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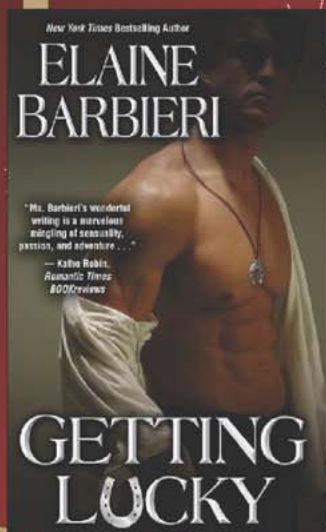
Holiday Party Humiliation

And The Handsome Hero That Saved Me

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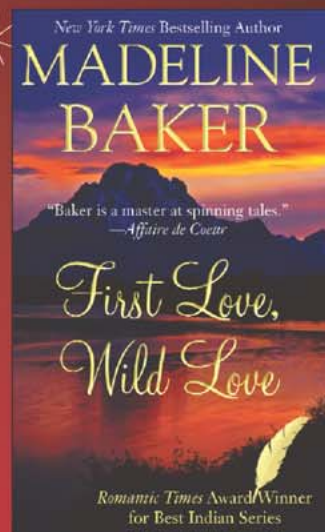
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Holiday Party Humiliation



And The Handsome Hero That Saved Me

“Tonight should be about an eighty dollar tip, don’t you think, Angela?” Janie asked. She lit the candle in the middle of the table centerpiece. “The Kendall holiday party is always one of the big ones.” She blew out the match.

“I guess.” I lit a candle, too, and moved on to another table.

Normally, I enjoyed working these fancy holiday office parties. I was trying to build my own catering business, so it was a great opportunity to pick up some pointers—like these centerpieces; they weren’t big enough for the table.

If it were my party, I would have put out some fresh greenery, something more elegant, something more noticeable than the typical candle in a vase. But I loved the festive nature of these events. There was excitement in the air. I enjoyed seeing everyone dressed up, and of course I loved the big tips all the servers got. But I hated the Kendall holiday party. More specifically, I hated Jake Kendall.

Jake and I had gone to high school together, and I had no idea how rich his family really was. I just thought he was the most handsome boy in school.

Looking back, he was way out of my league, but somehow I didn't realize it. We had a few classes together, and he seemed nice enough. But I clammed up every time I was around him.

So, when the winter formal dance was coming up, I wanted to go with him. I was too nervous to ask, though. So I had my friend Serena ask if he'd like to go with me.

His response? He laughed.

"Angela James? Why would she think I'd go out with someone like her? Short, round, and homely trailer trash? Just another gold digger."

And of course Serena had asked him during lunch so his whole table of friends heard the whole thing. The story was repeated around school, and by the end of the day everyone knew I had asked him out, and he had just laughed and insulted me. I stayed home sick for two days afterward, I was so humiliated.

Even eight years later, I still felt the stab of embarrassment.

I was tempted to ditch the Kendall holiday party like I did the year before. I didn't want to see the vile man. But this year, I really needed the cash. So, I took a look at the seating chart and made sure I wasn't waiting on the head table where Jake was sure to be sitting with his father and the other company bigwigs.

I also double-checked my hair and makeup in the bathroom. I'll admit it; I looked better than I did in high school. I had grown a few inches and slimmed out quite a bit. I liked how my hair looked up in a twist, and the black slacks and white tuxedo shirt flattered my figure.

I usually had a few party guests flirting with me by the end of any party, especially with the booze flowing. But still, the prospect of facing Jake Kendall left me feeling like the silly high school girl he had turned down.

It might have helped if I had a boyfriend who thought I was wonderful, but no. It was singlesville for me, as I worked sixty-hour weeks,

trying to get my catering business off the ground. And given that I was waiting tables on a Saturday night to supplement my income, it was pretty clear my life wasn't exactly where I hoped it would be at twenty-five.

It was my job to fill the water glasses before the guests arrived, so I hustled back to the dining room and filled all of the glasses with water in fifteen minutes. I was finishing the last table when I saw Jake and his parents arrive. I noticed he didn't have a date, but I'm sure he could've brought anyone he wanted. He was still gorgeous, and I'd heard his father had him rising through the ranks of his company.

I slipped back to the servers' area and took a long sip of soda to calm my nerves.

"Ready to rock 'n roll?" Janie asked.

I forced a smile. "I'm ready to get this over with."

With five courses to serve, and water to refill, the night flew by. I spotted Jake several times working the room, but he hadn't seen me. We'd gotten through the main course without incident, and it was time to serve dessert. I had another hour on the clock, and I'd be on my way home with eighty bucks in my pocket and five more hours in my paycheck.

A man at a table signaled me for the coffee I was holding, so I squeezed through the crowds, now starting to mingle again as people waited for dessert.

"Can I have a refill?" he asked.

I poured his coffee. "I'll be right back with your dessert." I grabbed a big tray of cake slices and held it over my head as I worked my way back to the table. I set it on a butler and started passing it out to the guests. That's when I noticed Jake had joined the table and was talking to a beautiful blonde woman. My stomach did a giant flip-flop and I thought maybe he wouldn't recognize me. I mean, I did look different.

I placed cake in front of a young woman who looked kind of familiar. She grabbed my arm. "Hey, you went to Riverview High, right?"

I forced a smile. "Yes, I did. I'm sorry, I don't remember you."

"Mindy Green." She smiled at me, looking even more spectacular than

she did when she was one of the cheerleaders in school. "I forgot your name."

I sighed. *Of course she forgot my name. She didn't even know it in high school.* "Angela James."

That got Jake's attention. He looked at me, and a smile slowly unfurled on his face. "Angela James? You're the one who asked me to the winter formal senior year." He laughed and his eyes flicked up and down me. "Maybe I would have said yes if you looked like this in high school."

I ignored him, and continued passing out the cake.

He jabbed his thumb at me. "You should have seen her in high school. She was short and fat. Kind of dumpy." He laughed again, and I was pleased to see no one else was joining him.

"Cake?" I asked him.

"But you probably still live in that trailer park, right? I mean, here you are waiting on me. Looks like things haven't turned around for you. Too bad, some people just aren't born lucky."

I couldn't help it. I dropped the cake in his lap.

"Oops," I said. "You forgot to tell everyone how clumsy I was, too."

I gathered my tray and rushed back to the serving area. I was too scared to see his reaction. I pressed my eyes shut and tried not to cry. He'd humiliated me again, and I was probably going to lose my job. He was right; I hadn't been born lucky. I was not a girl who got breaks in life. Everything had come hard for me. And things were about to get a lot harder.

"Are you okay?" Janie asked, rushing up to me.

I shook my head, and she squeezed my hand.

Sure enough, five minutes later Chuck, the very humorless manager of the banquet hall, was looking for me. He crooked a finger at me and walked me over to the table where Jake was making a great show of brushing off his suit coat. Apparently, I hadn't gotten his pants dirty, just the bottom of his jacket.

"I want her fired," Jake said, his nose in the air. "She purposely dumped cake on me."

I opened my mouth to protest, but I
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NOTICE OF ACTION

First Lady Pearls Now Being Released

2,500 Strands of Perfectly Hand Matched, Individually Knotted, Polished Genuine Glass First Lady Pearl Necklaces will be released within the next 72 hours

By: B. Michael John, Media Services

You can now get your very own strand of First Lady Pearls.

Yes, just like the pearls that Jacqueline Kennedy, Laura Bush and now Michelle Obama have been wearing for years... the most famous piece of jewelry a lady can get.

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From Jackie Kennedy to Michelle Obama, every First Lady has loved the genuine look of pearls.

Right now 2,500 beautiful, genuine glass pearl necklaces are being released in honor of our new First Lady and fashion icon; Michelle Obama.

Each First Lady necklace has 61 hand-tied perfectly matched and polished 8mm genuine glass pearls. A hand-knot is placed between each pearl by Lindenwold Fine Jewelers' renowned craftsmen, just like the finest of all pearl necklaces. A hand-tied knot is placed after each pearl is strung for perfect spacing and in case for some reason it should break, all of your pearls do not go flying to the floor.

Each necklace has a perfect-size lobster claw clasp so anyone can easily put it on and take it off.

Each necklace will be released in a beautiful gift box, accompanied by a genuine Certificate of Ownership.

So whether you are keeping this gorgeous strand of First Lady Pearls for yourself or giving it as a gift, you will have a Certificate of Ownership for each one you receive.

These First Lady Pearl necklaces are nothing short of fabulous!

They easily rival the beauty, color and shine of \$40,000.00 pearl necklaces.

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You will feel like a million dollars each and every time you put them on... \$17 is such a small price to pay to feel that beautiful, classy and sexy. Such a small price to be among the most elite in the country... such a small price to feel like a true unstoppable woman.

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There really is nothing to lose. Lindenwold Fine Jewelers offers a complete, 100% money-back guarantee on absolutely everything they sell.

So if you're not 110% satisfied with your First Lady Pearls, simply return them and Lindenwold Fine Jewelers will return 100% of your purchase price with no hassles, no questions and no worries.

I must warn you, other Americans will be jamming the phone lines trying to get their hands on a First Lady Necklace like this.

So respond now by calling 1-800-343-0452 or by returning the special coupon attached.

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Lindenwold

Holiday Party (Continued from page 3)

how could I? There were eight witnesses staring at me. I had purposefully dumped it on him.

Chuck looked at me, waiting for an explanation.

A man sitting at the table cleared his throat. "Actually, sir, I bumped her arm as she was serving the cake. It wasn't her fault that she dropped it." The guy looked up at Chuck. "It wouldn't be fair to fire her when it was my fault. I'll pay to have Mr. Kendall's jacket cleaned."

"You didn't bump her! She dropped it on me, you all saw it, didn't you?" Jake asked the people sitting at the table.

Silence.

Then Mindy said, "I didn't really see what happened." She looked away from him. No one else said anything.

The manager frowned and sighed. "Angela, I want you to apologize to Mr. Kendall and have his jacket cleaned. Deliver it to him, as well, when it's ready. And be more careful next time. I think that should make things right." He looked at Jake, who gave him a little nod.

I gave Jake a big fake grin. "I am so sorry, sir."

I wanted to hug the sweet man who had taken the blame, but I just waited for Jake to hand me his jacket, and I slowly walked away from the table, holding my head high—even though I wanted to curl up into a little ball under the table and cry.

I think the trailer park comment was the one that really hit my heart.

My mom raised us three kids on her own. Jake probably had no idea what it was like to visit the food pantry on occasion to make ends meet while we waited for Mom's next check. She didn't make much in her secretary job, but she'd always shown us lots of love.

She still lived in that old trailer. She was proud of it. She liked owning something that was her own. I had moved out, hoping for my own little piece of something. So far, it was just an apartment, but I was proud to be making it on my own.

TL I couldn't let stupid Jake Kendall
6 take that feeling of pride from me.

He was born into wealth. He did nothing to earn it. He was lucky, that's all. Just like he said, some people are born that way. He hadn't earned anything. I had, no matter how little it was.

I gathered my things and punched out. As I walked out to the parking lot, I was surprised to bump into the cute guy who'd taken the blame for me.

"Hey, I can't thank you enough for doing that. I don't know what came over me."

He laughed. "I do. He's a jerk. Any one of us at the table would have liked to do the same thing. So really, I should be thanking you. I'm Steve Cooper," he said, holding out his hand. "I've been waiting out here for you, actually."

My cheeks felt hot. I cleared my throat, surprised at how much he was unsettling me. "Well, as you heard, I'm Angela James, former chubby high schooler." I shook his hand, feeling defensive. Jake had really made me look bad.

"And I had a raging case of acne in high school. But I hope that wouldn't stop you from grabbing a drink with me right now." He smiled at me and I wondered if he'd been overlooked in high school, too. *Tough loss for those girls!*

But a drink? Right then? I felt tired and grubby and I really wanted to sink into a hot tub. However, I was intrigued by my handsome hero. It's not every day someone comes to your rescue like that. I'd be a fool not to go.

I brushed the falling snow off my jacket and smiled at him. "Yeah, I'd love to join you."

We found a small pub and I didn't even feel self-conscious that I was still wearing my work clothes. Steve was the total opposite of Jake. We shared a few drinks and a lot of stories, until I started yawning. It was late and I was beat.

"I'm sorry. It's been a long day," I said, covering my mouth.

He reached over and squeezed my hand—instant goose bumps. We had a connection, that was for sure.

"Well, then I really appreciate you joining me," he said. "Would you like to get together again? Maybe next week?"

"Just as long as its not another

Kendall function," I joked.

He grinned. "I promise."

The week buzzed by and I was excited to see Steve again.

We talked a few times during the week and picked out a movie to see that Saturday. The only downer was knowing I'd have to see Jake again to give him his cleaned jacket.

Maybe I could just drop it off without seeing him, I thought.

Late Friday afternoon, I brought his jacket to Kendall headquarters hoping to leave it at the front desk and scoot out unseen.

"I'd like to leave this for Jake Kendall, please," I told the receptionist.

Her eyes widened and she held up one polished finger. "Just one minute." She picked up the phone and punched in a few numbers. "That package you were inquiring about has arrived." Then she dialed another number. "I think she's here."

My heart hammered in my chest. *Who did she call?*

She smiled at me like a friendly grandmother and I wondered what was up.

A few moments later, Jake strolled out of the big doors behind the receptionist's desk.

"Angela, how good of you to drop off my jacket. I do hope you regret your actions at the party. You're lucky I asked the manager not to fire you."

I forced myself not to roll my eyes. "Oh, I have regrets, that's for sure," I said. *Like ever seeing anything in you!*

He leaned back against the receptionist's desk and gave me the once over. "So, I'm sure you're still interested in a date with me. I suppose we could work something out. Just so happens I've got nothing going on this weekend. I'm sure you don't either, unless you're working another banquet." He chuckled to himself. "How does tomorrow night sound?"

My mouth dropped open, but the words I heard weren't mine.

"I don't think so. She's actually going out with me this weekend." Steve stood there with his arms crossed.

Oh, the man is handsome, and rescuing me once again! My chest

tightened just looking at him.

The receptionist sat up in her seat, her head bobbing back and forth like she was watching a tennis match.

Jake looked at Steve and laughed. "You're going out with her? You did hear everything I said about her back in high school, right? The trailer park and everything. I was just asking her out to be nice. I don't usually go slumming like that."

I looked down at my feet, but then I held my head high. My mother worked hard and so did I. Jake was the one who should be ashamed, not me. He was a bad-mannered jerk who happened to be born to wealthy parents. He was a spoiled brat who'd never grow up. And if Steve had a problem with my background, then he wasn't worth it either, no matter how cute and nice he seemed. I was done being ashamed of my past.

I could feel Steve looking at me. "A trailer, huh?"

I tipped up my chin. "Yep. My mother raised us kids on her own. She's my hero, really."

Jake snorted and shook his head.

Steve ignored him. "But did you have your own room, because our trailer only had two bedrooms? I shared a room with my two brothers." He arched an eyebrow, looking very impressed with himself.

My jaw dropped a little. "I did have my own room. My brothers had to share a room."

He shrugged. "Tight quarters. But we had a lot of good times packed in that room together. We probably shared more fun and love in that little trailer of ours than Jake ever had in that big house of his."

Jake rolled his eyes. "You losers deserve each other. I was kidding about asking you out, anyway."

"Good, because I'd never say yes." I smiled at Steve.

Jake dismissed me with a wave of his hand and walked back into the office with his jacket slung over his shoulder.

Once the door slammed behind him, the receptionist clapped her hands excitedly.

"Oh, that was excellent, really excellent! I can't stand that man. None of us can. And let me congratulate you on catching our Steve's eye." She beamed at him, like he

was her own son. "He's the real gem here at Kendall."

I turned to him. "Aren't you worried Jake will try to get you fired? First the cake, now this?"

Steve shook his head. "I outsell him by leaps and bounds. His father would never can me. He's lucky his father keeps him on. He's nothing but bad news. But what can you do? He's family. You can't turn your back on family, no matter what."

I beamed. "No, you can't."

He looked at his watch. "I think I'm going to call it a day. I don't want to wait until tomorrow to take you out. What do you say to an early dinner, and we'll see where the night leads?"

I heard the receptionist draw in a sharp breath.

"I'd love to, Steve. Maybe I can show you where I grew up afterward."

He laughed. "You show me yours, I'll show you mine."

The centerpieces for the Kendall Holiday party were nicer than ever: fresh holly twisted around twinkling lights, and a vase of lilies. I stood back to admire my work.

"I knew we wouldn't regret hiring your firm to host the party this year," Steve said, as he came up behind me and kissed me.

"Let's hope the help is better this year. I heard some girl dumped cake on the boss' son last year," I joked.

"Oh, I'd tip her generously to see that again."

I swatted playfully at him.

"Now go get changed," he said. "My date is not working at this party."

Steve had convinced me to hand over the reins to my assistant so I could join him at the party. I'd double-checked the food, prepped the servers, and felt confident the night would go off without a hitch.

But I still dreaded seeing Jake. He joined his father at the head table and I managed to ignore him most of the night.

Steve checked in with them just out of courtesy, and he came back to the table chewing on his lip. "Mr. Kendall wants to see you," he said.

"Jake?" I whispered.

"No, his dad."

That was possibly even worse. I swallowed hard and nodded, hop-

ing he didn't have a complaint about the banquet.

Maybe he was upset I had joined the guests. Maybe he'd heard what happened last year.

I followed Steve to the table and Mr. Kendall looked up.

"Ah, Miss James. I'd like to thank you for our most elegant banquet to date. Nice work, we'll be using you in the future." He smiled and nodded.

I caught my breath. "Thank you Mr. Kendall. It's nice of you to support Riverview alumni," I said.

He cocked his head. "You went to Riverview? Did you know Jake?"

I nodded. "I was in his class."

Mr. Kendall frowned and looked at Jake. "Now why couldn't you have brought home a nice girl like Angela? I swear these bimbos you show up with. . . ."

Jake looked down at his feet and didn't say anything.

Steve put his arm around me. "Sorry, sir. She's spoken for."

"Smart man," Mr. Kendall said.

I smiled and took Steve's hand.

"No sir, I'm a lucky man," Steve said.

But I was the lucky one, and I always had been. It just took a while to realize it.

We went back to our table and I thought about what would make me even luckier—being Steve's wife.

But one thing at a time, I thought.

However, Steve must have been thinking the same thing.

He dropped to his knee and picked up a piece of cake. "One year ago, I met a feisty girl who sent my heart sailing. I want to spend my life with you, Angela. Will you marry me?"

I laughed and nodded as he knelt there holding a piece of cake. He smiled and picked the ring up off the cake and slipped it on my finger. I wrapped my arms around him and, of course, the cake got squished between us.

"I'll pay for your dry cleaning," I whispered.

"No you won't. I bumped your arm," he said.

I laughed through my tears and the cheers of the guests sitting with us.

"I am so crushing cake in your face when we get married," he said. TL

"I guess I deserve it," I said. ♥ 7



Keeping Secrets

It's Better Left Unsaid

“You didn’t tell me you had children.” My date stood on the porch, the look on his face a mixture of surprise and revulsion.

“Is that a problem?” I asked, even though I already knew the answer. “They won’t be going with us.”

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Storm Blue



He looked over my shoulder. Behind me, one of my sons raced through the living room with a towel safety-pinned around his neck. I couldn't remember if he was supposed to be Batman or Superman, but my other son, the one wearing the rubber Halloween mask, was clearly the bad guy. My sons' favorite babysitter, a teenaged girl named Libby who lived at the other end of the block, was in the kitchen making popcorn.

My date swallowed hard. I could tell that he was having second thoughts about the evening, but couldn't figure out how to politely back out of it. I let him stew a moment before letting him off the hook.

"You know," I said, "I just remembered, I have an important meeting in the morning and I'm going to have to get up early. I know you drove all the way over here, but do you think I could get a rain check? Maybe we could go out another time?"

Like, never, I wanted to add, but didn't.

He brightened. "Oh, sure, another time would be great. We could do that."

My date practically bolted from the porch and was in his car before I managed to close the door.

"Was that him?"

I turned to see Libby standing behind me with a bowl of popcorn in her hands. "It was."

She handed the popcorn to Tommy as he ran past, his faux cape fluttering behind him. "You still need me? If not, I'll go home. I have a lot to do."

My purse sat on the television, only two feet from the door. I opened it, found my wallet, and offered to pay Libby for the evening.

"You don't have to do that, Mrs. Bridges," she said. "I've had guys dump me before. I know it's not fun."

I shook my head—my teenaged babysitter was feeling sorry for me—and then thanked her.

Libby grabbed her coat and headed for the door. Just before stepping outside, she turned back and said, "Don't worry, Mrs. Bridges, a MILF like you will find a TL 10 guy someday. They can't all be stu-

pid."

Then she was gone.

Peter ran into the living room and stopped. He lifted his mask and asked, "Where's Libby?"

"She went home."

"Why?"

"My date was canceled," I explained.

"You're not leaving?"

I shook my head.

He turned and ran down the hall. "Tommy!" he yelled. "Mom's staying home!"

"That sucks!"

They had obviously been looking forward to spending the evening with Libby, probably because she always let them watch scary movies and stay up past their bedtime, despite my instructions to the contrary.

My date had promised an evening at one of the city's most posh restaurants and I had dressed appropriately. I wore a black dress that hugged my figure, heels just high enough to make my legs look good, and my grandmother's pearls. I'd even had my hair done that afternoon. I decided I wasn't going to let all that effort go to waste.

"Hey, guys," I called down the hall, "you want to go for pizza?"

"**Y**ou didn't tell him?" Becky occupied the office next to mine, and we often shared our bad dating experiences during Monday morning coffee breaks.

"It never came up," I said.

"You should have brought it up," she said. "Children should never be a surprise. What did you think would happen when he found out you had children?"

"I didn't expect him to run away."

"At least you got out of the date," Becky said. "I was trapped. I never should have let my sister set me up on a blind date."

"What happened?"

"He took me to one of those slasher-porn films that seem to have no reason to exist other than to exploit the degradation of women, and he had the nerve to try to cop a feel halfway through the movie."

"What'd you do?"

"I emptied my soda into his lap," she said. "That cooled him down."

He was too stunned to say anything when I got up and walked out."

"How'd you get home?"

"I called my sister and made her pick me up."

I didn't have any dating horror stories to share the following two Mondays, but Becky did. She told me about one date who spent the entire evening telling her about his collection of Star Wars figurines, and another who still lived with his parents and spent their entire date complaining about his "room-mates."

After having my previous date run away when he learned that I had children, I wasn't going out of my way to meet new people. Even so, I ran into an attractive man at the copy shop one Friday afternoon—literally!

I had rushed in to pick up twelve color copies of a report I'd finished the day before and had to deliver that afternoon, and I wasn't paying attention to where I was going. I don't think he was paying attention either, because we were both surprised by our collision.

I apologized. He apologized. And then I apologized again.

"We both seem to be in a hurry right now," he said. "Why don't we continue apologizing to each other later this afternoon?"

"I work right around the corner," I said, "and I'm off at five."

He pointed toward the coffee shop on the next corner. "How about meeting over there at a quarter past five? Then we can apologize to each other until we're blue in the face."

I looked him up and down. "I think I'd like that."

So Kevin and I met after work, and we sat outside watching traffic and pedestrians as we drank coffee. Of course, we apologized once again for running into each other, but after we got past that, we told each other a little about our jobs.

We'd only been talking for a few minutes when Kevin's cell phone rang. He looked at it and said, "I'm sorry. I have to take this."

He stood and flipped the phone open. As he walked away, he said, "Hello?"

I didn't hear what else he had to

say because he kept his back to me, only returning after he had ended the call and returned the phone to his pocket.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I have to leave. Could we do this again soon?"

I hesitated.

"How about Monday?" he continued. He seemed anxious to leave. "Same time, same place. Unless we run into each other before that."

As soon as I told him that would work for me, Kevin hurried away.

I finished my coffee and wondered what had just happened. Then I glanced at my watch, realized I would have had to cut our meeting short if it had gone on much longer, and gathered my things.

I picked up my sons from their after-school program and took them home.

During our Monday morning coffee break, Becky told me about her Saturday night date.

"He took me to a monster truck rally. Can you believe that? A monster truck rally!"

"Did he buy you dinner?"

"Two chili dogs and a beer."

