wrong. But I couldn't go back. All the lights in the house were turned out when I turned around. That's when I knew what an ass I'd been," he said quietly. "Believe me, I'm not proud of what I've done."

Megan reached over to lay her hand atop his on the table. "I know you love her, Hank. And I know she loves you. What you just told me is what you need to be telling her."

"You think she'll see me?"

"Well maybe not right away. She may need time to sort through everything. We don't know what Steven was doing there. Maybe the jerk upset her too. Did you ever think about that?" Megan had no idea why Steven would be in Black Horse. Janice had mentioned that he called a couple of times but hadn't elaborated on the subject. She hadn't seemed concerned about it so it couldn't have been very important to her.

"We have to get married."

"Whoa," Megan said raising a hand. "I wouldn't bring up marriage right away."

"But we're going to have a baby!"

"I know you are. But after what's happened, if you go to her demanding that you get married right away, she won't be sure of your reasons, Hank. Talk to her about your feelings and why you acted the way you did. Work all of this out before you approach the subject of marriage." Megan

Daring To Love

knew how she would feel under the same circumstances. Like most women she wanted to be loved and married because of who she was, not because she was pregnant with a child. Janice had one failed marriage behind her and was leery of taking that step a second time.

Hank covered Megan's small hand with his. "I hope my brother realizes how lucky he is to have married you? At least I know that one parent of my new twin nephews will know how to read."

Megan laughed. "Do you brothers ever stop cutting each other down?"

"This is our way of showing affection. Can you see us kissing each other like you women do when you get together?" Hank chuckled.

Megan gave this some thought. "No. I can't quite picture that. And what makes you so sure that I'm carrying two boys. We only know for sure that one is male."

"Call it male instinct."

"I didn't know there was such a thing. Anyway, I think it's a boy and a girl," Megan said firmly. She wasn't just saying that either. Since they had found out they were going to have twins, she'd had the distinct feeling that the other baby was a girl.

"How about a bet? If I win, you bake me a coconut cake every month for a year," Hank told her with confidence.

"And if I win?" Megan asked grinning.

"I'll wash your car every week during the summer. How about it? A bet?" he asked holding out his hand. "It's going to be two boys."

"Boy and a girl," Megan said shaking his hand. Then she stood to carry her dishes to the sink. "I'll expect the inside of my car to be cleaned too," she said smartly before leaving to change for the trip to town.

Megan drove him to the police station to pick up his car. After thanking Max and Megan for taking care of him last night he headed for his office. It was fortunate that he didn't have anything vital planned for today because he looked like hell and didn't think he was operating on all cylinders yet. His head still pounded, but not quite as badly as earlier in the morning.

He sat down behind his desk eyeing the telephone. Taking a deep breath he picked up the receiver and dialed Janice's work number. She picked up on the third ring.

"Wright Realty."

Hank heard the strain in her voice and was overcome with guilt. "Hello Janice."

Her indrawn breath said a lot. "I'm very busy, Hank."

"Please don't hang up, Janice. I need to talk to you. We need to talk. I can't tell you how sorry I am about my behavior last night," he began before she could cut him short.

"I'm serious, Hank. I have someone in the office and I can't talk. Please, give me some time...some space. You hurt me, more than you can imagine. I can't talk. Not yet."

Hank stared at the wall listening to the disconnect signal on the phone. Well what had he expected? *You act like the biggest jerk to ever hit Colorado and you think all you have to do is say you're sorry*, he muttered replacing the receiver. How much time was she talking about? How much space? And just what did that mean. He leaned back in his chair to stare at the rays of sunlight dancing on the ceiling.

Damn! If only he hadn't let his jealousy get the best of him last night! If only he hadn't stormed out of her house like an enraged maniac. Janice was going to have his baby. He was going to be a father. She had been married to Steven for almost three years and they hadn't managed to make a baby. But in a short time she was pregnant with his child. Hank wanted to pound his chest in male superiority, but that was childish. He still couldn't wipe the grin from his face as he pictured Janice getting rounder as the baby grew.

He had to tell his parents. Megan and Sunny already knew about it. Hank knew that they would keep quiet and let him do the telling. This was going to be his parent's grandchild and they had every right to know about it. Right now he couldn't talk to Janice and he had to talk about it with someone.

After leaving a message on his answering machine he closed the office to drive over to see his mom and dad. Once in the driveway, he turned off the engine and just sat wondering what he would say...and how he would say it. His dad never failed to give him good advice and he needed it today.

Daring To Love

When Hank let himself in through the front door, he heard laughter from the kitchen.

Nellie looked up from the paper in front of her when she heard someone enter the kitchen. "What happened to you?" she asked rising to her feet. She reached up to feel is forehead for a fever.

"I'm not sick, mom. I just had a late night."

"Well you look like hell," Lucas bellowed studying his youngest son. Something was amiss here.

"Thanks. That makes me feel better," Hank laughed but it had a hollow sound.

"I'll get you some tea," Nellie said pushing him down into a chair.

"Do you have any muffins to go with it," Hank asked hopefully. He was feeling more like food now.

"Mind telling us what's got you looking like the walking dead?" Lucas said folding and laying his paper aside.

"I'm in dire need of advice. I don't know of any way to say this but to just say it," Hank began. "Janice and I are going to have a baby." He watched as his parents looked at each other and then back at him.

"Congratulations, son," Lucas said clapping him on the back. "Jumped the gun a little here, but I know how much you two love each other." He and Nellie had done much the same thing before they were married so he really couldn't say much about that.

"That's wonderful, Hank. I assume there's to be a wedding in the near future then? Janice is a wonderful girl and we couldn't be happier to have her part of our family," Nellie said giving her son a hug. "I'll call Janice and..."

"No! Mom, there's more to it." Hank took a deep breath and related what had happened last night. He even told them about Max taking him home and about Megan. He didn't do anything to make himself look better because that would have been impossible.

When he was done, Nellie got up and started puttering around the kitchen slamming cupboard doors much the same way Megan had done earlier. Finally she cuffed him alongside his head. "Do you mean to tell us, Henry James, that you actually accused that wonderful girl of having an affair with her ex-husband? I cannot believe that any child of

mine could possibly be that stupid. Why a blind man could see how much she loves you!”

To Hank’s astonishment, his dad began to laugh.

“I don’t see anything funny about this, dad! I came here for advice and support,” Hank began.

“Hold on son, I’m not laughing at you. I’m laughing at the circumstances...the history,” Lucas said with a grin.

