

Three Minutes Before Christmas

Paige Ryter

Red Rose Publishing



Three Minutes Before Christmas
by Paige Ryter

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Chapter One

He laughed, caressed her cheek and touched his hot lips to hers. "Crazy insane."

Oh, it felt so good, she moved a little closer and stared into his blue eyes realizing he was really sexy. She wanted to kiss him again, but she just didn't feel right about it. She couldn't date him, the man a few steps up the social ladder from her. Maybe she could play with him instead, just for a few days? She'd only flirt for a while, then go back to her life.

"What kind of crazy?" she whispered.

Colin grinned and brushed his lips against hers for just a moment. "You tell me."

He was teasing her, but she couldn't resist any longer from wanting him so badly. She touched his cheek, moved toward him and concentrated on his red, hot lips. Her hand inched through his soft hair while she shifted her gaze from his hair then back to his lips. She finally took her hand off his hair and outlined his lips with her fingertip. Two could play this game, and she intended to win.

The electricity pulsing through her fingertip was incredible, making her heart race and her breath quicken. "I'm seeing how crazy you are," she whispered, moving her finger along his jaw line.

"No, you're playing chicken to see which one of us gives in first. I think it's going to be you."

"Really?" she whispered in a low tone. She inched closer so she could feel his hot breath on her face, melting her from

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the inside, then shifted in her seat to get as close to him as she could. "How long can you hold out?"

"I'm not sure. It's tough, because you're beautiful and such a fun person. You have no idea what you do to me, which I find very interesting."

Her voice was just a whisper. "Just don't lick my nose, or I'm outta here." She threw her left foot over the gearshift and onto his right leg, stroking his thigh with the inside of her knee.

He grinned and began massaging the inside of her upper leg, inching higher and higher. "Your nose was the last thing I was thinking about."

She slightly licked her lips and narrowed her eyes in a seductive move. "You're still adorable, with your sexy eyes and strong cheekbones."

He wrapped his arms around her and moved his face to within inches of her lips.

She touched his chin with a grin, then caressed his cheek with the back of her fingers, keeping her eyes on his. "You look like a model—"

He brushed his lips against hers then backed away.

"You just lost," she whispered.

"No, this is losing." He moved forward and captured her lips with a huge kiss. Their tongues entwined, the warmth filling her entire body. Her breathing grew shallow and she was sure he was enjoying it as much as she was just from his actions. She lost all sense of where she was, concentrating just on what was happening between them. Her stomach fell and she felt tingly all over, making her more than

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lightheaded. Thoughts of him in bed filled her mind, even though she knew it could never happen.

While he nibbled on her neck and ear, she threw back her head in enjoyment. "I think you're right. You lost. Feel free to lose any time."

"Miss!" A jolly overweight Santa stood over Sydney White, patting her cheek with one hand, his other hand to the right side of her head.

"Huh? What happened?"

She tried to sit up, but Santa moved her back to the floor. "No, you need to stay still. I saw the whole thing." He removed his fake beard and hat, facing her with the most adorable blue eyes framed by short brown hair. His strong, muscular face demanded respect, but Sydney couldn't help but stare at him, thinking he should be on the cover of a magazine as a model. She wanted to tell him how handsome he was, but her head hurt unbearably, so she raised her hand to the pain instead.

"Don't touch it," he said. "Your coworker whacked you with a giant roll of wrapping paper, making you lose your balance. Your head hit the metal edge of the table when you fell and passed out."

She didn't remember a thing. "I did? Where am I?"

His face turned puzzled. "You're working at the mall wrapping Christmas presents. Do you know your name?"

It all seemed surreal to her, as she stared at the unfamiliar territory. "Sure...maybe?"

A voice sounded from nearby. "She's Sydney White."

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Santa turned toward the man with the pointed green hat, standing in the Elf Wrapping Station in the mall hallway. The area was outlined by tables full of wrapping paper, tape and ribbons. "I was asking her, not you. I need to know if she's lost her memory."

"Oh," the elf-man answered. "I thought you wanted to know her name. I'm Justin if you need to know that." He looked down at Sydney. "I didn't even know you fell. Does it hurt?"

"Yes, it does." The pain was unbearable, but she kept staring at Santa. Surely he was married or dating. Her memory began to come back to her, reminding her that she was single and alone in the world, even though she lived near her family.

Justin went back to helping customers while sexy Santa turned toward Sydney. Now she knew what she wanted for Christmas and it didn't have anything to do with wrapping paper. If he just had a big red bow on his head...

"What's your address?" Santa asked, interrupting her thoughts while Christmas songs played over the mall speakers.

"Um...it's a garden apartment. Wait. It'll come to me. It's made of brick, I think...and might have jingle bells over the door..."

"That's the song you hear on the speakers." He frowned as he pointed toward the ceiling. "You need to go to the hospital because you're bleeding. I have some napkins on it to stop the blood."

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"I'm bleeding?" Her hand moved toward her head. "I'm not good with blood, especially my own."

With his hot fingers grabbing her wrist, he stopped her hand, making her look up into his eyes. His gaze pierced through to her soul and left her breathless. How could anyone have that much power over her feelings with just a glance?

"I've called an ambulance," he said, bringing her out of her trance.

Tears teased her eyes as she searched his face. "I don't want to go in an ambulance. I don't have very good insurance—"

"Don't worry about it. You need help and I'm sure your employer is covered for this."

"No, he's not. He's my brother, and I'm just filling in for him right now. I remember that part. Who are you anyway? Are you really Santa Claus?"

"No, I'm not." He studied her, his face growing confused. "Do you believe in Santa?"

"Well, no, of course not. But who are you?"

"The name's Colin Taylor. I was playing Santa for a charity function." He glanced toward the center of the mall.

Her gaze followed his under the table full of wrapping paper, seeing tons of kids waiting in line. "Oh, you'd better get back," she said. "You're needed."

"Not as much as I'm needed here." He pulled out his cell phone and made a call. "Tell Rudolph to get dressed. I have an emergency."

"I'm not an emergency." She tried to sit up, but he pushed her back to the floor with his hand on her shoulder while he

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talked on the phone. He really was in charge, which amazed her. She loved take-charge kind of guys, making him even hotter in her mind.

He ended the call and faced her. "Yes, you are an emergency."

"But I have to get back to work or my brother will kill me," she said. "I really need the money to keep my business running."

"Tough. Your health takes priority."

A siren sounded outside the mall, ending suddenly, as Sydney heard the outside doors whoosh open and a commotion fill the short hallway near where they were located.

Colin stood up and motioned to someone as she stared up at his whole body. "Over here," he said. "She hit her head and needs stitches. I'd also recommend a neck brace because she was unconscious."

"Stitches? Neck brace?" Sydney's hand flew to her head, then she glanced at the blood on her fingers, soaking through the napkins stuck to her skin. As she felt all the blood drain from her face, tears formed in her eyes.

"Stay with me, Sydney."

"I don't know if I want to," she whispered. "I don't feel that great."

Colin knelt in front of her, looked into her eyes and held on to her wrist, then had some sort of conversation with the EMTs. He seemed to know them, because they talked in code, or at least it sounded like code to Sydney. She figured the injury must have affected her hearing. Either that or he was

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just so sexy she wasn't able to concentrate. From his chiseled, handsome face, he looked like a gift from Santa.

"We have to transport you to the hospital," one of the EMTs said. The other one walked away while a crowd of people gathered around the makeshift office of tables to watch.

"I don't feel well," Sydney repeated, feeling herself shake.

"I know. Just relax and you'll be fine." Colin reached over, grabbed a coat from under the table and threw it on top of her. "You're going into shock."

"A-a-a-re you sure?" She looked down. "How did you know this was my coat?"

"Psychic." He reached up and opened her eyelids further. Oh, the better to see him with, she thought. Great. Now she was thinking about children's stories? At least she didn't have a red cape with a hood.

One woman peered over the side of the table and stared. "Is she going to live?"

"I don't know," Justin said. "But I wish she'd get up here and wrap some presents. I have a line of four people and I'm the only one working here."

Colin turned slightly toward Justin. "You know, you're the one who hit her, and if she decides to sue you, I'm on her side. I'd testify to that fact, and especially now with that snide comment of yours."

Sydney glanced down toward Justin, standing near her feet. "You hit me? Why would you do something that stupid? Did you want to kill me or something?"

"It wasn't me. He's making it up."

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"No, I saw it," Colin said.

"Liar!" Justin huffed, put his hands on his hips, and stared Colin down. Sydney decided she was in love with the Santa impersonator, just for coming to her rescue. He was her knight in shining armor, and was he ever hot.

"Hey, are you going to finish wrapping my present?" a huge man from the line asked. "The game starts in five minutes, and I don't want to miss it."

"Yeah," another man said. The people in the line seemed angry, so Justin turned and began to wrap. A few people stared down at her, but she figured they'd all seen her fall and Santa had told them it was okay.

Sydney closed her eyes, wanting to die from the pain in her head and the pain of her coworker. At least she felt warmer with her coat covering her.

"Sydney, is that you?"

She snapped her eyes open and saw the face attached to the voice. "Mom?"

"What happened?"

"I got hit," Sydney answered. "Tell your son he's got to find someone else to wrap presents. I'm headed to the hospital."

"He's not going to like that. I came here to tell you that your father and I are off on another adventure. We're going to Australia for the holidays and are leaving on Monday." She put a smile on her face, staring off into space. "I can't wait." She stared back at Sydney then at Colin. "Who's this man?"

"I don't remember his—"

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"Colin Taylor," he answered, with a concerned look at Sydney, then back at the woman in front of him. "I'd shake your hand but I have to hold on to her wound. I take it you're Sydney's mother?"

"Yes, I am. She'll live, right? It doesn't look too bad to me."

Colin grinned, looking down at Sydney. "Yes, she'll live."

"I'll ride to the hospital with you," Sydney's mother said to her.

"No, Mom. I'll be fine. I can even call a cab to go home."

"Are you sure?"

"More than sure. Go enjoy your bridge game tonight." The woman really needed to get out of the way. She didn't care about Sydney, but only her social life.

"No, tonight's Friday. That means bowling. If you're sure—"

"Bye, Mom." Sydney pasted a smile on her face, wanting to tell her mother to just get lost, but wasn't the rude type.

"Well, have fun at the hospital. Call me if you need me!" She waltzed off and Sydney slammed her eyes shut.

She felt Colin uncover her wound, the air on her injury making her wince. "You have a nice mother," he said.

Sydney opened her eyes. "Not really. I'm just glad she's not coming with me to the hospital. She'd annoy everyone there."

"That's a nice comment. I take it you two get along?"

"No." His grin made Sydney narrow her eyes. "You talk to her for five minutes and see if it's not true." She tried to sit up. "I have to go back to work."

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Colin pushed her back to the floor. "No. You have to stay still. You lost some blood on the metal table rim."

"Who died and made you boss?"

"I did. Now listen and I might have a lollipop for you."

"A lollipop? What makes you think I'll fall for that old line? I'm not a kid, you know."

"It's cherry—"

"Make it grape and it's a deal."

He smiled and glanced up just as an EMT walked beside her, pulling a gurney. After they wrapped her neck in a brace and put her on a backboard, Colin and the two EMTs lifted Sydney on top. She was just glad she was wearing pants instead of a skirt, glancing at all the people staring at her.

Colin, in his partial Santa suit, followed right along as they rolled her out of the mall. After lowering the gurney, they lifted the whole thing into the ambulance, which was a weird feeling. Glancing toward her feet, she watched Colin talking to the attendant, realizing he really was the cutest man she'd ever seen in her life.

He finally turned to her, his blue eyes catching the lights inside the ambulance. "I'll be there to see you."

"But you don't have to—"

"Yes, I do. I could never let a redheaded, blue-eyed beauty like you get away." He winked, but she could only stare, her mouth falling open in surprise.

Before she could protest, the EMTs got inside and pulled the door to the ambulance shut. They took her vital signs again while talking on the radio, then rammed an IV needle into her arm while she howled.

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She glanced down at the tubing coming from her arm. "Do you have to be so mean?"

"Yep," the dark-haired man said. "It's our job and we love it."

"Psycho," she muttered, still feeling the agony in her arm while the two men laughed.

One man put bandages on her head, then what felt like ice on top of that, but Sydney closed her eyes and ignored them, a tear falling from the corner of her eye. Yes, it was Friday night in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, with a little over a week left until Christmas. Once again, she was alone with a fledgling business. Her parents were gallivanting to yet another continent, with her brother's nose stuck too far in the air to even consider inviting Sydney over for the holidays. She'd spend Christmas alone, working on her client's wishes, while others had the opportunity to spend it with family, friends, and laughter. It never failed. All she ever wanted was to be around people on Christmas, but year after year, she spent the time alone. And considering her family thought of her as a loser because of her business, she spent her time off working on client projects.

After they arrived at the hospital, the EMTs opened the back of the ambulance and wheeled her into the emergency room. She closed her eyes and waited, her head throbbing a steady beat.

Why did these things happen to her? She had a lot of work to do, a demanding client to please, and no time to do it. Christmas was coming and the woman wanted her home decorated for the party of a lifetime, or so the old woman told

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her. Sydney couldn't imagine who would come to the woman's party because she was a nasty one. But it wasn't her problem...she just had to decorate and collect the money for her rent.

When she heard someone walk into her curtained-off area, she opened her eyes, seeing an older man with graying hair and a smile.

"I'm Dr. Weston." He lifted the bandage on her temple, took one look at it and shook his head. "I bet that's painful. At least the temporary butterflies are working for now. I don't want to turn your head or risk getting you into a gown until I'm sure your neck is okay." Lifting the clipboard in his hands, he read over it. "It says here you hit the metal rim of a table. Is that right?"

"I don't really remember, but Santa told me that."

His head popped up from his clipboard. "Santa? Are you hallucinating, too?"

She tried not to laugh. "No. This guy at the mall was playing Santa for a charity and saw the whole thing happen."

"Oh. I see." He checked his paper again. "No one said anything about Santa."

He walked out then returned with two other men in white coats. After they took her for tests in other areas of the hospital, she returned to the same curtained-off room, where the nurse helped her undress and get into a hospital gown.

Sydney hated this type of attention and just wanted to leave. She'd be fine if she could just go home. The more she thought about it, she hated hospitals. They smelled like alcohol, people moaned from their pain, and the nurses were

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entirely too friendly while sticking needles in their patients' arms. If Sydney would leave, would anyone notice? Probably not.

Just as she was ready to make her move, Dr. Weston entered the room again. "We have to put about ten stitches in that gash. Do you know the last time you got a tetanus shot?"

"Uh...well..."

He put his hands on his hips. "When was the last time you had a physical?"

She thought hard. "I don't remember. It's probably from the injury."

"Who's your doctor?"

"Well, when I was a kid I saw Dr. Smith, but since I moved out of my parents' house...I'm not sure."

"I see. When you get out of here, I'd like you to get a physical. Since you don't have a doctor, I'll give you my card because I have my own practice in town and only fill in here part-time. But for today, I'm going to fix your head."

Thoughts of her business filled her head, making her realize she really didn't need this doctor dictating her evening. "I don't think I need stitches. I just need a bandage and then I can go home. I really have work to do."

Dr. Weston chuckled as the nurse brought him a surgical tray. "No, it's going to take more than that." He checked the wound and shook his head. "At least the cut's not under your hair or we'd have to shave your head." He cleaned the area, gave her a nasty shot to numb her skin as she groaned, then removed her neck brace. "You didn't hurt anything other than

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your head, and everything else looks good from all the tests." He turned her to the side and began to work.