I shook my head. "It could have been worse."

"How?" she wanted to know. "He had four chili dogs and drank beer all night. If the passenger window in his truck hadn't been stuck halfway open, I might have suffocated on the ride home."

I laughed so hard I almost spit out my coffee. "Are you going to see him again?"

"I don't think so. I washed my outfit three times and I still don't think I got the smell out." She sipped from her coffee cup and then asked, "What about you?"

"I had a little thing Friday."

"How little?"

"He left less than fifteen minutes after we met."

"Did he just walk out?"

"No. His cell phone rang and he answered it."

"You're kidding," she said. "You think he set it up with a friend?"

It was something we had done a few times ourselves. If one of us thought we had an iffy date, we'd arrange for the other to call our cell phone about an hour after the date

started. That way we could use the call as an excuse to end our date early.

"I don't think so," I said. "We just met for coffee. We wouldn't have been together more than half-an-hour or so regardless, and he wants to meet again."

"When?"

"After work tonight."

"Sounds promising," Becky said. "What about the boys?"

"I made arrangements to pick them up late, and I promised them pizza for dinner."

I already had a table and was drinking my first cup of coffee when Kevin arrived.

"Fancy running into you again," he said, as he pulled out a chair and sat across the table from me.

"I wondered if you'd show up."

"Why's that?"

"You left in an awful hurry Friday," I told him. "I thought maybe I'd suddenly sprouted horns."

"Oh, no. That had nothing to do with you. Nothing at all to do with you," Kevin protested. "And I'm so glad you took a chance on me and came here tonight."

The waiter stopped at our table and Kevin ordered actual coffee—cream, no sugar. Then he asked if I wanted something to eat.

I demurred. I didn't tell him about my dinner plans with the two handsome young men in my life. Instead, I said, "I had a big lunch."

"Do you mind if I—"

"No," I said. "Go ahead."

He ordered a slice of cheesecake.

The mother in me came out. "Is that going to be your dinner?"

"I hope not," Kevin said. "I just need something to tide me over until later."

The waiter was quick, and he promptly returned with Kevin's cheesecake.

"So," Kevin said after the waiter walked away. "Where were we when we were interrupted Friday?"

"I think you were telling me about your new job."

"Oh, yeah, I was telling you how different it is to work downtown after working in the 'burbs for so many years. I don't like the extra commuting time, but I couldn't

pass up the extra money. What about you? How long have you worked downtown?"

He ate a bite of his cheesecake while I answered.

"I've never worked anywhere else, except fast-food jobs when I was in school," I told him. "All my full-time jobs have been here."

"So, do you live downtown?"

"I did for awhile," I explained. "It was exciting when I was younger, but now I live in the boring suburbs."

"Boring's not so bad," Kevin said. "Being a grown up means waking early on Saturday morning to mow the lawn, not waking up late to nurse a hangover."

From Kevin's mouth to my ex-husband's ear—my ex's unwillingness or inability to grow up and accept responsibility had been one of the primary reasons for our divorce, and it remained a major point of contention post-divorce. At first, he had been unable to handle structured visitation with the boys, and then he had moved halfway across the country without any advance warning, leaving me to explain to our sons why their father had abandoned them.

Of course, I didn't say any of that to Kevin because there's nothing that kills a date faster than trashing an ex. I just nodded in agreement and let him continue.

"That makes me sound like I've had a lot of experience waking up with hangovers," he said. "That's not what I meant. I was just using that as an example. You understood that, right?"

"So what did you do on Saturday mornings before you grew up?"

"Watched cartoons," he said. "I still do. Before I mow the lawn."

I live with two guys who enjoy Saturday cartoons, so I couldn't fault him.

"What about you?"

"Nothing exciting," I told him. "Mostly household chores in an attempt to catch up on everything I let slide during the week."

"Well aren't we a pair of fuddy-duddies."

"I hope not!" I protested. "I've still got a lot of go in my engine."

"Well, then, Nicole, would you be interested in a real date this Saturday?" Kevin asked. "I have 11

two tickets to the theatre."

"Awfully presumptuous of you to have already purchased the tickets," I said. "Did you expect me to say yes, or am I just one of many women you'll ask until you receive an affirmative answer?"

He laughed. "I'm not so presumptuous, and I don't have a list of women to invite. My company is one of the theatre's sponsors and we get tickets to every show. You're the only woman I'm asking. If you turn me down, I'll give the tickets to someone else in the office."

Kevin hadn't done or said anything that frightened me, and I'd actually appreciated his comments about grown-up responsibilities, so I told him I would enjoy going to the theatre with him. But, because my previous date had run off when he'd discovered I had children, I was reluctant to let Kevin pick me up at my home.

"Why don't we meet at the theatre?"

"In front of the box office, six-thirty?"

"Works for me."

"Dinner afterward?" he asked.

"Maybe a light snack," I countered.

We talked for a few more minutes before I excused myself. Kevin stood when I stood, apologized again for running out on me during our first coffee date, and thanked me again for giving him a second chance.

He hadn't finished his cheesecake, so I left him to it.

As I walked away I put a little extra swing in my hips, just in case he was watching.

When I reached my car, I flipped open my cell phone and called my family's favorite Italian restaurant. I picked up my sons first and our pizza had just come out of the oven when I reached the restaurant.

The pizza was still hot when we opened the box at home. While we were eating, I told Tommy and Peter that I had a date the following Saturday.

"Are you going to call Libby?" Peter asked.

"Don't call Mrs. Abernathy,"

Tommy added. "She makes us go to bed early."

12 "I don't think she makes you go

to bed early," I told my sons. "I think she makes you go to bed at the regular time."

"Yeah," Tommy said. "Early!"

"I'll call Libby first," I promised.

They seemed happy with my promise.

The week disappeared quickly, and I met Kevin in front of the theatre promptly at six-thirty Saturday evening. Hoping it wasn't my wardrobe selection that was jinxed, I was wearing exactly the same outfit I'd been wearing the evening my previous date had run off on me.

I could see Kevin's gaze appraising me as he approached. "Wow," he said when he stopped in front of me. "You look amazing."

He had also dressed to impress, so I complemented his attire.

"This?" he asked. "It's just a little something I threw together at the last minute."

"I'm sure," I said with just a hint of playful sarcasm.

He took my arm and said, "Shall we?"

"We shall."

Kevin guided me into the theatre lobby and a moment later the theatre doors opened and ushers began escorting ticket holders to their assigned seats. Our seats were in the front row of the center section of the lower balcony and they proved to be excellent. We had an unimpeded view and were able to follow everything that happened on stage during the musical. When the house lights finally came up at the end, the performers received a standing ovation, and we were discussing the performance as we walked out of the theatre.

Half a dozen restaurants and drinking establishments were located within two blocks of the theatre, and Kevin asked if I was still interested in the light snack I'd suggested on Monday. When I told him I was, he took my hand and led me around the corner to a dimly lit, little restaurant where he had made reservations.

After we were seated, I said, "You planned ahead."

"Of course," he said. "I didn't want to leave anything to chance tonight, and I know how crowded these places can get after the theatre lets out."

"So you've done this before?"

"Been to the theatre?" he countered. "Yes, many times."

I'd meant to ferret out a little information about previous dates, but Kevin had deftly avoided a direct answer.

"How about you?" he asked.

"Not so much," I said. "Although, I would like to. I could blame my busy schedule, but the truth is, I just don't think about the theatre when I'm planning an evening out." The real truth is that I didn't think my boys would sit still long enough for me to enjoy live theatre. When we made plans to go out, it usually involved parks with wide-open spaces, restaurants with play areas, and movies with lots of explosions.

"I attended more when I was younger," Kevin said. "Now that my employer provides free tickets I try to attend more often. Maybe you'd be interested in joining me again in the future?"

"Maybe," I told him.

Before I could complete my thought, the waiter stopped at our table and told us the after-theatre specials the restaurant had that evening. We ordered wine and cherry cheesecake, and had our wine glasses refilled twice over the course of the next few hours.

Whether it was by choice or by coincidence, we avoided talking about previous or current relationships, and, despite Becky's advice to the contrary, I never volunteered my parental status. Instead, we talked about movies, books, music, and all sorts of things I could never discuss with my sons. We both enjoyed romantic comedies from the distant past when they were actually funny, had read some of the same best-selling novels, and were so far apart in our musical tastes that we could never share an iPod.

I found myself laughing at Kevin's jokes, and more than once I reached across the table to touch his arm. When we finally decided to call it a night—with some reluctance on my part—Kevin hooked his arm in mine and I leaned against him as we walked three blocks to the lot where I'd parked my car.

After I opened my car door, I turned back to my date and said, "I

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can't remember the last time I had this much fun."

"So we'll do this again?"

"Soon, I hope," I replied. I leaned forward and tilted my face up toward Kevin's, hoping he would take the hint.

He did.

Kevin wrapped his arms around my waist, and pulled me close as he covered my mouth with his. Our kiss seemed to last forever, and I melted against him, the soft curves of my body molding themselves to his firm, masculine physique. I think I forgot to breathe and when I finally came up for air I found my lipstick smeared across Kevin's cheek and one of my earrings hooked in his shirt sleeve.

"I—I need to go," I whispered, hoarsely.

He brushed a stray lock of hair away from my eyes. "When can I see you again?"

"Soon," I said. "Call me Monday." "I will."

He unhooked my earring from his sleeve, while I wet the ball of my thumb and wiped lipstick from his cheek. I wanted him to kiss me again, and again. But we had already been more physical than I had ever been on a first date, and I knew better than to allow my unmet desire override my common sense. Despite his ability to make my heart pound and my knees turn to gelatin, I really didn't know enough about Kevin to let things progress any farther than they already had.

I wished Kevin a good evening and slipped behind the wheel of my car. He closed the car door and waited until I had keyed the ignition and was backing out of the parking space before he turned and began walking to wherever he had parked his car.

"Gee, Mrs. Bridges," Libby said when I walked in the door, "that must have been some date."

I glanced around. An old Boris Karloff movie was playing on the television and my sons were asleep, one on the couch and the other in the recliner. I asked, "Why's that?"

"I don't think I've ever seen you smile like that before."

"I'm smiling?"

"Like a Cheshire cat," Libby said.

"Yeah, I guess it was a good date."

"You going to see him again?"

"I think so." I wasn't comfortable talking to a teenager about my love life, so I changed the subject. "How were the boys?"

"They're always good, Mrs. Bridges," Libby said. "You know that."

I paid Libby for the evening and then stood on my porch and watched her walk down the street to her home at the other end of the block. I didn't step inside until I saw that she had reached her house and flashed her porch light twice to let me know she'd made it home safely.

Then I roused my sons and directed them to their own beds.

"If we had been standing on my porch I would have invited Kevin in," I told Becky during our Monday morning coffee break.

"What about your sons?"

"Okay," I admitted. "If we had actually been standing on my porch we probably would have been interrupted before our lips ever met."

"Your weekend was better than mine," Becky said. "My date took me to the mall to help him buy a birthday gift for his ex-mother-in-law."

"Eww," I said.

"That's not the worst part," Becky said. "He took me to Victoria's Secret."

"To buy something for his ex-mother-in-law?"

Becky nodded, my stomach rolled in disgust, and there wasn't anything I could say after that. I carried that image in my mind when I returned to my office and it stayed there until Kevin called me twenty minutes later.

"I haven't been able to get you out of my mind," he said.

"Have you wanted to?" I asked.

"No," he said. "Not at all."

"Good," I told him. "I've been thinking about you, too."

"Good thoughts?"

I lowered my voice. "Very good thoughts," I said. "When will I see you again?"

"How about lunch tomorrow?" he suggested. "Are you available?"

I glanced at my desk calendar. "I'm available."

He named an upscale restaurant within walking distance of my office building. "Eleven o'clock? We can beat the rush."

"I'll see you there."

I floated through the rest of the day, only returning to reality when I picked my sons up from their after-school program. Tommy had apparently had a disagreement with a juice box and was so sticky I could've affixed him to the roof of the car and he wouldn't have blown off on the drive home, and Peter told me he had a spelling test the next day and needed help studying.

Thoughts of Kevin disappeared under the weight of parenthood and for the rest of the evening—through early baths, dinner, and homework—I thought of nothing but my sons and their needs.

I didn't think of Kevin again until I crawled into bed and pulled a pillow over my face. My last thought before falling asleep was the memory of Kevin's kisses.

I met Kevin for lunch the next day, arriving only moments after he did. He had apparently made reservations, because the moment he gave the hostess his name, she had us escorted to a private booth near the back of the restaurant.

"I hope you don't mind," Kevin said after the waiter took our drink order and stepped away from the table. "I just wanted to be alone with you."

He reached across the table and took my hand in his. I had the feeling Kevin was going to kiss my fingers, but the waiter arrived with our drinks and interrupted him. The waiter wanted to tell us the day's specials, but Kevin stopped him. He looked at me. "Are you ready to order?"

I glanced at my menu and ordered a chef salad.

Kevin said, "I'll have the same."

The waiter gathered our menus and walked away.

Kevin told me again how much he'd enjoyed our time together that Saturday, but didn't dwell on it. Instead, we continued our discussion about great romantic comedies from the past and how the couples in those movies always had some form of miscommunication that threatened to tear them apart

before they ever had a chance to really get to know each other.

Before we realized where the time had gone, we had to return to work. I had barely touched my salad and I asked to have it boxed to go. I planned to have it for dinner while my sons ate hot dogs and macaroni and cheese. The words had already escaped my lips before I realized how tacky it might be to take leftovers home from a date, but Kevin made me feel comfortable when he told the waiter to pack his leftovers, too.

After Kevin paid the bill and we had our boxed leftovers, we headed out. As we stepped from the restaurant onto the sidewalk outside, Kevin took my hand and pulled me close. "If this wasn't a public place, I would try to kiss you."

"If this wasn't a public place, I would let you."

This time he did lift my hand and brush his lips across my knuckles. "Will I see you this weekend?"

"Saturday," I said. "Tell me where."

"I'll call you later this week."

We hesitated a moment, as if we each had something else to say, or as if each of us was waiting for the other to forget we were in public and actually initiate that kiss. But the moment passed, we said our good-byes, and we each headed back to our offices.

As Kevin walked away, his cell phone rang. I heard him answer it, I thought I heard him say, "It's okay, honey, I'll take care of it," but when I turned back I saw half a dozen men talking on cell phones and I couldn't swear the voice I heard was actually Kevin's.

He called me Thursday afternoon and asked, "Do you dance?"

"I haven't danced in ages." *Not with an adult. My sons and I dance all the time.*

Kevin mentioned a small dance club less than ten miles from my house. "Saturday is disco night. Can you disco?"

"I'm willing to try. Are you going to wear a leisure suit?"

"I don't think we have to dress the part," Kevin said. "Should I pick you up?"

"I'll meet you there," I told him.

And at nine Saturday evening I

was standing outside the club waiting for Kevin. I was still waiting when he finally arrived fifteen minutes later. He apologized profusely for being late, but didn't explain his tardiness.

It took some effort to find an unoccupied table, but we finally located a tall table with two stools only a few steps away from the dance floor and we quickly claimed it. The waitress spotted us immediately, came and took our drink orders, and then melted back into the crowd.

The loud music prevented us from carrying on much of a conversation, so mostly we danced, drank wine, and nibbled on the bar snacks that our waitress kept bringing to our table.

The DJ kept the music pumping without interruption and we stayed on the dance floor for three or four songs before we returned to our table for a rest, and then returned to the dance floor for another handful of songs. I was a little rusty and a little self-conscious at first, but I soon relaxed and let myself be carried away by the pounding disco beats.

We danced fast and we danced slowly. It was during the slow numbers, when I was pressed tightly against him, that I realized Kevin wanted me as much as I wanted him.

Afterward, in the darkened parking lot behind the dance club, we sat in Kevin's car and made out like teenagers. I let his hands travel places no man's hands had traveled in ages, and before long I forgot we were in a semi-public place. I wanted him, but not there, not in his car, not in a parking lot behind a dance club. I wasn't that kind of woman.

I pulled away, adjusted my bra, and straightened my blouse. I couldn't take Kevin home—I hadn't told him about my sons and I really hadn't told my sons about him—and Kevin didn't offer to take me to his place. I cleared my throat, "I should probably go now."

"We could go to a—"

For a moment I thought he was going to suggest a motel, but he stopped himself.

"To?" I prompted. If he actually suggested a motel my opinion of Kevin would drop a notch or two,

even if I might actually consider it.

He shook his head. "No. You're right. Maybe it would be better for you to go now. I'll walk you to your car."

"Mrs. Bridges!" Libby said when I eased in the front door. "What happened to your hair?"

I glanced in the mirror and realized how disheveled I looked. I didn't bother explaining to my babysitter what I'd been doing, though I'm pretty sure she suspected.

"You have that smile again," Libby continued. "Were you out with the same guy as last Saturday?"

"Same man," I told her.

Before Libby could make any further comments, I paid her and encouraged her out the door. I stood on my porch and watched until I was certain that she'd made it home safely, and then I put my sleeping sons to bed.

I fell asleep with thoughts of that evening tumbling wildly through my mind, and I must have tossed and turned all night because my bedclothes were a disaster when Tommy and Peter woke me the next morning with demands for toaster waffles and mashed bananas.

Kevin called later that morning, but he kept his voice low as if he didn't want someone overhearing us.

"I really enjoyed last night," he said, "and I wanted to apologize if I was a little too . . . forward."

My sons were outside and I stood at the kitchen window watching them. I said, "You weren't too forward. I hope I didn't give you the wrong impression. I'm not usually—"

I couldn't bring myself to finish whatever I had meant to say, but Kevin didn't let the sentence linger in the silence. He asked, "When can I see you again?"

We decided to meet for dinner after work on Wednesday. Then I made arrangements for my sons to get home and for Libby to watch them.

During the first coffee break the next morning, Becky grilled me about my weekend because, as it turned out, she had nothing to

(Continued on page 63) 11

Falling In Love

Just Blame It On The Reindeer!

The first thing I asked my father on Christmas morning when I reached the emergency room and saw him lying in the hospital bed was, "What happened?"

"I fell off the roof," he said.

"What were you doing on the roof?"

My daughter was clinging to my leg and my father looked at her when he answered.

"I was cleaning off the reindeer poo."



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"How did you know it was reindeer poo, Grandpa?" Chelsea asked.

"Because it smelled like peppermint."

"Don't tell her that," I insisted. "I'll find her in the yard tomorrow smelling dog turds!"

"Why does it smell like peppermint?" my daughter asked.

"Because reindeer only eat magic candy canes," my father explained. "That's what gives them the ability to fly around the world on Christmas Eve."

"Where do they get the magic candy canes?"

"From Santa's elves."

"Dad!"

He winked at me.

A voice from behind me said, "It's true."

I turned to face an attractive man wearing blue scrubs. He was about my age, with closely cropped brown hair, hazel eyes, and a firm jaw. I felt my pulse quicken unexpectedly.

"Magic candy canes are only grown at the north pole, Chelsea," my father continued, "but you see the seeds for them everywhere."

"Where do you see them?" Chelsea asked.

"They're the little, round peppermint candies that restaurants give you at the end of your meal," the man in blue scrubs said, as he stepped to the end of my father's bed and unhooked a clipboard.

"Or you can buy them by the sackful at the grocery store," my father added.

"But they only grow if they're planted on Christmas Day."

My daughter's eyes had grown as big as saucers. She tugged on my skirt and looked up at me. "Mommy, can we—"

"It's Christmas," I told her. "There aren't any stores open."

The man in the blue scrubs dug in his pocket and then handed a cellophane-wrapped peppermint to my daughter. "Plant this when you get home and see if it grows into a candy cane."

"I will!" Her head bobbed up and down like one of those bobblehead dolls you see in the back windows of people's cars. "I will, I will!"

I was outnumbered, so I gave up. I told my father sternly, "I'll talk to you later."

Then I turned to the man in the blue scrubs. He introduced himself as Dr. Kringle—Ed Kringle, he clarified before we got any crazy ideas—and he told

my father, "You're the first reindeer-related accident we've seen this season."

"Figures," my father said. "If Santa's sleigh hadn't bumped my satellite dish, I wouldn't have slipped in the reindeer poo, and I wouldn't be here."

"I've examined the x-rays," the doctor continued. "There's no break, just a bad sprain. You'll be hobbling around for a few days, but I doubt there will be any permanent damage."

"You're lucky Ethel saw you fall," I said, "and called an ambulance."

"That woman watches everything I do," my father said. "I would have been surprised if she hadn't seen me fall."

Ethel Wallace lives across the street from my father, and she's had her eye on him ever since she moved into the neighborhood.

"It could have been much worse," Dr. Kringle said. "You could have hit your head, or landed on your back, or gotten tangled up in the ladder on your way down. If Santa bumps your satellite dish next Christmas, or if the reindeer leave droppings on the roof, let someone else take care of it for you."

"Thanks, doctor," I told him.

"I'm going to release you," he said to my father. "Go home, put your feet up, and let—"

He looked at me until I said, "I'm his daughter. Laura."

"—and let Laura take care of you today." He squatted down in front of Chelsea and touched a finger to the fist she had clamped around the peppermint candy. "Plant that when you get home."

She nodded vigorously. "I will."

He stood and began to walk away.

My father called after him, "Hey, Doc!"

Dr. Kringle stopped and turned to face us.

"You married?"

"No, why?"

"Neither is my daughter," my father said, nodding toward me, "and she looks great in a Christmas stocking."

"Dad!" I felt my cheeks warm, and I was pretty sure I was blushing.

"Have a merry Christmas," Dr. Kringle said with a smile. Then he disappeared from view.

As soon as he was gone, I turned back to my father. "What did you do that for?"

"I saw the way he looked at you when he came in the room," he said,

"and I saw the way you looked back."

My father had been trying to set me up ever since the end of my marriage to Chelsea's father, a marriage he had neither approved of nor supported during its brief duration. He hadn't actively interfered, but he'd never hidden his feelings about Chuck and he actually smiled when I announced that Chuck and I had separated.

Chuck and I had been in the process of divorce when I realized I was pregnant, the result of one last attempt at reconciliation. At my insistence, we delayed finalization of the process until after Chelsea was born so that her birth would be covered by his medical insurance and so that she would carry his name.

By then, Chuck was living on the other side of the country, and he's never seen his daughter. Because he's all for doing the right thing, but not if it inconveniences him, he's never contested child support and it's automatically deducted from his paycheck and forwarded to me twice a month. Those checks, which he neither signs nor sees, is the only contact we have.

I folded my arms under my breasts and looked down at my father. "I can get my own dates."

"You couldn't prove it by me," he said. "You date as often as Santa visits."

Chelsea tugged on my skirt and I looked down. "Yes?"

"Where's Santa?"

"He's probably back home at the North Pole," I said.

A few minutes later an aide pushed a wheelchair into the room, helped my father into it, and we headed home. I hadn't even pulled into the driveway of my father's house before Ethel Wallace was bounding out of her house and rushing across the street to meet us. She made a beeline directly to the passenger side of my car and opened the door for my father.

"I'm okay, Ethel. Just a sprain," my father explained before she could ask any questions.

While Ethel helped my father out of the car, I unbuckled Chelsea and lifted her out of her car seat. She still had the peppermint clutched in her hand.

"Where are you going to plant that, honey?" my father asked when he saw what my daughter was clutching.

She shook her head.

"How about over by Frosty?"

My father had a plastic snowman next to his porch steps and a plastic reindeer with a red nose that lit up on the other side of the steps, all that remained of the many yard decorations he'd put up when I was a child.

When Chelsea seemed satisfied with his suggestion, my father made Ethel stop at the porch steps, and he made me walk around the house to his shed to find a trowel to dig a hole in the nearly frozen ground. A few minutes later I dug a hole for my daughter.

She was about to drop the wrapped peppermint in the hole when my father said, "You have to unwrap it first."

I glared at my father because Chelsea had been holding the peppermint in her fist for a long time and I knew how sticky it would be when the wrapping came off.

I was right, too, and my daughter had trouble getting the peppermint unstuck from her fingers and fall in the hole. After she finally shook it free, I refilled the hole and we made our way into the house, where I scrubbed Chelsea's hands.

Once we had my father settled on his couch and my daughter sitting in front of the Christmas tree staring at all the gifts Santa had left for her at my father's house, I led Ethel into the kitchen. While we prepared hot chocolate, I told her the story of the planted peppermint.