“You’ve totally lost me,” Hank snapped. “I don’t find anything humorous in these circumstances.”

“It’s the *James curse*, son,” Lucas said placing a large hand on Hank’s arm.

“Excuse me?” Hank asked incredulous. He’d never heard about this before.

“I remember my grandfather telling me about it and his grandfather had told him. It seems that when a James man finds his true love, there is always a rough patch before they find the true road to happiness.”

Hank looked at his mother. “Have you heard about this before?”

“A little...and it does seem to be true.”

“Look at Sunny and Zach. He stuck his foot in his mouth and had to work hard to win the lovely lady. Don’t forget Max and Megan. He almost didn’t win that battle,” Lucas related.

“Adam and Chloe didn’t have any problems,” Hank pointed out.

“Oh yes they did,” Nellie pointed out. “I think you were away at school so you wouldn’t know about it. Chloe had a trip to Europe planned when she met Adam. She was going with some girlfriends from college and he didn’t want her to go. As much as told her she couldn’t. Well, Chloe told him where he could go and she went on her trip.”

“Oh,” Hank conceded. Then he looked at his dad. “What about you two? I can’t believe you have ever had any serious problems in your relationship.”

“We had some difficult times in the very beginning,” Nellie admitted.

“Your mother can be pretty stubborn at times, Hank,” Lucas said with a glance at Nellie.

“Me!” she sputtered. “Tell him about the beginning of our courtship. Then let him decide who is the stubborn one.”

Daring To Love

Lucas winked at Hank. "Your mother was friendly with this young man."

"I had known Lester all my life. We'd grown up living next door to each other all of our lives," Nellie interrupted.

"Do you want me to tell this or not?" Lucas groused.

"Just don't leave out any important information."

He scowled, but resumed his tale. "We had been seeing each other for a couple of weeks when I asked her not to see Lester anymore. It seemed a reasonable request to me under the circumstances. But Nellie hit the ceiling."

"I did no such thing. I merely told your father that Lester was a good friend and I did not turn my back on friends."

"She was mad as hell and told me I accepted her as is and that included her friends. It took a few weeks apart, plus the realization that what she felt for that other guy was nothing compared to what she felt for me, to bring me to my senses. But it was a sorry and lonely few weeks I can tell you now," Lucas said covering Nellie's hand with his. "I don't know what my life would have been without her in it."

"I feel in love with your father the first time we met. Of course I didn't want him to know that at the time. It makes a girl feel vulnerable somehow. Maybe that's part of the problem you have with Janice, Hank. And don't forget that she's been through a very unhappy relationship."

"I guess what we're trying to tell you, son, is that if Janice is the right woman for you, everything will work out. Patience is what you need right now," Lucas said in gentle understanding.

"That's difficult to do after the way I hurt her. I just want to hold her and make everything better." Hank's first instinct was to rush over to see Janice; to force her to listen to what he had to say. He hadn't meant what he had said last night. He had realized how wrong he was before he'd even reached his car. Unfortunately once something is said, you can't take back the words once they leave your mouth. Too bad he hadn't had a monitoring device on his tongue last night to keep him from saying those hateful things to a woman who didn't deserve such treatment.

Nellie patted his hand. "Why don't you start by sending her some pretty flowers with a note enclosed. Let her know that you regret what you said and still care for her. But don't push the issue right now."

"But she doesn't have any family here to lean on. I have you," Hank insisted.

"What do you mean she doesn't have any family here? If I know the women in this family, they will all be paying a call on Janice to see how she is doing. They won't let her be alone in this, Hank." Lucas adored his wife and his daughters-in-law. They were all caring and loving women who supported each other. Janice had already been accorded family membership because of Hank and they all knew it was just a matter of time before it was official.

"They'll probably get together, make a doll in my image and stick pins in it," Hank groaned. "And I couldn't fault them for doing it either."

"Don't be so hard on yourself, son," Lucas laughed. "You're probably condemning yourself harder than anyone else would. Do as your mother says about the flowers. And some candy might be nice too."

"You can't force her to come to you. The next move will have to be hers. She's told you she needs some time. So give it to her." Nellie stood to clear the table. "And for heaven's sake, when you do get to talk to her, use that brain of yours to filter what you say before it leaves your mouth!"

"You make me feel so much better, mom," Hank groused, but spoiled it with a grin.

"That's what mothers are for," Nellie laughed as she went to load the dishwasher.

Jean had just left to go over to the café to get some lunch when Megan and Sunny entered the real estate office. Janice had returned to her desk with a cup of hot tea. Her smile of welcome was forced and she hoped she could keep up a strong front.

"Was that your new assistant?" Sunny asked having seen the woman leaving as they approached the office.

"Yes, that's Jean. She's just gone to lunch. What are you doing in town today?" She had an idea. They knew that Hank was due in last night and would want to know how he reacted to her news.

Daring To Love

“We came to see you actually,” Megan said lowering herself into a chair beside Janice’s desk.

“We know what happened last night,” Sunny continued. “For a smart man Hank can be so dumb! I could just box his ears!” She had been astonished when Megan had called her to tell her what had happened. If anyone else had told her the story, she wouldn’t have believed it. Hank couldn’t be that stupid. But apparently he had been last night.

Janice took a deep breath. She’d cried last night until there were no more tears. The sky was just beginning to lighten before she’d finally drifted off into a restless sleep. Somehow she had made it to work on time to be here to show Jean the office and get her going on her duties. “Did Hank tell you all about it?”

Megan and Sunny shared a knowing look. “Not at first,” Megan began. “Janice, he knew he was wrong to say what he did, but he was so jealous that he couldn’t stop himself.”

“He had no reason to be jealous, especially of Steven of all people,” Janice bit out. It still hurt to hear him accuse her of having an affair with her ex-husband.

“Men and women in love are not always reasonable. He’s taking this pretty hard. Max had to bring him home last night because he was roaring drunk,” Megan related. She was still mad at her brother-in-law, but was determined to help him win back his ladylove.

Janice looked at Megan as if she’d grown a second head. “Hank doesn’t drink?”

Sunny laughed. “Well he did last night. And from what Megan told me, he was in pretty bad shape. Max had to put him under a cold shower to help sober him up.”