She couldn't feel anything, so she let her mind wander back to the Santa who'd helped her, just as the curtain hooks screeched slightly against the metal rod behind her.

"Need help?"

Sydney opened her eyes and tried to look toward the male voice, but the doctor kept her head facing the other way.

"Colin?" Dr. Weston asked. "What are you doing here?"

"I rescued Sydney while playing Santa at the mall."

Dr. Weston turned back to Sydney. "Oh, so Santa did rescue you. I guess you weren't hallucinating, but when you called him adorable—"

"I never said that!" She thought for a moment, her memory hazy. "At least I don't think I said that."

He held her head to the side and laughed. "No, but you thought it. All the girls think that about Colin."

"They do?" Colin asked.

"Oh yeah. Rumor has it they come into emergency just to see you."

"But I don't deal with—"

Dr. Weston laughed, cutting Colin's sentence short. "Maybe their moms are hot for you then."

Sydney closed her eyes while Dr. Weston kept working. At least he'd numbed it first and she didn't need to deal with knowing what he was really doing.

"Open your eyes." Colin's voice made the butterflies in her stomach dance. She did as instructed, and there, sitting before her, was the handsome Santa who'd saved her.

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"Gosh, you're adorable without that suit." She covered her mouth as fast as she could, feeling her cheeks heat up considerably.

"See? I knew it," Dr. Weston said.

"I'm so sorry. That just slipped out." She stared at Colin again. "But you lost a lot of weight!"

Colin raised an eyebrow, pulled his chair up closer, and sat with his face right in front of hers, and his hand behind his back. "I just bet that slipped out. I had padding under the suit. It wasn't me at all."

She pointed toward her head. "Doesn't this stuff make you sick to watch?"

"Nope. I do that type of thing for a living."

"You do?"

"Didn't Colin tell you?" Dr. Weston asked. "He's a pediatrician who's on call at the hospital a few days a week, at least."

She shot Colin a confused look. "So you deal with bawling kids all day long, then volunteer to play Santa to those same brats?"

"Something like that." Colin's grin was priceless. "Don't worry. I get them back when I have to give them a shot." He leaned forward just as the doctor finished sewing. "I brought you something."

"A shot?"

He glanced up toward Dr. Weston. "No, that would be the mean doctor who's going to stick it—"

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He winced at the same time Sydney felt the pain. She screamed and looked down at her arm just as the needle was coming out.

"It wasn't me," Colin said, raising his hands in his defense. "Don't blame me for that one."

"But you knew about it and didn't warn me! What kind of doctor are you?"

Dr. Weston laughed and put a bandage on her arm. "A good one. He's the best in the area and has been written up in journals and magazines for a long time."

"Not that long. I'm not that old." Colin grinned at her again. "So do you want the surprise?"

"I'm not a kid..."

He sat back with a devious grin. "Okay, I'll just give it to someone else then."

"...but I'll take it. What'cha got?"

He smiled, pulled his hand from behind his back and handed her a grape lollipop, brushing against her skin. She ignored the jolt of heat from his hand when she took it, because nothing was keeping her from the taste of grape.

"My favorite! How did you know?" she asked.

"You told me, remember?"

"No, I don't remember." She unwrapped it and stuck it in her mouth while Dr. Weston rolled her to her back and took her blood pressure, again. Watching as they glanced toward each other in some unspoken conversation, Sydney was certain it was about her. Both of them were frowning, and Dr. Weston wasn't even watching the numbers on the dial as he took her blood pressure.

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"She hasn't had a physical since she was a kid," he said to Colin as soon as he was done.

Staring downward as he stood over her, Colin's face turned concerned. "You haven't? That's bad, you know."

She took the grape lollipop from her mouth. "I'm living. Get over it."

"Oh, a patient with attitude. Next time, no lollipop."

She grinned and winked at him. "Don't worry. I don't intend to hurt myself again, or get near Justin, the idiot." She sucked on the lollipop and studied him. "Good lollipop. I really appreciate it."

"I stole it from a kid in pediatrics."

She took it from her mouth and narrowed her eyes, studying his adorable face. "You didn't, did you?"

Colin chuckled. "I didn't have to. The kid's dad saw you come in and wanted me to give it to the pretty lady who was bleeding everywhere. I knew exactly who they were talking about."

Dr. Weston helped Sydney sit up. "How does that feel?"

She lowered her head and closed her eyes. "Just awful. I have the worst headache."

Colin and the doctor laughed, shaking their heads as she opened her eyes. Doctors thought headaches were funny? She should report them to the head of the hospital because it wasn't funny, from her side.

"Oh, I bet you have a headache," Colin said. "Don't expect that to be better any time soon."

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"What happens next?" she asked Dr. Weston, lifting her head slightly. "Can I go home now? I have a lot of work to do and can't sit around here."

"We're going to admit you to keep an eye on you."

She closed her eyes while her hand flew to her sore head. "No! I can't! My insurance really isn't that good, and I have to go to work early tomorrow morning."

"Call in sick," Dr. Weston said. "If you don't have anyone monitoring you, it could be bad. I have to put you in the hospital. When you're discharged in a few days, I want you in my office for a physical."

"A few days?" she asked, looking at him again. "A physical?" She really hated doctors. She was sure he just wanted to make more money. She hated people who lived for the almighty buck, and rich people made her even angrier. They usually made it while others did the work, or so she'd found.

Dr. Weston stared at her then checked his watch. "It's about eight at night, and when we do send you home, you'll need to have someone watch you constantly for at least a week. You can't overexert yourself. A concussion's nothing to fool with and it could take at least three months to finally get over it."

"I have no one," she said, feeling the tears fill her eyes. "I live alone and it seems my parents are jet-setting off to Australia."

"We'll see what can be done. In the meantime, welcome to Hotel Hospital, where the food is terrible, you don't get much sleep, and you never know what's going to happen next. Wait

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for the nurse to take you to your room before you get off this table. I think you'll be here at least two days, too, from what I'm seeing. After that, I'll know how you're progressing when you see me for the physical."

She turned to Colin. "Are you going to be there for the physical?"

He smiled. "Nope. I hate physicals. Have fun!"

He and the doctor laughed as they left the room while Sydney sucked on her lollipop and lay down. Her head hurt and she just didn't want to deal with this at all. Why did life have to be so difficult?

She got off the examining table and held on while lowering her head. She was so tired, but had to get out of the hospital. If she could only walk on her own, she'd be out of there.

A nurse entered with a wheelchair and helped Sydney sit down. "What are you doing off the table? Didn't Dr. Weston tell you to wait for me?"

"I don't remember. He was too busy laughing with Colin."

The woman grinned, wheeling her out of the room. "They're buddies from way back. They went to Johns Hopkins together."

"What are they doing in Lancaster? With a degree from Johns Hopkins, they could go anywhere."

The nurse leaned up toward Sydney's ear, continuing to push her down the long hall. "Well, Dr. Weston married someone from here, and Dr. Taylor was engaged to a woman who lived here, but she died of cancer. We don't talk about it, because he hasn't dated anyone since."

"How long ago was that?"

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"About two years now. He's still not over her death. It's a shame, because he could have his pick of women, he's such a nice guy. But instead, he just works himself to death, trying to forget. He's on call a lot, then goes into his practice every day as well. Whenever he has a free moment, he either does charity work or goes home to his empty house and sits in the living room, alone." She pushed the button for the elevator. "But I'm not one to gossip."

"Not at all," Sydney said, holding back her grin. "What was his fiancée's name?"

"Ruth. She was a strong woman and a farmer, believe it or not. She had her master's degree in agriculture and just wanted to farm. They were planning to marry, building a house together on her farm. When she died, her family gave him the land and the house. I think there's at least a hundred acres there, and he just rents it out to local farmers for a pittance. It's so sad, because he's really good with kids. But without a woman at his side, he'll never have any of his own."

"Haven't any other women tried to date him?" Sydney asked.

"Oh, yes. Many women at the hospital have tried, but he turns them all down. He says he's still mourning Ruth's death, but it's been two years. It's time for him to move on, but he just won't."

"Someone needs to kick his butt," Sydney murmured, making the nurse laugh.

"I bet you could do it."

"Oh, no. I'm just a lowly patient and nothing to him. Once I'm out of here, I have to get my life in order before I could

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ever consider dating. I'm out of his social class, anyway." Sydney looked down at the gown as they got into the elevator. "Why am I dressed like this?"

The nurse looked puzzled. "You remember dressing in that, right?"

"Sure, but if I'm going to my room, won't someone see me? It is a bit drafty." She reached back and pulled the two sides shut.

The nurse grinned. "I won't let them see anything. You need to be dressed like that so we can take care of you easier."

"Oh. I get it." It still didn't make sense, because it was her head that was hurt—not her body.

The nurse wheeled her into a room meant for two people, but no one was in the other bed. After helping her get ready for bed, the nurse covered her and brought her a small cup containing a pill. "This will help your headache." She put a cup of water by the bed and explained the call button for the nurse. "Call us for everything, even if you have to go to the bathroom. We don't want you falling over."

Sydney swallowed the capsule and drank some water. "Sure. Thanks."

"Try to get some sleep. It's going to be a rough night for you, in case you're wondering. We have to check up on you a lot to make sure you're still breathing."

"Thanks for the warning."

Just as the nurse turned to leave, Colin knocked at the door, dressed in a white lab coat. "So they stuck you in here, huh?"

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"Not my choice either. I have to work in the morning."

"She needs some sleep," the nurse said, walking toward the door.

"I know. I won't be long. I want to make sure Dr. Weston did his job and she's not going to pass out again."

The nurse chuckled then left the room.

"So how do you feel?" He pulled a chair up next to Sydney's bed and sat down.

"Tired. I was on my feet for four hours at the mall after working since six this morning."

"What do you do?"

"I'm an interior designer. I have my own business, and if I don't get this contract finished, I'm pretty much out of business for good. Then I'll have to find a real job."

She hid a yawn and he grinned. "Interior designer. I think I need one of those."

"You do?"

"Yes. My place hasn't been updated since—" He frowned suddenly. "A while." He was so amazing and so calm. "Get some sleep and I'll check in on you in the morning."

"Don't you have to work tomorrow?"

"I'm working upstairs tonight." He stood and kissed her forehead. "Good night, sweet Sydney." He winked, walked to the door, turned off the light, and closed the door behind him.

What an odd thing for him to do, and he called her sweet? He knew nothing about her, because she knew she was anything but sweet. But when he kissed her forehead, she could've sworn the heat from his touch seared her skin. She felt her head but it wasn't on fire or even hot to the touch.

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But she could've sworn he'd burned it. She'd never met a man like Colin before, so adorable and so relaxed.

Sleep came quickly to her, but she was awakened what seemed like every fifteen minutes for a nurse to check up on her. By morning, she was so exhausted she could hardly hold her eyes open.

She finally checked the clock and jumped out of bed at six, holding her head in pain. Grabbing the buzzer for the nurse, she slammed it down and held on for a long time. "I need help!" She couldn't run from her bed, because they'd put an IV in her arm, which was just frustrating. With the pain in her head, she couldn't figure out how to take the IV with her, because it was on the other side of the bed from where she was standing.

An older, heavysset nurse finally waltzed into the room. "You're to be asleep. Wait till the doctor hears this!"

"Dr. Weston—"

"He's in emergency. Up here, you have Dr. Brooks." The nurse leaned forward and began to whisper. "She's nasty, too. Hope and pray you get discharged today."

Great. "Look. I have to get my cell phone from my purse. It's an emergency. Do you know where it is?"

"You're to be in bed. No cell phones in the hospital because of potential hazards. If an oxygen tank was nearby, we could—" The nurse made a huge 'ka-boom' sound, then moved closer to Sydney and lowered her voice. "Blow up and die!"

She was a scary woman, and certain it wasn't true, Sydney persevered. "What if I have to go to the bathroom?"

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"I'm to help you. Let's go."

"Can I make a phone call along the way?"

The nurse raised her eyebrow. "No! You're to be sleeping until the doctor gets here. No excuses. I'm not going to lose my job because you're being obstinate."

"Fine. Bathroom then." She hated the hospital rules and hated stupid ones even more. The nurse helped her inside and watched her. Sydney ignored the woman, thinking about where they'd put her cell phone. The nurse helped her back to bed and covered her up.

"Can I use the phone by the bed?" Sydney asked, trying to reach it.

"No and I already told you that." The nurse unplugged it and took it off the nightstand, moving it beside the other empty bed. "No phone until the doctor says you can."

This brute of a woman was insane!

"Do you need anything else?" the nurse asked.

"No, thank you," Sydney said with a grin on her face. She was making a plan, and as soon as the witch was gone, she'd figure out how to move the IV with her to get the phone and plug it back in.

The nurse left and closed the door. Sydney put her feet on the floor, lowered her head and took a deep breath. She took a few steps toward the other bed, and just as she pulled the IV with her to reach the phone, the door opened. She ran for the bed, but the IV pole didn't come with her, falling to the floor with a crash.

Colin stood in the doorway in his white lab coat and stared at the pole on the floor, the tubing stretched as far as it

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would go. Sydney tried to stand perfectly still beside the bed, hiding the fact that she was in trouble and knew it.

He crossed his arms and stared at her. "Does it hurt?"

"What?"

"Your arm. Does it hurt?"

She bit her lip. "A little, why?"

"Oh, brother." He walked to her side, set up the pole and moved it closer to her, then checked her arm and helped her back into the bed.

He was still as sexy as he'd been the night before, his touch on her arm still as hot. Why did he affect her like that? It must've been the bump to her head causing the attraction to him.

"Why were you up?" he asked.

"I need a phone. The monster nurse won't let me call my client and my business will go under if I don't. Does that make sense?"

He pulled a piece of paper and a pen from his pocket.

"What's the client's number?"

She looked up at the ceiling and rattled off the number.

"Her name is Mrs. Richman. She never gave me her first name."

He raised an eyebrow after writing. "Richman?"

"Yeah, and she lets everyone know it, too. I hate rich people."

He chuckled while pocketing the paper and pen. "What time are you to be there?"

Sydney glanced at the clock on the wall. "Ten minutes ago."

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"I'll be right back."

He left her room and she just stared at the ceiling. Her life was over and she knew it. She'd have no income and she'd have to live out on the streets while her parents and brother had money coming out of their ears. She'd never go to them for help, because they didn't care about anyone else but themselves. Rich people made her sick, staying in their little country clubs and never even smiling at their hired help. If she were rich, she'd be nice to the people who worked for her.

When Colin came back into the room, she turned toward him, wiping her tear-stained cheeks. "Can I talk to her now?"

"You don't have to. She's giving you time off because she's afraid of a lawsuit."

"A lawsuit?"

He moved to stand beside her bed. "If you fall while in her house, she could be sued for making you work when you should be asleep."

"Did she buy it?" Sydney asked.

"Yes, because it's true."

Sydney grinned and sat up. "Great! Now can I get my car and go home?"

"No."

Sydney threw her legs over the side of the bed and pushed her feet to the floor, facing him in frustration. "Why not? Do I have to stay here all day today, too?" She lowered her head, feeling very lightheaded all of a sudden.

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He grabbed her arms right as she began to fall. "Get back in bed and wait for your doctor to come in here," he said. "You're pale and lightheaded."

She looked up at him, his compassion hitting her right in the heart. She could fall in love with this man. "I'm always lightheaded. It goes with the hair."

He lifted a few strands of her shoulder-length hair in his hand. "But you're not blonde."

"I'm golden blonde with a hint of strawberry."

Colin moved closer to her, still holding on to one of her arms, the heat from his fingers traveling into her heart. "And it looks great on you, too. Now, I'd appreciate it if you'd go back to bed and wait for Dr. Brooks."