She wasn't surprised that my father had made up a story about reindeer defecation on his roof, but she was surprised that a doctor had played along with my father's tall tale.

"I wish my doctor had a sense of humor," she said. "I swear the man hasn't cracked a smile in thirty-seven years."

"Do you have dinner plans?" I asked Ethel after she stopped grousing about her humor-challenged doctor. Before she could reply, because I knew she would say that she had plans even though I suspected she didn't, I continued, "With my father sitting this one out and us getting a late start, I'm going to need help preparing Christmas dinner. And knowing my father, he bought enough food to feed a small army, even though it was just going to be the three of us."

"I—" she hesitated, as if unsure how to respond. I knew she liked my father and we both knew he was never going to make the first move, so she had to be thinking about the opportunity to

spend Christmas with us. She finally smiled. "I baked a couple of pies this morning. Let me go get them, and then I'll help you cook."

We served hot chocolate to Chelsea and my father. Then Ethel went across the street for her pies.

"I lost my wallet," my father said. "Where?"

He shook his head. "It was in my pocket this morning and it isn't in my pocket now. I didn't even realize it was gone until a few minutes ago. I could have lost it anywhere."

I went outside to check my car.

When Ethel returned with the pies and saw me digging around the inside of my car, she asked what I was looking for. After I told her, she put the pies on the porch and went around the side of the house to check the area around the ladder where my father had fallen that morning.

She returned as I was closing my car door.

"Any luck?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Nothing but a flattened azalea."

We each grabbed one of her pies from the porch and carried them into the house.

I gave my father the bad news and asked him the name of the ambulance company that had come to his aid that morning. He couldn't remember, but Ethel did, and a few minutes later I was on the phone.

I had no luck with the ambulance company and no luck with the hospital, either, when I called there a few minutes later.

"I'm going to have to cancel all my credit cards and get a new license and—"

"Deal with all that tomorrow," I told him. "Maybe we'll get lucky and a Good Samaritan will find your wallet and return it."

Chelsea climbed up on the couch and settled in next to my father. She handed him a picture book and said, "Read me a story."

I left the two of them on the couch and returned to the kitchen. Ethel and I spent the next several hours preparing dinner.

She had moved into the neighborhood after I had already moved out of my parents' house and was living on my own, so I didn't know her well. I learned that she'd lost her husband in the first Gulf War and had never had

children, and I told her about losing my mother to ovarian cancer when I was barely a teenager, and about my marriage to Chelsea's father. We also talked a lot about cooking, holidays, and family traditions. By the time we were setting the table, we had bonded.

We were about to sit down to dinner when the doorbell rang. I looked at my father. "Were you expecting anyone?"

He shrugged. "Santa's been and gone."

I walked to the foyer and opened the door to find a handsome man in blue scrubs and an overcoat standing on the front porch. "Dr. Kringle!"

He held up my father's wallet. "I thought you might want this back."

I pushed the screen door open and stepped to the side. "Come in, come in."

He hesitated. "I don't want to interrupt anything."

"Who is it, Laura?" my father called from the dining room.

"It's Dr. Kringle, with your wallet," I called back.

"Well, invite him in."

I looked at the doctor and said, "I already did, didn't I?"

He finally stepped into the house and let me shut the door. I offered to take his coat, but he said, "I won't be here long."

"Nonsense." I took his coat, hung it on the wooden coat tree, and then led him into the dining room where my father was seated at the head of the table, with Ethel on his left and Chelsea on his right. My plate was to my daughter's right and there were two more empty chairs at the table.

"I'm sorry," Dr. Kringle said. "You were just about to eat. Let me give you this and be on my way."

He handed the wallet to my father, who asked, "Where are you rushing off to?"

"Home. I was going home."

"And who is there waiting for you?"

"No one," the doctor said. "I live alone."

I began setting another place because I knew what my father was about to say.

"Nonsense," he said. "Stay. Eat."

"I couldn't impose," the doctor protested.

"Do we have to hogtie you to a chair?" my father asked.

Dr. Kringle finally sat. Then I sat, and then
(Continued on page 22) 19

Here Comes The Bride...



“Till death do us part.” Those were the same words I’d said to my husband on our wedding day in 1958. Yet they meant so much more as we repeated them on that lovely spring day in 2008, a full fifty years later.

Death had almost parted us six years earlier when my husband George had two heart attacks and again just one year before our fiftieth anniversary when I had open-heart surgery to repair a life threatening aneurysm.

Having faced death and survived, we had much to celebrate on that day. As I walked down the aisle to the altar, holding my husband’s hand, I felt like a bride again. When we’d said our vows the first

time, those last words hardly seemed to matter. We were young and in love and our wedding day was the beginning of our life together. For us, the future held nothing but promise.

But on that day in May, as my husband repeated the vows he’d made to me fifty years earlier, the tears in his eyes matched my own. This time around we knew exactly what it meant to, “love, honor, and cherish . . . till death do us part.” With both our hearts healed, they seemed now to beat almost as one and our love had grown far beyond our youthful expectations.

Standing beside us, just as they had on our wedding day, were the same maid of honor and best man who’d witnessed us making those vows so many years ago. Patti and Bob had both made a commitment to be with us on our special day. They had been there for us with their love, prayers, and support through the bad times and were there again to celebrate that awesome occasion—the day we pledged our love anew.

The biggest difference at our “second” wedding was the people gathered in the church that day. Though our parents were sadly missing, twenty-seven members of our immediate family replaced their loss. Filling the pews were our six children and their spouses, nine grandchildren, and the families of our niece and nephew, who had become part of our family after their mother lost her battle to cancer.

Following the vows, when we turned to acknowledge the applause, my tear-filled eyes focused on all the smiling faces in our family—a family born of our love. And, as I actually felt their love, saw it reflected in their eyes, just like in the Christmas story of the Grinch . . . my newly repaired heart grew three sizes that day.

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Falling In Love ***(Continued from page 19)***

my father said grace.

He thanked the Lord for bringing together family and friends, both old and new. He asked the Lord to bless our food and to watch over Chelsea's planted peppermint. Then he wrapped it up with an Amen. My father's prayer was short and sweet and it was time to eat.

We had spiral-cut ham purchased the day before and warmed in the oven, mashed potatoes, sweet potato casserole, string bean casserole, corn, scratch-baked rolls, a relish tray with two different kinds of olives and three different kinds of pickles, and a choice between iced tea and white wine.

I helped Chelsea prepare her plate, Ethel helped my father with his, and Dr. Kringle filled his plate by taking a little bit from every serving dish.

As we started eating, I realized that Ethel and the doctor hadn't been introduced, so I rectified that oversight by explaining to each of them how we knew the other. When I did, Dr. Kringle insisted that we call him Ed.

"So you're the one who called the ambulance?" he asked.

"She didn't just call an ambulance," my father interjected. "She ran across the street with a blanket and a pillow and wouldn't let me move until the EMTs arrived. I told her I was fine but she didn't believe a word I said."

"You would have told her you were fine even if you'd broken both legs," I said.

"I can take care of myself."

I looked at Ethel and shook my head. "He says he can, but I worry about him sometimes."

Ethel turned to Dr. Kringle. "So, tell me, Doctor, how is Marcus, really?"

"As long as he avoids stepping in reindeer droppings, he should be fine," the doctor said.

"See, I told you," my father said. Before Ethel or I could contradict him, my father changed the subject by asking our newest dinner guest, "So how come a good-looking guy like you is single."

"Dad!" I protested.

Dr. Kringle—Ed—held up his hand. "It's okay," he said. "It's simple, really. I haven't met the right woman. Worse, I suppose, is my job. I work long hours in the emergency room and most of the

people I meet have been traumatized. When I leave work at the end of my shift, I'm usually more interested in sleeping than in the single's scene."

"You sound just like my daughter," my father said. "She hates all that barhopping nonsense. She says any man who trolls bars looking for women isn't the kind of man she wants to spend time with."

Ed turned to me. "Really?"

I had a mouthful of ham, so I just nodded.

"I suppose you can meet nice people in bars," Ed said, "but when I was in med school, everybody I knew who hung out in bars wasn't looking for Mr. or Mrs. Right; they were looking for Mr. or Mrs. Right Now. That was never my idea of a good time."

I swallowed the ham and we spent almost ten minutes talking about how hard it was to meet someone nice. Unlike Ed, I didn't meet a steady stream of traumatized people each day. As Human Resources manager for a small manufacturing plant, I spent each day with the same small group of people, and because of my position my co-workers were completely off-limits as potential dates.

Chelsea interrupted me to ask for more mashed potatoes, and I realized that I had been so wrapped up in my conversation with the doctor that I had forgotten there were other people at the table. Ed and I rejoined the conversational flow while I attended to my daughter's request for seconds.

After we finished eating, Ed helped me clear the table, scrape the plates, and load the dishwasher. Then we all adjourned to the living room where I distributed the gifts stacked under the Christmas tree. Most of them were for Chelsea, a few were for my father, and a few were for me.

Unfortunately, there weren't any for our unexpected guests, but neither Ed nor Ethel complained.

We watched Chelsea open her gifts—some toys, a lot of clothing—and made all the right noises when she showed us what she had received from Santa, her grandfather, and me.

My father opened two presents from Chelsea and me—a pullover sweater and an MP3 player—and I unwrapped two from him—all three books of the fantasy trilogy I'd been dying to read and a four-slice toaster to replace the one that had caught on fire two weeks

before Christmas, because I had failed to clean out all the crumbs.

After we unwrapped the last gift, Ed excused himself for a moment. He stepped into the foyer and fussed with his coat. He came back a moment later with two candy canes.

He handed them to Chelsea and said, "These are from the crop I planted last year."

My daughter beamed. "Are they magic?"

Ed shook his head. "I can't grow magic candy canes," he explained. "Only Santa's elves can do that, and only at the North Pole."

As much as Chelsea liked all of her other gifts, those two candy canes seemed to be her favorite gift of all. She carried them with her when we returned to the dining room table for dessert and she talked to Ed about growing candy canes.

"My grandpa puts manure on his azaleas," she said. "Manure is cow poo. Did you know that?"

"No, I didn't know that," he told her.

"Do I need to put reindeer poo on the candy cane seed I planted?"

Ed shook his head and I knew he was trying hard to repress a smile. "I think whatever your grandfather does for his azaleas will be just fine."

"You and my father have really started something," I said. "If that candy cane doesn't sprout, I'll have a devil of a time explaining why."

"It'll sprout," my father said. "I'll make sure that it does."

"You'd better."

We finished our pie, cleaned up, and then Ed told us he had to get home. He was working another midnight to noon shift and needed sleep before returning to the hospital.

Ethel and I wouldn't let him leave until we had packed up several days worth of leftovers, and then I walked Ed to his car.

"I had a wonderful day," he said. "Thank you for that."

"It's a good thing you found my father's wallet."

"I didn't," he said. "One of the orderlies did. I just volunteered to return it."

"That was kind of you," I said. "That went above and beyond the call of duty."

"I had an ulterior motive," the doctor admitted. "I hoped I would see you again."

I felt my cheeks warm and I suspected I was blushing. I hoped it wasn't too

noticeable.

"Would you be interested in having dinner with me this weekend?" he asked.

"You don't have to do that," I protested. Inside, I felt a rush of joy that Ed wanted to see me again.

"I know I don't have to," he said. "But I want to."

I smiled.

"And if dinner goes well —"

"It will."

"—would you be interested in attending a New Year's Eve party one of the other ER doctors is having? There probably won't be more than a dozen couples."

I had the perfect little black evening dress in the back of my closet, purchased on sale the previous Black Friday and never worn, and I was certain my father would watch Chelsea that night. "I'd love to."

"Then it's a date," Ed said.

"Two dates," I corrected.

That made Ed smile. He leaned toward me and, for a moment, I thought he was going to kiss me. I felt an unexpected tingle of anticipation that didn't diminish after he just clasped my hand, stared into my eyes, and said, "This just might be the best Christmas I've ever had."

Then he climbed into his car, and I stood in the cold and watched him drive away, not returning to the house until he was completely out of sight.

I gathered our Christmas gifts and some of the leftovers and carried them to the car. Then I returned to the house for Chelsea.

When I asked my father if he was going to be okay staying alone, Ethel insisted that he wouldn't be alone that night. "Somebody has to take care of your father. He can't very well fend for himself in his condition."

I had the sneaking suspicion that my father was overplaying his pain, but I didn't protest. He's a grown man and Ethel is a grown woman.

They stood arm-in-arm behind the screen door and watched as I buckled Chelsea into her car seat, then closed the door as I backed out of the driveway.

As I drove home, I realized Ed was right. This had been one of the best Christmases ever, with unexpected gifts for both my father and me.

And all because of a little reindeer poo on my father's roof!♥

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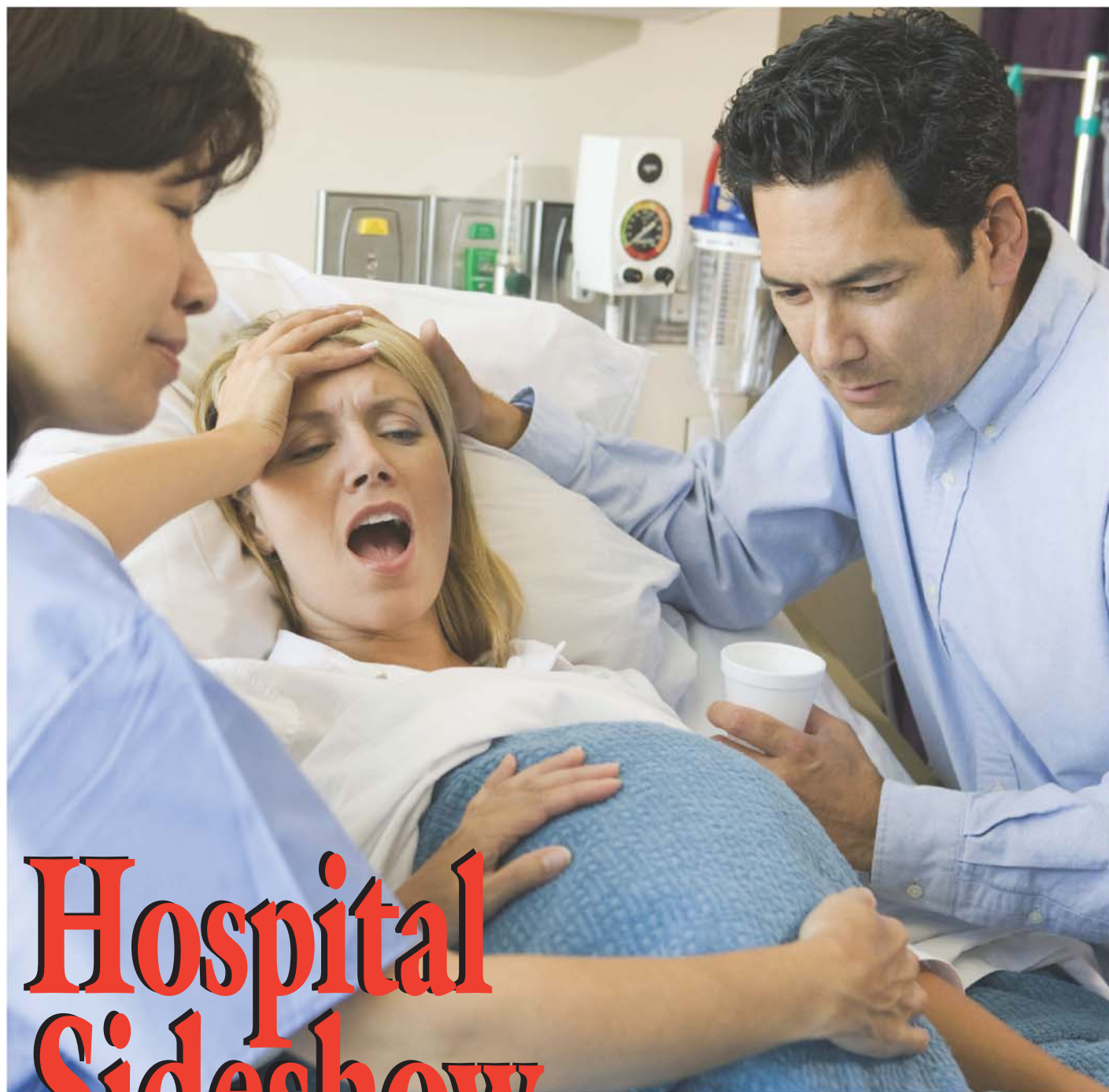
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Hospital Sideshow

Saying No Isn't Easy

“**C**ould I take a look?” Without waiting for an answer, Mom took the piece of paper out of my hand. “A Birthing Plan,” she read. There was a hint of amazement in her voice. “What will they think of next?”

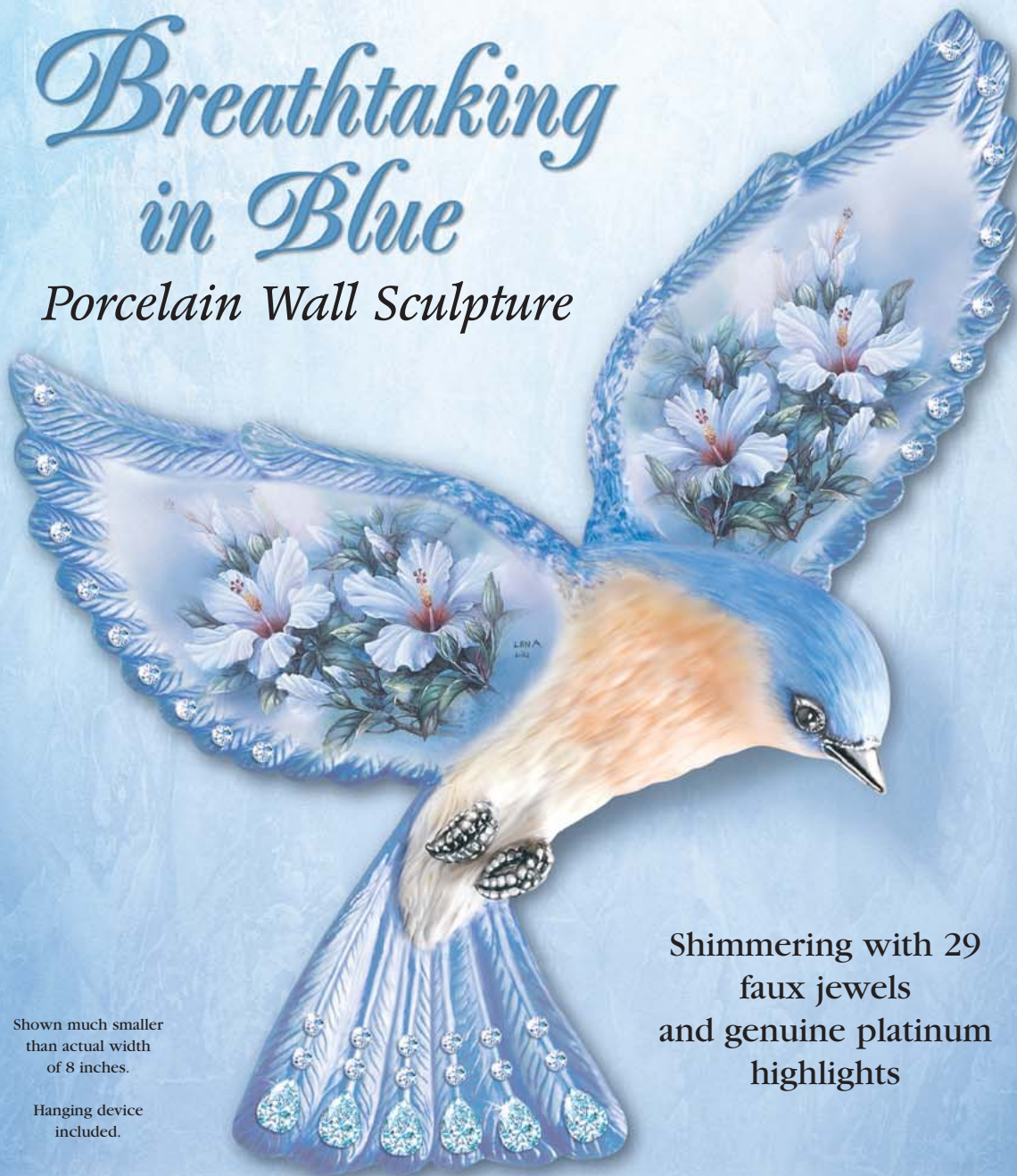
“That’s what they do these days, Mom,” I explained. “They give expectant mothers a lot of choices. You can have a medicated or a natural delivery. You can deliver in a hospital or a birthing center. You can decide what friends or relatives you want with you during labor and delivery. At the birthing center, I can have as many people as I want.”

Mom squinted at the form I had filled out. “You put my name on it.”

“Of course, Mom. I want you with me. Just you and Liam.” I pointed to another line. “Liam is going to cut the umbilical cord.”

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Her blue eyes turned misty and she hugged me. "Oh, honey, I wouldn't miss my grandson's birth for the world. Why, this is such a wonderful surprise! Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"Because a birthing plan is usually not done until the thirty-second week. That's where I am right now. That way, the doctor has a better idea of what kind of delivery to expect. In my case, everything is normal and they don't expect any problems."

"Thank heaven for that." She sat on the edge of the sofa cushion and continued to read. "No drugs. IV and electronic monitoring are allowed." She looked up at me. "Yes, I would insist on the monitoring. We have to know right away if there's the teeniest change in the heartbeat." Without taking her eyes from the birthing plan, she took a quick sip of coffee. Setting the cup back on the coffee table, she almost missed the saucer. "If there's a C-section, only Liam is allowed in?"

"Mom, I didn't think you'd have the stomach for it."

"Of course, I would. Go ahead and put me down."

"You fainted in the emergency room that time I had to get my foot stitched up," I reminded her.

"It was my low blood sugar. It was because I hadn't had any breakfast."

Knowing my chances of having a C-section were pretty low, I grudgingly scribbled down her name.

"You're saving the cord blood?" she asked.

"Yes, for the stem cells, in case the baby gets any diseases later on."

"Good idea. We definitely want that."

I suppressed a smile. She was acting like she was having the baby, not me.

"I also put down that I want to be able to move around during labor," I went on. "It helps things progress. The birthing room will be a lot like a regular bedroom in a home, with pretty pictures on the walls and low lighting. It also has a hot tub to help relieve discomfort. There's also a CD player and a television. Liam is going to bring some of our favorite music. After the baby is born, a meal of our choosing will be brought in."

Mom laid the birthing plan on the sofa between us. "That all sounds very nice, but you know, I think we can do TL even better."

26 I felt a pang of surprise. "What do

you mean?"

"I'll bring in flowers—lots of flowers—and candles. They forgot the aromatherapy."

"Sorry, Mom. Candles aren't allowed. Fire hazard."

"Well, I'll just get a room spray. I'll get gardenia. You love gardenia."

I nodded.

A beat of silence followed. "And there's something else," she said finally. "How could we not invite Aunt Margaret?"

"My plan is to call the rest of the relatives after the baby arrives."

Mom shook her head. "Aunt Margaret is your father's twin sister. She and Aaron were just like this," she said, holding up two crossed fingers. "As twins, they had a psychic bond. Your father would want her at the birthing center in his place."

The baby inside me began to stir, as if my nervousness had spread to him.

"This birth would have meant so much to him," Mom continued, her eyes misting again. "He would have been so proud of you and his grandson. Having Aunt Margaret there would be like having your father there, don't you see?"

I sighed deeply.

"She would be a lot of support. She has three children of her own."

"All right," I agreed.

"And don't forget Uncle Ted. We couldn't very well invite Aunt Margaret and not her husband."

"I don't know, Mom," I said, nervously running a hand over my swollen belly.

"And what about Kathy? The two of you have been best friends since fourth grade. Wouldn't she want to share your happiness?"

"She could do it afterwards," I said.

"She's studying to be a nurse. It's not as if she'd be in the way," Mom argued.

"Mother, it's a birth, not a party!"

"It's both," she insisted. "They wouldn't be hovering over your bed unless you wanted them to. They could be in the waiting area and just come in when it was appropriate."

"I'll think about it," I said, trying to put her off.