Hope flared briefly, but then caution dampened the emotion. “He called me this morning. I couldn’t talk to him yet. At first I was so hurt that I didn’t know how I was going to handle it. But now I’m just plain angry. Did he tell you what he accused me of?” Janice asked as she rose to pace behind her desk. “The fact that she was repeating herself didn’t register. “How could he ever think such a thing? Doesn’t he realize that I could never make love unless I was in love with a man? And if I had truly loved Steven I would have fought to save my marriage. Since I didn’t do that, I must not have been as much in love with him as I’d assumed.”

Megan and Sunny didn't say a word. They just sat listening and grinning.

"What?" Janice snapped uncomfortably. "I fail to see anything humorous in all this."

"Janice, were you listening to what you just said?" Sunny asked softly not the least bit offended by her tone. She, probably more than anyone, could appreciate Janice's mental upheaval. She had been reluctant to tell Zach about her true feelings at one time.

"Sunny's right," Megan joined in. "We know Hank loves you. Whenever you're around he has eyes only for you. And you're just the same about him. You've just admitted that you love the man. So what are you going to do about it? If you haven't told that poor man that you love him, you're long overdue." Megan had come close to walking away when her relationship with Max had hit a roadblock. But thank goodness she had stayed or she wouldn't have her wonderful marriage today.

Had she said that? Janice thought to herself. It was true she did love him. But if he really loved her, why had he jumped to the totally wrong conclusion when he found out about the baby. She sat back down in her chair. "I don't know what to do. You don't know how much I want to believe Hank, but it's not that easy after last night. If he'll just give me a little time to myself," her voice trailed off as if she'd run out of steam and words.

"The longer you put off talking to him, the more your imagination will work as you go over and over what happened," Megan said shifting in her chair trying for a more comfortable position. She was getting larger with the twins and it was getting more difficult to stay in one position for any length of time. "How much time are you looking at here?"

"Just a few days or more. I don't know! My life was so uncomplicated before he stormed back into it!"

"You mean plain, boring and uneventful," Sunny stated firmly.

"I never complained," Janice said in defense of her former lifestyle. But she knew that Sunny was right.

"No you didn't," Sunny agreed. "Now we'll leave you to your work. And if you need to talk, we're just a phone call away. And Janice, he needs to know how you feel about him. Women aren't the only ones who need to hear the words."

Daring To Love

Megan stood with a sigh. “Don’t hesitate to call any time of the day or night, Janice. We’re here for you if you need to vent.”

Janice felt close to tears. She hadn’t known these two women very long, but the three of them had forged a warm friendship in that time. “I appreciate what you’re trying to do. I really do. You’ve given me something to think about.” She walked them to the door and stood watching as they turned right and walked out of sight. Slowly she retraced her steps back to her desk.

CHAPTER 15

Three days. It had been three full days since Janice had seen Hank. Oh, he had called her at the office where she'd supposedly been too busy to talk; and at home where she had let her answering machine pick up. He had come over to the house twice, but she hadn't answered the door. The second time she'd been next door visiting with Galen. When he had knocked on Marion's front door, she'd hurried out the back. Apparently he had stayed and played with Galen too because it had been a half hour later before she'd heard his truck leave. Perversely, she had been hurt that he hadn't tried to see her again and relief that he was leaving.

Yesterday he'd sent her a dozen long stemmed red roses with a note asking her to call him. He'd signed it "with love". She'd left them at the office so she wouldn't see them at home where she was more vulnerable and might give in and call him.

Christmas was just around the corner and Nellie had called her this afternoon to invite her over Christmas Eve and for dinner the next day. Janice had already bought several presents for each of the James children. She found the cutest little stuffed goat in a catalogue that sang Jingle Bells. Naturally that was for Kelsey. For the older children she got computer games and some really nice sweatshirts. It had been

Daring To Love

fun shopping for Zoe and Galen because she was a sucker for baby toys.

She thought about the things she'd bought for Hank. While in Akron one day she'd come across the most beautiful emerald green sweater and knew it was made for him. She'd also gotten him a nice watch because she'd noticed that the one he wore most of the time was badly scratched.

Jean had gone over to the café to grab a sandwich to bring back for lunch later. Janice was leaving for Sterling and wouldn't be back until around four this afternoon. Her new assistant was proving to be a joy to work with. Not only did she know the real estate business, but she was so pleasant and always seemed to be happy. Janice had tried her best to keep her own upset from showing through during the day but she knew that Jean was aware of the trouble in her relationship with Hank.

It was almost four thirty and Janice was tired from the long drive. The sky had turned dark around one and someone had told her that they were predicting more snow later in the day. It had started to come down just as she arrived back in Black Horse. With a sigh of relief she parked her car and headed for her office.

She opened the office door and immediately stopped short. The vase with the roses still sat on the file cabinet behind her desk, but now there were flowers of all kinds on every flat surface. There were several vases filled with a variety of cut flowers; there were pink roses, peach colored roses, white roses and her favorite yellow roses. A huge vase stood on the floor beside her desk filled with brightly colored gladiola. But her attention became riveted on the shiny silver bucket filled with, what had to be, several dozen blue roses sitting in the center of her desk.

Jean looked up from the file she'd been working on. "Looks like a funeral parlor in here," she laughed. "Janice, you have got to talk to your young man. He must have bought out every florist within a hundred mile radius. Well don't just stand there. Read the cards. I've been dying to know what he has to say."

"That man is crazy," Janice muttered crossing the room to her desk. "If he thinks he can make amends with flowers he had better think again." But even as she was

thinking the words the wall of ice she'd tried desperately to wrap around her heart began to melt. What was she going to do? Only last night she'd given some thought to opening another branch office in Sterling and moving because it would be so painful to see Hank everyday. And Black Horse was a small town and their offices weren't far from each other so there was a good chance that they would bump into each other. Now she didn't know what to think...or do.

The card with the gladiola said simply *I love you!* That's what each card said as she made the rounds of the various vases. She saved the silver bucket and blue roses until last. *I'm so blue without out. Peter Pan.* Janice drew in a shuddering breath as she sat down. Tears filled her eyes and she made no attempt to hide them. Silently she handed the card to Jean.

The older woman grinned as she laid the card down on the desk. "Oh, your young man has got it bad, Janice. I know I'm new around here and I don't know everyone yet, but something tells me that you will regret it if you don't talk to Hank." Jean had been told she was a good listener, but it was up to the other person to speak up. This was especially true since she hadn't known her new employer all that long.

Janice dabbed at her eyes. "You're right. He might be an idiot, but he's *my* idiot. He's probably at his office," she said reaching for the phone. Before she could pick it up, it rang startling her.

"Wright realty," she said a second later.