"I hear she's nasty," Sydney whispered, trying to ignore the draw to him. What was it about this man that she found so fascinating?

"She is nasty." Colin picked her up, laid her in the bed and covered her up. "I'll be back in a little bit, because I have to finish a report upstairs. Hang in there."

"Thanks." The warmth from his touch on her bare arms made her throw the covers off her chest.

"Warm?"

"Oh, hot. Very hot."

"But it's cold in here."

If he only knew. She smiled and fanned herself. It had nothing to do with the temperature in the room.

His kiss to the back of her hand was sweet, his eyes meeting hers in one intimate moment. He grinned and headed toward the door.

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Not more than a few minutes after he left, the door burst open, and a tiny blonde-haired, dark-eyed woman waltzed in, holding a clipboard. She was wearing makeup and an expensive dress under the white lab coat, and seemed to be no taller than five feet in height.

"Well, well, well. Who have we here?" the woman asked.

"I'm Sydney." She looked at the woman's nametag. "And you're the infamous Dr. Brooks I've heard so much about."

The woman raised her eyes toward Sydney. "You have? Was it good?"

Yeah—good she knew about her in advance. "Oh yes," Sydney lied.

"Well, they obviously don't know me very well, or you're a good liar." She read over Sydney's chart once again then checked her stitches. "It seems you've caught the eye of Dr. Taylor. You're all he can talk about."

Sydney felt her face heat up. "Really?"

"Yes." She checked Sydney's eyes with a small flashlight. "He said he rescued you and you're the prettiest woman he's ever seen."

"Uh..."

Dr. Brooks lowered her little light and faced Sydney with a nasty scowl. "This is against my better judgment, but I have to say this. I've been working on dating Dr. Taylor for two years now, and I'm not going to let some poor helpless girl get in my way. Got it?"

"Oh, attitude," Sydney replied. "Can I report you to the American Medical Association for that, or do you teach bedside manner classes for psychopaths?"

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Sydney was afraid she was going to be hit when Dr. Brooks narrowed her eyes, moved closer and gave her a nasty glare. "Just remember, he's mine, and if you try anything, I'm going to let you know who's boss."

"Is that a threat?" Sydney asked.

Dr. Brooks' face turned even angrier. "It's whatever you want it to be. Just don't turn your back if you date Colin." The tiny woman signed some papers and began to walk away. "You're discharged. Now get out of my hospital and out of Colin's life." She walked away from the bed but glanced back at Sydney before she opened the door. "Stay away from him and I mean it."

She pulled on the door handle just as Colin opened it from the other side, running right into his chest. She pasted a smile on her face. "Oh, I didn't see you there, handsome."

He raised an eyebrow. "Handsome? What?"

She touched his chest, blew him a kiss with a wink, then walked away.

His mouth hung agape, facing Sydney. "What was that all about?"

"She discharged me." Sydney sat up slowly and put her feet on the floor to get out of bed. Once her head didn't pound so loudly, she stood up. "I'm calling a cab and getting my car."

"Oh, no you're not," he said. "You're not driving like that."

"Like what? She said I'm discharged and didn't tell me I couldn't drive."

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"I can't believe it." He stared at her with his eyes narrowed and a confused look on his face. "Did she tell you anything about caring for your head or stitches?"

"No. Was she supposed to?"

"Yes, she was. As a matter of fact, if you were my patient, I'd keep you another day at least, just because you're not steady on your feet."

"I'm steady now. Where's the nurse?" She tried to pull the tape from her arm, but it kept yanking the hair from her skin, causing her even more pain. "How do you get this thingy out, anyway?"

He moved her hand away from the tape, picked her up and sat her on the bed. His hands stayed on her arms, and she glanced down at them. There was that heat again from his fingers. She lifted her head and stared at him in awe.

"You need the paperwork done before the nurse takes that out," he said. "Why did she discharge you so soon?"

"Uh..."

"Tell me."

"Well." She stared into his beautiful blue eyes and knew he wasn't going to believe a lie. "She's afraid I'm going to take you from her. She even threatened me if I went out with you."

"What? I'm not hers and never will be!" He shook his head. "She actually said that to you? That's extremely unprofessional!"

"She doesn't like me one bit and wanted me out of here so I'd be out of your life. From what I gather, I'm taking up too

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much of your time." She hopped off her bed, ignoring her aching head. "I'm outta here. Nurse!"

He lifted her back onto the bed and sat her down with a plop. "First, there's a call button to get the nurse's attention. Second, she has no right to tell you anything like that. And third..." His gaze went toward her lips, a smile covering his face. "Third, you're adorable."

She felt her mouth fall, drawn to his every word. He was one of those people who could control any situation with class. She just hoped he wasn't snotty like those rich people she couldn't stand. It didn't matter, because as soon as she was out of the hospital, she'd be out of his life, anyway.

She had to change the subject from dealing with the butterflies in her stomach while he kept his hands on her arms. "Dr. Brooks isn't going to like hearing you call me adorable, you know." Sydney lowered her voice and checked out the door. "I thought she was going to hit me!"

"Really? If she does, she'll be kicked out of the hospital. We had another case of a doctor like that scaring the patients, and had him removed. Let her hit you and I'll take care of you. I'd love to be the one to remove her."

"You? What kind of power do you have?"

"I'm on the board of directors here. That's another reason I could never date anyone at the hospital, including her, even though I really don't want to anyway. They're so stuck up, it makes me sick."

So, he didn't like snotty people either. Nice development. "Oh, I see." She glanced down at his huge warm hands that

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moved to her wrists. "Can you let me go now so I can go to work?"

"No. You're not working today, remember?"

"Yes, I remember, but I have to work or my bills don't get paid and I lose my business. Remember that part?"

He grinned. "Of course I remember. I'm not the one with the head injury." He put both her wrists into one of his hands and held them in her lap so she couldn't move. Then he reached over the bed and pushed on the call button, leaning down to whisper to her. "You're in so much trouble. You just wait and see."

"Pit bull," she muttered under her breath.

Of all the people who could've saved her from the wrapping paper roll of death, she had to get an adorable militant pediatrician who had a thing for her, and a lovelorn female doctor who wanted to beat her up. Fate had handed her yet another situation in her life she didn't want to deal with.

* * * *

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Chapter Two

"We can discharge her," the nurse said as soon as she walked into the room. "Dr. Brooks gave us the paperwork." She glanced at Sydney. "We have breakfast for you if you want it."

"No thanks. I just want to go home." Sydney studied the IV in her arm. "Can you hurry this along? I'm not getting any younger."

"Are you going to sit still?" Colin asked Sydney. "Or do I have to hold you here while she takes out the IV?"

"I'll sit still," she said, staring at his face. "You know, you're kind of nasty."

He all but laughed at her. "Yep. And I'm good at it, too."

As soon as he let go of her wrists, the nurse removed the IV. The sting of the tubing coming out was painful, so Sydney just held her breath and closed her eyes, waiting for the bandage to cover the gaping hole in her arm.

The nurse handed Sydney her clothes from the day before that were hanging in the closet. Sydney stood up, let her brain readjust, then walked into the bathroom, followed by the nurse. Her head hurt, but she hated hospitals and Dr. Brooks was the worst. She dressed as fast as she could, walked out of the bathroom and went straight for the phone, which she intended to reconnect. She picked it up and put it on the table beside her bed, lowering her head as soon as she did.

"Who are you calling?" Colin asked.

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She held on to her head from the pain. "A cab. I have to get my car, don't I?"

"It's at the mall, right?"

"Yes, it is."

"I'll drive you home then get your car somehow. I know some people who would help me."

"Oh, no," she said, lowering her hands. "I don't want—" She glanced at the nurse who was finding the discussion funny. "—you-know-who finding us in the same car. I'll just call a cab."

Sydney put the phone cord back into the wall, her head ready to explode when she bent over. After she was done, she put her head down on the bed and the nurse handed Sydney her coat.

"Where's my purse?" Forcing herself to stand up, she lifted the receiver to dial.

The nurse looked back in the closet. "I didn't see it. Did you bring it with you?"

Sydney sighed and turned toward Colin. "Did they bring it with them from the mall last night?"

"I don't think so. I bet it's still there. I can find it for you if you want."

She put the receiver back into its cradle and walked around the far side of the bed. "No, I'll find it." She headed for the door, but suddenly felt weird. She grabbed the doorframe and lowered her head. "Or not."

"You shouldn't be allowed out of here." He ran to her side and held her up, but she wiggled free, trying to get away from Dr. Adorable before she impulsively jumped on him.

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"I'm fine. Just a little woozy," she said.

"Oh, a technical term." He put his hand around her waist again, much to her dismay, and walked her back toward the bed. While facing his strong cheekbones and handsome grin, she felt her breathing quicken. The butterflies in her stomach were everywhere and her heart was beating double-time. She tried not to swoon over him, but it was tough.

"You have to sign the papers before you can leave anyway." He turned her around, sat her on the bed, and handed her the clipboard.

She signed the papers, not even taking the time to read them. "I don't have my insurance card with me. It's in my purse with my keys and cell phone."

"We'll mail you the bill. It's not a problem," the nurse said.

"But I can't pay the bill! I have insurance—"

"Take it up with your insurance company." The woman left and returned a moment later with a wheelchair. "Do you have someone to take you home?"

Sydney faced the nurse. "No, I'd call a cab but I don't have my purse to pay him. I can just walk home." She stood up too fast, lowered her head and fell back to the bed. "It's just going to take some time. It's only a few miles from here."

"I've got it." Colin helped Sydney to the wheelchair and, to her surprise, strapped her in.

She struggled to get free, staring at her immobile arms. "What's that for?"

"To make sure you don't try to walk away. I'd say run, but I highly doubt you're up to that." He glanced toward the nurse. "I'll take her. I'm off duty anyway."

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Sydney tried to get her hands untied from the chair, but it wasn't working. Considering she had no choice, she sighed and let him push her to the elevator. He pressed the down button and they waited.

"I hate being taken care of. Do you know that?" she asked.

"I figured as much. So you have no purse, no key to your car or your apartment and no cell phone. What shall I do with you?"

She was glad she couldn't see his face because, from his tone, he seemed to find the whole situation amusing. "Take me to the mall and I'll have a chat with my brother. I'd call him, but he'd never help me out unless a gun was put to his head."

"Your brother wouldn't help you?" he asked, just as the door opened. He wheeled her inside and pushed the button to the lobby.

"No, because he'd throw me out or make me a slave." She sighed. No one in their right mind would understand her dysfunctional family. "He owns Bruce's Antiques, Bruce's Music, Bruce's Paper Place and the Elf Wrapping Station. Most of his businesses are in a strip mall across the street from the big mall."

"Oh, let me guess. His name is Bruce."

"No, actually, it's Dave. My dad is Bruce. Dave used his name in case he's sued. It's a long story and stupid if you ask me."

"Sounds like it. So Dave owns all those Bruce places?"

"Yes, including my apartment complex, called Bruce's Garden apartments, even though there's not a tree anywhere

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in sight," she answered. "That's why I need to see him. He'd have a key to my place."

The doors to the elevator opened and he wheeled her out. Flirty pretty women said hello to him as they passed, making Sydney disgusted. Colin was the type of man who attracted women to him like a magnet. Sydney certainly felt that pull herself, even though she'd known him less than a day.

"Do you get a discount on your apartment because your brother owns it?" he finally asked.

She snorted a laugh. "I wish. He charges me full price and even threatened to evict me once because I left a light on when I went to work."

"Is electricity included?"

"No. I pay my own, but according to him, people complained. I have no idea how they'd complain. I have windows on one side and in the back, and no one can even see into the apartment. The light was nowhere near the windows and it was sunny that day. He's pretty scummy."

"I agree with you. So do you think Dave will have your purse?"

"He might. I can't wait to chew him out because of those working conditions. He's always been the favorite twin."

Colin leaned down to the side of her face. "Twin?"

"Yes. He's three minutes older than I am and throws it in my face every time he talks to me. I don't like him or his wife."

Colin chuckled. "Cynical?"

"Maybe. This time of year does that to me."

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They reached the lobby but he stopped instead of wheeling her outside. He parked the wheelchair then knelt beside it and faced her in a very sexy move that had Sydney thinking lustful thoughts. She took a deep breath and looked into his amazing blue eyes, trying not to swoon.

"Wait right here for me," he said in a low, sexy tone. "I'll get my car."

"You really don't have to do this."

His slow grin covered his entire face. "I know. I don't have anything else to do today, so this is fun for me."

"What? Taking care of a helpless woman strapped to a wheelchair against her will?" She tugged on her arms, trying to get loose, but it didn't work.

Colin grinned, watching her struggle. "Yes. At least I have someone to talk to."

Her heart felt sad as she faced him. "Are you lonely?"

"That's another whole discussion. I'll be right back." He smiled as he stood up, then turned and walked outside.

She waited for a long time while people stared at her, laughed, then walked on. It was humiliating to be strapped to the chair. He might be cute, but she didn't like being controlled and certainly didn't like being helpless. She made a note to herself never to be in this situation again. Even if she had to sew up any cuts herself, she promised herself she'd be in control and not dependent.

Her thoughts returned to the adorable pediatrician who was going to be her chauffeur. Did she trust leaving the hospital with him? As she glanced at the straps on her arms,

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she had to admit it seemed odd. She usually didn't trust people, but for some reason, she didn't think he'd hurt her.

He finally returned inside, walked behind her and pushed the wheelchair out the doors to the car. A blast of December air hit her face with force and she narrowed her eyes to shield them from the cold.

She glanced at him and furrowed her eyebrows. "Where's your coat?"

"I left it at the mall. Since I have to go there to get it, finding your purse will be easy." He pulled the straps free and helped her into the car, making her wish she could date the man. He was even chivalrous.

"Why don't you take my coat," she asked. "You'll catch your death from the cold!" She started to take it off but he stopped her.

"No way," he said. "I'm fine."

She watched him close the car door and take the wheelchair back inside. He walked to the driver's side and got into the car, but she could only think about how she'd been given an early Christmas present in one sweet doctor. She couldn't define him, other than he had the 'it' factor. He was charming and caring, yet could handle any problem with calm ease. If she ever decided to date someone for a potential husband, he was the type, if not the *exact* man.

"Did you go home last night?" she asked, trying to keep her thoughts on something neutral, instead of jumping into his lap and attacking his lips.

He pulled into traffic. "No. I stayed at the hospital and checked up on my patients. I was on call."

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"You stayed up all night? How can you do that and function?"

His gentle smile warmed her heart. "They have a room for me, and I got a few hours' sleep and a shower."

"Wish I could get a shower," she muttered, looking out the window.

"We'll take care of that, but you really shouldn't get those stitches wet."

"Great. No one told me that either."

"I'm not surprised. Do you feel up to going to the mall or do you want some breakfast?"

She turned toward him, trying to tell herself he was just a man and not some model she should put on a pedestal. "The mall. I want my purse and if I can't find it, I want to beat up my brother."

"With your head?"

She closed her eyes and put her aching head back on the seat. "It makes me mean. He deserves it full force, too. I'd go to his house, but he just moved and I have to remember how to get there, which hurts my head."

Colin turned the radio onto a jazz station, keeping the tone low. The music made her want to sleep.

"The mall doesn't open for another two hours," he said, waking her from her thoughts. "I have a better idea."

She opened her eyes, trying to stay awake. "You do?"

"Yep." He drove away from the hospital, heading toward the countryside. It was gorgeous, with the first snow of the season glistening on the fields.