"Wonderful," she responded, patting my knee. "The more you can surround yourself with the people you love, the better off you'll be. Take it from me, I know. When you were born, I was put in this awful labor room and they

wouldn't even let your father or your grandmother in. I was scared to death. I didn't have a soul to hold my hand. I'm going to make sure that doesn't happen to you."

"It won't, Mom. Times have changed."

"Thank goodness for that," she said. "Just add those names to your list and don't worry about a thing. Leave everything up to me."

"But—"

Before I could say anything else, she gave me a quick kiss and got up. "Sweetie. I've got to run. There are a thousand things to do. Don't forget to take your vitamins."

With a wave, she was off.

The minute the front door closed, a sinking feeling came over me. I'd been happy with my birthing plan. Now, I was conflicted.

When I told Liam, he was more than conflicted. He was mad. He'd looked so relaxed after coming home from fishing with a buddy. Now, his face was red.

"I thought we had this all worked out. Your mom and I would be the only family members at the birth."

"That's the way I wanted it," I said.

"Then why didn't you tell her?" he asked. "If you don't want your aunt there, why don't you just put your foot down?"

"No one says no to Mom. You know that. Besides, I don't want to hurt Aunt Margaret's feelings or Uncle Ted's."

"Uncle Ted?" he said with alarm. "She wants him there, too?"

"Well, it wouldn't be right to invite one and not the other. Don't worry. It's not as if they're going to be hovering over me the whole time. We'll have our privacy, just like we planned."

He shook his head stubbornly. "No, it won't be like we planned."

I swallowed hard. "Maybe not exactly, but it will mean so much to Mom. She has this thing about Aunt Margaret being Dad's stand in. You know she's never gotten over his death."

Liam sighed. "Lisa, you're going to be a mother yourself in a few weeks. You're an adult. You can't keep on letting your mother run your life."

"She's not running my life," I countered. "It's just that I'm all she's got."

"Well, she needs to get a life of her own," he grumbled.

The baby started to kick again. I sat down and stared at the kitchen table.

"If I make her happy, you're unhappy. If I make you happy, she's unhappy. What am I supposed to do?"

"It looks like you've already decided."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"In this case, you're going to try to please her."

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I know we had our own plans, but after seeing how much it meant to her to have Aunt Margaret there, I just couldn't say no. You should have seen her. She was so excited, so eager to be part of the planning that I didn't have the heart to tell her to butt out."

"What about me? I'm the father. Don't my wishes count for something?"

I took his hand in mine. "Of course, they do."

He pulled his hand away. "I'm afraid you have a funny way of showing it."

"Liam, please try to understand."

"Excuse me," he said, walking off. "I'll be outside cleaning fish."

Exasperated, I grabbed a bag of the vinegar and sea salt potato chips I'd craved all through my pregnancy and started munching. This wasn't the first time that Liam and I had disagreed over Mom. Only this time, it involved the biggest issue of all—the birth of our baby.

Mom and I had always been close. For part of our lives, it was just the two of us against the world.

Once, we'd been a family of four. That was until my little brother, Robbie, died of a heart defect when he was only five months old. Two years later, when I was six, Dad died in a car wreck, leaving Mom a widow without many resources. She hadn't worked since I was born. Funeral expenses and Robbie's unpaid medical bills quickly consumed the proceeds of Dad's modest life insurance policy. The small amount left was put aside for my education.

It was tough living on the tiny widow's pension that Mom received, so she got a job in a lingerie factory. After she finished paying for a babysitter for me, her net pay wasn't much. Then the factory closed and Mom was out of work. Things got so bad at one point that she had to sell our car to keep the bank from foreclosing on our house. But no matter how bad things got, she never touched my education fund.

One night, I went into her bedroom after having a bad dream and I found her crying.

I didn't like seeing my mother so sad, so as I got into bed and snuggled around her, I made up my mind that I was going to do everything I could to make her happy. Maybe I couldn't make her troubles go away, but I could get her to smile a little bit. I told her jokes that I learned at school. I gave her wildflower bouquets. I drew pictures for her to put on the refrigerator. I helped with the housework.

Finally, she had a real reason to smile. She landed a job at a bakery. Since there were no busses running at that hour, she had to walk the mile to Sweetie's at three in the morning. This went on for six months, until she could scrape together enough to buy an old car.

It wasn't until I was in my teens that I fully understood how miserable things had been for her. She bought her clothes in thrift shops, cut her own hair, and took catering jobs on weekends so I could have a few extras. For her, there was little time for friends or social events. It was all about making ends meet.

Then the tide turned. The bakery owner retired and sold the business to Mom with a financial arrangement that she could manage. She added a deli and business grew. For the first time since Dad died, there seemed to be a sparkle in her eyes.

With Mom's prize-winning wedding cakes, Sweetie's became the most popular bakery for brides. And since it was near a college campus, there was no shortage of customers for deli soups and sandwiches, or her speciality cupcakes.

Even though Mom had the bakery, she still lived much of her life through me. After all, I was all the family she had left.

When Liam and I got engaged, she literally took over the wedding, planning it down to the last detail. I'd wanted to do it myself, but I just couldn't bring myself to deprive her of that joy. For so much of her life, she'd had so little to be happy about.

After we were married, she continued to be deeply involved in our lives. Although Liam hadn't wanted her to, she insisted on making half the down payment on our house. Now that she had help running Sweetie's, she dropped in frequently and had dinner

with us once a week. Sometimes, she planned weekend day trips, such as a foliage tour, for the three of us.

Eventually, it became a point of contention between Liam and me. Liam wanted me to ask her to respect our privacy a little more, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. I just enjoyed seeing Mom happy, even though I might be inconvenienced. Besides, Liam couldn't really understand. He'd been raised in a complete family.

When I became pregnant, Mom was ecstatic. Of course, that only intensified her involvement in our lives. And although she loved Liam, sometimes she seemed to sort of forget about him. I understood how he felt about Mom's intrusion into our birth plan. But at the same time, I wished he'd be more understanding of her. Here I was, stuck in the middle. What was I supposed to do?

I pushed my rounded body up from the sofa and went outside. Liam was packing several freshly cleaned fish on ice.

I slipped an arm around his waist. "Honey, I'm sorry."

He wiped off his hands and turned toward me. The corners of his mouth turned upward in a slightly mischievous smile. "You know, I've been thinking. If your aunt and uncle are going to be there, then my parents are going to wonder why they weren't on the list."

I nodded. "Of course, we can add your parents."

"Then there's my brother and his wife."

I blinked.

"And then there's my cousin," he added.

I gulped. "You mean Brent?"

"Yes. He lives right here in town. How could we exclude him? After all, it's a major family event."

I felt like I'd just swallowed a rock. Brent was the kind of guy who didn't think anything of putting his feet up on the coffee table or reaching into the refrigerator and drinking milk straight from the carton. I knew, because he'd done both at our house. He also drank too much at parties and overstayed his welcome. With a history like that, how could we expect him to act at a birthing center?

"I don't know about Brent," I said after a long pause.

"But he's my cousin," Liam said. "He was a groomsman at our wedding. 27

And don't forget, I'm going to be his best man when he gets married next month."

I thought of Brent's loud and overbearing personality and felt the stirrings of a headache. "This must mean that you have changed your mind about having my aunt and uncle there."

"Honey, I just want you to be happy," he said. "You're the mother-to-be. I'll go along with anything you want."

I bit my bottom lip. He was right. I couldn't very well invite my family and not his. "All right, but let's keep everyone at a distance as much as possible—except for Mom, of course."

He took a deep breath and pulled me close. "Sure. I think we can manage that."

The next day, we had Sunday dinner at Mom's. It was pretty much a tradition since Liam and I had gotten married. Although he sometimes complained about the time Mom spent at our house, he never complained about going to her house for some of her great cooking.

I felt good. I'd only had to get up once during the night to go to the bathroom, and my back wasn't aching. I was also happy with the compromise Liam and I had reached on the birth plan. It wasn't what I truly wanted, but at least it was something everyone could live with. I told Mom about it over our meal of pot roast, mashed potatoes and gravy, vegetables, and homemade rolls.

"Mainly, they'll be there on the sidelines," I said.

"Of course, honey," Mom said. "I'll see to it that no one gets in the way."

"I'd appreciate that, because I'm going to be too preoccupied to be any kind of a hostess."

Mom responded with one of her wonderful, musical laughs. It was a laugh I seldom heard as a child and I loved hearing it. "What about your best friend, Kathy?" she asked. "Is she coming?"

"Mom, I think we have enough people already."

"But she's almost finished with her nursing degree. The more medical help you can have, the better. Besides, she can help manage the relatives."

I sighed. "I'll think about it."

"Since we're on the subject," Mom said, "I have a little surprise to announce."

I laid down my fork. "What is it?"

Her eyes sparkled. "I've hired a professional photographer to record your baby's birth."

My breath caught in my throat. "But Mom, I'm not sure—"

She held up a hand. "I know what you're thinking. You don't want a strange man standing over you while you're in an undignified position. But this photographer is a woman with two children of her own. She's done this before. She's very discreet and tasteful. And she does beautiful work. I heard about her through one of my customers. You won't even know she's there."

I looked warily at Liam. His face was expressionless.

"I was thinking that the birthing center could take a few shots of the baby afterward," I said.

"Honey, you know those pictures aren't the best. And for the first time in my life, I can afford to splurge a little. We'll have a wonderful record on video."

I looked at Liam again. A muscle twitched in his jaw. I knew what he was thinking, *There goes the meddling mother-in-law again*. But what could I do?

"It's very nice of you, Mom, but—"

"But what?" she asked, her smile fading.

"It will be expensive. You've been too good to us already."

"Don't worry about something as silly as that," she said, her smile brightening. "It gives me great pleasure to be able to do something special for you. It helps make up for the times when I couldn't afford it. And think of what it will mean to the baby later on. How many children get to see their own birth? You'll be so glad I did this. Trust me."

I reached across the table and touched her hand. "You have a point, Mom. It's a wonderful idea. Thank you."

I nudged Liam's knee with mine. "Thank you, Mom," he said, with a stiff smile.

"You're more than welcome," she beamed. "Now, who would like some blackberry cobbler?"

Later, as we got into the car to go home, Liam turned to me. "I wish she'd consulted us first."

"She wanted it to be a surprise," I said. "Doing things like this makes her happy."

"I was hoping for something a little more intimate," he said. "Nobody filmed my birth and I don't feel the slightest bit deprived."

"Then do you want to be the one to tell her no?"

He shook his head. "That's your job. She's your mother."

There I was, back on the horns of the same old dilemma. Mom was happy, but Liam wasn't.

As the next few weeks passed, Mom went into full gear. She ordered flowers and had the bakery make cakes with raspberry filling and blue marzipan bows on top.

"Don't worry about a thing," she said. "I'm a caterer. I know how to manage a crowd. The guests will be so busy snacking that you'll hardly know they're there."

In the meantime, Liam and I started to focus on more important things. We were going to be parents soon, and our lives would never be the same. The altered birth plan took a back seat to living up to the awesome responsibility of parenthood. We went to our last birth preparation class together, and then went out to a nice dinner in a tucked-away Italian restaurant. It was the same restaurant we'd gone to on the night Liam had proposed.

The doctor continued to give me positive reports. The baby's heartbeat was strong, his development was normal, and all of my test results were good. By all indications, the baby would arrive in two weeks and I was more than ready. I was getting up three times a night to go to the bathroom and I felt sore all over. Luckily, I had a sympathetic female boss who let me do my bookkeeping job from home.

Ten days before my due date, Liam went to a bachelor party being thrown for his cousin, Brent. A party room had been rented in a pub across town.

"I'll be fine," I told Liam reassuringly. "Just have a good time."

He gave me a quick kiss. "That shouldn't be hard to do. I should be back sometime after midnight."

After he left, I wrote thank-you notes for gifts from a baby shower my co-workers had given me. Suddenly, two sharp pains bolted through me. They were so strong, that I grabbed the rail of the crib for support. *Was this labor already?* My heartbeat quickened. Like a lot of women, I'd had occasional twinges throughout much of my preg-

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nancy, but they were nothing like this. These pains had almost knocked me off my feet.

I went into our bedroom and sat down on our bed. As the pain went away, my mind began to clear and I began recalling what I'd learned in our birthing classes. I was going to have to try to make myself comfortable and just wait. But the next couple of hours went by without incident. *False alarm*, I told myself. Those things happened. Yet, I couldn't help but be a little worried.

Feeling tired, I went to bed. I dozed off, but it wasn't long before I awoke. This time, I felt an odd pressure inside me, one that I couldn't relieve. Suddenly, there was a gush. My heart seemed to stop. My brain froze. My body just seemed like it was suspended in time. As the minutes ticked by, my brain began to thaw from the shock of this new development. *Had my water broken? Or did my over-preserved bladder fail?*

I felt the wetness that had seeped from my body. The weight of realization hit me like a bowling ball dropping from the ceiling. This was no bed-wetting incident—my water had broken!

I switched on the light and looked at the alarm clock. It was only nine o'clock. Liam wouldn't be home for at least three hours. *But that's okay*, I thought, slowly gathering my wits. *First babies tend to take their time. The birth could be another twelve to eighteen hours away.*

I'd learned there was no need to rush off to the birthing center until I'd reached a certain stage. I needed to keep calm and start timing my contractions.

One hit and then another. I'd never been through this before, but I knew that they were coming faster than they were supposed to. With sweat popping out all over me, I called Liam on his cell phone. It took several rings before he answered it. I could hear loud music and laughter in the background.

"Liam, my water broke."

"What, honey? I can't hear you."

"You'd better come home," I shouted. "My water broke. I'm in labor."

"I—I'm on my way."

I hung up quickly and called Mom.

"Don't move an inch," she said, excitedly. "I'll be right there."

In the meantime, the pains got closer together. I called the birthing center to tell them I was on my way.

Mom was at the house within minutes, grabbing the small bag I'd packed and hustling me off to her car.

"What about Liam?" I asked.

"He can meet us at the birthing center," Mom said in her usual take-charge way. "We can give him a ring while we're on our way."

Mom did the ringing. I was in the middle of a contraction. "He's on his way, honey," she said. "Everything is going to be fine."

Mom took off at a brisk pace. "As soon as I get you settled, I'll call the photographer and all the guests. I've already arranged for the cakes and the flowers to be delivered. Too bad the birthing center wouldn't let us have champagne. I had to settle for ginger ale."

I groaned as she hit a speed bump.

"Hold on, sweetheart," she said. "Just a few more minutes."

The lighted birthing-center sign was a welcome sight. Mom parked quickly and we went inside. There was no sign of Liam yet.

"He'll be here at any moment," Mom said. "In the meantime, you've got me."

After signing in at the admission desk, I was taken to my birthing room. As I slipped into a hospital gown, Mom stepped into the hall to call all the "guests."

Katherine, my nurse-midwife, came in to examine me. "Labor is progressing faster than usual for a first-time birth, but you're doing fine," she reassured me.

"The baby wasn't supposed to be here for nine days," I said, worriedly.

"Sometimes they're early. Sometimes they're late. We don't know why. Generally speaking, you're still in the ballpark, so don't worry," she said with a smile. "We'll take good care of you."

She strapped a fetal monitor around my bulging belly and waited for the readout. "We've got a strong fetal heartbeat. All we have to do now is help Mother Nature take her course."

Before I could respond, I was seized by another contraction. Katherine helped me with my breathing exercises and wiped my face with a damp washcloth. "Has your husband arrived yet?" she asked.

I shook my head.

"I'll stay with you until he does," she said.

There was a knock on the door.

"Can I come in?" The voice was Mom's.

I nodded and the midwife opened the door. Mom rushed to my bedside.

"How's my little girl?" she asked.

"She's fine and so is the baby," the midwife said. "If you would like, I'll let the two of you have some privacy." She repositioned the buzzer on my bed. "If you need me, just buzz."

"Where's Liam?" I asked as soon as Katherine left.

"I called and he said they're on their way."

I tensed. "Who's they?"

"I don't know. I suppose he's bringing Brent."

"But it's Brent's party."

She patted my arm. "We'll maybe I misunderstood. In the meantime, there's someone out there waiting to share in this blessed event. It's Aunt Margaret and Uncle Ted."

"They're here already?" I asked in surprise.

"They live only about five minutes from here. Can I have them come in?"

"Just for a minute."

Mom jumped up and opened the door. In paraded not only Aunt Margaret and Uncle Ted, but also their teenage son, Mike.

Aunt Margaret rushed up to me and planted a kiss on my forehead. "How's the little mother?" she crooned.

"So far, so good," I said, managing a smile.

"You young, modern women," she said, shaking her head. "Who would have thought anybody would want to go back to natural childbirth? If the going gets rough, honey, don't be afraid to ask for drugs. There's no need to suffer."

My cheeks prickled with irritation. "Drugs aren't good for the baby."

"Nonsense. When Mike was born, I told the doctor I wanted it as painless as possible. It didn't hurt him any."

Mike, a gangly sixteen-year-old, stared wide-eyed at my bulging middle as if it were an extraterrestrial egg about to hatch. In his hand was an oversized soft drink. Plugged into his ears were headphones. He seemed oblivious to what his mother was saying.

Uncle Ted stood stiffly back, pretending not to look at my scantily clad body.

"I hope you don't mind our bringing Mike along," Aunt Margaret said. "I thought it would be an educational

experience for him.”

Mike, still staring at my midsection, took a long and noisy slurp from his drink.

Aunt Margaret yanked one of the buds from his ear. “Mike, say hello to your cousin Lisa. Thank her for allowing you to be a part of this miracle.”

“Cool,” he said. “Thanks.”

Before I could indulge in my dismay, a sudden, sharp pain caused me to cry out softly.

Mom jumped up and hustled the “guests” out of the room. “It’s all right,” she said, taking my hand. “Your mother’s here.”

But she isn’t the one I need, I thought, huffing through my breathing exercises. What is taking Liam so long?

Suddenly, the door burst open and my stressed husband appeared. He rushed to my bedside. “Lisa, how are you? Is everything all right?” he asked, anxiously. His eyes looked slightly cloudy.

“Yes. What took you so long?”

“I started to come on my own, but I realized I’d had too much to drink and that I shouldn’t be driving. Everybody at the party had been drinking. A guy called one of his friends to drive us. He got lost on his way to the pub.”

I looked at him with alarm. “Liam, are you in any condition to help me through this?”

“I’m fine. I had two cups of black coffee on the way over. I’m so sorry. I had no idea the baby would come so soon.”

“It’s all right. Just stay with me.”

As the clock ticked away, I grew increasingly uncomfortable. Liam came through like a trooper, making sure I didn’t lose my focus. He helped me into the hot tub and rubbed my back with scented lotion. He put on our favorite music, but the noise and laughter coming from outside the door could still be heard. One laugh rang out over the rest. I recognized it as Brent’s. My pain, combined with the party atmosphere outside, made everything seem surreal.

In the meantime, Mom and the midwife came in and out and the photographer arrived. She set up a camera and tripod at the head of the bed, and left the room.

My stay in the hot tub eased my discomfort and Liam helped me back to bed. I’d barely gotten settled when the door opened again. It was Mom, this

time with my friend, Kathy. My heart thumped in surprise. I purposely hadn’t invited her because the guest list had already gotten out of hand. But someone else had, and that someone was obviously Mom.

Kathy gave me a hug. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m starting to flag a little bit.”

“That’s normal. Is there anything I can do?”

“You can hurry this baby up,” I managed to joke.

She touched my shoulder and got up. “I’ll step aside and let you regroup. You’re doing great. You’re going to be a wonderful mom.”

Before she could leave the room, Liam’s parents arrived. I was in such a disheveled state, that his mother was probably wondering what Liam ever saw in me. Liam’s father rubbed his son’s shoulders as if he were the one in labor. His mother gave me a welcomed cup of ice and a few words of encouragement.

They left after a few minutes, allowing me to rest and refocus. But soon, the door opened again.

This time, it was Brent with a man I’d never seen before. Painfully, I pushed myself up slightly. Accompanying the two into the room was the pungent evergreen smell of aftershave. My labor pains had already pushed me to the edge of nausea. Now, with this overpowering scent in the air, my stomach was threatening to turn again.

“Hey, Mom-to-be,” Brent slurred with his booming voice. “I want to see that little guy who cut my bachelor party short.”

“It won’t be much longer,” Liam said.

The stranger handed Liam a cup of coffee. “I thought you might like this.”

“Thanks, buddy,” Liam said.

“Lisa, this is Dave Marler,” Brent said, loudly. “He turned out to be our designated driver for the night.”

Dave looked slightly embarrassed. “Pleased to meet you.”

I’d barely managed to thank him for driving Liam when an intense wave of pain had me moaning and clutching at the mattress. Quickly, the room cleared.

Liam coached me through it and buzzed for the midwife.

She appeared, with Mom rushing in after her.

The midwife checked me over and glanced at the monitor. “It won’t be much longer,” she said. “Keep up the

good work, Lisa. You’re doing beautifully.”

But I didn’t feel like I was doing so well. The pains were so strong that I could barely stand it. Liam mopped up the sweat pouring off me. I had trouble focusing on my breathing. I cried out through clenched teeth.

“Give her something,” Mom demanded of the midwife. “We just can’t let her suffer like this. Give her something!”

“Mrs. Evans,” the midwife responded, “Lisa specified that there would be no drugs.”

“But I’m her mother,” Mom snapped back. “I know what’s best for her.”

“Mom, leave,” I said, weakly but firmly.

Her eyes widened in surprise. “What? You can’t mean that.”

“Come on, Mrs. Evans,” the midwife said, taking her by the arm. “I know this is hard for you—”

“I’m staying right here,” she said, stubbornly. “I’m not leaving my daughter.”

“She won’t be alone,” Liam said. “I’m here.”

“Mom, listen to the midwife,” I said, breathlessly.

“I’ll come and get you when the time comes,” Liam said.

Mom glanced at us with a wounded look. “All right then,” she said, softly. “I’ll respect your wishes.”

The time soon came. The midwife announced that the baby’s head had crowned and a nursing assistant was sent after the family.

I was so focused on pushing that all I could see was a blur of faces crowded around my bed. Liam was on one side of me and Mom was on the other. At the head of the bed was the photographer. Next to her was Liam’s father with a camcorder. The midwife was positioned between my barely draped legs. Everyone turned quiet with anticipation, even Brent.

Despite being in a haze of fatigue and pain, I became conscious of someone holding a small object high over the midwife’s head. Slowly, I realized it was my teenage cousin with a cell phone camera.

His father quickly took it out of his hand. “What are you doing?” he demanded in a loud whisper.

“I’m showing this to my friends.”

“No, you’re not.”

(Continued on page 58) TL

A close-up photograph of a young woman with blonde hair lying down, looking unwell. She is holding a white digital thermometer in her right hand, which is near her forehead. Her left hand is resting on her forehead. She is wearing a white tank top and a yellow and red striped towel or blanket is draped over her. The background is plain white.

Lovesick

Paging Dr. Dreamy

Bailey whined to go outside, but there was just no way I could brave the cold, windy day—not while I felt like I was going to die at any moment. I reached for my cell phone on the floor and dialed my next-door neighbor's number.

Luckily, Kent answered on the second ring. “Hey, Liz, what’s up?”

“My temperature. I’m so sick and Bailey has to be let out. I can’t even get off the couch. Could you take him out for me?” Just that little conversation left me winded.

“Wow, you sound really bad. I’ll be right over.”