"Janice, thank god you're in the office!"

It was Chloe and she sounded upset. Hank. "Has something happened to Hank?" Janice gasped clutching at the receiver.

"No, it's Lucas. They've rushed him to the clinic. Mom was pretty upset. She thinks it's his heart."

"Lucas? But he's so healthy and robust," Janice replied.

"Everyone is meeting at the clinic, but I had to wait for the babysitter to get here. I knew you'd want to know," Chloe said softly. She knew how much Nellie and Lucas meant to Janice.

"I'm leaving right now," Janice told her before hanging up. She repeated what Chloe had told her and asked Jean to lock up. After grabbing her purse she rushed out of the office without a second thought. In the summer it would

Daring To Love

have been a nice walk over to the clinic, but in winter it would be a cold one. She drove as fast as the road conditions would allow and made it in less than ten minutes.

She saw the family gathered at the far end of the hall when she entered through the automatic double doors. They were all facing the other way and didn't see her approach. Janice had eyes only for Hank who stood with his back to her. Silently she made her way to his side, slipping her hand into his giving it a squeeze.

Hank knew instantly who had taken his hand. He turned to look down at Janice. Her smile was tender as she looked up at him. Bending down he pressed his lips to hers. "Thank you for coming."

"Chloe called me. Do they know anything yet?"

He shook his head. "Mom's in with him now. They're doing all sorts of tests. I got here just as they arrived and he didn't look good." He drew her hand up holding it against his chest. "I never really thought about mom or dad dying. They've always been so full of life and love."

"You don't know that he's dying, Hank. Lucas is strong and he'll fight whatever this is."

Hank drew her hand up to his lips. "I've missed you."

"I've missed you too."

"We need to talk about what happened."

"You're right, we do. But not right now. It's enough that we're together. We need to be here for your mother and the rest of your family," Janice told him quietly as she nodded to Sunny and Zach as they came down the hall accompanied by Megan. They had the furthest to drive so were the last to arrive.

"Where's Max?" Megan asked looking around.

"He's in with mom," Hank said releasing Janice's hand long enough to give his sisters-in-laws a hug. "I wish someone would come out and tell us something. Adam is in there too. You'd think he would tell us what's going on."

"They'll tell us when they can," Zach told his youngest brother. But he was more shaken than he'd let on although he was sure that Sunny understood. All the James boys were close to their parents and shared a special relationship with their father.

It seemed like an eternity before Max emerged through the swinging double doors that led back to the emergency room. Megan rushed to his side. He pulled her close as he faced the rest of the family. "Dad is resting comfortably now. Mom won't leave his side and Adam is talking with the doctor."

"Is it his heart?" Zach wanted to know.

Max shook his head. "They've ruled out his heart. Thank goodness it wasn't a heart attack. Dr. Ballard thinks it's his gall bladder. They're going to run an ultrasound in about half an hour."

"Is he in any pain?" Sunny asked. Lucas had come to mean a great deal to her since she'd first met him. It hurt her to think he could be suffering in any way.

"Not now. He was in quite a bit of pain when they first brought him in, but he's resting easier now. Oh, and he doesn't want anyone to know about this," Max told them with a grin. "As if we ever keep any secrets in this family."

"He just doesn't want you to worry," Megan replied looking up at her husband. Then she grinned. "If it was one of us he'd be mad as hell if we didn't tell him."

"Besides we couldn't let mom go through this alone. Go back in there and tell him we're all out here waiting to take him home," Zach said half in jest. If only it could be that easy?

At that moment Adam joined their group. It had been a long time since Janice had seen him in his white lab coat. Somehow it made all of this seem more real. "They're going to be taking dad down for the ultrasound in a few minutes. See if you can get mom to go to the cafeteria for some tea. She's more shook up than she wants anyone to know. It will do her good to be with you, even if you are a motley looking group." He was quick to see the strain on each face and in the tense posture of everyone present.

"Whenever I can think up a good reply to that remark, big brother, you'll hear about it," Zach told him. "Right now it's a little difficult to think."

Sunny put her arm around his waist. "Dad is going to be fine, Zach. We are not going to celebrate Zoe's first Christmas without her grandfather!"

"Yes ma'am," Zach said pulling her into his arms. Lord how he loved this woman! Fifty years with her wouldn't be enough.

Daring To Love

Adam went back into emergency and returned about ten minutes later with Nellie. Janice took one look at her and knew she was doing her best to put on a brave front. She and Sunny stepped forward at the same time to take her in hand.

"Mom, let's go get a cup of tea. The test will take some time and you need to sit down for a while," Sunny said putting her arm around her mother-in-law.

"I should stay here in case they need me," Nellie began.

"I'll tell them where you are, mom," Adam said. "Go with the rest of the family and sit for a bit."

"Adam, if it's his gall bladder will Dr. Ballard operate?" Nellie insisted on knowing. Over the years she and Lucas had handled cuts and a couple of broken bones while the boys were growing up. But the only other illness had been when she had to have her appendix removed about ten years ago. Lucas had never been in the hospital as a patient before.

Adam shook his head. "He'll need a surgeon, mom. They'll have to transfer him to Sterling."

"But that's so far," Nellie protested.

"Dad's not in any pain right now and it would be by ambulance so they would keep an eye on him. If it comes to that, I can ride along with him. Okay?"

Nellie looked skeptical, but she finally nodded.

"I'll be with dad. You get something to eat and some nice hot tea. And that's doctor's orders," Adam told his mother as he leaned down to give her a kiss.

Forty-five minutes later they returned from the cafeteria. Zach had managed to get Nellie to eat half a sandwich and drink some tea. But no one could make her relax. Only good news about her husband could do that.

Fifteen minutes later Adam came out to join them. "It's his gall bladder all right. He has quite a few stones. Dr. Ballard wants to move him as soon as transportation can be arranged. He's contacting Dr. Castor right now about doing the surgery as soon as we get to Sterling."

"Can I see him?" Nellie asked looking up at her son.

"Sure. You can stay with him until we're ready to leave."

"How long will he be in the hospital?"

“Mom, if all goes well, he’ll be ready to come home tomorrow evening,” Adam told her.

She blinked. “So soon?”

“With the new methods today they don’t make big incisions, just three small ones in the abdomen. The recovery is a lot quicker. Dad will be up and chasing you around the kitchen table in no time,” Adam laughed to ease the tension. What he told her was true, up to a point. There were cases when they had to revert to the old method that required a very long incision and a much longer recuperation period. But his dad was in excellent health and he would hope for the best.