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"Did it snow last night?" she asked, squinting from the sunshine.

"Yes, about half an inch."

"Think it'll be a white Christmas?"

He shook his head. "No. I haven't seen one of those for a long time. Those are only for magical Christmases."

"Magical?"

He sighed. "Yes. Ones surrounded by family, friends, and fun. They also have to have an element of surprise with them, or they wouldn't be so memorable."

"Do you ever have Christmases like that?"

His face turned sad and she knew he was thinking about Ruth. "Not any more. Do you?"

She shook her head and stared out the side window again. "Never. My family doesn't get together on Christmas. I'm always alone and working. It's been like that for so many years, I don't remember any fun Christmases."

He reached over and warmed her hand with his touch, the heat filling her entire body, making her turn to stare at him for a moment.

"Even with family, you're very alone, aren't you?" he asked, glancing toward her.

"More than anything, but I don't let it get me down. I celebrate Christmas, but just differently than others."

"How do you celebrate Christmas?"

She couldn't suppress her smile. "I eat banana splits for breakfast, work on designs for a while, then watch television. It keeps me sane." She turned toward him and he looked frustrated. "How about you?"

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He moved his hand away from her and stared out the windshield. "I work."

"That's it? You just work?"

"Yep."

She decided not to push it. "I understand." She turned and looked out the window, seeing Amish men out with their cows walking on the frozen ground. "Where are you taking me?"

"To my house."

"Your place?" she asked, moving toward her door and away from him.

"Sure. It only makes sense. You have nowhere else to go for someone to watch over you, you need to eat breakfast and you want a shower. I even have a toothbrush for you."

"But I hardly even know you!"

He smiled. "You can trust me. We won't be alone, either. I have a maid and a chef on duty today, so we'll have company."

"A maid? A chef? Are you rich?"

"I do okay."

"I hate rich people," she mumbled.

He chuckled and turned off the radio. "I was just going to go home and go to bed."

She gulped, took a deep breath and faced him. "With me?"

"If you want."

He seemed so nonchalant, Sydney pulled her coat closed at the top. What kind of man was this and what did he think she was?

He glanced at her. "Cold?"

"Uh, no."

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"Scared?"

"No—"

"Good."

"—I'm terrified. I know nothing about you and you're taking me to your home?"

Colin's deep belly laugh filled the car. "Do you think I'm a murderer or something?"

"Something is right." She leaned toward him and narrowed her eyes. "Who are you, Dr. Taylor?"

"I'm a good guy who rescued you last night, and if I remember correctly, you even called me adorable."

"I must've been delirious."

He wagged his finger at her. "Oh, no. I'm not taking that for an answer. You said it yourself and I know you remember it."

"How do you know?"

He touched her hand, making her almost melt. "From your face every time I touch you, like you're doing right now." He chuckled while glancing her way. "You're like an open book and are very easy to read. I'm just surprised you don't act on it and jump all over me."

"It's my head. It slows me down." She turned toward his smile. "At least you don't think I'm easy."

"Oh, I'll figure that part out soon enough."

"I said too much," she muttered, then turned toward him. "You aren't going to attack me, are you?"

He laughed again. "Not at all. I'm nothing like that and I promise nothing will happen." He touched her hair. "And with

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your head, you shouldn't even be worrying about something like that."

"That's good to know," she said, hoping he wasn't lying.

"How does your head feel?"

"Oh, you know, like a huge bolt of deadly wrapping paper attacked me and knocked me out, ripping my skin off my skull. At least Santa was there to save me."

He laughed as he put his hand back on the steering wheel and drove down a long, slightly snow-covered lane lined with bare trees and a huge yard beside fields that seemed to go on for miles.

Sydney looked out every window in amazement. "Oh, this is beautiful! I bet it's gorgeous in the springtime."

"Very. The dogwood trees have so many white blossoms, you can't see the road from the house."

"Amazing." He rounded a corner, and dead ahead of them was the most stunning and elegant home Sydney had ever seen. "I take that back. You're not a murderer. No murderer would ever live in a home like this."

It was red brick with white shutters and a dark brown wooden front door. From its size, the home probably had at least four bedrooms, three baths and a giant kitchen. She could only imagine the size of the living room.

"Oh, it's a house, but not really a home," he said.

She didn't want to tip her hand that she knew about Ruth. "Why is that?"

He parked the car, and before she could even get out, he was at her side, but didn't answer her question. He helped

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her walk to the front of the house with his arm on her shoulder, unlocked the door, and assisted her inside.

"Amazing," she whispered.

She tried to keep her mouth shut while checking out the interior of the gigantic home. With cathedral ceilings, this place put Mrs. Richman's house to shame. The floor of the foyer was dark wood with the walls painted off-white. To the right was a huge living room decorated in brown, off-white, and dark red. To the left was another hallway, and right in front of her was a beautiful dining room with long flowing tan curtains and a gigantic rectangular table in the same color wood as the dark floors.

"Marjorie, I'm home!" Colin picked up the mail at the front door and leafed through it while Sydney closed the door behind him. From the throbbing pain in her head, she leaned against the wall, just wanting to die.

"Yes, sir?" A young, short, dumpy woman wearing a maid's uniform walked toward them. "Where's your coat?"

"Long story." He turned toward Sydney and leaned down to her face. "Are you okay?"

"Just catching my breath from the beauty of your home."

Colin turned toward Marjorie. "This is Sydney. I rescued her at the mall last night."

"Yes, sir," Marjorie answered with a grin.

"She wants a shower and some breakfast, but has no other outfit except for this."

He pointed to her clothes then helped to remove her coat, making her feel like a stray he'd dragged in from the cold.

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"Yes, sir. I'll take care of it." Marjorie pointed to the stairs. "Miss, there's a shower upstairs, and I'll set out a bathrobe for you to wear while I clean your clothes."

"Oh, that's really not necessary—"

"Yes, it is," Colin said. He walked into the living room, studying the mail in his hand.

Sydney started up the stairs to the left of the foyer with Marjorie at her side, but by the time she got halfway, she turned around and sat down. "Just give me a minute." She put her head between her knees, closed her eyes, and tried to breathe.

"Dr. Taylor!" Marjorie called out.

Sydney heard someone running, then felt someone touch her hair. His presence was just amazing, and she could feel his warmth as he knelt, knowing it was Colin before she even looked up.

"Can't walk up steps?" he asked.

"Sure. I'm just taking my time admiring the view."

"Of the carpet? It's tan, in case you're wondering."

"I see that. And your maid does a great job of keeping it clean, too."

He lifted her into his strong arms and carried her to the bathroom, her eyes shutting from being lightheaded. He was so strong and felt so comfortable, she leaned up against his chest. She'd never known anyone like him before, intriguing her.

He sat her down on the closed toilet lid, moved her head to her knees, then turned toward Marjorie. "She can't be left alone. I'll be right back. I have to talk to Chef John."

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"Yes, sir," Marjorie answered.

As soon as he left, Sydney lifted her head a bit to see what was going on. Marjorie opened a linen closet and pulled out a thick plush white bathrobe and a new toothbrush and toothpaste. She handed the robe to Sydney, then laid the toothbrush and toothpaste on the counter.

"Put this on and give me your clothes when you're ready to get in the shower," Marjorie said. "I'll clean them for you and have them back to you in no time."

"But—"

"It's fine. We're all happy he found you last night and he told us all about it. We were expecting you."

Sydney's eyebrows rose. "You were?"

"Yes, and we couldn't be happier. He called us this morning to let us know you'd be here."

"I didn't even know I'd be here. Why are you happy about that?"

"He doesn't bring anyone home, so we don't have a lot of work to do. With you here, it'll bring life to this old house and happiness to Dr. Taylor." Marjorie headed toward the bathroom door. "Take your time. There's no rush."

Just as Marjorie opened the bathroom door, Colin walked in. "I don't want you standing in that shower. You might fall over."

"I doubt it."

"Well, you have your choice. If you stand up in my shower, then I have to be here to catch you when you fall."

"That's not good. What's the other choice?"

"You sit in a chair."

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"But it'll ruin your chair!"

"So? It'll save your life."

"Melodramatic," she muttered under her breath, making him chuckle. "Okay, where's the chair?"

"Get into the robe so Marjorie can take your clothes and I'll get it." He turned and she heard him mutter, "Melodramatic," and start to laugh. As he left the room, Marjorie walked in. It felt like a train station with them coming in and out.

"He thinks you're funny," Marjorie whispered. "That's a good thing."

"I'm usually not funny, but it's just weird being here."

"Do you need help with your clothes? I should've asked earlier."

"I'm fine."

Marjorie pulled on the door. "I'll be right outside waiting for them."

"Thanks."

Marjorie shut the door behind her and Sydney stood and held on to the counter. She undressed, but her head was pounding, so it took longer. She wrapped herself in the thick warm robe then opened the door and handed her clothes to Marjorie, who smiled and walked toward the stairs. She brushed her teeth but felt awful, lowering her head while still standing.

Colin walked into the bathroom and put the chair he was holding into the shower. "Do you feel okay?"

"Why?"

"Your head's on the counter."

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"Oh yeah. Nice marble counter. Gotta get me one of these things."

"I don't like this one bit. Dr. Brooks is going to hear about this one. You should've stayed another day at least."

Sydney closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "I'm fine."

He leaned his face down to hers. "Does your head hurt?"

She nodded, trying to keep the tears from escaping.

"Can you take a shower? I'll have breakfast and something for your head when you get downstairs."

"Thanks." She looked up and sighed.

He began to peel the bandage off her head. "Are you allergic to anything?"

"Not that I know of."

"How much do you weigh?"

She winced at the tape pulling her skin and hair. "Why do you need to know? That's kind of personal, isn't it?"

"Some prescription medications go by weight."

"You're going to write me a prescription?"

"Sure. Are you over 100 pounds and less than 125?"

"Yes."

He finished taking off the bandage and faced her. "Want me to sit here in case you fall?"

"No. You've been kind enough."

"You think I'm adorable, too, so I'll be outside the door to protect myself from you." He opened his cell phone and walked into the hallway, closing the door behind him while he chuckled.

"Very funny!" Sydney took a deep breath, turned on the shower and took off her robe. Holding on to the chair, she

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climbed into the shower and sat down. It felt good to let the water run over her head, so she just let it happen. She opened her eyes, found some shampoo and washed her hair, then soaped herself up, feeling much better in the process. She finally removed any other bandages off her arms from the IV and shot from the night before.

"You okay?"

From Colin's voice, she could tell he was inside the bathroom, so she reached around and turned off the water. She put her head in her hands and rested her elbows on her thighs. "Yes, I'm fine."

"You don't look fine." His voice was inside the shower behind her, but she didn't care.

She felt a towel rubbing her back, then the robe covering her shoulders. She turned her head toward the side. "I thought you were outside?"

"I was, but came in to help you. I don't think you'll attack me."

She pulled her arms into the robe, then pulled it shut in the front. "You're right and I won't attack you. I'm fine, really."

"I don't think so. You look like you're ready to pass out."

She held on to the chair and stood up, then stepped out of the shower. Colin grabbed the chair from the shower and put it on the floor near where she was standing. "Sit."

"I'd love to." She fell into the chair and he dried her hair for her. "It's so nice having personal slaves."

"Oh, I'm sure. Wait until I get a comb for your hair. You'll be really thankful then."

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"Don't you have a brush?"

"No. I don't need one. So a comb it is."

"Great. I'll be bald."

He laughed, finished drying her hair then put something into it that smelled like conditioner. "Don't worry. It won't hurt." He turned and removed a comb from the drawer, then started to comb her hair.

"Do you make house calls for doing my hair?"

"I would for you. Say the word."

"Hilarious." She lowered her head again. "I don't feel well."

"I'm not surprised." He pushed her head to her knees.

"That'll help. Take deep breaths and think of a beautiful beach."

"Who's on the beach?"

"Oh, you are, of course. I think I'd be there, too, just basking in the sun." He touched her stitches. "You weren't to get that wet." He dried the sutures, opened another drawer and removed some sort of cream. He dabbed it on the wound, then covered it with bandages.

"Thanks for taking care of me," she said, trying to lift her head. "I can do this myself, though."

He pushed her head back down and continued with her hair. "I enjoy this. Now, we're both on the beach."

"What am I wearing?"

"Let's see. A thong."

"That's it?"

"Yep. Topless beach," he answered.

"I say we find another beach."

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"This one's beautiful. White sand, clear blue water, dolphins—"

"What are you wearing?" she asked.

"Swim trunks. We're sitting on the sand making sandcastles."

"We are? We're not making out in the surf?" She covered her mouth and he laughed.

"Hey, if you want that, it's fine with me. I was keeping it innocent." He finished with her hair and helped her to her feet. "Can you make it downstairs?"

"I can try." They took a few steps into the hallway. "I don't think your version is that innocent. You had me topless!"

"Yeah, but in my version, we were building sandcastles. In your version, you were thinking about sex."

She lifted a finger to make her point. "No, making out. Not specifically sex."

He laughed and walked beside her down the stairs. He leaned over, put his arm around her and began to whisper. "You're going to have to show me the difference."

She caught her breath, from the scent of his sexy aftershave and the fact that he was touching her again. Her stomach's butterflies were fluttering double-time, making her hands and feet tingle.

She tried to stay on the topic at hand. "You're a doctor and you don't know the difference between making out and..." She lowered her voice. "Sex?"

He stifled his laughter. "Yes, but I'd rather you show me." His eyebrows waggled, so she shook her head and rolled her eyes.

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"Very funny, psycho," she whispered, then looked down at his hand around her waist. "You don't have to hold me going down the stairs."

"Yes, I do. You're not steady yet and you don't need to fall. If you do, you could lose that robe and give everyone a show, including me." He paused. "Hey, that's a thought!"

"You're incorrigible. My goal right now is to get my clothes. I feel so naked after you mentioned the topless beach and that show thing." She pulled the robe closed at the top and Colin just laughed.

They walked into the gigantic kitchen with warm off-white walls and dark marble countertops, where Marjorie and a man were standing. The table was filled with food, and Sydney felt her mouth drop, amazed at the sight.

She faced Colin and pointed to the table. "Are you going to eat all of this?"

Colin helped her to her seat and pushed the chair in for her. "No, you're going to help me."

Sydney turned toward the man and Marjorie. "Do you guys want to eat, too?"

Marjorie smiled. "No, ma'am. We've already eaten and have work to do."

The man was wearing a chef's outfit and rather rotund. He stuck out his arm and shook her hand. "I'm Chef John. It's nice to meet you, Sydney."

"You know my name?"

"Sure. Welcome to our home." He glanced toward Colin. "The medication's on the way."

"Medication?" she asked.

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"For your head, but nothing to worry about," Colin said. Marjorie and Chef John walked away from the table, and Colin poured them both some orange juice. "Now, about the beach—"

"You seem to be fixated on that beach. Why is that?"

He sighed and put a waffle and some bacon on her plate. "This time of year is really tough for me, so I go on a mental vacation to an island. It keeps me sane." He began loading her plate with eggs, toast, fruit, and bacon.

"Do I look hungry?" she asked, watching him dump what seemed like a whole pound of hash browns onto her plate.

"Yep. Now eat or I won't tell you."

Chef John brought them each a cup of coffee, with cream and sugar on the side. "Thank you," Colin said.

"Yes, thank you so much," Sydney added.

Chef John grinned, winked at Sydney and left.

"What was that all about?" she whispered to Colin.

"They like to see me happy."

"Are you usually unhappy?"

He loaded his plate, took a bite and glanced at her from the side, as if he was thinking of what to tell her. "Yep."

"Why?"