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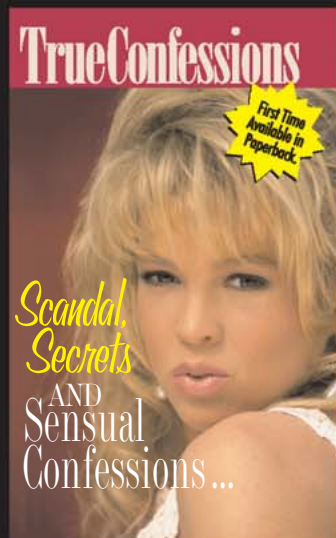
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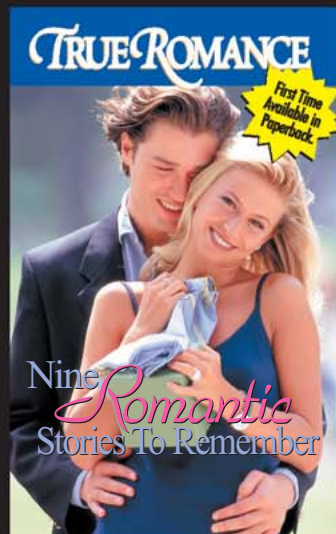
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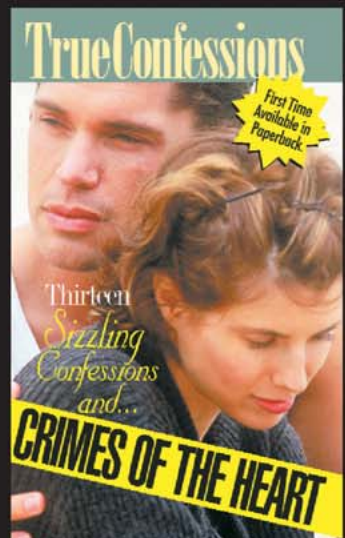
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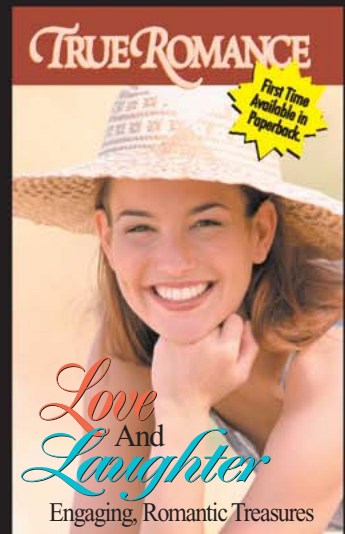
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Kent knocked on the door thirty seconds later.

I had to drag myself to the door to unlock it. I slumped against the wall, my heart thundering in my chest. I flopped one hand up in greeting. "Thanks, Kent."

His eyes went wide and he scooped me up off the floor in his arms. "You are seriously sick. Are you taking anything? Is anyone taking care of you?"

"Bailey," I offered, as he carried me to the couch. It would have been quite romantic if I didn't look like a pathetic lump of rags—and if I had been interested in Kent. But we were just friends and had been since he moved in nine months earlier. Sure, there had been a bit of flirting, a testing of the waters so to speak, to see if there was a spark. There wasn't. But we hung out sometimes, and babysat each other's dogs when needed.

He had a playful husky named Rex and I had my mutt, Bailey. The two dogs got along great.

Kent hooked Bailey up to his leash. "Come on boy, let's take care of business. We'll be right back, Liz." They went out the door, Bailey straining on the leash.

I tried to pull the covers back on me, but I just didn't have the strength to reach for them on the floor. I knew the flu knocked the life out of you, but I guess I forgot how bad it could really be. The pesky coughs and colds I'd had before were a cakewalk compared to this.

My boss had told me to take the whole week off because he didn't want me infecting the bank's customers. *Thank goodness for sick days.* I hoped a week off would be enough. I knew the flu could last much longer than that. It was tough being sick when you're all alone.

Goosebumps prickled my skin as another wave of chills shook my body. I wished I were at back home, so my mother could take care of me. Moving off on your own isn't always as glamorous as it seems. Sometimes it was lonely being single in the city. It certainly wasn't like *Sex And The City*, that's for sure.

I managed to snag a corner of the blanket and pulled it half-heartedly over myself.

34 The door burst open and Kent and

Bailey dragged in a cloud of cold with them. I shook from the frigid blast, and Kent quickly shut the door. He unleashed Bailey who trotted over and curled up next to the couch, looking up at me with worried brown eyes.

Kent's eyes looked very much the same as he covered me up with the blanket. They were really nice, kind eyes, I noticed. "You want another blanket?" he asked.

I nodded. "You can grab the quilt off my bed."

He quickly returned with it and draped it over me. "Have you been drinking water?"

I shook my head.

He went into the kitchen and came back with a glass of water and a glass of juice. "Ladies choice," he said.

I sat up and reached for the water with a shaky hand, sloshing it over the side of the cup. Kent wrapped his fingers over mine and brought it to my lips. I was too miserable to be embarrassed that I couldn't even drink by myself, but I wasn't too sick to notice how nice his hand felt over mine.

He pressed the inside of his wrist against my skin. "You're burning up. Have you been to the doctor?"

I shook my head. "There's nothing you can do for the flu. Gotta ride it out, just treat the symptoms."

"Do you have any over-the-counter medicine?" He looked very cute, standing there so concerned. I supposed I wasn't going to die if I was still able to check out a guy.

"No, I don't have any medicine here." My head was throbbing.

"Alright, I'm going out to the store to get some. Do you think you could eat anything?"

I shrugged. "I don't know."

He tucked the covers around me again. "I'll make you my mother's famous chicken soup. Will you be okay without me?" He felt my forehead again.

"Kent, you don't have to do all this. I just needed you to let Bailey out. I don't want to put you out."

"Shut up. I've got nothing else to do tonight and you're my friend. You're sick, I don't mind helping out." He put his coat back on and slipped out the door.

I settled back on the couch, feeling a little bit better that at least some-

one was here to help, that someone cared. I ignored my aching muscles and drifted off to sleep.

I woke to the smell of something wonderful.

He looked over from the kitchen and smiled. "This should be done in about half-an-hour. My mom's chicken soup always made me feel better."

"I can't believe you know how to cook," I said, suddenly feeling very hot and kicking off all the covers. I pulled my long hair off my neck and fanned myself. How I could go from frigid to roasting in minutes, I had no idea.

"Don't give me too much credit. I can cook soup, spaghetti, and a few other dishes to keep me full. Mostly, I'm a take-out kind of guy. I'll do Mexican any night of the week."

"Did you ever try Three Amigos over on the boulevard?" I asked.

"Try it? I keep them in business." He laughed, as he poured chicken stock in the pan.

"I'll have to take you there when I feel better, as a thank you."

"That would be awesome." He grinned, and I realized how cute Kent really was. He had an endearing little boy charm about him, with his dimples and dark curly hair.

"I'm not keeping you from a girlfriend or anything tonight, am I?"

He smirked. "No such luck. I haven't seen anyone since Cindy and I broke up. What was that, five months ago? That's pretty sad, when you think about it."

"No, it's just tough to meet the right person. Believe me, I'm going on a longer dry run than five months."

He stirred the soup. "I find that hard to believe, a hottie like you not finding a date?"

If my face wasn't already flushed from my fever, I'm sure I would be blushing. I didn't say anything. *Kent thought I was a hottie?*

"Here, I made something to help your headache." He pulled something out of the microwave and brought it to me. He laid it on my forehead.

"What is this?"

"It's a headache log. A tube sock filled with rice. You heat it up in the microwave for three minutes and it really helps when you have a

headache. My mom always used to make them for us. Don't worry, it's a new sock," he quickly added.

"Thanks, Kent. You've really gone above and beyond for me." The moist heat on my head felt good.

"No, I haven't done enough. I still have to give you a dose of medicine." He went back to the kitchen and poured a packet into a cup of hot water and brought the nasty potion over.

I frowned. "I've had this before. It's yucky."

"It'll make you feel better. Just drink it quickly."

So I did, and I just about gagged. Kent patted my shoulder when I was done. "Good girl."

I drank some juice to chase the bad taste. "I really appreciate you being here. I feel better just having someone here."

He looked over at me and grinned. "I don't mind at all. I like hanging out with you, even when you're sick. We should get together more often. I know we're both busy with work and stuff, but I like you. You're cool. And our dogs get along. That's the most important thing."

I laughed. "That's a big plus. Why don't you bring Rex over right now? Kind of like a play date or something."

"That's a great idea. We can watch a movie tonight and let the dogs hang out. I'll let the soup simmer for a minute and I'll be right back." He dashed out the door.

It was kind of stupid, but my heart was thumping, thinking about spending the evening with him. I thought I'd written off Kent as potential date material, but there I was thinking, *Hmm . . . Kent?* Or, maybe it was just the fever talking.

Kent came back with Rex, and the two dogs yipped joyously at each other, chasing each other around the apartment. Kent brought me out a bowl of soup with some crackers. I managed a sip or two.

"This is really good," I said. "I just don't think I can eat much more."

"That's fine. Just need to get a little bit in you."

I moved over on the couch, giving him room to sit down. "Is there anything else I can get you? I bought some Popsicles. Sometimes those are good when your throat hurts."

"No. I'm good for now, thanks."

We chose a movie, and somehow, despite the chills and fever and aches and pains, I had a nice time.

"Listen, I feel weird leaving you alone tonight," Kent said when the movie was over. "So how about we get you into your bed, and I'll sleep on the couch?"

"Are you sure?"

He shrugged. "Yeah, you were really sick when I first came over. I want to be here in case you relapse or something. What if you get delirious and wander out of the building into the cold winter night?"

I shook my head and laughed weakly. "Trust me, I don't think I could make it to the elevator. But thanks. That would be great if you stayed. You're too sweet."

He helped me up from the couch and I realized how nasty I must've looked and smelled. I hadn't managed a shower in two days. Here I was thinking about Kent and I was probably blowing any chance with him looking like I did. I hobbled to my bed and he tucked me in.

"Seriously, just holler if you need anything." He smiled at me and flicked off my light.

"Thanks, Kent. You're the first guy to sleep over in forever."

He chuckled. "Get some rest. I have to leave for work at eight. Call my cell tomorrow if you need anything. I'll stop by after work."

"Thanks. I hope I can pay you back some day." I snuggled up to my pillow and fell asleep thinking of his big brown eyes.

I slept in until noon the next day, and did feel much better. Not, night-out-on-the-town better, but good enough to drag my butt to the bath.

I soaked in the bubbles for at least an hour, and put on fresh clothes. I felt halfway human again, but I still crashed on the sofa. I watched another movie and found myself keeping an eye on the clock, waiting for Kent to come home.

I was curious to see if my interest had just been some sort of nurse-patient-bonding thing—or if I really was interested in more than just being next-door-neighbor buddies.

Kent knocked on the door at twenty after five, and this time I was able to walk to the door instead of crawl. I opened the door and he smiled. "You look like you feel a lot better."

"I had a good nurse," I teased.

"Perhaps I can interest you in some Mexican?" He pulled a bag from behind his back.

"Oh, I might be able to force it down." We sat at the table and I took one of the burritos from the to-go containers.

"How was work?" I asked, as we sat together eating. It was really nice having him there. It was easy to imagine what it would be like as Kent's girlfriend. *A lot like this*, I thought.

"Well, I still hate my boss, I still wish I had majored in something besides accounting." He shrugged. "But what are you gonna do. Wanna watch another movie tonight? I picked up a few on the way home."

"Sure. I'm not going back to work this week, so I can stay up as late as I want."

He raised one eyebrow and coughed. "I'm suddenly feeling sick. I think I'll be calling in sick, too."

"You're bad," I teased. But my tummy swirled with excitement thinking that Kent was going to hang out with me again. At least, I hoped it was excitement and not a bad reaction to the burrito.

Kent brought his dog over again and we popped some popcorn and put on a movie. Kent sat right next to me and I smiled at him. "Thanks again for everything."

"No problem. That's what friends do, right?" He slung his arm around my shoulder and I spent the next two hours wondering if Kent would ever see me as anything more than a friend.

When the first movie ended, Kent hopped up to get us more drinks. "Have you had your medicine today?"

I made a face and held up my hands. "I'm much, much better."

He laughed. "Do you need anything?"

You! I wanted to say, but I just shook my head.

Kent sat next to me again and this time he set his hand on my knee. I took a deep breath and held it, staring at his hand.

He must have noticed, because he moved it and said, "Sorry."

"No," I said, "it's okay. I like it. I like . . . you, Kent. Maybe even more than a friend." I stared at my feet as I said

(Continued on page 59) 35

Winter Flame

A man and a woman are embracing in a snowy environment. The man is wearing a black beanie, a black jacket, and white gloves. The woman is wearing a pink jacket, a fur-lined hood, and blue pants. They are both smiling. The background is a snowy forest.

So Hot It Sizzles!

“Please. You can’t take my car! I need it to get to work!” I stood there in my driveway almost begging the man who was repossessing my car.

“Maybe you should have thought of that before you started skipping payments,” the man said.

The whole scene was surreal to me.

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I'd just barely got home from work and went inside my little house—a really little house—that my grandmother had left me. I'd just had the worst day.

I was only a couple of weeks into my new job and just learning the complicated procedures, when the boss announced that all the procedures were going to change immediately. My head was throbbing on my drive home.

That day was just another to add to the list of bad things that had happened in my life over the past six months. My fiancé, Joe, and I, had split up. My grandmother had died, leaving me alone in the world. I'd started a new job that I felt I couldn't possibly learn. And now, this!

“Oh jeez, lady. Don't start that,” the repo man said.

I was crying. So what? I was due, wasn't I?

“It's not going to help,” he said, sighing. Suddenly, he produced a crisp white handkerchief from his black jacket and gave it to me.

“Go ahead and take the stupid car,” I told him, my chin sticking out in defiance.

It wasn't his fault. I should have seen this one coming for miles. Joe would have stopped payments on the car as soon as we split up. Since it was in his name, no one would have sent me a letter about it.

I just didn't have the money. This man had to take the car.

The name on his jacket read Alex's Repos.

“That's all right, Alex. You're just doing your job,” I said. I'd likely lose my new job, too, since now I really had no way to get to work.

“I'm not Alex. That's my brother. He's gone on vacation and I'm just filling in for him. My name is Callan.”

For one crazy moment, I thought he was going to take me into his arms for a reassuring hug. I stepped back.

“Are you gonna be okay, lady?” he asked.

“I'll be just fine,” I told him crisply, standing straight and proud. This was just another setback, nothing more. I would get through this.

He took off the black cap he was wearing and ran a hand through his

hair. “Do you have someone you can call and talk to?”

“No one,” I said. “No one at all. Now just take the car and leave.”

If circumstances were different, I might have noticed how unusually attractive he was—tall, and handsome enough to be a model. I wondered what he did for a regular job—strange that I was thinking about the repo man while my life was in shreds.

I watched as he backed the car out of the driveway and slowly drove off. He looked at me and we made eye contact as I stood there watching him, wrapping my arms around myself as though I could prevent any more bad stuff from happening.

And inside my grandmother's house, all the reminders of the past six months lay about—wedding favors, gifts, and a stack of invitations that had slid onto the floor. And then there were things from the online knitting store that I'd planned to open. Joe had been very supportive of me doing that, right up to the day he announced he was having second thoughts and asked if we could start dating other people again.

Not the thing to tell your fiancée after half the wedding invitations had gone out!

I looked over at the picture of my grandmother, my sweet, caring grandmother who had raised me. She was the only family I had, and now she was gone. *How I miss her, especially now!*

That did it. I started crying and didn't let up for an hour. Life was just too unfair.

A little while later there was a knock on my door. I wasn't going to answer it. My eyes had puffed out from all of my crying and I didn't feel like talking to some door-to-door salesman anyway.

It was Callan, the repo man.

“I got to thinking, lady—”

“My name is Molly. Molly Hansen.”

“I got to thinking, Molly. I could give you a ride to work tomorrow morning.”

“Is this a repo man's guilt?” I asked, and saw his face tighten.

He started to walk away.

“No, I'm sorry. I know you were just doing your job. And yes, I could use a lift tomorrow. Then I'll just have to find another job, at least one on a

bus route.”

He stood there looking very uncomfortable. Maybe I shouldn't have, but I invited him in for coffee. I just didn't want to be alone.

“Nice house,” he said.

“It's a mess right now. I've got to clear some things away.”

“Oh, you're getting married?” he asked.

You really couldn't ignore all the wedding stuff lying around. My house really was a mess and it reflected the state of my mind.

“Was. It was called off,” I said firmly.

“Oh.”

“Do you take cream in your coffee?”

I asked about his brother's business. Callan said that he avoided filling in for his brother. He normally worked as a youth leader for a camp for troubled boys up in the mountains.

So that's how he got so physically fit.

And after talking to him for just a few minutes, I could see that his occupation really suited him. He loved the outdoors and he loved making a difference in young people's lives.

“So your brother twisted your arm to fill in for him?” I asked.

“Yeah, you could say that. I hate it. I hate the look on people's faces when I show up to take their cars away.”

He looked at me and then looked down at his coffee.

“Don't worry about me, Callan. I'll be all right.”

“Are you sure?”

“You can't have this kind of regret over every car you repossess,” I told him.

“Normally, I don't. But the look on your face today—I was worried about you.”

“Life hasn't exactly been a bowl of cherries lately,” I said, and told him briefly about my grandmother and my wedding.

“But things will get better for you now,” he said.

“Yes. I guess they have to.”

Callan not only picked me up to take me to work the next morning, he was there at the end of the day to take me home.

“Thank you very much, but I'll be all right. I'm looking for a job closer

to home. In the meantime, I'll get a ride with a coworker," I said.

I didn't know many people from work, but I knew it wasn't Callan's responsibility to bring me to my job. He was a virtual stranger.

I didn't see him for some time after that. Maybe he thought I was trying to get rid of him or that I was just ungrateful, but I was busy getting my life back on track.

I did end up finding a job closer to home. It didn't pay as much as my other one, but then again, I could walk to work each day, saving even bus fare, and it was a job I liked.

I was the assistant manager of a store that sold liquidated goods. I liked the other employees very much. They had regular barbecues and get-togethers so that when we worked, we knew each other and had fun.

The customers were happy because they were getting bargains on things they really needed, from food to furniture. Some work places just felt happy, like this one.

I was slowly getting over my failed relationship as well. Some days went by where I didn't even think about Joe, making me wonder why I'd decided to marry him in the first place.

I cleaned up my house and donated all the wedding finery to a charity. I organized the things for my online knitting store and started working on it again. It was something I could do in the evenings after work.

Winter came and life settled into a pattern for me. I was beginning to enjoy my own company. Life with Joe had been hectic. Now I could take my time to enjoy my job and my little house.

I could feel my grandmother's loving presence and I decided that if I never found someone to marry, then I would be all right. For the first time in my life, I felt at peace.

One cold November evening, there was a knock at my door. I really wasn't expecting anyone. I'd made a couple of close friends at work, but it didn't seem likely that they'd venture out to visit quite yet.

It was Callan. He was looking happy, not like the last time I saw him when he was working for his brother.

"Hello!" I said, genuinely glad to see him. "Come on in, out of the cold."

"Is it cold? I'm used to this up in the mountains."

"I'm sure you are," I said, laughing. "How about some hot mocha cocoa?"

"Sounds great. Got marshmallows?"

"Of course," I said.

Callan and I just slipped into conversation as though we'd only been apart for hours. He had just come back from finishing his camp with troubled kids. The company he worked for took most winters off, although they occasionally put on extreme winter camping sessions for the kids.

I handed him his cocoa and settled down with mine in Grandma's favorite wing chair. Callan talked about some of the kids he worked with—many who had problems with drugs and gangs. His face glowed when he spoke about the successes.

"You really love your job," I said.

"Yeah, I guess I do. And you? Do you like your new job?"

"Absolutely. But I'm still planning my knitting store."

"Your own store? Tell me about it."

It was refreshing to have a man really listen to me.

I realized that Joe had never done that. I'd spent hours listening to his plans and dreams, but he never asked about mine. I guess he just figured that his dreams were our dreams.

Nothing could be further from the truth. I wanted to have my own little store for years. My grandmother had encouraged me, but I'd put those plans on hold when Joe and I got together. That was the wrong idea.

I made up my mind that if I ever did get involved with anyone again, he'd have to care enough about my dreams to at least listen to them. If I didn't find anyone like that, that was okay. Why did I have to get married, anyway?

But Callan was listening. I didn't know if he was just being polite or what, but he asked good questions and seemed to understand where I was going with my plans.

"So you want to find unique yarns from all over the world? I think that's a fantastic idea, Molly. I'll tell my

mom about it. She's a fanatical knitter."

I had to laugh at that term.

"Hey, sounds like a great name for my business," I joked.

We drank another couple of mugs of cocoa and then he said he'd let me get some sleep before work the next day.

I watched him leave, and for a minute, I remembered the day he came here to repossess my car. The day I thought my whole life was coming to an end. How wrong I'd been!

In a few short months I'd found a better job, put my past with Joe pretty much behind me, and felt very good about my future. I had good friends in my life now, and that included Callan.

A thought crossed my mind as I watched him drive away. I was so glad that he wouldn't be repossessing cars for his brother Alex anymore. He would be far safer dealing with a group of troubled teens than he would repossessing cars from people—possibly very dangerous and desperate people.

I don't know why I thought that.

My grandmother had the gift of premonitions. She often wouldn't tell me about them, but from time to time she'd call my school just before I would fall and skin my knee or something.

When I was old enough to work, Grandma would tell me to be extra careful that day. And sure enough, something would happen, like a traffic accident that I'd just missed, or a piece of loose plywood that blew onto my parking space at work. But because Grandma told me to watch out for things, I'd miss getting hurt.

Did people inherit this gift of seeing the future? I wondered.

I didn't know the answer. It was just that seeing Callan's car pull away made me think.

He'll be okay, right?

I didn't think of it again. Work was super busy and we had twice the merchandise coming into the store in time for Christmas.

I hoped I would see Callan again because I'd bought a gift for him. But we had a casual friendship and I didn't really know when we'd see each other again.

Christmas came and went. I was a little sad that he didn't come to see 39

me.

We never exchanged phone numbers and I didn't even know where he stayed when he wasn't in the mountains.

Then one Saturday morning, I heard a truck in my driveway. The sign on the side read, "Alex's Repos." A burly man got out.

I blinked. They couldn't be repossessing my car because I didn't have one anymore. I walked to work and the grocery store. My friends would often pick me up to go out with them to restaurants or shopping. I found I didn't really need a car.

So then why is this truck here? Callan?

"Are you Molly?" the man asked.

"Yes."

"I'm Alex, Callan's brother," he said. There was some family resemblance, but not much. Alex was shorter and stockier than his brother.

He didn't say any more and my heart nearly stopped. Something had happened to Callan.

"What's wrong? What's happened?"

Alex didn't want to tell me. He sat there uncomfortably at my kitchen table and tried to find the words.

"He's been shot, Molly," he said.

I sat down hard on the chair across from him and just stared.

"How? When?"

"He was out repossessing a truck for me. The guy was waiting for him in the garage. He shot Callan and ran."

Pure, white fury blinded me.

"He wasn't supposed to do that anymore! He promised me he would give it up!"

"I'm sorry," Alex said.

"How is he? Where is he?"

"At my place. They only kept him in the hospital a few hours. The bullet just grazed him."

I wanted to slap him.

"You could have told me that before!"

"Sorry," he said, shrugging.

"So did he send you here?" I asked once I'd calmed down a little.

"Yeah. He knew you didn't have a car so he sent me here to give you a ride to my place so you could see him. If you want."

I quickly grabbed my purse.

"Then what are we waiting for?" I demanded.

It was obvious that Alex wasn't

used to being given orders, and I suspected he wasn't used to a woman giving him orders. He didn't say anything as he put the truck in reverse and we left.

There were all kinds of emotions going through me. Fear, relief that the bullet hadn't hit anything vital, and anger at this brother who just didn't seem to get it. Finally, I couldn't hold my tongue.

"Why do you get your brother to fill in for you like this? It's dangerous work. He's not suited to do it."

"You don't know anything about him or about me. I'd be grateful if you kept your thoughts to yourself."

Well I certainly did that, not saying another word to this rude man until we got to his place. I was so happy Callan was there, standing outside waiting for me.

Alex just took one look at him and stomped inside the house.

Are you all right?" I asked, touching his arm in the sling.

"I'll be fine," he insisted.

"How did it happen?"

Callan shrugged.

"I was about to repossess this guy's new truck. It was in his garage. What I didn't know was that he was hiding in the garage, waiting for me. He must have got tipped off that we were coming to get it."

The way he was talking, he could have been discussing the weather. But my stomach was churning thinking of what could've happened. I could not understand why anyone would get into such a dangerous business.

"Callan, I want you to stay with me," I said, throwing a fierce look at the house where Alex was now skulking around somewhere.

"Oh, you're mad at Alex," he said, figuring it out. "It wasn't his fault, Molly."

"Still, I'd feel better if you stayed at my place for awhile."

I called a cab on my cell phone and Callan went into the house to collect his suitcase.

This was where he stayed in the winters when he wasn't working. I couldn't imagine staying even one minute with that surly brother of his. I was still fuming.

When we got to my house, I sat Callan down and made him a cup of hot tea.