Hank looked down at Janice who still held his hand. “Mom, Janice and I will drive you to Sterling and stay with you.” He felt Janice’s hand tightened on his and loved her small smile of approval.

Nellie smiled and held out her hand to him. “I’ll be ready to go as soon as your father is.” With that she followed Adam and the doors closed behind them.

“You know that mom won’t rest tonight,” Sunny said. “She’ll need something to keep her occupied. Why don’t I run over to the house and get her knitting and the book she’s been reading?” Everyone knew that Nellie kept her book on the table by her chair in the family room and her current sewing project in a canvas bag on the footstool.

“I wish I could go with them to Sterling, but the babysitter can only stay until eleven tonight,” Chloe told Sunny. If it was a weekend she knew Susan’s mother would let her stay the night since they lived right next door. But even if it was a weeknight and school was out for the holidays, Susan had to be home by eleven.

“Look,” Hank began. “We know that dad’s condition is not as serious as we had assumed in the beginning. Janice and I will take mom and call you when dad goes into surgery.”

“And when he’s done and back in recovery,” Janice finished. As much as she wanted to talk to Hank, being with Nellie took top priority right now. They would have time later, after Lucas was back home.

In the end they took Janice’s car because it had more room and Lucas would be more comfortable on the journey home. Nellie had her book and knitting in a flowered canvas bag, but she was unusually quiet during the hour plus drive into Sterling.

Daring To Love

When they arrived just behind the ambulance with Lucas, Dr. Castor had everything ready so that his patient was immediately whisked away and prepped for surgery. Nellie was dismayed because she had not been able to see her husband so Hank went to find Adam who arranged for his mother to see Lucas before they took him upstairs to surgery.

Nellie looked a bit pale and shaken as they took Lucas down the hall and through the thick double doors that said *HOSPITAL PERSONNEL ONLY*. "Come on, mom, let's go get something to eat," Adam said placing an arm around her shoulders.

"Oh, I don't want to be away in case they need us," she protested.

"They won't call us until after the surgery and they have my beeper number too. Besides we have to go upstairs to the surgical waiting room. That's where they'll be looking for us. We have at least two hours. We'll just get something in the cafeteria and then go directly upstairs," Adam said taking her elbow firmly.

"Go with Adam," Hank insisted. "Janice and I will go to the waiting room now." This would give him some time alone with her, or at least he hoped that this time of night there wouldn't be anyone around. If there was someone in the waiting room, he'd find somewhere quiet where they could talk for a while.

As he and Janice took the elevator up to the third floor, he reached for her hand. When she didn't pull away he felt comforted by the fact. And she had come to the hospital to be with him. He hoped he wasn't reading more into this than there truly was. He was relieved to see that the waiting room, decorated in soft shades of blue and green, was empty. Hank led her over to a blue-green patterned sofa.

"I've missed you more than you can ever know, Red," he said putting an arm around her slender shoulders. Suddenly the full force of the situation hit him. This woman was going to have his child. A surge of masculine pride and sense of ownership filled him. No matter what had happened; no matter how much of an ass he had made of himself, this woman and the child belonged to him.

Janice looked up into his dark brown eyes seeing the sincerity of his words reflected there. And there was something else...a hunger, a need that had been denied these

last days. "I've missed you too, Hank," she replied. No matter what had happened, she couldn't lie to him. "Your flowers are beautiful. But there are so many of them! You're crazy, Peter Pan!"

"Crazy about you. I wanted to put some beauty back into your life after what I'd done." The local florist had thought Hank was a mad man when he had all but emptied her store. The blue roses and one other large arrangement had been sent from Akron. That had cost him plenty, but money was no object in this case.

Janice's eyes misted over. "You hurt me," she said on a sob as heartache, frustration and anger overwhelmed her. "I tried calling Friday," she began as her voice broke. "A woman answered." Anger was directed at Steven and his ploy to disrupt her relationship with Hank; heartache and frustration with Hank and his harsh assumption about her and Steven.

Hank frowned. "A woman? I don't understand. Are you sure you had the right room?"

"She said I did. You were changing clothes so *you* could go out." Her voice broke again on the accusation.

"The only people I was with that Friday was Bert Grafton and his wife." He looked thoughtful for a second. "That bitch! Look Janice, it wasn't what you think. We had gone to dinner and the waiter spilled some coffee on me. Bert and Claudia wanted to go out for a drink, so we went up to my room so I could change. I took a quick shower. You must have called while I was in the bathroom because I swear I never heard the phone ring. And she never said a word about any call. Neither did Bert for that matter."

"She did offer to take a message," Janice said softly as hope swelled within her once again.

"Well, she didn't say anything about someone on the phone. To tell the truth, she was a bit put out because I wasn't fawning all over her. I pity Bert if that's the way she acts around other men. I made it plain that my heart was engaged elsewhere and that I wasn't interested in her charms...as limited as they were," Hank said harshly. He could gladly strangle that pushy bleached blonde. He cupped Janice's face in his large hands. "Please say you believe me, Red. I can't go on like this without you."

Daring To Love

“Hearing a woman in your room was as painful as the horrible things you said about Steven and me,” she whispered as her eyes glistened with moisture.

Hank pulled her onto his lap and into his arms. “I know, Red! You don’t know how badly I wish I could take back everything I said. If there were any way I could I’d do it in a heartbeat. But you can’t erase words once they’re out of your mouth. If it makes you feel any better, I’ve never been so miserable in my entire life. Without you life seems to have lost its luster.” Right now he felt about one inch tall. When he thought about the way he had acted when she’d said she was pregnant, he could kick his own butt from one end of Colorado to the other. “Darlin’ I don’t think a bigger fool than me has ever walked the earth.”

Janice sniffed into his shoulder. “Well that’s one thing we can agree on,” she said before breaking into tears. She sniffed a couple of times. “How could you possibly think that I was sleeping with Steven? What kind of a woman do you think I am?” she asked thickly.

Hank raised a hand to brush the hair from her cheek. “You’re absolutely perfect! I never meant those words, Red. Even as I said them I knew they weren’t true. Maybe it was frustration because you wouldn’t marry me. You have never said that you love me either. That didn’t do much to bolster my self confidence where you’re concerned.”

Janice heard the hurt, the disappointment in those last words. All fight went out of her as he wrapped her arms around his neck. Maybe Megan and Sunny were right. A man needed to hear those words as much as a woman, especially if he was a warm, loving and sensitive man like her Hank. She’d been so concerned about protecting herself from being hurt that she hadn’t really given any thought to how her actions were making Hank feel. “I do love you,” she said softly.