"It's a long story."

"Does it have anything to do with this house?"

"Yep." He took a bite of bacon and chewed slowly.

"Are you going to tell me?"

"In due time. How's your head?"

He was a tough nut to crack, but she had her ways to get him to come around. "It hurts, but I'll live."

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"I know you will." He took a bite of his waffle.

She leaned up and faced him. "Look. If I'm going to be your friend, we have to communicate or I'll go call a cab right now."

"No! Don't do that!" He sat back and grinned, suddenly sure of himself. "You don't have any money. How can you call a cab?"

Sydney checked her watch. "Dave's probably at work, so I'd take the cab to his place and have him pay for it. He owes me anyway."

"Oh. I see."

She leaned forward even further. "Does this have anything to do with you being so lonely in this house to the point of overworking yourself and never having fun?"

He remained calm, sipping his coffee. "How do you know that?"

"I know a lot." She ate some of the toast. "Tell me about her."

"Who?"

She faced him to see his reaction. "Ruth. What kind of cancer did she have?"

His face went pale and his mouth fell open. "How do you know about her?" he whispered. "No one's allowed to even say her name here."

"Oh, they didn't. I didn't hear it in this house."

"Dr. Weston?"

"Nope. I read it on the internet."

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"I don't think so. You had no access to the internet in the hospital. I was in your room too much last night—" He shut his mouth, then lifted his cup to take another drink of coffee.

Sydney raised her eyebrow. "You were?"

"Well, if I save someone, I want to make sure they're okay."

"So what kind of cancer did she have?" Sydney asked, then took a sip of coffee.

"It started out as ovarian then went to her brain. If I just would've seen the signs—but she was really good at hiding it."

"I heard she was tough and solid. She was a hard worker, too."

He was silent then turned to her. "Yes, and I don't want to talk about it."

Sydney touched his arm, his skin so comfortable to the touch. She wanted to stroke it, but moved her hand away instead. "That's okay, but it's also okay to get it out. Remember the good times and make it part of your life instead of hiding away from everyone."

He frowned and lowered his voice to almost a whisper. "But you don't understand how alone I am."

"Yes, I do. I'm alone, too, and I take it one day at a time. I want you to do that as well. I know you can. You're my hero because you rescued me from that killer wrapping paper. No one else even bothered to help me, but you did."

"I had to. No one else knew what to do for you."

"See? You're my hero." She winked at him, and he smiled, grabbed her hand and held on tight. The warmth between

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them made her feel like they were connected in some odd way, sharing the common bond of loneliness.

"Now, tell me how you celebrate Christmas around here," she said. "I don't believe you work all Christmas day with a beautiful home like this."

"I don't celebrate anything. Honestly, I volunteer to work and do work. Every year. Sick kids don't take a holiday so neither should I."

"That's got to change. No one sits around and works on Christmas."

He leaned up closer and raised one eyebrow. "You do, though. What makes that any different?"

"Ah, but I have a treat. I have that banana split and watch TV. It's usually tapes I've made of football games from the week before, too."

He sat back and assessed her. "You? Football?"

"It's the best sport around. Where else can you see adorable sweaty men wearing tight pants over their tiny butts fighting over a ball like that? Sometimes I rewind the tape to watch the cute ones. I just imagine I'm the ball—"

Colin started to chuckle at her. "And sail down the field at what—fifty miles an hour? What about the cheerleaders on the sidelines? Wouldn't you rather be one of them?"

"They're fluff and I'm more...substance. Yeah, I guess I'm not the ball, except for the snap." She lined up her hands with a grin. "Right between the guy's legs. Oh baby!"

Colin leaned up to her, laughing. "I think you're sexually repressed."

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"Oh, I know I am," she said, continuing to eat. "It comes with dating idiots."

"How many idiots have you dated?"

She didn't even raise her eyes from her plate. "All of them." She shoveled in some of the eggs that were really tasty.

"No, I mean how many?"

She laid down her fork and faced him. "Every idiot on the face of the planet. I've dated all of them. Some try to weasel me into their bed with ideas of half-naked beaches." She glanced at him slyly with one eyebrow raised.

"Hey, but we're not dating!"

"Nope." She pulled her robe tight at the top again. "I have to know a man better before I talk about getting topless."

Colin laughed. "You're good for my soul, know that?"

"Yep. And the same goes for you."

"What was the worst date you've ever had?" he asked.

She grinned and sat up. "Oh you won't believe this one. I was about twenty-three and my cousin set me up with a neighbor of his. He lived at home and was at least forty. His mother came with him on the date! His pants were up to his chest with taped glasses and a pocket protector. He talked about how he loved his joystick when he played games on the computer and it almost sounded sexual. It was odd, but then when the date was over, he leaned toward me and I was afraid he was going to kiss me. He licked my nose and started to put his hand down my top."

Colin chuckled. "What did you do?"

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"I didn't have to do anything. His mother hit him over the head from the back seat with her huge purse and I ran out of the car and up to my apartment. I locked the doors, then he stalked me for weeks. I finally had to call his mother to have him stop."

"I'm glad I'm nothing like that. My mother doesn't live with me, and I'd never lick someone's nose or talk about a 'joystick'—unless they wanted me to."

"Very funny." She ate a bite of fruit then faced him. "So are you saying you want to date me?"

"Would you be upset if I said that?"

"The timing's really bad right now. I have Mrs. Richman who wants her stuff done, then have two other clients who want me to decorate their downstairs for the holidays. That gives me about a week before I collapse and get my banana split, and with my head, that's about right, minus the banana split."

He took a sip of coffee. "It doesn't sound like your business is falling apart to me."

"Oh, but it is. Those two other clients are waiting to see what I do for Mrs. Richman. I have about ten hours left of work to do for her, then they'll inspect it and see if I can do their places too. So I really have two contingent clients."

"What if I helped you out?"

She looked at him, stunned. "You? You're a doctor! Don't you have to stick a needle in some unsuspecting kid or steal lollipops or something?"

He grinned. "I can stick a kid with a needle, have a stash of lollipops of my own, and work when I want. I can take

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vacations when I want, and even not work if I want. The salary's the same."

"Huh?"

He shook his head slightly with a smile. "I'll make you a deal. You let me help you and I'll take you out."

"Something doesn't sound right about that arrangement. I'm not a mercy date, am I?"

He chuckled. "Hardly." He faced her, lifted her hand and kissed the back of it with such warmth, she thought she'd faint dead away. He grinned at her, almost laughing. "I'd just love to move on and I think I've found someone I'd like to do it with."

She moved her hand from his and thrust her thumb toward her chest. "Me?"

"Yep."

What was he thinking? "I'm glad you think I'm worthy, but I don't think I'm the girl for you."

"Why not?"

She pointed around the kitchen. "You're rich! I'm definitely not. I wouldn't fit in with your lifestyle or friends. Think about how your coworkers would react if they met me. I'm kind of outspoken and can be a real pain if I want to be."

He grinned, picked up a piece of toast, stuck his knife into the jelly and started to spread it on his bread. "That's where you're wrong, and I intend to prove it to you."

"Where am I wrong?"

"My coworkers aren't my friends at all. They're snotty and I'm not. I'm just like you, with just a few more zeroes in my bank account."

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She couldn't argue with the zeroes part. Hers was pretty much zero, without any leading digit. She had to think of something else, because he was just too good-looking for her to date, if that was even possible. He could have his pick of any woman, and Sydney knew it was just a matter of time before he found one in his social circle and moved on.

She changed the subject to a more tactful way to approach things. "You also have to think about Dr. Brooks. If you go out with me and she finds out, she'll hunt me down, stick a needle in my arm and run me over."

"She's nothing. Even her husband hated her and left after two months. I don't care what she thinks. You're it, and if I have to fight for you, I will."

"That's nice to know," she said. "But not going to happen."

Colin grunted. "We'll see."

Chef John entered the room. "Just got the stuff." He laid a bag on the table and walked away.

Colin took a bottle out of the bag, opened it and handed her one capsule. "For your headache. It's stronger than regular aspirin."

"Yes, sir." She took the pill and drank her juice.

He sat back, raised one eyebrow and grinned. "I think I like being called master better than sir."

"Oh, but if you work with me, I'll be your boss. Don't ever forget it, buddy."

He leaned closer. "But if you date me, I'll be the boss."

"Won't happen. Dates have to be equals, not bosses and slaves. Besides, I don't date coworkers...or underlings...or rich people...or adorable people." She covered her mouth. It

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was certainly getting her in more trouble than she wanted it to.

"Adorable people?" he asked as she tried to regain her composure, moving her hand.

Darn. He heard it. "Yes, sir. They can have anyone they want, and as soon as a cuter person gives them the time of day, they're off."

"Oh, so I should worry about you running off with some dark-haired man named Juan with a boat or something?"

She pointed to her chest again. "What? Me? I'm not the adorable one at this table."

He leaned up close with a grin. "I think you are, and you're very right. I'd have to keep a close eye on you."

"Oh, you couldn't be more mistaken—"

He held on to her hand and faced her with that incredible stare, seeing into her heart and soul. "You're beautiful and the most gorgeous woman I've ever met." He touched his fingertips to her cheek and she caught her breath, felt her mouth open and her face heat up. Oh, he was good, and she was putty in his hands, but definitely outside her comfort zone with this guy.

She cleared her throat and took a deep breath. "Not only do you have good lines, you're probably blind." No man had ever treated her like that, and she didn't know how to handle it.

"Not blind, and not a line," he said in a serious tone. He touched her hair and stroked it, making Sydney close her eyes. "You know it, deep down, too. I can see it."

She opened her eyes slowly. "So what are you telling me?"

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"It's too early," he said, turning back toward his food.

"You lead me on with a line that has me breathless and thinking lustful things and won't even explain it?" She suddenly realized what she'd said and covered her mouth, feeling her face redden.

He laughed aloud. "I'm so good at reading people, I amaze even myself."

"Egotist."

Sydney ate a few more bites and pushed the plate away. "I'm sorry to waste food, but someone put too much on my plate. I'm done."

He glanced up at her plate, his eyebrows furrowing. "You hardly ate anything!"

"Unless you want my breakfast on your floor, you'll forget about it. It was really good, and if you save it in the refrigerator, I'll eat some more for lunch."

He shook his head, chuckling. "That's not necessary. I should've guessed you wouldn't be that hungry after last night. So, does Justin hate you or what?"

"He's jealous because the boss is my idiot brother. He has nothing to be jealous about, but he's trying to climb the corporate ladder. He's going about it all wrong if you ask me. There is no ladder in any of Dave's businesses, and not even a stepstool."

Colin finished his breakfast just as Marjorie brought Sydney her clean clothes. Helping her to her feet, she showed Sydney the bathroom down the hall on the other side of the foyer so she could change. Sydney walked inside, put on her

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clothes and tried not to pass out. For some reason, her head was worse than ever.

She left the bathroom, having to stop at a doorway on the way back to the kitchen. She glanced inside and saw an office containing a dark wooden desk, filled with pictures of a beautiful woman with bright short red wavy hair and green eyes. She had a very happy look about her, bubbly and alive. Sydney was sure it was Ruth, amazed at how much she looked like Sydney, but with green eyes instead of blue, and hair a bit darker than Sydney's.

She held on to the doorframe and lowered her head.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," Sydney answered, turning to see Colin. "I get such a pain in my head just from simple things. Is that normal?"

"You should've been kept in the hospital longer. I'm tempted to take you back there myself."

"I don't have the cash for that and don't want to run into the evil Dr. Brooks. Besides, I need my car and my purse, remember?"

"Oh yeah. I have an idea." He put his arm around her back and walked with her, leaning his head against hers. "You take a nap here and I'll find your purse and your car with your brother's help."

"But you can't do that. My brother's an idiot."

"Oh, I doubt that. Call him and tell him I'm coming. He can help me out, too, when I get your car."

"Good luck with that. He's nasty and probably won't believe you."

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"We'll see." They walked into the huge living room, containing four light tan leather couches, a big-screen television and various overstuffed chairs.

"This is beautiful!" she said. "You know, this would make the neatest place for a Christmas party."

"I don't do parties," he said.

"Have you ever held a party?"

"Yes, but that was years ago, before Ruth got sick, but now, it's not the same."

Sydney grinned and winked. "That's because you hadn't met me yet."

He thought for a moment. "A party would be fun. We could invite everyone at our office and the staff from the hospital—"

"See? It *would* be fun! There's so much potential for decorating this place, too."

"Would you help me with it?"

"Yes," she said. "Let's get the rich lady and her friends done then spend time in here. Simple but elegant. That's my theme."

He smiled and sat her down then knelt in front of her. "Today it's stick to the couch. Got it?"

"Yes, master. I feel like your dog."

"Master sounds right. I'm glad you remembered."

He helped her lay down on the couch then covered her up with a warm fleece blanket and handed her the phone from the end table.

Sydney dialed the number of Bruce's Antiques. Dave always started his day there, to make sure nothing was stolen the night before.

Three Minutes Before Christmas
by Paige Ryter

"Bruce's Antiques."

She was right and it was her stupid brother. "Dave, it's Sydney."

"Where did you go last night? You didn't finish your shift and now Justin wants to quit."

"Let him quit. He's the one who hit me in the head and sent me to the hospital."

"Hospital?" Dave asked. "He didn't say anything about a hospital!"

"Well, I spent the night there, and didn't get my purse. Did you see it?"

"Nope," he said. "I'll see if I can find it. Where are you now?"

She glanced at Colin, who was smiling. "I'm at a friend's house. He saved my life last night when I got hit."

"He? You're at a man's house? Sydney! Why didn't you call me for help? If Mom finds out—"

"She's going to Australia. Now, this man is really nice, and he's coming over to get my purse, my keys and my car. Can you help him? I can hardly walk without passing out."

"Fine. What's his name?"

"Dr. Taylor. Be nice to him."

"A doctor? He took you home? Is he loaded? Did you sleep with him yet?"

Sydney rolled her eyes and Colin laughed. "Dave! Just help him out and don't ask questions. He's a nice guy and you can get your brain out of the gutter."

"Sure, Syd." He chuckled. "Wait till I tell Margaret."

Three Minutes Before Christmas
by Paige Ryter

"Don't you dare tell your wife. Just get my purse and help him get my car. It's near the exit for the wrapping paper."

"Got it. The blue clunker with the muffler hanging off."

"The muffler hasn't fallen off yet and it still passes inspection, sort of...if I pay enough under the table. Now he's on his way over. Dr. Colin Taylor. Got it?"

Colin stood in front of her with his arms crossed while laughing.

"Sure," Dave said. "I'm writing it down. I'll be waiting at the paper place."

"Thanks, Dave."

"You owe me, you know—"

Sydney pushed the end button on the phone without answering him and handed it to Colin. "He's at Bruce's Paper Place. Don't let him think you owe him anything for this. You're an innocent bystander and he's always after the almighty buck."

"I know exactly how to handle this guy." Colin grinned. "I can't wait."

"Nothing illegal. My dad's a lawyer. He's also kind of an ambulance chaser, so if he thinks anything's wrong, he'll hunt you down."

"Oh, that's even better!" Colin kissed her forehead and walked toward the door. "Get some sleep, and I promise it'll be fine." He pulled on a brown coat while she craned her neck to see him.

"You found your coat?"

He walked over to her. "No, this is a different coat. It's not as warm as my black one."

Three Minutes Before Christmas
by Paige Ryter

"You can wear mine if you want. It might fit."

He smiled and stroked her hair. "It's fine. I'll be back in a little bit and you get some sleep. Don't worry about anything. If you need help, yell for Marjorie or John. They can take care of any problems and are always around the house."