"Promise me you'll never, ever do this again," I said.

"I promise," he said, giving me that adorable smile of his that just made something melt inside me.

I had to admit that something changed with us then. When Alex had told me Callan had been shot, I was scared, more scared than I'd ever been in my life. I was starting to care for him a lot. That was something I never expected.

After Joe left me I didn't want to get seriously involved with another man because I didn't want to get hurt. But now I could feel myself falling for someone, and I was afraid.

I didn't know much about Callan at all. And now I'd just invited him to live with me!

"I'll get your room ready," I said, hoping to make it clear that this would be just a roommate situation.

But I'm not ashamed to say that it didn't take more than a week before I really wanted that situation to change. I walked past his room one evening and found him changing his shirt. I almost gasped. My ex, Joe, didn't have half those muscles. Suddenly, my fingers itched to feel every last one of them.

I moved away quickly before Callan turned around and caught me ogling him.

So much for spending the rest of my life without a man.

This one in particular kept me awake at night thinking about him. I wondered if he was feeling the same things.

I decided to approach it slowly, even though my hormones were in overdrive.

One day after work I came home to find that Callan had cooked us barbecued chicken complete with a salad and dessert.

"Wow!" I said.

He beamed at me, pulling out a chair at the fully set table. He'd even gone out and bought pretty napkins.

We shared a beautiful, intimate dinner. We talked about our hopes and dreams. Or rather, he listened while I talked.

I was falling in love.

"What about you, Callan?" I asked. "I know so little about you."

"Maybe that's a good thing, Molly," he said, holding his wine glass to his lips.

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"No, no it's not," I said. "You always let me talk about myself, but I don't know much about you."

"What would you like to know?" he asked, but I got the feeling that he really didn't want to talk about his past.

"What do you want me to know?" I asked.

He shrugged and smiled. "You already know the important stuff. I work in the mountains with kids."

"And you fill in for your brother in his repo business."

Callan sighed and put his wine glass down. It was like he had been avoiding talking about something, but now he had to.

"It's not really Alex's business. He inherited it from the old man. Alex didn't have much choice about being a repo man."

I listened while Callan told me the story of his family. His mother had died when Callan was small. The father had been very abusive and would beat his two sons on a regular basis.

"I used to hate Saturday nights," Callan said, his eyes looking far into the past. "I'd try to find a good hiding place for when Dad came back home from the bars. I'd think of places all week. Maybe the shed? No, not the shed because he had a key to that. Maybe our treehouse? No, my father had a gun and if he got mad enough, he could just point the gun up and shoot me there. Maybe my school a few blocks away? No, he'd just call the police and tell them I was a runaway, and they'd drag me back home."

I continued to listen in horror at the story of this little boy who would do such desperate things to avoid his father's anger. But, from what Callan was saying, Alex got the brunt of it.

"Alex would take beatings for me. If Dad couldn't find me, he could always find Alex. Alex would stay and just stand there as my father hit him."

I ran over to Callan and held his head in my arms as he cried.

"I owe him so much, Molly."

Now I could understand a little of what Alex had been trying to tell me. Callan said that their father got in his car one night and never came home. He just ran himself off the road in a drunken daze.

took over the repo business with the help of his father's only employee. Alex also took on the upbringing of his little brother.

I couldn't believe it. I didn't think it was even possible for such a young man to do that. Suddenly, I gained a lot more respect for Alex.

"So you see, Molly, I like to help out with the business when I can. Although I'm not very good at it, it's the only thing Alex knows and he'll be doing it until he retires. I was lucky enough to be able to go to college, with Alex's help, of course. That's why I'm a youth instructor today."

"I think I owe your brother an apology," I said.

Callan laughed.

"I would have liked to see the two of you at it. You are both strong personalities."

"We are?"

"That's one of the things I love about you, Molly. You know what you want in life and you go after it."

I didn't know about that. I just felt like I kept picking myself up after bad things happened. But I guess I did have plans for my life—my knitting store, for one.

And now, I was planning to have Callan in my life on a permanent basis. But things were still new. I didn't know how he felt about me.

I found out that weekend.

I wanted to have a nice, intimate dinner with Callan. I put steaks on the barbecue and made potato salad and chocolate cake. People really loved my chocolate cake and I hoped Callan did, too.

"Now it's my turn to say wow! What's the special occasion?"

I just smiled. All through the dinner we couldn't take our eyes off each other. And after dessert, it just seemed a natural thing that he would come into my bedroom—natural, and unbelievable!

Callan was so different from my ex that I wanted to shout it from the rooftops. I almost did, a couple of times that night.

"You're incredible, do you know that?" Callan told me in the middle of the night.

"You're not so bad yourself," I said, laughing and kissing him on the shoulder. He had lost the sling and his arm was doing much better. But

he'd always have the scar of the time some crazy man hiding in a garage shot him.

I didn't want Callan to ever go on another of those repo runs. And yet, I was beginning to care a lot for him and we might end up getting serious, possibly even married.

If that were the case, I'd have to make some kind of peace with Callan's only relative—his brother.

I don't know who was more surprised the day I showed up at Alex's house—him or me. I'd vowed never to go back there again.

But like Callan said, I had a strong personality. I could see this through.

"I'd like to go along with you some time when you're repossessing a car," I told him.

He looked shocked, but hid it right away.

"Why?" he asked bluntly.

I looked away for a moment.

"I care about your brother. I think we might be getting serious. I feel that family is important and I want to understand what it is you do."

He nodded even though he was still looking at me strangely. Alex wasn't a man of many words.

"All right. Tuesday night. You'll be alone?"

"Yes. Callan doesn't know I'm doing this."

Was that a hint of respect I saw in his eyes? I couldn't tell.

On Tuesday night I lied to Callan and told him I would be out with a couple of friends. He just smiled and wished me a good time.

I took a long time deciding what to wear.

What did a person wear to repossess a car?

I giggled as I looked in my closet. Jeans and a dark hooded sweatshirt would be my best bet, and sneakers, in case I had to get away fast.

Alex was waiting for me. I'd taken a cab to his place. I still didn't see the need to buy a car since I could walk to work. Callan normally borrowed an old clunker from his brother when he was staying with him, but of course he didn't feel like he could do that when he'd left.

"Are you up for this?" Alex asked, gruffly.

He might be wondering why I was really doing this, but to his credit he didn't ask about it. Maybe he sensed

that Callan cared about me and he didn't want to reject the woman who might become his sister-in-law.

I believed that Alex cared the world for his brother—he had taken on all those beatings when they were growing up.

"I want to make it clear that I still don't want Callan doing any more of these runs," I told him.

"He's got his own job. He only does this to help me sometimes. I don't ask him to do it."

"You don't?"

But he didn't say any more. He was looking for an address.

It was just getting dark and the whole city had an eerie feeling. But thankfully I didn't get any more of those premonitions like my grandmother did. I was just nervous, that was all.

"I'm looking for a white house, 437," Alex said.

I looked, too.

"Over there!" I said.

"Okay. No matter what, you stay in the truck, all right?"

I nodded and watched as he got out of the truck and headed for a new blue car parked on the street in front of the house. Suddenly, someone came running out of the house so fast that I didn't even get a good look at him.

All I knew was that Alex was in trouble. I didn't think. I rushed out of the truck to help.

If I were thinking clearly, it would have been better for me to stay in the truck and call for help. I didn't have a gun and I wouldn't be any match for some angry young guy.

When I got there Alex was talking quietly to a very upset man. It turned out he wasn't young, maybe in his sixties.

"This can't be happening!" he said.

Alex held out a hand to stop me from coming closer.

"You can't take my car away!"

I could understand the man's anguish. He told us that he would lose his job without the car. Alex still spoke to him in low tones. I could see the man starting to relax.

"I'm sorry I have to do this, Ivan, but it's my job. It's my way of making a living, the only thing I really know how to do half-right," Alex told him.

"I know, I know, but what am I gonna do?" Ivan, the man whose car

we were taking, asked in an anguished voice.

To my surprise, Alex gave him a list of places he could call. Carpools, things like that. There were agencies in the city that would drive you to work on a temporary basis if you were without transportation until you could make better arrangements. Alex even had information on food banks.

I wanted to tell Ivan that I knew exactly what he was going through, because not so long ago, the same thing had happened to me.

I used to think that only the worst deadbeats had their cars repossessed. But just because you were going through hard times didn't make you a criminal. It didn't make you any less of a human being.

And in his way, that was exactly what Alex was telling Ivan.

Ivan backed off. Alex got the car and we made it back to his house where Alex ran the business.

"You can't tell me you do that for every person?" I asked.

"Depends. Every situation is different. Some guys, if you told them about carpools, they'd take that as adding insult to injury and would punch your lights out. You have to know how to read people in this business."

"And you're never wrong?"

"Almost never. I've got a couple of scars to show for the times I was wrong."

I was quiet then, thinking this over. I'd been furious at Alex for putting Callan in danger, but it never occurred to me just how many times over the years that Alex himself had put his life on the line to take back a car.

"The most dangerous job I did was repossessing this old lady's car. She came at me with a .45 pointed right between my eyes."

"No!"

"Yes. My life flashed before me on that one. You can never go in thinking it will be an easy night. Expect the unexpected and all that."

It was a dangerous business, and also a lonely one, I guessed. But what choice did Alex have when he was raising his younger brother? I felt a new respect for this gruff man.

"That was really gutsy of you to come running out like that," he told

me. "Sure you don't want to join the family business?"

I shook my head quickly and Alex laughed.

"You're all right, Molly," he said, and that was about the best compliment I'd ever got.

It would be a long, long time before I told Callan where I'd gone that night.

In fact, it would be on our honeymoon. We were lying on a beach in Barbados, just letting the warm breeze flow over us.

"What's the craziest thing you've ever done in your life?" I asked Callan, tracing one finger in the white sand.

He opened one eye and propped himself on one elbow, looking at me.

"The craziest? I guess the time I went skinny dipping in this mountain lake. It was so cold that for a moment I thought I was going to die and be quick-frozen in that lake until the end of time. What about you, Molly? What's the craziest thing you've ever done?"

"I went on a repo ride with your brother," I told him, and watched as the shock transformed his face.

It's been a couple of years now.

Alex is a frequent guest at our house. He's never once suggested that Callan have anything to do with the repo business.

Alex seems to have mellowed a little. He loves my cooking, or so he says, so he'll always be welcome. In fact, he's even found himself a girlfriend and seems to be enjoying life a little, at long last.

It's been a hard road for the two brothers.

Sometimes I see them sitting in the Adirondack chairs under the trees in our yard, just talking for hours. They need that time alone, and I give it to them.

I can't even imagine what life was like for them growing up. As hard as it must have been for Callan, it was probably twice as bad for Alex.

I get the sense that there's some major healing going on.

It's so good to see the two brothers spend time together. They really do have a special bond and I'm glad that I made peace with Alex before I made a commitment to Callan. And to think that I once thought I hated him.♥

IN MY SISTER'S SHADOW

It's Time For
The Oddball
To Shine!

My older sister Jade never does things by halves. She's always been the cleverest, the prettiest, and the girl chosen as most likely to succeed, whereas I was almost never chosen for anything. I was a very ordinary student who didn't shine at anything.

When she was at college, she got Valedictorian, but when I went the following year, I barely scraped through.

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She was still at college when she was headhunted by some big advertising agency, but for a few years I just drifted from one dead-end job to another—serving and working behind the counter at a diner, until I found employment in the rather shabby office of Simon's Printing Works.

Of course, once I got the job Jade came by to see where I worked.

"That old place will have to do for a start, Carrie," she said kindly, looking at the shabby offices, which were in an industrial area on the edge of town. "Learn as much as you can, then try for a decent job in the city."

But I never felt the urge to move off to a trendier job, because I liked Andrew Simon the moment I met him, and he was an easy man to work for.

I guessed his age was somewhere between thirty and forty, but it was hard to tell because he wore thick spectacles and was starting to lose some of his hair in front.

He ran the family business in an old-fashioned, hands-on way, and was very popular with the men. In fact, he seemed much happier operating the printing presses than working in the office, and after a few weeks he left most of the office work to me even though I was still very inexperienced.

"You're far better organized than I am, Carrie," he said. "Could you take over the ordering of the printing ink? We're always running out at critical moments and it's my fault, I'm hopeless at checking the stockroom."

"Of course, Mr. Simon." He had such a sweet smile I'd have agreed to anything, and I was pleased he had such confidence in me.

"I think it's time you called me Andrew," he said. "Is that coffee you've got there? Do you think I could have a cup?"

"Of course, Andrew," I smiled.

He grinned back, and suddenly seemed a lot younger. I made him his coffee, but he didn't go back into the noisy printing works, he perched on the edge of my desk with his cup.

TL "When my dad started this busi-
46 ness there were only three men,"

he said. "And he managed everything himself. Of course, my mom helped him in the beginning with the office stuff, but that was before she had my brother and me. After that, she was a stay-at-home mom. My dad never dreamed it would grow this big."

"A staff of forty!" I said. "He'd be proud of you, Andrew. Did you always want to join your father in the business?"

"Never. Actually," he pulled a rueful face, "I had dreams of being a professional artist. But then Dad died when I was in my second year of college, and I had no choice, really. I had to step in for a while and keep the business going for the sake of the family. My kid brother Warren was still at school . . . so ten years later, here I am."

He sounded a bit dispirited and I had a sudden vision of his dream: sitting in some exotic, sunny spot like Italy or Hawaii, painting and drinking red wine, and feeling his creative juices flowing. Instead, he was under pressure every day from irritable customers to meet printing deadlines, and worked amidst thundering printing presses in these old, rundown premises.

A lot of the time Andrew looked tired and anxious and I knew, from doing the books, that some months were pretty close when it came to paying the wages of the men.

"I'm hoping when Warren gets his degree next year he'll join me here," he said, adding wistfully, "If he decides to become a partner, I could take a vacation."

"Where would you go if he did?"

"Me?" he laughed. "I'd take a month off in the fall, and go walking somewhere in New England with my paint box. But I don't expect that'll happen for a very long time."

"When did you last take a vacation?" I asked, sympathetically.

"Hmmm," He considered. "Actually, I haven't had more than two consecutive days off since I started here."

The poor guy! What he needed was a wife. Someone who'd make him take a break, and be sure they went to a restful, picturesque spot where he could indulge his hobby of painting. Someone who'd buy him new shirts instead of letting

him wear the same old ones with ink stains and frayed cuffs, and who'd remind him to have his hair cut. But as far as I could tell, he didn't have a girlfriend or any sort of social life. Not one that he talked about, anyway.

Andrew's younger brother Warren, who popped in to work part-time during vacations, was the exact opposite of Andrew. He was full of jokes and irresistibly good-looking, with blonde hair almost down to his shoulders, and three cute little gold studs in his ear.

The minute I saw him I fell for his easy charm. I guess every girl who ever met him did the same.

The gold earrings annoyed Andrew, who was rather conservative.

"I keep telling him that the customers won't like bits of metal all over his face," he grumbled. "But he won't listen."

"Don't exaggerate," I smiled. "Anyway, I'm sure he'll get rid of them when he starts working here permanently." Although, secretly I thought he looked pretty dashing.

Once Warren had graduated I expected him to find some high-flying job in the city, but to my surprise he agreed to join his brother in the family business.

He was officially on the payroll of Simon Printing Works as Trainee Company Manager. Andrew gave him various duties, but he spent more time sitting opposite me with his feet on my desk, paging through motoring magazines. He was supposed to be working out business plans and ideas for extending our customer base.

"Just you wait, Carrie. I'm going to buy one of those classic sports cars in British racing green," he said, dreamily. "One with a walnut dashboard and real leather seats."

"Yep, and I'm going to grow wings and fly," I joked. "But when you buy it, be sure to take me for a ride. I've always loved the idea of speeding along with the wind in my hair."

I loved the idea of speeding along with Warren, too. I spent a lot of time fantasizing about him.

I dreamt he'd ask me for a date and we'd go dancing. I'd wear a shimmering dress, and we'd whirl

around the dance floor. He'd hold me close and whisper that I was the most beautiful girl he'd every known. *Yeah right!* I said it was a fantasy. I knew what would happen if I ever got a chance to dance with him. I have two left feet and would probably tread on his toes before we even got started.

Besides, along with all my other duties I handled the switchboard, and with all the female callers who asked eagerly for Warren, I knew I didn't stand a chance.

One afternoon he was sitting in my office when Jade breezed in, looking her usual beautiful, chic self.

"Hi, Carrie," she said, briskly. "Did you forget that I'm picking you up for Mom's birthday dinner? I'll wait while you change."

"I haven't forgotten," I said, picking up my bag. "But I'm quite happy dressed as I am."

She wrinkled her nose in charming disapproval.

"Like that? Really? Are you sure? Oh well," she said, and then smiled at Warren. "And you are?"

"Warren Simon," he said, with a goofy expression—Jade has that affect on men.

"I'm Jade, Carrie's sister."

They stared into each other's eyes like a pair of idiots and I had to practically pull her away.

"Come on then," I said. "Or we'll be late. Bye, Warren."

"Good-bye Jade," he breathed. "I'll see you again. Soon."

Warren and Jade started going out almost every night, and he phoned her every day. I couldn't help overhearing snippets of phone conversation from Warren's side, which made me realize things were heating up between them. I felt the old burning resentment for my sister that I'd always felt since we were kids. Jade was getting what she wanted, as she always did. And in this case, it was clear she wanted Warren.

It was easy to see the influence Jade had on him. One day he came to work in a well-cut suit, looking even more gorgeous than usual.

I couldn't resist commenting when he strolled in to pinch one of my sandwiches.

"Applying for another job, are you?" I teased. "Or did you finally decide to wash those old jeans?"

"I'm taking Jade to an art exhibition after work," he said, defensively. "She wouldn't want me to be dressed like some peasant."

And the following week he walked into the office looking so completely different that I gasped in amazement. He now had a sharp brush cut and looked, well, leaner and meaner. He was also missing his ear studs, something Andrew noticed at once.

"Glad to see you're taking life a bit more seriously," he said, approvingly. "And I like the suit, it gives our customers a good impression."

Warren could feel my adverse opinion across the room and rubbed a hand over his stubble, as if he couldn't believe it himself.

"Jade knows this terrific hairstylist," he said, defensively. "He studied my facial contours and designed a cut to suit me."

"What was he, a sheep shearer in a previous life?"

He scowled but he was dying to tell me his news.

"Jade says I'm wasted here," he said, helping himself to my store of chocolate cookies. "She says I should apply for a job at her company."

"But you don't know the first thing about advertising!"

"Well, there's a position of Junior Accounts Executive coming up. Just right for me and it could lead to better things once I've learned the ropes."

I just knew that was Jade talking. Something always had to have possibilities, and lead to better things.

"How can you let Andrew down? He's counting on you to take over some of the business." I could imagine how disappointed Andrew would be.

"Andrew will get on fine without me, and besides, he's got you."

"But he wanted a partner—someone to help carry the responsibilities. I'm just the drudge around here!"

"I think you're a bit more than that. Haven't you noticed? But I know advertising will suit me," he muttered. "Jade says I have a cre-

ative mind."

"Jade says, Jade says. You sound like a parrot." I was furious with him, and my sister. I knew how much Andrew had been counting on Warren to take some of the load off his shoulders, and it was horrible of Jade to lure him over to her glitzy offices with the promises of some high-flying job. He'd probably come creeping back after a few months anyway.

"So, apply for that stupid job, then," I said crossly. "But before you go, could you give me the production figures for last month please, I've been asking you for them the whole week."

When Warren told his brother, there were no roars of outrage, just quiet disappointment.

Later that day, he slumped on a chair in the reception area where I worked, and shared the news.

"His heart wasn't in it, I could tell," he commented gloomily. "Anyway, there's a nice big office waiting for you now, if you want it. You should have had it in the first place."

"Really?"

"Of course. You can probably do all your own work as well as Warren's, and do it better than he did, to be honest."

I could feel my face flushing with pleasure.

So I inherited Warren's office, his nice big shiny desk and all of the work he was supposed to do. Andrew gave me a great pay raise along with all my new responsibilities, and once I'd sorted all the haphazard mess of papers he'd left behind I didn't miss Warren at all. I sometimes wondered if he'd done anything at the office besides read car magazines.

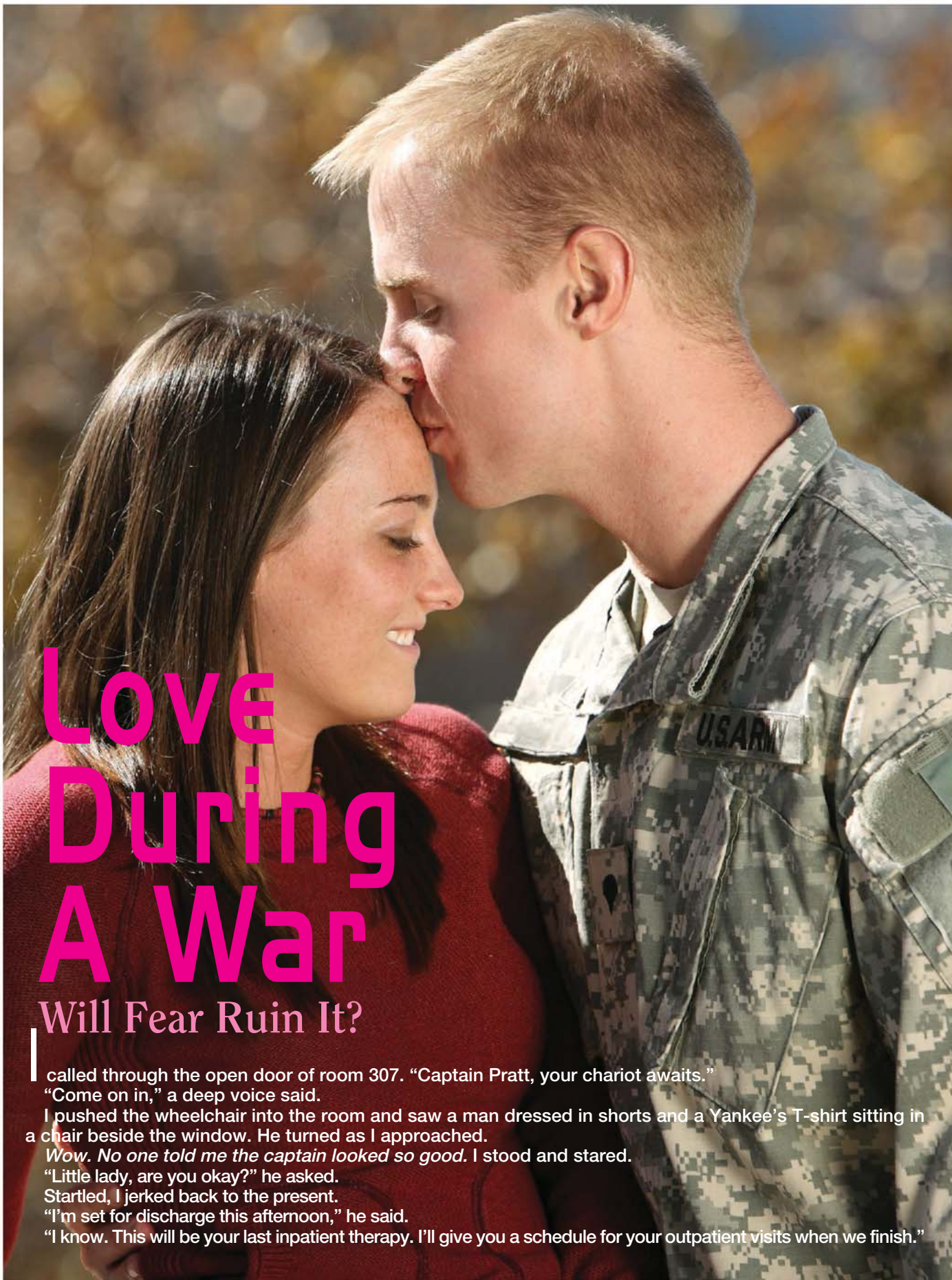
I was now running every aspect of the business except for the actual printing. Andrew was really impressed that I got everything running so smoothly and gave me the title, Office Manager—that sounded a lot better than drudge.

One morning my phone rang and it was Jade.

"Carrie? Can we meet sometime for lunch?"