Hank pulled her closer, holding onto her as if he had no intention of ever letting her go. And that’s exactly how he felt. “God, but I love you, Red. And I love our baby!”

She cupped the side of his face with a trembling hand. “I know this pregnancy is a complete surprise and not planned, but I’m so happy, Hank. I have part of you growing inside of me. This was something I had given up on a long time ago.”

"The timing is perfect, Red. Whenever we have a child will be the perfect time. I don't know why you got pregnant now, but you've made me very happy." And it was true. He had always loved his nieces and nephews and assumed that he would have some children of his own one-day.

"Dr. Polk said that tension and stress could play a large part in not getting pregnant. When we made love getting pregnant was not an issue because I didn't think it was possible."

"So no stress about it," Hank finished for her.

"Yes. When he told me we didn't have to do any further tests because I was already pregnant, I didn't believe him. It was too wonderful to be true. Those were words that I had never thought to hear." She was thirty years old, divorced and had accepted the fact that she would never have a child. Even now it seemed like a dream.

"How have you been feeling, Red? Any morning sickness?" Hank asked looking into her beautiful blue eyes. They were still misty but the tears had stopped.

"Just a little but nothing to complain about. Actually I feel great. Well, maybe I'm a little more hungry than usual and a nap in the afternoon now and then sounds pretty good. Hank? What is your family going to say about this? Sunny and Megan know, but what about your parents?"

He gave her a bright smile. "Mom and dad already know and they're thrilled to know that there is another grandchild on the way."

"You told them?"

"I was desperate for advice," he shrugged. "I might be a grown man, but mom and dad are great listeners and give great advice if asked. All my brothers have gone home to them at one time or another. Guess we always will," he said kissing her neck.

"That's nice," Janice said softly.

"The kiss or the advice?" Hank asked threading his fingers through her long hair.

"Both. The relationship you have with your parents is wonderful. I just don't want them to think badly of me because of the baby and..."

"Red, believe me, my parents are delighted. The fact that we're not married yet isn't an issue with them. They know these things happen. It's not like we're just out of

Daring To Love

school. We're adults and are ready to take responsibility for our actions. And the first thing we're going to do is get married. I bought that house for you which is why nothing has been done to furnish it properly because I want you to make it our home." He had a bed and his desk but the rest of the house stood empty. Even the kitchen had very little in it except what could be put into a microwave oven.

"Oh Hank!"

"Marry me, Red? Let me love you and take care of you and our children. I'll even learn to grill like dad." He raised her face to look into her eyes.

Janice saw the hope, the love and the yearning in his eyes. She was so filled with happiness that it robbed her of words for several seconds. Never had she dreamed she would find so much love after her divorce. "Yes! Yes!" she gasped kissing his chin before claiming his lips. This was where she belonged. This was the man she was meant to spend the rest of her life with. The kiss deepened as they celebrated their love and the knowledge of their future life together.

CHAPTER 16

The sound of a cough, actually several coughs, and each one louder than the first made Hank aware that he and Janice were no longer alone. Reluctantly he raised his head to see Adam and his mother taking seats across from them. Adam was openly grinning while Nellie was chuckling as she made herself comfortable.

“So, when is the wedding?” she asked getting directly to the point. It never even dawned on her not to ask. She knew these two people loved each other and with a baby on the way they would want to be together.

“Nellie, I hope...” Janice began but Hank’s mother cut her off.

“I think it would be nice if you would call me mom like the rest of the family, Janice. And please don’t feel for one moment that because you’re pregnant that Lucas and I think less of you. We were young once. Raging hormones, both male and female, can be difficult to control especially when true love is involved. Lucas and I sort of anticipated our wedding day by a month or so. Oh how I adored that man! He was so dashing, funny and so incredibly handsome. To me he has only become more handsome over the years.”

Hank stared at his mother in disbelief. He could barely believe what she’d just said about her and dad. It was difficult to imagine your own parents making love. Oh, you knew they did it or you wouldn’t be around. It was just something that younger people indulged in. Almost as soon as

Daring To Love

this thought crossed his mind, he discarded it as being naive in the extreme. He glanced over at Janice and realized that when they were older, when their children were grown and married, that he would still love her and want her as he did today. It was as simple as that. He grinned.

"Red has finally agreed to marry me," he said getting to his feet. Janice stood with him as Nellie stepped forward to hug her soon to be daughter-in-law.

"Congratulations," Adam said stepping forward. He slapped Hank on the back before leaning down to give Janice a kiss on the cheek. "I hope you know what you getting into with this clown?"

"Hey, I've had a difficult time already," Hank protested with a laugh. "I don't need my own brother putting any ideas into her head.

"She is probably already very aware of all of your bad habits," Adam chuckled.

"I do not have any bad habits unlike my older brothers," Hank stated taking a stand in front of Adam.

Nellie shook her head. These boys of hers never could turn down a chance to rib each other no matter what the situation. Her smile was warm and full of love as she looked at her two sons. They were a close loving family and she considered herself extremely blessed. She and Lucas were proud of their sons. Each had chosen a wonderful woman to share their lives with. Now they were all instilling that sense of love and family in their own children.

"He has an ego the size of Texas," Janice chimed in as she led Nellie over to the sofa to sit. "Is it just a male thing or does it run in all the James men?"

Nellie patted her hand. "I think it's unusually strong in our men," she said softly, but her eyes were laughing.

"Ego has nothing to do with it," Hank said sprawling in a chair. "We James men are perfect specimens of manhood. Women clamor for our attentions and aspire for the coveted position as wife."

Nellie cocked a brow.

Janice just stared. "Buffalo chips!"

"I beg your pardon?" Hank and Adam echoed. Hank stood next to his brother as they flexed their muscles and pounded their chests.

Nellie snorted as she reached for her knitting. "Pay no attention to them, Janice. If you say anything more you'll likely damage their fragile egos." She knew they were acting so silly to keep mind off the surgery. It worked up to a point, but nothing could keep her from thinking about what was going on down the hall. "Now tell me, since you have agreed to marry my son, have you decided on a date for the wedding?"

"We haven't discussed that yet," Janice said looking up at Hank.

"As soon as possible," Hank replied. Now that she had agreed he wanted to get married as soon as possible. He'd waited so long to make her his wife that he was impatient to make it official.