"Well, thank you in advance."

"No. Thank *you*! I can't wait to play with Dave's head. This will be more fun than anything."

"What are you going to do?"

"Oh, nothing for you to worry about, sweet Sydney. Just close your eyes and dream happy thoughts about me, since I'm so adorable." He laughed, kissed her forehead again and walked through the foyer and out the door.

What had she gotten herself into?

* * * *

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Chapter Three

"Sydney."

She opened her eyes and saw Colin sitting beside her, holding her hand in the dark. She covered her yawn, then turned toward him. "You're back so soon! Did you have a problem with Dave?"

"It's not soon. It's about six in the evening. You need to get up for dinner."

She moved her hand from his, sat up and put her head down. "Dinner? But I fell asleep—"

"At about nine this morning. You've been asleep for nine hours."

She turned her head toward him. "You're kidding, right? I just fell asleep."

He showed her his watch in the darkness, lighting it up by pressing on the stem. "It's six, see? The sun's even set."

"Oh, it's not just overcast. Guess I was tired."

"I got your purse for you."

"You did? Where was it?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Where you left it. In your car."

"But my keys—"

"Were in your coat pocket."

"Huh? I keep them in my purse. How did you figure that out?" she asked.

"Oh, your brother and I looked through your purse after we broke into the car and couldn't find them, so we came back here."

Three Minutes Before Christmas
by Paige Ryster

"You brought Dave here?" she asked.

"Yep. He liked the house. He even watched you sleep then had a few choice words—"

"Oh, I just bet."

"He knew they'd be in your coat pocket. Your mom does the same thing."

She thought for a moment. "Oh yeah. She does do that."

"Did you also know you don't have any money in your purse, your muffler's falling off, and your driver's side door doesn't close right?"

"Yep."

Colin studied her for a moment. "What do you charge an hour to do your job?"

"Fifty bucks an hour, and starting in January, it's going up to sixty. Why?"

"So, if you work full-time, you're making at least a hundred grand, yet can't get a decent car? Why is that, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I have bills."

"What kind of bills?"

"School bills. I still owe twelve thousand for my bachelor's and about eighteen thousand for my master's in design."

He leaned forward. "You funded your schooling by yourself? Why?"

"I don't believe in handouts and want to make it on my own. That's why it's important for this business to make it." She hid her mouth while she yawned again. "Now, is my car here? I need to go home and get some sleep."

"Sleep? You just slept for nine hours and you're tired?"

Three Minutes Before Christmas
by Paige Ryster

"Sleeping so much makes me tired. What can I say?"

"I'd rather you stay here tonight, or I can take you home and stay with you. You shouldn't be that tired after almost sleeping around the clock. You really should be in the hospital."

"Oh, but Dr. Taylor, you've taken up enough of your day with me, and I'd hate to impose. I'll just go home and go to bed. Then tomorrow, I can go to Mrs. Richman's place and get those ten hours in to finish up."

"Ten hours? You intend to work ten hours tomorrow? I don't like that at all. You're going to be dead on your feet."

She grinned. "We'll see."

"I'm helping you, remember?"

Sydney shook her head. "Oh, no. I'm not going to hold you to that. It's not fair to you at all."

His eyes captured hers as he ran his fingers through her hair, his other hand still holding on to hers. "I want to help you. Otherwise, I'd be alone again, and I'd rather be with you. Please?"

She caught her breath and thought about it, removing her hand from his. He was weaseling his way into her heart, and she had to keep her distance, because she didn't know him very well. "What do you know about interior design?"

"Nothing."

"Good. At least you won't think you know what you don't know. We'll try it and see how it goes. And I promise I won't be judging you if it doesn't work. You're still a great guy, and I want you to know that, even though you are rich."

Three Minutes Before Christmas
by Paige Ryter

Colin smiled. "Thank you. You gave me a reason to look forward to the holidays again. I appreciate it, too." He helped her to her feet. "How's your head?"

"I don't know, but I don't think that medicine helped very much."

"Oh, it's worn off by now. You need more. Are you in pain?"

"I'm not feeling that great, if that's what you're asking."

"Then, yes, you do need more."

She went into the bathroom, and he met her on the way out, walking her to the dining room. "I talked to Dr. Weston while waiting for you to wake up."

"You did? Why?"

He helped her sit at the end of the long side of the dining room table, then sat down at the end, the corner of the table separating them. "I told him what Dr. Brooks did to you."

"Why did you do that?" she asked.

Colin faced her. "He's on the board of directors, too. He's very unhappy about her attitude. We're going to take it up at the next meeting, and may even call a special session. For right now, it's a secret. He even wrote on your chart to keep you at least two days because it was a bad cut and in a bad area. She shouldn't have released you at all."

"I'm glad she did. I wouldn't be able to pay the bill."

Colin grinned. "You will once the board hears the story. They should fire her and make her pay your hospital stay out of her own pocket. They'll probably even file a malpractice suit, because she didn't even give you a prescription for when you left the hospital, or tell you not to get those sutures wet."

Three Minutes Before Christmas
by Paige Ryter

Oh, she's in trouble. There's no doubt about that." He studied her face. "Are you hungry?"

"Not really." She lowered her head into her hands.

"Pain?"

"Just lightheaded."

"I see. I've been documenting your vital signs all afternoon. Your blood pressure's low. Dr. Brooks should've mentioned that as well and possibly even done more tests. I read your chart this morning at the hospital and it was even lower there."

She lifted her head slightly, wanting to change the subject. "How involved will I be for this board of directors thing? I don't have time—"

"I know. I'll keep you out of it as much as I can. Now, do you think you can eat steak?"

"I'll try."

Colin called Chef John to the table, and he immediately ran to the kitchen. Within fifteen minutes, they had piping hot steak, a baked potato and green beans on a plate in front of them.

"You eat well around here," she said, staring at her plate.

"Do you only eat banana splits, or do you eat other things?"

"Cereal mostly."

He ate some of the steak and faced her again. "You need to get out more."

"You too," she said in a low tone.

"With you."

She glanced over at him. "I don't think so."

Three Minutes Before Christmas
by Paige Ryter

"You don't trust me. Why is that?"

"I don't know you well enough yet."

He stared at her for a moment after he ate a bite of steak.

"I wonder why you're like that. Hmmm...now I have a mystery to solve."

"Go ahead, Sherlock. I'm giving you nothing. I've just been out on a lot of dates and it takes me a while to trust someone."

"I don't believe you, but since I'm friends with Dave now—"

She snapped her head toward him. "Friends?"

"Yep. We're playing poker together next weekend."

"My brother invited you to his poker night? Are you insane? He'll rip you off!"

Colin grinned. "No he won't. I learned how to count cards in college. I plan to win."

"Did he ask why I was here?" She ate a bite and faced him.

"Yep. I told him something close to the truth."

She leaned up closer to him. "Something? What did you tell my brother?"

"I'm not saying. Hurry up. We're going to your place and I'm sleeping on the couch."

"How do you know I have a couch?"

His eyebrows went up. "You do have a couch, right?"

"Uh..."

"No couch? Your car's a mess, and you have no furniture?"

Three Minutes Before Christmas
by Paige Ryter

He was judging her already and she could feel it. He was rich and her initial assessment was right—she wasn't the one for him. "Wait till we get there. You'll see."

They finished their meals and Colin went upstairs to get some clothes for the next day while Sydney talked with Marjorie and Chef John in the kitchen. "So how long have you guys worked here?"

"We've both been here for about four years," Marjorie answered.

Sydney moved closer to her then glanced out the door to make sure they were alone. "Tell me about Ruth."

"She was really nice, but not nice to us at all," Marjorie whispered. "I don't like talking about the dead like that, but she had an attitude. Oh, and she was mean to Colin behind his back, but he'll never remember the fights they had. He feels very guilty from when she died."

"I thought so," Sydney said. "She had attitude. I can tell from her picture."

"You're much nicer. We'd love it if you two got married."

"Marriage?" Sydney whispered. "I'm not looking for anything more than a friend because I'd never fit in here. Does he know that?"

Marjorie zipped her lips and Chef John just laughed. "I'm already making the wedding cake," he sang.

"Great. I can't get married. I've got too many things to finish before I can even consider—"

"Ready?" Colin said as he ran into the kitchen.

"As ready as I'll ever be, for whatever you're dishing out." The words were out of her mouth before she could even

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by Paige Rytter

think. She pasted a smile on her face, hoping he wouldn't notice.

He put his arm around her. "What does that mean?"

She had to change the subject because he was so close to her, making her head spin. "Oh, my apartment—"

"Don't worry about it. I'm sure it's fine. You're an interior designer. How bad can it be?" He turned to his staff. "I may or may not be back, because I have to keep an eye on Sydney. She's still not back to herself and I don't want her to be alone."

"Yes, sir," Marjorie said with a grin. "We'll be here if you need us."

"He'll be back," Sydney said. "He's never been to my apartment."

"If I'll be back, so will you," he answered, directing her out of the kitchen. He got her coat and helped her put it on, then grabbed his black coat.

"You found your coat?"

"It was at the mall where I left it."

"Do you have to go back and be Santa again?" she asked, looking up at his adorable grin.

"No, just one night for me. I have more important things to do anyway."

"What? Do you have to go to work or something?"

"No. You're the more important thing. I have to document everything for the board, and I'm taking you to see Dr. Weston on Monday to see how you've progressed. I think he recommended a physical for you, if I remember correctly."

Three Minutes Before Christmas
by Paige Ryter

"Don't tell me you're going to do it," she said. "I hate physicals."

"Dr. Weston again. He knows your case already. Remember?" They walked outside to a gentle snowfall. She looked up and grabbed a flake on her tongue, then bit her lips, because she'd embarrassed herself.

He grinned and helped her into the car, but said nothing. Maybe he didn't notice?

"Is that why you're hanging around with me?" she asked. "Because of the hospital issue?"

"Let's go with that." He shut her door while laughing, walked around the car and got inside.

What was she getting herself into? "Liar. You're bad at it, too," she muttered.

He began to drive away, going slowly on the wet roads. "I've known you what...twenty-four hours now?"

"Yeah, why?"

"I think it's a little too early to tell you too much."

She touched his arm and he grinned. "What do you have in mind?"

"Nothing."

She moved her arm, realizing she was probably leading him on. But she liked touching him. Regardless, she put it out of her mind. "I can tell when you're lying, and you're in big trouble at the poker game. Don't take too much money or you'll lose everything, probably including the house and the farm."

"That's not a big deal. It's time to move anyway."

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by Paige Ryter

"Where to? Are you leaving Lancaster?" She hoped she didn't drive him away.

Colin started to laugh. "No way. But I need a smaller, happier house. That thing is too dark and depressing. It's time to move on and bury the past."

"I understand."

He drove to her apartment and pulled in beside her car.

"You got it! I'm so happy!" She hopped out and ran to her car, touched the top and patted it. "My baby!"

"It's just a car," Colin said, standing beside her.

"Yeah, but it's paid off. That's incredible in my book. Why did you bring it here and not your place?"

"You can't drive yet and I didn't want to tempt you."

"Thanks for kidnapping me."

He looked at her and shook his head then handed her purse to her. "I had this in the back of my car."

She grabbed it and kissed it. "Thanks! I feel so much better having my life back!"

Colin raised his eyebrows and stared at her. "Your life is your purse and your car?"

"Yes. Thank you so much." She took his arm and walked with him toward the apartment building. "This is home."

He grinned and moved his arm to her shoulder. "I hate to tell you this, but your brother's a slumlord."

"Yeah, I know, but it's cheap, sort of. I only pay about two thousand a month."

"Two thousand? Are you kidding me? You could have a mortgage on a house for that. And with this place—"

"Rub it in."

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by Paige Ryster

He tickled her side as they entered the building.

"Hey, not fair!" she said, wiggling to get away.

"I didn't say life was fair." He pulled her to him and stared into her eyes. "You are so pretty." He moved a few strands of hair from her face with a sexy smile, his lips close to hers.

"Uh..." She was tongue-tied, her heart racing. She'd never been out with a man as gorgeous as Colin before. She wasn't worried about what he might do, but more worried about what she'd do to him. She promised herself it would go no further than a kiss—well, not much further if she could stop herself.

Colin circled her with his arms, his eyes just inches from hers. "Is there a problem?"

"Uh..." He was so hot and sexy, and so darned close to her. She could feel his breath on her cheek, his eyes penetrating the whole way through to her soul. The electricity from his very presence was more than she could handle.

His gaze shifted from her eyes to her lips. She was intrigued and worried. That first kiss could make or break a relationship and this one was too good for just practice. She had to stop him before he kissed her, but...she couldn't do it. She inhaled his spicy aftershave, reached up and touched his soft brown hair, losing herself in the pools of his blue eyes. It was mesmerizing, his chest against hers and breathing in harmony.

He moved his mouth closer, and just as he was ready to kiss her, someone cleared his throat behind them.

"Take it somewhere else or get a room. We don't need to be seeing smut in the lobby."

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by Paige Ryster

Sydney shook her head and backed away from Colin. "Mr. Barnes, it's me. Sydney. Remember? I live here."

He put on his glasses and stared at her. "Oh yeah. Don't matter. Take it outside. My grandkids are coming tomorrow and I don't want them seeing things like that."

"Tomorrow?" Colin said. "Do you think we'll still be in the lobby tomorrow?"

"Yep. You're probably homeless, will be here begging and kissing, and my grandkids won't be able to deal with it."

"Mr. Barnes, your grandkids are at least eighteen years old," Sydney said. "They're all married or dating. I think they'd understand something simple like a kiss."

"You mean like this?" Colin turned toward Sydney, wrapped his arms around her, and planted a huge kiss on her lips. He didn't just stop with a simple kiss either, but intensified it by making it a probing kiss, dipping his tongue into her mouth, exploring every sensitive part.

She kissed him back, feeling such chemistry between them from the top of her head to the tip of her toes and every important part in between. The warmth from his lips and tongue enveloped her, making her lightheaded and wanting more than just a kiss.

When he finally pulled his lips from hers, she couldn't even open her eyes or stand on her own, let alone breathe normally.

"Sydney?" he asked.

"Yeah..." She forced her eyes open, gazing into his. It was the most intense thing she'd ever experienced. Realizing he still had her in his arms, she pulled herself to the present and

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glanced over at Mr. Barnes, whose mouth was hanging open in surprise.

The old man finally cleared his throat. "I think I'll pass on finding a soda and go back to see what Caroline's up to." He began to whistle, turned, and skipped back to his apartment.

Colin started to laugh, then turned to Sydney, his arms still around her. "Guess I made his night."

She leaned her head against his strong, broad chest. "Mine too."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm not sure. I don't think I can stand by myself, if that's what you're asking."

He stroked her hair then lifted her chin with the tips of his fingers. His face was so strong and his eyes so sexy, she felt like she was in heaven, staring at an angel.

"You can't stand? Is it your head?" he asked.

"Not after a kiss like that. You should be written up for the most powerful kisser ever. I think I'll call the newspaper and have your lips insured."

"You're funny," he said with a chuckle.

"I'm just glad..." She stopped and stared at him, not knowing how to finish the sentence.

"Glad what?"

"I forgot?"

He smiled. "I don't think so. What are you glad about?"

She lowered her voice. "I'm glad you're not doing my physical."

He raised his eyebrows. "Oh yeah?"

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by Paige Ryter

"Let's go." She put her arm around his waist for support and they climbed the stairs to her apartment.

"No elevator?" he asked.

"Dave's too cheap. What can I say?"

He touched the cracks in the walls and stared up at the plaster hanging from the ceiling. "Do you have rodents here?"