None of that "How are you? Il

(Continued on page 62) 47



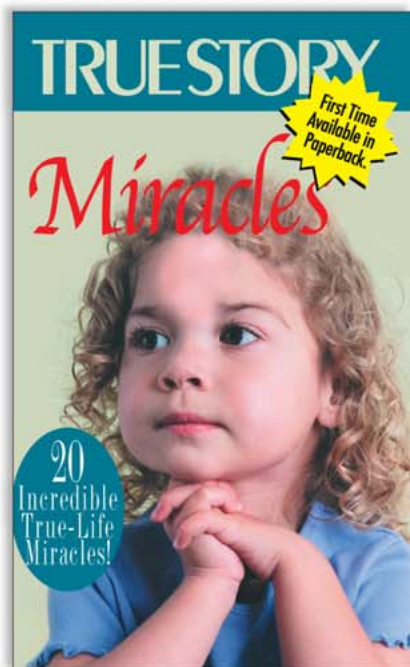
Love During A War

Will Fear Ruin It?

I called through the open door of room 307. "Captain Pratt, your chariot awaits."
"Come on in," a deep voice said.
I pushed the wheelchair into the room and saw a man dressed in shorts and a Yankee's T-shirt sitting in a chair beside the window. He turned as I approached.
Wow. No one told me the captain looked so good. I stood and stared.
"Little lady, are you okay?" he asked.
Startled, I jerked back to the present.
"I'm set for discharge this afternoon," he said.
"I know. This will be your last inpatient therapy. I'll give you a schedule for your outpatient visits when we finish."

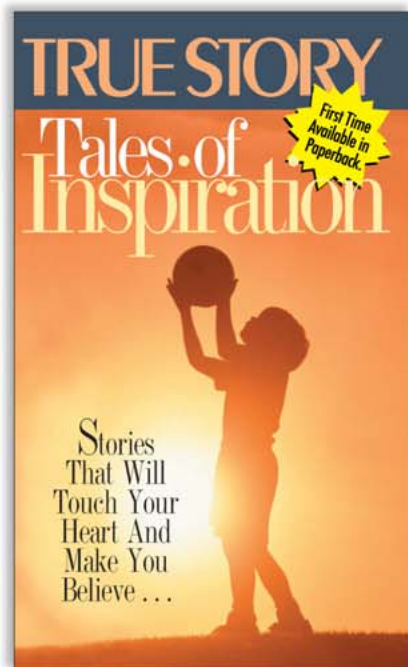
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"Little lady, could you tell me why the people here at Walter Reed don't want to let go once they get one of us?"

I saluted him. "Sir, we just want to be sure you're well before we turn you loose. And, I imagine the female doctors and nurses enjoy having handsome soldiers around."

Captain Pratt laughed. "If you're planning on joining the Army, you'll have to improve your salute."

"You have the prettiest smile I've ever seen," he said. "Now tell me your name. A soldier salutes and states his name."

"Give me another chance," I said.

I snapped my feet together, jerked my hand to my forehead, and said, "Sir, Lori Marshall, physical therapist here to take you to the torture chamber for your exercises, Sir."

The room echoed with his laughter. "Better. Nice to meet you Lori. Now tell me where you found your smile."

"Sir, one day I found a bottle on the beach, shook it, and out came a genie—looked just like the one on the 'I Love Genie' television series. She said, 'Tell me your wish.' I told her I wished for the prettiest smile a girl could have."

Captain Pratt stood. "Lori, you got your wish. Plus you're the prettiest physical therapist I've seen since coming to this place. Course, the others have been male."

I looked into the Captain's eyes seeing straight into his soul. What I saw convinced me a good man with a keen sense of humor stood in front of me.

"Okay, Lori, let's hurry and get this ordeal over with, and then we'll move on to our get-to-know-you session and dinner this evening."

"Sir. . . ."

"I know you're going to say we don't know each other. True, and that's why we're having dinner together. I'm not suggesting we go to bed, at least not tonight."

"I can't."

"It's my first night out of the hospital after being shot—twice—I don't know a single person here, and you would deny me the pleasure of your company at dinner. I'll even pay."

"I see you're not above playing on a girl's sympathies."

"Did it work?" he asked.

TL "Captain, you know you'll be coming in every day for therapy. We're not
50 throwing you to the wolves."

"Might as well. Besides, as soon as I saw you I said to myself, self ask the woman out or someone else will. So, how about dinner?"

My mind spun. *Should I? What did I know about him except he was a soldier who had been injured in Iraq? Fighting for our country. Keeping us free. No, I knew more because I'd visited his soul and found him a good man. He could be trusted.*

"Tell you what, Captain, have dinner at my house. You'll be too tired to go to a restaurant."

What had I said? I asked a strange man to my home—on a date! No, just a friendly dinner for a brave soldier.

"Okay, Lori, you've got a date."

Date. Do I want that?

"Hey, Lori, are we going to therapy or not?"

I jerked back to the here and now.

"Hop in the chair soldier and let's get the torture over with. The doctor has signed discharged orders, so as soon as I'm finished with you, you're free to go."

"Ah, freedom at last. Away Silver," Captain Pratt yelled.

In the therapy department the captain continued to joke with everyone within hearing distance.

I watched and wondered at his smile and the way he talked with the staff and soldiers in therapy. I saw the reason why he made a good leader. He put himself on the same level as the enlisted men, yet his sincere interest in them and the easy way he spoke evoked respect from the men—a true leader. I pictured him in combat, putting himself in the front leading the way.

As I put him through his exercises, I admired the grace of his movement even with a gimpy left leg and shoulder. His firm body had muscles in all the right places, not an ounce of fat. With his determination he would be back to normal soon.

When we finished his routine I gave him his outpatient schedule.

"Will you be my therapist?" Captain Pratt asked.

"No. I work inpatient," I said.

"Too bad for me. Now if you promise to be my therapist every day I'll try to talk the doc into keeping me here."

I laughed. "Soldier, you are officially discharged. We need your bed for someone else."

Captain Pratt frowned and his eyes went flat. "Yeah. Too many need your help."

I hesitated. "Yes, you're right. Our country's injured soldiers need help getting back to their lives."

"Wait here and I'll get an orderly to take you to your room to pack up," I said.

"No need. I can manage on my own. Now write your address down so I can find you this evening, say seven? Don't even think you can get out of the dinner you promised."

I scribbled my address on a piece of notepaper and handed it to him. "Come at six."

"Lori, will you do me a favor?"

A favor. What does he mean? "I guess it depends on what the favor is."

"Call me Maxwell. It's the name my Mama gave me at birth." His eyes sparkled.

"You got a deal, Maxwell."

I knew he'd never be Max; his demeanor demanded the full name, Maxwell.

I walked him to the door of the department and watched him make his way down the hall.

At the end of the corridor he turned, threw me a salute and said, "See you soon."

I turned back to the therapy department, my mind on what I would cook for dinner. It'd been a long time since I'd cooked for a man.

I picked up Allie, my three-year-old daughter, from daycare, and on the way home explained to her we would have company for dinner.

She bounced in her booster seat with excitement. Seldom did we have anyone visit.

My parents lived in Louisiana and Doug's lived in Dallas. Allie didn't get to spend much time with either set of grandparents. I wanted to spend every moment I had with my child so I didn't really make friends, go out, or have people over.

"Who, Mama?"

"A patient from the hospital. His name's Maxwell."

When we reached home I settled Allie and went to the kitchen to start preparations.

Six o'clock on the dot the doorbell rang. I sat the pan of baked potatoes I had taken out of the oven on the stovetop.

Allie ran in and grabbed my apron.

"He's here, Mama."

"Believe you're right. Shall we let him in?"

Her dark eyes looked up at me and she gave an impish smile. "Yes."

"Allie, remember you promised to behave." Too late, she'd already taken off at a run.

Allie stood beside me when I opened the door. I laughed at the surprised look on Maxwell's face. Recovering quickly, he bent down and took Allie's hand.

"What's your name, beautiful princess?" he asked as he kissed Allie's hand.

My daughter giggled.

"Meet my daughter, Allie."

Handing her a rose from the bundle he held, he said, "A flower for a beauty."

Allie took off through the house with squeals echoing.

"Sorry, I should have told you about my daughter. She's the reason we have to eat early."

Maxwell gave me a slow smile, leaned over, and placed a kiss on my cheek. "No problem. But . . . tell me, is there a husband?"

Lightning bolts of electricity ran through my body, but I managed to squeak out, "No. Doug died in the Pentagon on 9/11."

He frowned. "I'm sorry."

I shrugged.

"Come on in to the kitchen and I'll get you a drink."

Maxwell stopped me with a hand on my shoulder. "First date since he died?"

Guess he recognized my nervousness. I nodded my head, brushed his hand off, and started down the hall.

Maxwell gave me a few minutes and when he entered the kitchen he had Allie with him.

"Come on, Allie, let's make the salad for your mama," he said. The two set to work.

As I prepared the rib steaks for broiling, I glanced over at them. Allie concentrated on making the right size tears of lettuce, and I saw her glance at Maxwell to see if he approved.

"I do believe you are a salad chef," he said.

Allie didn't know what a chef was, but recognized praise and gave him her quirky smile.

I stood frozen for a few seconds. The amazement of how comfortable Allie and I felt with Maxwell shocked

me. The scene in my kitchen looked like one of a family, each comfortable with the other, a feeling of harmony and, yes, affection. Had I known the handsome man visiting forever, or did I experience an allusion? My heart skipped a beat when I realized I wanted him to take me in his arms and kiss me.

Dinner proved to be a lively affair. Allie laughed at Maxwell's teasing and even ate her dinner without prompting from me. Afterwards, I put the dishes in the dishwasher while Allie and Maxwell picked out a movie for us to watch.

When I entered the living room, I saw a small head close to an adult one, the two sitting side-by-side on the couch talking while they waited for me.

"Did Allie pick out her favorite cartoons?" I asked.

"Yep," Maxwell said with a smile.

Allie seated herself between us and Maxwell pushed the start button. During the show the three of us laughed and hollered until I feared the neighbors would come over to see if someone was robbing us.

The video finished. I switched off the television.

"Time for bed, Allie."

"Let me help," Maxwell said.

Allie squealed and jumped into his outstretched arms.

How, I didn't know, but the man won our hearts the first night. Maybe he'd hypnotized us.

Maxwell tucked Allie in her bed making a big production of getting the covers just so, not a wrinkle to be

seen. We listened to her prayers and to my surprise, Maxwell read her a story until her eyes closed and her little lips puffed in and out in sleep.

"You're really good with children," I said, as we walked back to the living room. "Do you have any? I never thought to ask if you were married."

"No to both questions. I think I fell in love with Allie the moment I saw her."

Maxwell stopped me, lifted a strand of my hair, and stared into my eyes.

"Allie looks just like her mother. Her hair's white blonde now, but will be darker like yours when she's older, and her turquoise eyes hold hidden mysteries just as yours do."

My breath caught. Our attraction to each other spun a thread between us, attaching our hearts.

"My friends told me men ran from women with children," I whispered.

"I think I've been running to you all my life," he said.

Maxwell's hand went around my head and he leaned into me, his lips touching mine lightly.

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I wanted his hands on me so bad it hurt. Instead, I pulled back and said, "How about some coffee."

Taking a deep breath, Maxwell said, "You're probably right; we'd better have a drink."

I put the grounds in the pot and plugged it in. We sat at the kitchen table.

Maxwell took my left hand in his calloused ones and played with my fingers. He bent his head and kissed my right palm.

"I go back to my unit in Iraq as soon as the doctor releases me."

My heart plunged, hitting my stomach with a hard thud. *Would he die from a bullet this trip? Or maybe a RPG?*

"Do you think it's tempting fate to go back to the war zone after one injury?" I asked.

"I'm a soldier. It's what I do. Lori, I want to continue seeing you, but understand I'm career Army. My men depend on me. I volunteered for Afghanistan and when I returned to the states I volunteered for Iraq."

We sat staring into each other's eyes.

I saw Maxwell's feeling for me, and knew he saw mine. *Could I fall in love with someone in a day?*

"I believe the coffee's ready," Maxwell said.

I stood and went to fill our cups.

"Lori, would you and Allie like to go to the D.C. Zoo tomorrow? It's Saturday and I remember the therapy department is closed on the weekends."

"Sounds like fun. Allie will love it."

"Let's make a day of it," Maxwell said.

I smiled. "Yes . . . a day."

Suddenly, I didn't know what to say. I took a sip of the hot coffee.

Did I fear feeling too much for him just to have him leave us when he became fit again?

War scared me. I saw the injury to his leg, and knew if he hadn't had good treatment in the field hospital he would've lost it. I saw men every day who had lost legs or arms, and were maimed in horrible ways.

"Tell me about your family," Maxwell said.

Jerked from my thoughts I smiled.

TL
52 My sister and I were raised in. It's in Monroe, Louisiana. Dad's a doctor.

They met at the hospital where Mom worked as a nurse. Dad talks about how he fell in love at first sight with the beautiful blonde nurse holding a bleeding child in the emergency room. Even today, you'd think they were newlyweds."

"Did you think about going home after your husband's death?"

"I did. To tell the truth, I felt I had to prove to myself that I could stand on my own feet. It would have been easy to run home to my parents, and they wanted me to. Maybe I will one day. Allie loves them. They visit often and beg me to move back every visit. How about your family?"

"They all live in Dallas. That's in Texas, you know," he said with a grin. "I have four brothers and one sister. Susie, my sister, is the baby and we all spoil her. I'm the second oldest boy. My family's active, loud, and could drive a sane person crazy. I love them. Like your parents, Mama and Pop love each other. They used to embarrass us kids when we were teenagers with their hand-holding; just not being able to keep their hands off each other."

"Sounds like a fun household," I said.

"It is. Now, I'd better go and let you get to sleep or you won't be able to stay awake at the zoo tomorrow."

I walked Maxwell to the door where he stopped and looked at me for a long second. He bent down and kissed me lightly on my lips. The need to grab him and hug him tight came to me and giving into my needs, I did.

He returned the hug briefly then pulled away.

"Good night, Lori."

I stood at the door and watched him get in his car and drive down the street.

That night I couldn't sleep because I was thinking about Maxwell.

Did I find him attractive just because he was the first man I dated since Doug's death?

When I did fall asleep, I dreamed I stood on the edge of a cliff, slipped, and started to fall, but a dark, handsome man reached out and pulled me back and into his arms. He kissed me, and I didn't want the kiss to end. I heard Doug, my dead husband, call to me, "It's time for you to live your life, Lori."

Saturday morning came and Maxwell showed up with helium balloons for

Allie. She jumped with excitement. He tied one around her wrist with the string and she wore it to the zoo.

Our day with the animals fascinated Allie. I laughed at the faces she made at the monkeys and the ones they made at her. She talked to the wild cats and they cocked their heads listening.

We ate hot dogs, ice cream, and popcorn. I feared Allie was going to have a stomachache, but still allowed Maxwell to stop for ice cream on our way home.

Laughter filled our day. My heart was light and gladdened, seeing both Allie and Maxwell laugh and tease each other.

On the way home, Allie fell asleep in her booster chair. When we reached the house, Maxwell carefully lifted her out of the car and said, "This is one night she can sleep in her clothes, and no bath."

Without thinking I replied, "You sound like a father."

"I hope to be one day. Coming from a large family, I would like to have a house full of kids—well, maybe four. Every time I talk to Mom, she reminds me I need to hurry and make her a grandma, since I'm not getting any younger."

I laughed. "You're not that old."

"Old enough to think of marriage," he said.

"I don't want Allie to grow up as an only child. Children need siblings to learn to share, and to provide support for each other."

"Will there ever be room for a husband in your life?" Maxwell asked.

"I hope to marry again. Just depends on if I find a man who accepts and loves Allie. I couldn't bear for her to feel different or left out."

Maxwell stared at me, and looked as though he wanted to say something, but I yawned and stood blinking my eyes, tiredness overcoming me.

"I had a wonderful time, but I've just got to go to bed before I fall down," I said.

"I can see," Maxwell said.

He leaned to me and kissed my forehead. "Okay if I come over tomorrow afternoon around two?"

"I'd like that."

Maxwell stepped closer and gave me a soft kiss on my lips. Electrical shocks began at my lips and went through my body. My arms rose and pulled him closer. The kiss deepened.

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Maxwell's hands moved gently up my arms, over my shoulders, and with one on each side of my head he pulled back and stared into my eyes for long seconds.

"You're special, Lori." Dropping his hands, Maxwell smiled. "See you tomorrow."

I didn't follow him to the door for I knew if I did, I'd beg him to stay the night.

I stood still until I heard his car door slam. Turning, I went to my bedroom.

Undressing for bed I thought about how sad I was that Maxwell and I didn't have the time to get to know each other before he shipped out. I felt such a strong attraction to him.

After falling into a deep sleep, I dreamed of Maxwell. He held me in his arms. I felt his taste, his caresses, and his male passion, but I woke and realized it was a dream. I fell back to sleep and dreamed of Maxwell again. Only the second one wasn't pleasant; I saw him walking out of a shattered building with blood all over him, dripping from his head, his gun slack in his hand. I woke with a cry and fear in my heart.

The next morning, I took Allie to Sunday School and then home. She wanted to know where Maxwell was, and I explained he would come by later. To distract her, I suggested we make cookies.

We were elbow deep in chocolate chip cookie dough when the doorbell rang.

"Maxwell," Allie yelled, and took off running, dough falling from her hands.

I waited in the kitchen until Maxwell came with Allie in his arms.

"I couldn't wait until two," he said.

"I'm glad."

We stood and stared into each other's eyes until Allie squealed to be let down.

"We're making cookies," I said.

Maxwell smiled. "Chocolate chip, my favorite."

"They go well with ham and sweet potatoes. I'm glad you came to eat Sunday dinner with us."

"Me too."

I wanted to go into Maxwell's arms—no I wanted to take his hand and drag him to my bed. If Allie wasn't present I . . . yes, I would.

Allie. She cared for Maxwell, too.

TL The man invaded our hearts and life in a day.

54 Sunday passed much too quick.

Allie stayed glued to Maxwell's side. I felt electrical tingles running through my body each time he touched me.

Allie's bedtime came.

"Hey, little girl, how about I put you to bed since you're dozing in my arms," Maxwell said.

"Will you read to me?"

"Of course."

Once Allie fell asleep, I made coffee and we sat on the couch to drink it.

"Lori, next weekend I'm going to see my parents. Would you and Allie come with me?"

To visit his parents? That usually signaled a man had serious intentions. If not, I should stop now, before Allie got more attached to him.

"What would they think if we showed up with you?"

"The truth—that I can't stand to be away from you. That I fell in love with Allie the moment I saw her. And—don't be afraid—I fell in love with you when you walked into my hospital room."

In love with me? Could it be true? Did I feel love or lust? Love. I felt love. I loved Maxwell.

"It's so soon, but I love you Maxwell," I said.

"I don't want Allie to be hurt. She wouldn't understand if you just disappeared one day. You have to be sure. We're a package deal," I said.

"I wouldn't have it any other way," he said. "But, Lori, I have to leave soon for Iraq. Will she understand?"

"I don't know."

"We'll have e-mail. I've thought all night about this, Lori. We could make it work for us—and Allie."

"What about after you return?" I asked.

Maxwell pulled me close.

"Lori, I'm career Army. It's my calling. Please understand."

I stared into his dark eyes and saw fear, hope, and love.

"I wouldn't think of asking you to give it up," I said.

Maxwell's face softened. His lips spread in a wide smile.

"Lori, I want you until I can't sleep, can't take a deep breath, and can't look at my hands without seeing them on your body."

"I feel the same about you," I said.

Taking his hand I got up and lead him to my bedroom.

Inside, Maxwell said, "Are you sure?"

For an answer, I tugged my shirt

over my head and unzipped my slacks. Going into his arms I said, "Find out."

With a muffled cry his arms tightened around me and his lips took mine.

I felt his arousal against me and knew that night was the beginning of a commitment. I didn't want his kiss to end, but my body needed more of his caresses and his male passion.

Monday morning, Maxwell left before Allie woke. We agreed we'd tell her that evening.

I went to work with a rosy glow; my feet didn't seem to touch the floor as I went from patient to patient, exercise to exercise.

Maxwell stopped by after his therapy, and told me he would be visiting a soldier friend and we agreed to meet in his friend's room when I got off work.

When I got to the fifth floor, I saw Maxwell with his arms around the shoulders of an older woman. A man stood close to them. Maxwell let his arms drop and rubbed his eyes. He turned and saw me.

I hurried to him.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Jim died."

"I'm sorry, Maxwell. Do you need to stay?"

"No. I've done all I can. His parents will notify me about the funeral. We went to school together all the way from first grade to West Point."

I took Maxwell's hand, wanted to hold him in my arms, and wished I could take the pain away.

As we exited the front door, an anti-war demonstration was going on. People waved signs with "Maimed for a Lie" and "Enlist here to die for Halliburton" painted on them. Men and women walked up and down the sidewalk, yelling at people coming and going.

I held Maxwell's hand and walked quietly by his side. But, I wanted to scream at the demonstrators, hit someone, anything to try and soothe Maxwell's pain.

We reached the street and saw casckets blocking the sidewalk to the parking lot. People yelled, "Our children died for oil!"

Maxwell squeezed my hand, and hurried me to the parking lot. Once in the car, he took a deep breath. "I go by them every day. My own people treat us worse than the people of Iraq."

I knew Maxwell was stressed by the death of his friend, yet his anger was directed at the citizens of the United States not the terrorists or the people of Iraq.

Maxwell shook his head. "Most of the people out there demonstrating are intelligent men and women. They've probably read how many of our soldiers have died and how many have been wounded. Why do they come here where our soldiers, the people fighting to keep the terrorists out of the U.S., are healing or dying, and mock us?"

"Survivors' guilt. No one who hasn't lived with it can understand. I deal with it every hour of every day. Those demonstrators push our surviving soldiers to suicide and then print and yell how high the incidence is. Why won't they let them recuperate in peace? Can you imagine how Jim's parents felt seeing that, that . . . mess when they came to be with their dying son?"

"I know, Maxwell."

"Can you tell me why they don't go to the White House and demonstrate there, instead of hurting the ones who fight the battles?" Maxwell asked.

I knew he wasn't really asking me the question.

I drove to pick up Allie at daycare. Maxwell waited outside. Inside, I told Allie that Maxwell felt bad and to be really quiet.

When we reached the car she crawled in the front seat, put her little arms around his neck, and said, "Want me kiss it better?"

Maxwell smiled, hugged her tight, and said, "No sweetie, but you can give me a kiss on the cheek."

She did.

Before pulling out of the parking lot, I asked him if he wanted to skip dinner.

Maxwell looked at me and gave a small smile. "No way. You two are the best thing that's ever happened to me. But I will be glad to get out of D.C. this weekend."

The rest of the week passed too fast. Allie accepted Maxwell into our lives without question.

I asked and received a five-day vacation.

Thursday night, after putting Allie in bed, I sat beside Maxwell on the couch.

"I know you said you wanted Allie and me to be part of your life, but are you sure?" I asked. "I don't want this to

be something triggered by your injury or the war."

"How could you even think that, Lori? I love you and want both of you to be with me, to be here waiting when I return from Iraq. I want us to marry this weekend. Tonight, I planned to ask if you would agree. If you said yes, we'd call your parents."

I sat stunned. *Married? This weekend?*

"I know I'm just running this all together. Lori, honey, I don't want to wait. I want us to have every minute together before I leave." Maxwell pulled me into his arms, and held me in a gentle embrace. "I love you, Lori. Please don't say it's too soon. I've waited for you my entire adult life."

Reaching up to kiss him, I said, "My heart is close to bursting with love for you."

But, I didn't know about marriage. What about his going off to war—a war he'd been injured in. *Am I strong enough to wait for him, stand the strain of not knowing if he lived when I wake each morning?*

"I know you're thinking of me going to a war zone. I can't promise I won't be killed or injured again, but Lori, isn't it better to love than to hide from it because of fear?"

Maxwell was right.

"I'd be honored to be your wife."

Maxwell stood and pulled me up and into his arms and kissed me, a deep kiss, one that reached my soul, tightened my heart, and took my mind from me.

Pulling apart I said, "I better call the folks."

"Would you rather make love first, then call them?" Maxwell asked.

With a soft laugh, he pulled me back to him.

The next Tuesday we were married in Maxwell's parents' backyard.

Allie told everyone, more than once, that Maxwell was her daddy.