"Christmas is just a few days away. I think we should wait until after the New Year," Janice said. "Don't forget we want Lucas to be well enough to enjoy the day."

"If all goes as Dr. Castor anticipates, dad will be as good as new with in a couple of weeks. With this procedure the recovery time is dramatically reduced. He'll be his usual boisterous self by Christmas," Adam said encouragingly.

"We could have a New Years wedding!" Nellie proclaimed laying her knitting down in her lap. "We could have it at the house or I'm sure Sunny and Zach would let us use the ranch house. That is unless you want a big church wedding?"

"A small family wedding sounds wonderful, Nellie...mom," Janice told her. "But the New Year doesn't give us much time to plan."

Nellie waved aside her concern. "Once the rest of the family gets involved, we can arrange a grand ball if that's what you want. I'll call Chloe and the other girls in the morning and get them working on it. If it's okay with you?"

Janice's eyes filled with tears.

"Now no tears," Nellie said squeezing her hand. "You're as good as a James already and we take care of ours. Lucas will be so pleased when we tell him the news. Adam, when will your father be able to come home?"

"They'll keep him tonight and should be released in the morning. He'll have to be careful about any heavy lifting for a while. And the grandkids won't be able to jump all over him. But other than taking it easy for a few days, he should be able to resume his normal activities," Adam told her. He

Daring To Love

could see that she was now more relaxed. The fact that Hank and Janice had resolved their problem had gone a long way to help. Now his mother had something else to think about besides the surgery.

Hank was also aware of the change in his mother. She loved nothing more than to plan family activities and a wedding was a favorite of hers.

Nellie nodded. "Good. You'll be hearing from the girls later and can make arrangement to get together to make plans." Her knitting forgotten she chatted about the coming wedding and what had to be done.

They spent the better part of the next hour planning. Hank sat by Janice holding her hand. They were so close he could feel her thigh pressed against his; he could smell the floral scent of her glorious red hair. What he wanted to do was carry her off to some secluded spot, slowly undress her and make love. But that was out of the question so he had to settle for just being with her.

For her part, Janice had felt a bit overwhelmed at the prospect of a wedding just a little over a week away. But after watching and listening to Nellie talk about Lucas, she knew beyond any shadow of doubt that marrying Hank was right.

Lucas had been home for two days now and was doing fine. Nellie was having a difficult time keeping him down. He took her hovering with a smile knowing how much of a scare he had given her. All of the family had been over to see him several times.

Janice and Hank had finally found time to go out to dinner tonight. It was the first time since the trip to Sterling they had been able to find time alone. The women in the James family were a power to be reckoned with once they embarked on a project. Hank had spent the past two days clearing up some work so that he and Janice could have a few days for a honeymoon. They were going to spend it at the house. They had agreed that what they wanted was just some time alone and at the house they would have privacy and be able to plan for their future together.

When they arrived back at her house, Janice didn't have to ask Hank to come in. As if by mutual consent they entered the small house, softly closing the door behind them effectively closing out the rest of the world.

Hank took her into his arms. "I've wanted to do this all evening," he said claiming her lips. His tongue lightly brushed her bottom lip as he drew her close against his body. One hand worked the clip loose at her nape releasing her hair to cascade down her back. As his mouth opened over hers she reached up to wrap her arms around his neck pressing closer to his warmth.

"Stay with me," she breathed into his mouth. She wanted him in her bed upstairs. She wanted to feel his naked body against her bare skin; to feel him inside her. After her disastrous marriage to Steven, she had never thought she would relish making love as she did now. And it seemed an eternity since they had been alone like this.

Hank cupped her bottom pulling into his heat. "I plan to stay with you the rest of my life, Red. If you keep that up, we won't make it upstairs," he laughed as she began to fumble with the buttons on his shirt.

Her smile was saucy and full of love as the shirt parted to reveal a broad muscled chest with its matt of dark hair. She ran her hands down over his chest to rest on his belt. "My sofa is pretty comfortable, but I don't know about making love on it," she grinned up at him. Then she gasped as he swung her up into his strong arms.

"Maybe we should find out!" In several strides he covered the distance to the sofa and lay her down before coming down beside her.

He was laying half over her and Janice could already feel the promise tension build in her belly. Just the feel of him fully clothed pressing her down into the soft cushions aroused her, elicited an ache that only he could assuage.

"I love you," Hank groaned pressing his lips to her throat.

"I love you," Janice echoed running a bare foot up the back of his leg. She shifted so that he lay cradled between her legs. She arched up so that he could reach behind her to undo the zipper on the back of her dress. She marveled at his expression as he slowly peeled the garment down over her shoulders. It still amazed her that she could arouse such longing in a man, and that it was Hank James made it all the more special.

Hank buried his face in the valley of her breasts. When he turned to trail kissed over the swell of each tender orb she rocked beneath him. He just reached for the front

Daring To Love

clasp on her bra when the shrill peal of the phone stilled his hands.

Janice frowned at the interruption. If that were Steven she would give him a piece of her mind. "Maybe we should just let it ring," she suggested. She really didn't want to move.

Hank groaned. "I can't stand an unanswered phone. Besides, the family knows we're together tonight. It might be one of them," he said pushing up and off the sofa.

Janice straightened her dress the best she could before reaching for the phone on the table by the sofa. "Hello."

"Janice, it's Marion. Look I know it's late and I hate to disturb you but Galen is sick and crying for you."

"What's wrong with him?" Janice demanded at the same time turning so Hank could zip up her dress. She knew that he had been running a little fever this morning when she'd gone over to see him. But it hadn't been enough to keep him down.

"I think it's just because he's cutting those molars. I've given him something to ease the pain, but he's so restless and keeps asking for you. If you could come over and get him to sleep he'll probably sleep the rest of the night," Marion told her.

Janice could hear Galen crying in the background. "I'll be right over," she said replacing the receiver. She turned to Hank. "It's Galen. He's running a fever and asking for me. I have to go see him."

"We'll both go. I didn't get to see him today." Hank quickly straightened his own clothing. He had been spending quite a bit of time with the little boy, almost as much as Janice. He had become more than a little attached to Galen over the past months, but that wasn't hard to understand. He was a loveable little character.

As soon as they walked into Marion's living room a few minutes later Galen reached out his little arms for Janice to take him. "Momma," he cried all but jumping into her waiting arms. Janice cradled the little boy close feeling the heat from his fever as it radiated from his small body. She pressed her lips against his forehead. He relaxed into the comfort of her arms.