"Only if you feed them."

He glanced toward her. "That's a joke, right?"

She turned to him with a straight face. "Do I look like I'm kidding?"

"Nope. Roaches?"

"Yes. Big suckers, too. But it's not bad if you put everything in plastic."

"Sydney, this isn't healthy. I'd love it if you moved out."

"I can't afford to."

They reached the second floor. She lowered her head and leaned up against the wall with her eyes shut then sat on the floor with a thud.

"Too much exercise?"

"No, it's my favorite wall in the place. I have to bond with it."

He knelt down and stared into her eyes. "Is the room spinning?"

"I'll be fine." She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and got up from the floor with his help. "Let's go."

Colin put his arm around her and she leaned against him for support.

As they started down the hall, a woman came out of her apartment. She walked toward them with a coffee cup to her

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by Paige Ryster

ear, talking as if she was on the phone. "I'll be right there. Don't let anyone leave until I frisk them all."

Colin watched the woman in surprise, then turned toward Sydney. "Who's that?"

"Old Mrs. Long. She's certifiable. If you give her something to eat, she'll think it's poisoned."

"Does she live here alone?"

"Yes. Her husband died of a heart attack while in bed with her and she thinks he was murdered. Rumor has it they were 'getting cozy' while playing with some sort of medication for sex and he was...overexerted. You don't want to know the details."

"You're right about that."

They continued down the hall, and Colin handed Sydney her keys. "These were the ones in your coat pocket."

"Thanks." Just as she put the key into the lock, a woman stepped out of the apartment across from hers.

"Sydney!" She stared at the bandage, then walked toward her and touched it with her fingers. "What happened to your head? Did a space alien kidnap you and drain your brain?"

Sydney pasted a smile on her face. "No. I had a little accident at the mall."

"Well, I'm so glad you're back! I missed you! Can I come over for a cup of tea?"

"I have company," Sydney answered and pointed toward Colin.

"Oh, your boyfriend?"

"No, just a friend."

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Colin raised his eyebrow and grinned. She could only guess what he was thinking.

The woman nodded with a look of amusement as she gave Colin the once-over. "I see." She stuck her hand into her housecoat and pulled out a bottle of what looked like dishwashing detergent. She poured it over Sydney's and Colin's heads, spraying it on their hair while she chanted some quiet words. The water dripped down over their faces and onto their coats, making them both jump back, out of the way of the dripping liquid. As soon as they did, the old woman squirted them in their faces and all over their clothes.

"Beatrice, what are you doing?" Sydney exclaimed.

"It's magic Christmas dust. Your most precious wish will be granted with this potion, and I promise you'll be very happy you experienced it." She closed the lid, put the bottle in her robe, and walked back into her apartment.

"You live in a looney bin!" Colin said. He wiped the water off his shirt and face, then checked his gold-covered fingers. "That was glitter, too! Do you know how hard it is to remove glitter?"

Sydney ran her fingers through her hair, just feeling all the small squares of glitter everywhere. "She's insane too. She and Mrs. Long hold seances to talk to their dead husbands."

"Hurry up. I can't even imagine who else lives in this place. How can you stand it?"

"It's home," she answered, unlocking the door. She flipped on the light and shut the door behind Colin, then walked into the bathroom. Grabbing two towels, she shook them out to check for bugs.

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by Paige Ryter

"This is home?" His hands were on his hips, staring all around the corner apartment.

She handed him a towel then began to dry her hair. "Yes, it is."

He dried his hair and shirt, then looked around the living room. "But you only have plastic crates for tables and your TV has a coat hanger for an antenna. Your couch is a loveseat futon and it's falling apart."

"Just the corner being propped up by books and I have a VCR, so I'm not destitute. I'm just trying to pay the bills."

He looked over toward the windows beside the kitchen. "No table?"

"I eat standing up." She glanced around the one room containing her living room, dining room and kitchen, suddenly feeling very poor.

Colin walked down the hallway to the bedroom. "A mattress, a clock and a lamp? That's it? Not even a dresser?"

Was he angry with her? She did nothing wrong, yet tears teased her eyes. She walked over to the loveseat and fell onto it, the books under the corner shifting slightly.

He returned to the living room. "Are you okay?"

She wasn't about to tell him how she really felt. She hated being judged. "I'm fine," she said, wiping away her tears. "I'm just tired."

"Oh, I don't think so. Not after that long nap you had. How long have you been living here?"

"A while, why?"

He bumped one of the crates and a huge cockroach scurried toward the middle of the room and stopped. Colin

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walked over and stepped on it, then took a paper towel from the kitchen and wiped it off the yellow cracked linoleum living room floor. "I don't mean to be judgmental, but this is awful! How do you cope?"

"It's my home." Tears poured down her cheeks and she swiped them away.

He pulled her off the couch and into his arms, wiped her tears, and kissed her head. "I didn't mean to upset you at all. Honestly. I'm more upset with your brother charging you a fortune for this place."

"This is where I live, and that's the way it is. I'm trying to make it, and it's all I have."

"And it doesn't seem fair to me that you have to live like this. You probably work harder than anyone I know, just from listening to what you have to do." He glanced toward the dining room area. "Why do you have part of your kitchen hidden?"

She looked toward the two partitions blocking off what should've been her dining room. "That's my work area. I keep it hidden so I don't mix business with my home life. If I saw it, I'd work on it all my waking hours."

"That makes sense." He walked toward the partitions. "Can I see what you're doing?"

"Sure. If you're going to help me tomorrow, you'll be intimately familiar with it."

"Intimately?"

She grinned. "Poor choice of words." She walked over to her work area and moved the partitions away.

Colin's mouth hung open in surprise. "Did you do these?"

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"Sure. Why?"

He knelt down in front of the five wooden children, painted with excitement and happiness covering their faces. Clad in different styles of clothing, they each stood about three feet tall.

Colin touched the hair on one of the children's heads, then picked up one of its hands. "Their hair is real and their hands are soft cloth, like skin. They look alive. How did you do it?"

"Dad has a woodshop, Mom has a sewing machine, and I built them then painted them. They're all to look like Mrs. Richman's five grandchildren. The theme for her house is 'The Magic of Christmas,' and I'm showing it through her grandchildren's eyes."

He stood and stared at each of them. "Are you going to set them up in a row?"

"No. The boy and girl sitting in the small rocking chairs with presents in their laps go on either side of the fireplace. The redheaded tomboy that's lying down right now will be staring at the ceramic village with the train at eye level. The boy with the dark hair will be leaning over the same table, and the little girl with the long blonde hair will greet people from the door. Her dress was the hardest to find at the thrift shops."

He bent down and touched the long white dress. "She looks like an angel, the way she's looking up with a grin. How did you get her to stand up?"

"A wooden rod behind her that's removable. And her hands are out right now because she's going to be holding a plate of chocolate chip cookies for the people walking into the house."

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"These are adorable." He stood up, still staring at the five children in front of him. "Could you do something like this for my office?"

"Sure. They're cheap to make, too. I spent about thirty bucks on raw material for each one, but can charge the client a lot more because of the time spent putting them together."

He shook his head and walked behind the children, then stared at a painting on an easel with his mouth agape. "Did you do this?"

"Sure. It took about three and a half hours. It's not a big deal at all."

"Are the five kids in this painting also her grandchildren?"

"Yep." Sydney walked over to the canvas painting of five children opening presents on Christmas morning while sitting around the tree, pointing as she went. "That's Zack, the oldest, then Kirsten, Randy, Abby and little Nikki." She showed him the five pictures she used for a guide.

He looked at the photographs, lifted his head and stared at the painting. "You're very talented. They look just like the pictures. I bet that would be worth a fortune on the open market."

"I'm charging her my time and materials. It'll cost two hundred eleven dollars and twenty-four cents."

He bent down and picked up the two-by-three-foot frame. "And you're framing it in gold?"

"Yes. Gold is magical, even though I got the frame at a thrift store and spray painted it."

He looked over at all the unpainted decorations and houses on the tables on the far side. "Part of your ten hours yet?"

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"Yep. How good are you at painting?"

"I'm pretty good with details. You have to be when working with children. Their parts are so small."

"I guess so," she said with a grin. "At least they were for my kids over here." She glanced at the five children, all smiling with the magic of Christmas on their faces. "I'm going to miss them. They each have a personality all their own."

"What's going to happen to them when she's done with them?"

"Each kid gets themselves. So the children will take them."

"Incredible. Has Mrs. Richman seen them yet?"

"No, but she has an idea of what I'm doing." Sydney looked at her watch. "I have to get to bed, because I have to be up and working by six."

"Tomorrow's Sunday."

"I lost a day of work thanks to Justin, and I have to make it up. No, I can't slack on this one. I have to be done before Monday because I have to be available for both of the other clients on Monday morning."

"After your doctor's appointment."

She sighed. "You know, this little hospital problem of yours is really messing with my life."

"I'll help you." He looked around the apartment and shook his head. "Tell you what. Let's go to my place and get some sleep. I don't want you here."

Her hands flew to her hips. "Why? Because I'm poor?"

"Because of your bed. With your head, getting down to a mattress on the floor, then getting up again could be

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dangerous. Plus, I can't sleep on that small futon. No, we're going to my place or a hotel."

"A hotel? They're over a hundred bucks a night!"

"So?"

"I don't have that kind of money. I can just stay here. Honest."

He put his hands on his hips and sighed. "Lie down on the floor."

She pointed. "Here? Why?"

"I want to see if you can do it."

"Fine." She got to her knees and sat, then slowly lay down on her back, looking up at him. Oh, he was sexy all right, and she thought about her position, almost making her laugh.

"Now get up."

She rolled over and waited for her head to stop pounding, then got to her knees. She put her head back on the floor, lightheaded.

"Well?"

"I'm working on it! Give me a minute."

He pulled her to her feet and held on to her while she hung her head. "Breathe, Sydney," he said into her ear, walking her to the living room. He sat her down on the futon and pulled her head to his lap. If she felt better, she'd have considered this foreplay for something else.

"Okay, I'll spring for the hotel," she said. "You made your point."

"My place instead. I have a king-sized bed and can keep an eye on you all night."

"Are you watching over me for documentation purposes?"

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"Yes. I have enough to fry this woman and I can't wait. I wrote up a bunch of things while you were sleeping, and I'll need to add more. What exactly did she do before she discharged you?"

Sydney rolled onto her back, pulled her feet up to the futon and faced him. "She looked at my stitches, looked in my eyes, then told me to leave you alone because she wanted you instead. She threatened me, too. She said I was the only one you could talk about and I caught your eye because you rescued me or something." She studied his face. "Is that true?"

"Not at all. I was worried about you and made a few notes in your chart, just because I helped you at the mall. I never spoke to any nurse about you and definitely not her. My notes were very professional, never even mentioning anything to the contrary other than I found you in the mall."

A banging noise on the other side of the wall had Sydney checking her watch as she sat up. "Right on time."

"What are you talking about?"

"Every night about this time, the couple next door has sex. It sounds like it's the couch tonight. Usually it's the bedroom."

Moaning and screeching came from the other side of the wall, and Colin and Sydney just listened until a final scream left the room in silence.

"That's it," he said, moving her head to the couch and standing up. "Let's go. Entertainment's over."

"Oh, it'll go on and on like that for at least two hours yet."

"Two hours?"

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"Yep. They take breaks, then go back at it over and over and over again. I usually wear earplugs."

Colin took Sydney's hand and helped her slowly to her feet. "You need to pack some clothes."

"Right." She walked to the kitchen, grabbed a garbage bag from a cabinet and headed for the bedroom.

"You don't have a suitcase?"

"Nope. Mine broke," she yelled.

He walked into the bedroom. "Pack for a week."

Sydney turned from her closet and faced him. "A week?"

"Yep. Concussions can take months to heal, but a week should be good for starters."

"Who'll get my mail?"

"Don't worry about it. It'll be taken care of," he answered.

"But what about the things for the job?"

"We'll take it all to my house. I have the perfect place to work, and it's bigger than your entire apartment. You won't be bothered at all, and I guarantee no one's enjoying themselves for hours at a time next door for you to hear."

Right on cue, the banging started on the other side of the bedroom wall. Wails, moans and groans pierced the silence and Sydney ignored it while she continued to pack. "I don't have enough clothes for a week," she said, raising her voice over the noise from the other side of the wall.

"Just bring what you have," he yelled back. "Even dirty clothes, and I'll have Marjorie take care of it."

"No way. I do my own laundry—"

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"Just bring the stuff and let's get out of here," he shouted. "I'm sure you're tired, because I am, too. We can argue about it later."

She finished stuffing her clothes in a few bags, separating dirty from clean clothes, then Colin took them to the car about the time the noise stopped. She boxed up the houses and the ornaments, and he carried them out. Then, he took the wooden and cloth children in a few trips, while she cleaned up her supplies and stuck them in plastic bags and bins. She was almost done when the banging started up again in the bedroom. Colin walked in and sighed.

"They're busy tonight," she said.

"They do that every night?"

"They're newlyweds. They've been married about a month or so."

"Oh. That makes sense then. Let's get out of here."

He helped her take all her supplies to the car, and as she sat in the passenger's seat and shut the door, she looked into the back seat filled with Mrs. Richman's new items. "They look so real, don't they?"

"Yep. Okay, kids, behave and I'll take you for ice cream," he said, staring into the rearview mirror. She laughed as he started the car and began to drive away.

"Have you ever thought of having kids?" she asked.

"Ruth didn't want kids, but I wanted as many as possible. That was one of our disagreements. They're fun to watch, and I know that from my practice. They hold nothing back. When they're teenagers, they're so eager to learn how to live in the world and fit in."

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"Did you have a lot of disagreements?"

He sighed and stared out the front window. "The more time I spend with you, the more I realize that the past wasn't as rosy as I remember it. She was a great lady, don't get me wrong, but she was stubborn." He glanced over at Sydney. "You're stubborn, but at least you listen to both sides."

"My family tells me that, too."

"Speaking of your family, I was to tell you that your parents have decided to stay home and not take that trip to Australia."

"Why? They always go! They're rich, too. I hate rich people." She had to keep mentioning it so he'd get the message that she really couldn't date him because he was rich. It kept that safe barrier between them.

"They're worried about you. I gave Dave my phone number so he can keep tabs on you."

Something wasn't right. "Why are they worried about me?"

"You were in the hospital, remember?"

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, and Mom didn't seem to care I was going, either. Why the change all of a sudden?"

"Oh, you know. Things get said and people assume things."

"What happened? What did you say?"

He shook his head. "Nothing at all. When Dave was watching you sleep, he tried to wake you up. I told him it wasn't a good idea in your condition."

"My condition?"

"Yes."

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Sydney turned to face him. "Dr. Taylor, what *is* my condition? Are you holding out on me here?"

"I told him nothing. It was all his brain working overtime."

"Explain it to me. You told him it's not a good idea in my condition. What did Dave say?"

"He said, 'condition?' and I said 'yes, but I don't feel comfortable discussing it.'"

She could only imagine what would've gone through Dave's thick skull. "Does he think I'm dying?"

"Not...exactly," Colin answered, rubbing his neck.

"Tell me what he thinks!"

"Uh, he thinks..." He stared at her for a moment then returned to watching the road. "He thinks you're pregnant."

Sydney sat back on the seat, felt her mouth fall, her eyebrows raise, and her face heat up. Her parents wanted grandchildren so badly, and Dave's wife couldn't have any. If they thought she was pregnant—her life was ruined!

"So now you have to date me, for the baby's sake," Colin said, breaking the silence.