I knew Maxwell would return to war soon, but I didn't fear any longer. No matter how long we had together, we would live each second to the fullest.

The day Maxwell returned from Iraq, Allie and I were waiting for him when he got off the plane. I knew he'd go to war again and while I would worry about his safety when he was gone, I'd cherish our time together and know he loved me. I wouldn't let fear spoil our life.♥

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My Worst Date Ever!

**WHEN IT COMES
TO BAD DATES,
LET'S FACE IT,
LADIES . . . WE
ALL HAVE A
SHARE-WORTHY
STORY TO TELL!**



As a single mom, my social life isn't great. My son Cameron is only three months old and even if I can find a babysitter I'm so exhausted that it's hard to keep my eyes open, let alone meet interesting guys. So I stay home most nights.

One day Dave from my office asked me out; he works in the computer department down the hall from me. I've worked there since before I got pregnant—before Cameron's father left me—but I never thought someone at work might be interested in me. You could have knocked me over with a feather.

I invited Dave to dinner at my house so that I wouldn't need to find a babysitter. I'd cook and we could enjoy a quiet evening. He agreed and said he would come by around eight, after Cameron would be in bed.

I was so excited to have a real date!

I prepared a beef stew in the morning and put it in the Crock-Pot. When I got home from work, I took Cameron out in the stroller so that he'd get lots of stimulation and sleep deeply that night. An hour later, we returned home to the smell of beef and thyme filling the house. Cameron had his milk, a bath, and then went straight to sleep. So far my plan was working perfectly!

Dave arrived with a bottle of wine in his hand and a big smile. He repeatedly complimented me on my dress and on the food. After dinner, I turned down the lights and lit some candles that I got on sale after Christmas. I turned the radio on to a soft-rock station and invited him to join me for an after dinner drink.

It could have been a perfect moment, but as we settled down on the couch, an unholy scream came from upstairs. I ran up to try to calm Cameron, but as soon as I left the room, he started crying again. He refused to be consoled and meanwhile Dave was shouting up the stairs, asking if everything was okay.

There wasn't much choice: I took Cameron down with me, hoping he'd fall back asleep before the mood was totally ruined. He took one look at Dave and started screaming his head off again. I rocked him and sang to him while Dave watched on, looking bored.

By the time he settled, I was haggard and annoyed—not to mention covered in baby drool. I carried Cameron back upstairs, turned off the lights, and tiptoed away in hopes that he'd stay dozing.

I tiptoed to the stairs, hoping the romantic mood wouldn't be totally lost. Somehow, I managed to slip at the top stair and tumble all the way to the bottom with a loud thud. Cameron started wailing while I lay in a crumpled heap, trying to figure out if I was broken. I could see blood pouring from my foot.

Dave tried his best. He carried me to the couch, blood spurting from the gash at the base of my toes where I'd bent them so far backwards the skin had split open. Then he went upstairs and got Cameron, who kicked him and tried to struggle free. Dave brought him to me and then stood looking helpless.

Cameron was shrieking in horror, I was crying and shaking like a leaf on a tree, and the couch was covered in blood.

I discovered that I had a broken toe. And Dave discovered that maybe he didn't really have the stamina for dating a single mom after all. I never heard from him again.

—Sarah Wright, Spain

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"Dad, it's too late, I—"

At that point, I faded out. I was present physically, but mentally, I was in a different world, a world of pushing and panting.

Suddenly, the baby slipped out so fast, that the midwife almost didn't catch him. A shrill cry filled the air and I heard cheers. The next thing I knew, I was looking into the beautiful dark-blue eyes of my son. I was so happy and relieved that I began to cry. Nothing else mattered anymore.

My son's birth was hardly the intimate and controlled event I'd intended. It was more like a spectacle. Heaven only knows how many of my cousin's cell phone images are circulating in cyberspace. Even Dave, a man who was a virtual stranger, had been dragged into the room.

But the experience made me realize something, if I could stand up to the pain of childbirth, why couldn't I stand up to my own mother?

In her excitement over the birth, everything had gotten out of control. In my lifelong habit of trying to make her happy, I'd let it happen. If I was going to be a good mother, I was going to have to grow a backbone.

I'm also trying hard to be a better wife. It's not enough to hear what Liam has to say, I have to listen. His inviting Brent to the birth was his way of letting me know that the guest list was getting out of hand. But I'd been so eager to please Mom that the reverse psychology hadn't worked on me. Now that we're parents, I realize that Liam and I need to stick together on issues and work together as a team.

The baby's birth has made Mom very happy and has filled a big void in her life. But now we have a new understanding, she knows that she has to give Liam and me a little more space.

Having a child of my own, I know how deep a mother's love can be. So now, more than ever, I can appreciate what she did for me. What I can't do is continue to hold myself responsible for her happiness. It's a burden she never wanted me to carry.

We've all learned from the experience. That shows that there's nothing quite like the birth of a baby to help people see life in a fresh, new way.♥

Poetry Page

Making Others Happy

*If people could only realize
What a little thing can do
A "hi" or a cheerful smile
Can make the sunshine come through.*

*A few words of companionship
To pass the time of each day
Will take away loneliness
That can make your skies turn gray.*

*A sincere compliment gives
An added zest to life
By lessening the heartaches
Of each trouble or of strife.*

*So remember all the ways
That's given bright hope to you
And pass them on to others
To help make them happy, too.*

—Lucy Marie Duncan, Virginia

Lovesick (Continued from page 35)

this, realizing I might be ruining a good friendship.

Kent didn't say anything for a moment. Then finally, he said, "Seriously? I didn't think you were really interested. When I first moved in, I tried to get a feel for whether or not something was there, but I wasn't getting any signs from you. What changed?"

I shrugged. "I guess I just never spent as much time with you as I have these past few days. I didn't realize how great you are." I looked up at him and his smile melted my heart.

He put his arm around me and pulled me to him. "Are you sure that's not the flu talking?"

I shook my head. "Are you sure this isn't just some routine to lure in unsuspecting sick women? Act all sweet and caring hoping to score?"

He squeezed my arm. "That seems like a lot of work for a date. No, I helped you out because I like you. And I've always been interested in more than a friendship."

"Huh? I didn't pick up on that. Well, I can only hope you're interested in me after seeing me at my absolute worst."

"Honey, even at your worst you're pretty darn great. I've always had a thing for you, and not just because you're so pretty. You're cool and funny and," he moved closer to me as he talked, and his lips found mine, "and you're great." His breath was hot on my lips.

My mouth answered his and the kiss was slow and sweet. "You know, I'm probably still contagious," I said, my face feeling very, very hot.

He shrugged. "I don't care."

We didn't watch much of the movie. We kissed and held each other, telling stories and making plans for when I felt better. "Do you think you'll be well enough to go out to dinner this weekend?" he asked.

"Yeah, as long as I keep getting this great medical attention. Who said the healthcare system needs to be fixed? It's working great for me."

He laughed. "Do you want me to stay over again?"

My hormones said, yes, yes, yes! But my brain and my mouth said,

"No, I don't want to rush things."

"No, me neither. I really like you, Liz. I don't want to blow this. I meant do you want me to sleep on the couch again in case you need me."

I blushed. "Sure. That would be really great."

If I wasn't sick, I'm sure I wouldn't have been able to sleep knowing Kent was lounging in my living room. But with the flu still battering my body, I quickly nodded off.

I was thrilled to wake the next morning and find Kent puttering

**"Honey, even at
your worst you're
pretty darn great.
I've always had a
thing for you, and
not just because
you're so pretty.
You're cool and
funny and," he
moved closer to me
as he talked, and
his lips found mine,
"and you're great."
His breath was
hot on
my lips.**

around the kitchen. "You really did call in sick!"

"I'm a man of my word. Do you feel well enough to take the dogs out for a walk?"

"Yeah, in a little while." I made a piece of toast while Kent ate Mexican leftovers. "This is really weird," I said, sitting at the table. Bailey wandered into the kitchen and settled at my feet. I scratched his head. Rex was parked next to Kent. It was a very cozy little scene.

"You've never had Mexican for breakfast?" he asked, munching on an enchilada.

I laughed. "No, I mean this is weird, you and me. You're here the

next morning, except nothing happened last night. Well, okay, some great kissing happened. But you know what I mean."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. This all sort of worked out in an interesting way." He smiled at me with one side of his mouth. With his tousled bed head he looked absolutely gorgeous. *How had I missed this wonderful man who was next door all the time?*

We finished breakfast and Kent bundled three scarves around me to protect me from the cold. We took the dogs for a quick walk down the block.

"Okay, it felt good to get out, but I'm tired already."

Kent grabbed my hand and the dogs reluctantly turned back to the apartment building. We spent the rest of the day hanging out doing crossword puzzles and watching old reruns on TV. We curled up on the couch for yet another movie—and more kissing.

"I can't call in sick again tomorrow," Kent said. "So, I probably should get going soon."

I was sad to see him leave. "Well, at least tomorrow's Friday."

"That's right. Are we going to try dinner on Saturday?"

My heart fluttered. This really was happening between us. "Yes. It's a date."

I giggled a little bit and he smiled.

He kissed me goodnight. "Can I stop by after work tomorrow? I need to check on my patient."

"Absolutely. Bailey and I will be waiting." I walked him to the door, kissed him again, and collapsed into bed.

I started looking for Kent after five the next day, but by nine o'clock he still hadn't shown up. I figured he must've been putting in some overtime to make up for his sick day. I fell asleep on the couch waiting for him.

The next morning, there was no message from him. I waited for him to call, hoping he'd have an explanation. But when I hadn't heard from him by noon, I was wondering if he'd changed his mind about us being a couple.

Finally, at two my phone rang. "Liz, can you come over?" His voice was quiet.

"Sure, I'll be right there." It sound-

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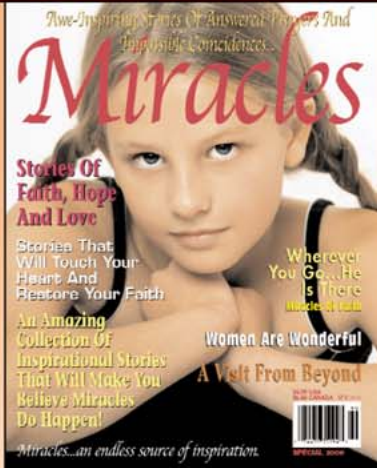
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ed like he had some regrets to talk about. My heart hung heavy in my chest. *Could we ever be friends after this?*

I knocked on his door and he took a while to answer it.

"Hey," he said, leaning against the doorframe after he let me in. His face was white—I knew that look.

"Oh no! You're sick."

He nodded.

I covered my face with my hands. "I got you sick. I'm so sorry."

He made his way over to the couch. "I seem to remember being the one who kissed you first."

"But you wouldn't have gotten sick if I hadn't called you over."

He forced a smile. "And I wouldn't have gotten to kiss you if you hadn't called."

"Good point." I covered him up with a blanket. "Well, luckily I know how to make this fantastic chicken soup that's bound to make you feel better. And I've got some medicine next door."

He groaned. "Not the medicine. It's horrible!" he whined.

"Don't I know it!"

"Will you bring over the headache log, too?"

"Sure." I dashed next door and gathered the things to take care of Kent. I brought Bailey over and got out the supplies to make soup.

"I should warn you, I'm a better nurse than a patient," Kent said.

"We'll see about that."

I spent the weekend hanging out at Kent's, taking care of the dogs and taking care of him. "What a way to start a relationship," I said, joking around Sunday afternoon.

"Yeah, talk about through sickness and health."

I snuggled up next to him on the couch. "Are you calling in sick tomorrow?"

"Yeah, at least the next day or two." He still looked pale.

"Well, I will stop by after work to check on you."

"Will you stay with me tonight?"

"Sure, I'll stay on the couch again."

He laced his finger in mine. "No, I mean with me. In my bed."

My eyes widened. "Wow. Well, not that I don't want to, because I really want to, but I think that's a little soon. Remember, we're taking this slow."

He laughed weakly. "Trust me, I

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don't have the energy for that tonight. I just want you here with me. I want you close to me. I like having you around, Liz."

I kissed his cheek. "I like that, too, Kent. Yes, I'll stay with you."

I gave him another dose of medicine, feeling a little vindictive doing it. But hey, it helps! Then we climbed into bed. It felt strange knowing we were doing this not to move things along physically, but because we just wanted to be together. I think maybe that's when I knew this relationship was going to be different from all the others.

The dogs both climbed onto the end of the bed and the four of us drifted off to sleep. And that's how we slept from that night on, even once we got married and bought our own little house outside the city.

Kent wore a medical mask as a joke when he proposed to me, and we both giggled during our vows when we promised to be there during sickness and health.

But so far, we haven't gotten the flu again. I know he'll take great care of me if I do. ♥

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In My Sister's Shadow (Continued from page 47)

Sorry I pinched Warren," from my sister. She was straight down to business.

"Sorry, I'm too busy to go out," I said, ungraciously. "But I'm having a sandwich at my desk, you can join me if you like."

To tell the truth, there was no little coffee shop anywhere near my office, only a caravan parked on an empty lot which sold cups of instant coffee and greasy hot dogs. Not Jade's idea of lunch!

I heard a deep sigh, but she agreed, and at one o'clock she appeared, carrying a bag with the name of a gourmet deli on it.

"Nice office," she said in some surprise. I could see her mentally measuring the size of my desk. Desk size meant a lot to Jade.

A feast of lovely little smoked salmon patties, tiny pork sausages, and slices of quiche spilled out of the packet.

I grinned. "Beats peanut butter," I said, my mouth full. "Okay, what's the problem?"

"Warren's the problem," she said, bitterly. "That smooth talker has pinched my job, after all I've done for him. I'm leaving at the end of the month."

"Warren Simon? Pinched your job? How could he? I mean, he wasn't exactly a ball of fire when he was here." I felt a bit treacherous, but it was true.

"The man's an advertising natural," she said, crossly. "He has great ideas for media campaigns and a clever way with words. You know those funny advertisements for yogurt with the fat woman and the flowers? He's just won an award for that. It used to be my account until he came on the scene."

"I'm sorry," I said, awkwardly.

"He used me," she said, bitterly. "I was his steppingstone to better things. Anyway, as far as I'm concerned, he's history." She sniffed. "But he did me a favor, really. I'm starting at Longridge's on the first of next month. Better pay, nicer office."

"Oh, good. So you're happy, then."

TL "Carrie! I'm furious! He dumped
62 me!"

For the first time in my life, I felt almost sorry for my sister.

"And when are you planning to leave this dusty little place?" she went on. "I don't know how you can bear to work in such a hole."

"It has a certain charm," I said. "Anyway, I like it."

"You always were a bit crazy," she said, and gathered up her bag, barely nodding to Andrew who came in as she left. "You like the oddest things."

He hesitated. "Do you really like working in this dusty little place?" he asked, quietly, with an odd expression on his face. "Sorry, I couldn't help overhearing."

"Of course I do," I said. "But nevermind the dust, it's the people I work with that count."

Why did I say people? I meant person, of course. Andrew. He's just so pleasant and friendly and . . . nice.

"I'm glad you feel that way, Carrie," he said, softly, taking off his glasses and cleaning them with a tissue from the box on my desk. "I don't know what I'd do without you. Everything's going so much better since you've been around."

I looked deep into his eyes and all of a sudden I confirmed what I already knew, but hadn't admitted to myself—Andrew was a gorgeous man. Not the smooth, fast-talking hunk his brother was, but he had all the qualities I wanted in a man. And once I had this breakthrough, everything fell into place and it was all I could do not to throw my arms around him and kiss him. And the way he was looking at me, I could see he felt this, too.

He cleared his throat hesitantly and seemed like he was about to say something else when the phone rang, and I had to take the call. When I hung up, he'd left the room.

Oh well! There's always tomorrow. I knew something between us had changed and I couldn't wait to see what happened.

That evening I was just leaving the office when a shiny, green sports car roared up to the front door of Simon's Printing Works.

It was Warren, in a soft leather jacket, his head now aggressively shaven with a tattoo on his neck

like David Beckham. He even had three eyebrow rings firmly in place, like on of those swaggering pirates.

"So you've bought your car," I said, stupidly.

I'd forgotten how devastatingly good-looking he was.

"Yep. Like it?"

"It's gorgeous."

"So, hop in, Carrie. I'm taking you for that ride I promised. And afterwards, how about the Golden Pheasant for dinner?"

Six months before, I'd have gone weak at the knees and hopped in as ordered. But I shook my head. "Sorry, Warren, not tonight."

"Come on. Wind in your hair, remember? How can you resist a spin in this baby?"

Quite easily, I realized. "It's good to see you, Warren. I'm really glad you're doing so well," I said, and I meant it. "But I have a date."

I went back into the printing works and found Andrew chatting to one of the printers, his hands full of blue ink. He gave a huge grin when he saw me and came over, wiping his hands.

"Carrie! I thought you'd left for the day," he said. "Anything wrong?"

"It's just that we didn't finish our conversation this afternoon," I said. "I had a feeling you were going to ask me something."

"Um . . . yes I was . . . well—"

He looked so painfully shy that I took pity on him. "Well, maybe you had the same idea as me," I said. "I was going to ask you something, too. Would you like to have dinner with me sometime? Like tonight, for instance?"

"I'd love to," he said, and the twinkle behind his glasses gave me the feeling that we were about to have a very good evening. "Thank you for asking."

"Well, okay." Suddenly, I felt a bit foolish. "Umm—could you pick me up?"

"Of course," he said. "But it won't be in a sports car with a walnut dashboard, I'm afraid."

"Oh, so you saw Warren outside? Don't worry, Andrew, I much prefer an old sedan with piles of paper samples all over the back-seat."

"That's one of the things I love about you, Carrie," he said quietly. "You like the oddest things." ♥

Keeping Secrets (Continued from page 15)

report.

"So how much do you know about this guy?" she asked.

I told her what I knew, which wasn't much, and I started thinking about her question again half-an-hour after I arrived at the restaurant for dinner Wednesday night and Kevin still hadn't arrived. I was sitting at a table in the center of the dining room and had just finished my first glass of wine when my cell phone rang.

"I'm sorry," Kevin said as soon as I answered. "I've had an . . . emergency. I can't make it tonight. I'm really sorry."

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I really want to see you," he continued. "I do. I just can't make it tonight. I'm sorry."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he said. "I'll talk to you later. I'll make it up to you somehow. I'm sorry."

There wasn't much else to say after that.

There I was all dressed up and sitting by myself. It was embarrassing," I told Becky during our coffee break the next morning. "In fact, I stayed out late because I didn't want to return home early and have my babysitter feeling sorry for me again."

"There's something wrong with him."

"What?"

"There's probably another woman in his life."

"No," I protested.

"Why else would he leave so abruptly the first time you have coffee?" Becky asked. "Why else does he take calls on his cell phone when you're together, but won't let you overhear his conversation? Why else would he stand you up at the last minute and not even give you a reason?"

"You really think there's another woman?"

"Do you know where he lives?"

I shook my head.

"Do you have his home phone number?" she asked. "Or his office number?"

"Only his cell," I said, but I hadn't

given him my home phone number, either.

"That's what married guys do," Becky explained. "I was burned twice before I figured it out."

"No. Really?"

She nodded. "They think they're so smooth, but they all have the same tricks."

After I returned to my desk, I dialed Kevin's cell phone. When he answered, I suggested lunch.

"I'd love to, but not today. How about tomorrow?"

I agreed. "Eleven good for you? We'll beat the lunch rush."

He hesitated a moment and then said, "Eleven's fine."

I named the restaurant he'd taken me to the first time we'd had lunch and he thought it sounded perfect.

"Should I make a reservation?" he asked.

"I can do it," I told him.

I had all night to stew over the things Becky had suggested and the more I thought about what she'd said, the more convinced I was that Kevin was hiding something from me. I liked spending time with Kevin, and I'd been hoping that our relationship would continue to grow, but our relationship couldn't budge an inch until I discovered what he was hiding.

Halfway through lunch I braced him. "Are you married?"

Kevin's eyes widened in surprise. "No. Why?"

"Are you seeing someone else? Is there another woman?"

He didn't answer my questions. Instead, he asked one of his own. "Why are you asking?"

"You act like someone who's juggling two women. You take phone calls and don't let me hear your conversation. You leave without explanation or stand me up without a good reason. I'm not interested in playing those kinds of games. Just be honest with me. Is there another woman?"

He took a deep breath and looked straight into my eyes. "Yes," he said. "Sort of."

"Sort of?" I demanded. "How can there 'sort of' be another woman?"

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet. He flipped it open and showed me a picture of a six-year-old girl. "That's my daughter,

Kelly. I have full custody, and you won't believe what a nightmare it is to juggle work and a social life and still give her all the attention she needs and deserves."

Kevin's revelation of parenthood had caught me completely off-guard. "Why didn't you tell me you were a single parent?"

"Do you have any idea how many women I've scared off by telling them about my daughter?"

"I think I do," I said. "I've scared off plenty of men when I told them about my sons."

"Sons?"

I reached into my purse and retrieved my wallet. Then I showed him pictures of Tommy and Peter. "I was afraid to tell you I had children," I explained, "because I was afraid you might not be interested in me if you knew."

"So we were both hiding something?"

He stared into my eyes and I stared right back. Then he smiled and we both began to laugh.

"So now what?" I asked.

"Are you still interested in me now that you know my secret?" Kevin asked.

"Of course."

He reached across the table and took my hand. "I guess now we meet each other's children and have them meet each other."

That was several months ago, and most of our dates since then have involved Tommy, Peter, and Kelly. Libby still watches my sons when Kevin and I use his company's tickets to go to the theatre, but she's started looking for another family in need of a babysitter to make up for lost income.

Becky and I still spend our Monday morning coffee breaks rehashing our weekend dates, but I think we're starting to bore each other. There're only so many stories I can tell her about spending Saturdays in the park with children, and now that she's spent eight weekends in a row with the same man—a well-balanced middle manager she met on-line—her stories have developed a certain blandness to them.

Maybe that's just as well. Maybe we've both found the exact men we were looking for.♥



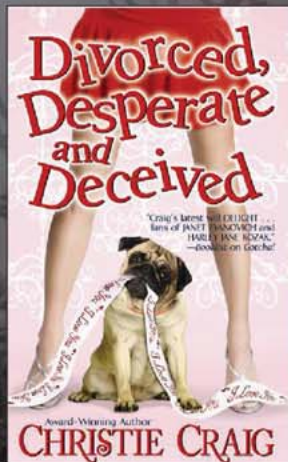
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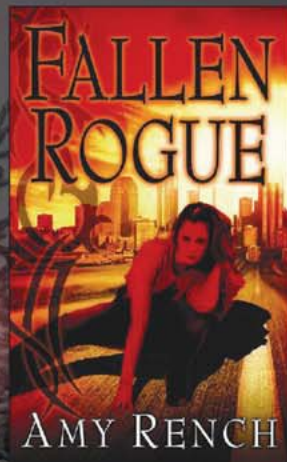
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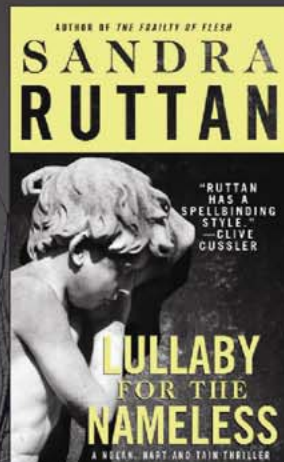
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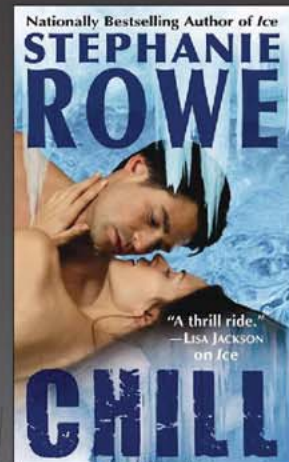
LULLABY FOR THE NAMELESS

Missing girls are turning up murdered, in ways that eerily resemble the MO of the killer from the first case that Hart, Nolan and Tain worked on together. Did they get the wrong man the first time? Will they be able to stop this killer before tensions drive the team apart—or get one of them killed?



CHILL

Alaskan bush pilot Luke Webber finds a bleeding woman on his doorstep and realizes the past he tried to leave behind eight years ago is about to catch up with him—in a very deadly way.



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