Hank rubbed Galen's back with a large gentle hand. "Hey, big guy. We hear you don't feel so good." Galen's red tear-strained eyes and the unhealthy red cheeks concerned him, but he knew from past experience with the kids in his family that this would pass. It sure was hard on little ones when their teeth came in. Absently he wondered why it wasn't so painful when children cut their adult teeth because it sure was an unpleasant experience for babies.

"Daddy!" Galen cried grabbing at Hank's hand.

Hank's heart contracted. This baby needed a family; he needed a mommy and daddy of his very own. And if he had his way that is exactly what Galen would have.

"His temperature has come down some since I gave him the medicine. He's just fighting sleep now," Marion said indicating that they should sit. "I hated to disturb you, but he wouldn't stop crying for you. I was afraid that all that crying would make him sicker than he is already."

"I'm glad you called, Marion," Hank said watching as Janice soothed Galen with her voice and her touch. "This little guy has come to mean a great deal to Janice and me." Galen gave him a sleepy smile. His crying had ceased as he rested comfortably in Janice's arms.

Marion didn't say anything, but she read something in Hank's eyes that pleased her very much. She knew about their wedding on New Year's Eve and couldn't be happier. Somehow she felt certain that this was going to be a wonderful year for Galen too.

Within minutes Galen was sound asleep with his head resting on Janice's shoulder. They waited another ten minutes before she carried him to his bed. Once she laid him down she rubbed his back until he sighed, as his breathing became slow and steady. Then she and Hank returned to the living room. "Don't hesitate to call if he wakes during the night," Janice told Marion. "He felt much cooler when I put him down so hopefully he'll rest for the remainder of the night."

Janice had to get out of the house before she made an ass of herself by crying. Every time Galen called her momma it tore at her heart. She all but ran out the door and across the lawn.

Hank knew what was bothering her and followed closely on her heels.

Daring To Love

When they were safely inside her house she turned to him. "He calls me momma!" she wailed before the tears started. "He's so...little...and needs..."

"He needs us, Red," Hank said holding her against his chest. "He needs a mommy and daddy all of his own. And I think we need him." He gently placed a finger under her chin to force her to look at him. Her eyes were wide with wonder. He grinned down at her loving this woman who would be his life partner and the mother of his children.

"Are you serious?" she gasped. His smile was answer in itself. Janice wrapped her arms around his neck hugging him close.

"We can talk to Marion in the morning. I'm sure Judge Walters will be happy to handle the paperwork for us. This would mean that we'll have two children in a short time, Red." He swung her up in his arms and headed for the stairs. "Are you sure you're up to taking on a husband and a son all at once?"

She cupped the side of his face with her hand. "With you by my side I can take on anything. You really are a very special man, Hank James. Galen already loves you too. It felt special when he called you daddy, didn't it?"

Hank stopped by the side of the bed. He let her slide down the length of his body to stand in front of him. "Yeah, it did. And since he's not feeling well I think I should stay here tonight just in case he needs us again. What do you think?" he asked nuzzling her neck as he slid the zipper of her dress down.

"I think that would be a wise precaution just in case." Her hands hurriedly worked to remove his shirt and undo the belt at his waist.

Clothes flew in all directions in their haste to be together. At last they tumbled onto the bed. Hank leaned over her studying the beautiful picture she made with her glorious red hair fanned out on the pillow, her beautiful body pressing close to his. He was on fire wherever her silky smooth skin touched his.

Janice felt complete and a sense of coming home as Hank looked down at her.

Hank placed his hand on her still flat abdomen. "My baby!" he whispered in awe. "You don't know how happy I am that you're carrying my child, Red. I know this wasn't

planned and it's that last thing you ever expected, but I'm glad."

"What about your feelings on a ready made family, Peter Pan? You're going from being a bachelor to husband and father in short order," Janice asked kissing his bare shoulder. "Are you ready for sleepless nights, dirty diapers, teething and all the rest that goes with having a family?"

His grin turned a bit smug. "It sounds wonderful as long as you're by my side...day and night." His lips kissed a slow tingling path down her throat and across each breast.

Janice arched up to press closer to his long hard body. This was where she belonged...with this man tonight and for the rest of her life. The quiet and darkness of the night engulfed them as they reaffirmed their affections and a promise of a loving future together before falling into a contented sleep to dream of the wedding to come.

EPILOG

One year later the James families crowded around the huge Christmas tree in Sunny and Zach's great room. Lucas sat in a recliner by the fireplace watching his offspring and their children. The entire family was present with four new additions this Christmas.

Max and Megan were there with the twins, Lucas Maxwell whom everyone called Luke and Alexandria Nellie that had been shortened to Alex. They were eight months old and crawling. He watched as Max jumped up to retrieve Alex from pulling up on the Christmas tree. Lucas grinned. Max had taken to fatherhood as if he'd been born to it. Now that had surprised him. Oh, he knew Max loved his nieces and nephews, but he hadn't expected him to be so happy about changing diapers.

Hank had lost his bet with Megan about the gender of the babies. He had dutifully washed her car each weekend this past summer except for the time Janice had to be rushed to the clinic when her contractions came on suddenly. She had given birth in less than an hour after arriving there. Lane Zachary James had been in a rush to join the family and, according to Hank, had announced his arrival with a great pair of lungs. Galen at two years old was talking up a storm. Now that was

one happy little boy! And did he adore his four-month-old baby brother!

Sunny and Zach had just announced that they were expecting another baby next summer. Eighteen month old Zoe and Galen sat playing with some building blocks. Whenever there was a family get-together those two were inseparable.

Lucas looked up as Nellie sat on the ottoman. "If this family keeps growing, someone is going to have to build a bigger house to hold all of us," she laughed. "What are you doing sitting here looking so smug about?"

He reached over to take her hand in his. "Did you ever think when we were first married that we would be this rich with family?" he asked indicating the noisy room. "I am so proud of our boys. They are all fine men, husbands and fathers."

Nellie squeezed his hand. "Why should that surprise you, Lucas James? They had the finest example a child could have while they were growing up." She smiled as Megan pulled Luke away from Pete and Josh who were playing some board game. "They have certainly given us marvelous daughters to love."

"The James men might have a love curse in the beginning of a courtship, but it's well worth the battle in the end. All you have to do is dare to keep loving." Lucas brought Nellie's hand to his lips.

"I love you," they said before settling back content to watch their growing family, listening to the laughter and sounds of happiness in the warmth of the love that filled the room.

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