She shook her head. "Not going to happen. I'll set them straight. I can't date you anyway."

"We'll see. I'm going to wear you down and you'll beg to go out with me." He started to whistle a wedding song, trying not to laugh. She was ready to throttle him!

* * * *

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Chapter Four

Sydney thought about it while Colin drove toward his house. "Why would you tell my brother that I'm pregnant? I've never—" She shut her mouth and bit her lips.

Colin pulled up to a red light and stared at her. "You never?"

"No. No idiot I've ever dated was good enough for me. They never got past a kiss, and that would usually end in a slap because it's not what I wanted."

"You're that inexperienced?"

She watched the cars in front of them. "I'm waiting for a nice guy."

He started through the green light and glanced her way. "So, do you think you'll ever find a nice guy?"

She looked over at him and raised one eyebrow, not quite sure what to say. He was a nice guy, he wanted to date her, and he probably made Dave believe he was the father of her imaginary child. But he was rich and she wasn't in his league, even remotely. "I don't know."

"Can you be a little more positive?"

"I'm really picky. I have a set standard to even consider dating a man past the first date."

Colin started to chuckle. "And what do those standards include?"

"Breathing, employed, nice, fun personality, and no pocket protectors."

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He glanced down. "Darn. I forgot my pocket protector. I guess I'm in the running."

"Oh, very funny. I haven't figured you out yet. You're rich and I wouldn't fit into your lifestyle. I should've added that, too."

"That's so far off from the truth, it makes me laugh."

"Being rich? Have you looked around your house lately?" she asked.

"Yes, but I'm hardly rich." He paused and glanced over at her. "However, I'm a great kisser. That's going to be my ace in the hole and your weakness. I like this challenge."

"Yes, you are a great kisser..." She turned toward the window, letting the end of her sentence trail off.

"But what?"

She faced him. "You told my family I was pregnant! How can I trust you?"

Colin began to laugh. "I never said you were pregnant. Dave assumed it, and I told him I couldn't discuss your condition because it's against the client-patient confidentiality agreement."

"But I'm not your patient!"

"No, not formally, but I'm making sure you get better. That has to count for something."

"Quit playing with words for a minute. Did Dave ask who the father of this alleged baby is?"

"Oh yeah, but I said nothing. He knew it wasn't me—I think."

"You? I just met you what—a day ago? How could I get pregnant so soon?"

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He took her hand and kissed each fingertip. "You can get pregnant in a matter of about a minute, or in some cases, hours—depending on how good the guy is."

She pulled her hand from his. "You're such a stud."

"I know."

"Egotist."

He laughed as he pulled up to his house. "We're home! Kids, you're in bed, and you, my sweetheart, future mother of my child, you're in bed, too."

"Sweetheart, future mother—are you insane?"

He laughed, caressed her cheek and touched his hot lips to hers. "Crazy insane."

Oh, it felt so good, she moved a little closer and stared into his blue eyes realizing he was really sexy. She wanted to kiss him again, but she just didn't feel right about it. She couldn't date him, the man a few steps up the social ladder from her. Maybe she could play with him instead, just for a few days? She'd only flirt for a while, then go back to her life.

"What kind of crazy?" she whispered.

Colin grinned and brushed his lips against hers for just a moment. "You tell me."

He was teasing her, but she couldn't resist any longer from wanting him so badly. She touched his cheek, moved toward him and concentrated on his adorable smile. Her hand inched through his soft hair while she shifted her gaze from his hair then back to his lips. She finally took her hand off his hair and outlined his lips with her fingertip. Two could play this game, and she intended to win.

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The electricity pulsing through her fingertip was incredible, making her heart race and her breath quicken. "I'm seeing how crazy you are," she whispered, moving her finger along his jaw line.

"No, you're playing chicken to see which one of us gives in first. I think it's going to be you."

"Really?" she whispered in a low tone. She inched closer so she could feel his hot breath on her face, melting her from the inside, then shifted in her seat to get as close to him as she could. "How long can you hold out?"

"I'm not sure. It's tough, because you're beautiful and such a fun person. You have no idea what you do to me, which I find very interesting."

Her voice was just a whisper. "Just don't lick my nose, or I'm outta here." She threw her left foot over the gearshift and onto his right leg, stroking his thigh with the inside of her knee.

He grinned and began massaging the inside of her upper leg, inching higher and higher. "Your nose was the last thing I was thinking about."

She slightly licked her lips and narrowed her eyes in a seductive move. "You're still adorable, with your sexy eyes and strong cheekbones."

He wrapped his arms around her and moved his face to within inches of her lips.

She touched his chin with a grin, then caressed his cheek with the back of her fingers, keeping her eyes on his. "You look like a model—"

He brushed his lips against hers then backed away.

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"You just lost," she whispered.

"No, this is losing." He moved forward and captured her lips with a huge kiss. Their tongues entwined, the warmth filling her entire body. Her breathing grew shallow and she was sure he was enjoying it as much as she was just from his actions. She lost all sense of where she was, concentrating just on what was happening between them. Her stomach fell and she felt tingly all over, making her more than lightheaded. Thoughts of him in bed filled her mind, even though she knew it could never happen.

While he nibbled on her neck and ear, she threw back her head in enjoyment. "I think you're right. You lost. Feel free to lose any time."

"We both won," he said, out of breath. "Now if I could convince you to play chicken with me upstairs—"

She moved her leg off his and backed away, her eyebrow raised. "With a concussion?"

"Oh, not yet. I have to make it build up first, and make you want it. It's more fun that way. At least I know you want to date me. That's a good sign."

"But I can't date you."

"I know you say that with your head," he said, grinning her way. "But your heart is saying something completely different."

She laughed at him, gave him a peck on the lips, then turned toward the wooden children in the back seat. "I'm carrying these things to the place where I'll be working."

"No, you're not. They're going to my huge basement where I have part of it finished, and part made into a shop. I

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don't want you climbing any steps more than once tonight. I'll take care of it."

He got out of the car, and she opened her door, her window completely fogged up. He appeared at her side and helped her out, then walked her to the door, holding on to her.

"I can walk, you know," she said.

"Oh, I know. I'm just...protecting my interests."

"Is that for documentation for the board again or do you just want to touch me to make me turn red?"

"Something like that." He opened the door. "Marjorie, I'm home!"

"Sir?" she said, running to the front door in her coat.

"What are you doing—oh, I see!"

"Her apartment wasn't appropriate, so I brought her home. Can you put her in the guest bedroom, and I'll be up later?"

Sydney shook her head, turning to Marjorie. "You don't have to stay for me. I can handle this by myself."

"No, she needs help," Colin said. "If you could just stay for a little bit to help me out, I'd appreciate it. She needs to go upstairs and can't go alone."

"No problem," Marjorie said with a grin. "I wasn't quite ready to leave anyway. I was just outside making sure the water wasn't going to freeze in the pipes."

Sydney turned to Colin. "But I'm going to help you—"

"No, you're not. I'm not having you go steps more than once after I saw you almost pass out at the top of your apartment stairs." He glanced at her head and pulled some

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glitter out of her hair. "Oh, and you might want to get a shower to get rid of the glitter."

Sydney touched the top of her hair. "Great. That Beatrice. I could shoot her."

"Glitter, sir?" Marjorie asked, removing her coat.

He chuckled. "It's a long story. I'm sure Sydney will fill you in." He turned to go outside, but stopped and turned toward Sydney. "I'll be up in a minute to bring you something for your head." He winked, turned, and was outside. That man was something else—hot and sexy—but something else.

Marjorie helped Sydney with her coat and walked with her up the stairs. "Why do you have glitter on your head?" she asked.

"My neighbor sprayed us with glitter water for some Christmas magic dust. She's old and needs to be committed."

The front door slammed shut and Sydney heard Colin humming a Christmas tune. She lost her balance and grabbed on to the railing.

Marjorie caught Sydney's arm. "Oh, be careful! I don't think you're better yet."

Sydney lowered her head. "I see that. Tell me, Marjorie, are you married?"

"Yes, ma'am. Chef John is my husband. We just got married a few months ago."

"I know this is personal, but are you planning on having children?" Sydney took a deep breath and started to walk again.

They reached the top of the stairs, and Sydney stopped, leaned against the wall and lowered her head.

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"Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I'm just not used to this." She lifted her head and ignored the stars in her vision. "So are you going to have children?"

"Yes, we'd like to. We live in the guesthouse here, and Dr. Taylor said we could stay if we have children or not, as long as my husband promises to cook for him. So, some day, we'll have kids."

"I'm glad he said that. I know he'd love to have kids in this house."

"But the guesthouse is about half the size of this house, so he can have his own space. We live about a hundred yards from here."

"Very interesting."

Marjorie took her to one of the guest bedrooms decorated in dark blue and tan, with a queen-sized bed against one wall. It was stunning, with the four-poster bed and all the furniture built in light-colored wood. "It's gorgeous," Sydney whispered.

"This is Dr. Taylor's favorite room. He stayed here when—" She stopped talking and Sydney faced her, watching her cover her mouth.

"I understand."

"Oh, no you don't," the woman whispered. "They didn't sleep together because they fought a lot. He gave her the master bedroom and he slept here most nights." She checked in the hallway. "I've also never seen him this happy. You don't realize how you've changed that man."

"Me? I've only known him a day."

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"Yes, ma'am. He really likes you a lot. John and I have even placed bets on when you two will be married. I think it'll be before the end of the year, and John thinks it'll be at Christmas." She smiled, then walked to a door on the other side of the room. "This is your bathroom." She turned toward Sydney. "Thank you for bringing happiness into this home."

"Uh, you're welcome?" It was so odd. She wasn't ready for marriage and definitely not to Colin. She'd just met him! What were these people thinking?

Marjorie smiled and left the room just as Colin walked in and fell onto the bed. He lay back and breathed deeply.

"Tired?"

"Yes, I am. Those things aren't light, you know."

She moved beside the bed and stared down at him. "I could've helped you." He was so adorable, looking up at her. She just wanted to touch him and do more than kiss his red lips.

He sat up, pulled her to the bed and laid her down beside him, then moved onto his stomach to face her. "How's your head?"

"It hurts."

He stroked her hair. "Want me to make it feel better?"

She tried to smile. "That all depends on what you have in mind."

Tilting his head slightly, he looked puzzled. "You still don't trust me, do you?"

"I don't know you well enough, like I told you before."

"Oh, you will."

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She sat up and moved away from him. "What does that mean?"

"I really frighten you, don't I?"

She got off the bed and faced him. "I'm out of my league here, and yes, it's kind of scary."

He sat up and moved closer to her. "Why are you out of your league?"

She couldn't tell him or he might take that as an invitation for something else. "Uh..."

He held on to her hand and stared up at her lips from the bed. "Do you find me too attractive? Is that the problem?"

He had no idea, which amazed Sydney. "You can have any woman, you're that attractive. It's a worry."

"Put it out of your mind. It's not going to happen. I'd be more worried about you finding someone else."

"Nope." She let go of his hand and took a step backward.

He grinned as he stood up, grabbed her hand and pulled her to him, moving closer to her lips. "Are you afraid I'm going to kiss you again, or do you want to play that game?"

"Uh..."

Colin looked into her eyes. "But kisses are just kisses, right?"

"I'm not worried about the kisses or what you'll do."

"Good." He touched his lips to hers. "I don't want you to be afraid."

"But I am afraid."

His eyes met hers again. "Of what?"

She sighed. "Me. Being in the car is one thing, but up here..."

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His eyebrows rose and he looked surprised. "You're afraid of you?"

Sydney backed away and began to pace. "You have no idea. When you get close, I just can't stop what I'm thinking." She crossed her arms. "I've never been in this situation before."

"What are you thinking about?"

"Oh, you know." She turned to him, dropped her arms and sighed. "The usual."

"No, I don't know, and you can tell me anything. I'll never think it's wrong or judge you one bit."

"I can't tell you or you'll think it's an invitation for something I'm really not ready for."

He was quiet for a moment while he thought. "Oh, I get it. Sydney, I'm not going to attack you and I promise. I like you a lot, and trust me, many things have crossed my mind, but whatever we do, you're in control. If you don't want to progress past a certain point, I'll make sure both of us stop before it goes too far."

She walked to the door and closed it. "So we won't have sex right away?"

"No way. Not even if you wanted it. With your head, I don't think it'd be a good idea even if we were married."

She felt her eyebrows all but hit the ceiling in surprise. Why did these crazy people only have marriage on their minds? Didn't they know it took time to get to the marriage stage? They'd have to be in love first. She felt her mouth fall and furrowed her eyebrows. Was Colin in love with her? "Did you say *married*?"

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He bit his lips. "Forget I said that."

"I'm not going to forget." She crossed her arms. "What do you have in mind for me, Dr. Taylor?"

"Nothing. I was just using it as an example, and that's all."

"I don't think so. Are you thinking of marrying me?" She couldn't believe it. From the look on his face, it had crossed his mind. She wasn't ready for marriage, that was for sure. She had to get her life in order before she did anything.

He was quiet for a few moments. "I don't know, but I'm tired, so don't corner me into telling you more. Now, I want you to come downstairs to find the medication I forgot to take with me and drink something. Then you can come back up here and get some sleep."

"Alone?"

"I promise it'll only be sleep if I'm here. Nothing will happen, and I promise you won't get pregnant."

He started to chuckle and she walked over and hit his arm slightly. "That's a sick joke. My family thinks I sleep around now, and I'm not the good little girl they raised me to be." She fell to the bed, sitting close to the edge. "You have no idea what it's like to be the one who has all the morals and work ethic in the family. It's a big responsibility, and they still think of me as a loser. I can never stop working and I feel so guilty for taking today off."

"That's not good. You have to have time off."

She turned to him, confused. "You don't take time off either, right?"

"That's different."

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Sydney shook her head. "No, it's not. You work as hard as I do, and I've heard stories that you either work or come home to sit in a dark room alone."

His face turned almost angry. "Where did you hear that? Was it from my staff?"

"No, but I know a lot about you and I want you to know I've been there." She reached over and touched his arm. "I also know it can get better."

"I realize that." He searched her face with a smile. "Ever since I met you, I've seen how life is passing me by."

"So you need time off, too."

"Yes, I do. You're absolutely right." He laid her back on the bed, hovering over her. "I wish I could tell you something."

"You can talk to me. About anything."

"Not this."

He touched his lips to hers in such a gentle manner, making her want more. She leaned up, but he backed off, chuckling.

"Do you want something?" he asked.

She smiled. "Maybe."

"What do you want?"

"That subject's off-limits right now." She tried to get up, but he was laying over her, holding her down. "I have to get ready for bed."

"Oh, that can wait." He kissed her chin, then down her neck, making her want more. She closed her eyes, feeling his hot lips burn her skin as he made his way back to her lips. He tortured her even more by staring into her eyes and stroking

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her hair. She leaned up to give him a kiss, but he just laughed and moved back from her face.

"You're nasty," she whispered.

"Patience makes the wait much sweeter. You need to learn patience."

"I'm a pretty patient person. More so than you are."

He grinned, lowered his lips to hers, hovering over them. "Whatever you say." His hot breath danced across her lips, making her grab his neck and roll on top of him. She kissed him with urgency, parted his lips with her tongue and dipped it inside. Hearing a moan, she suddenly realized it came from her. Every nerve awakened in her body, making her want to throw her clothes off and go for more.

As soon as she started kissing down his chest, she became conscious of what was happening. Her leg was between his legs, and his hand was stroking the naked skin on her stomach, under her shirt.

Sydney backed off, feeling herself blush, then faced him. "I'm so sorry."

He started to laugh. "For what?"

"I'm leading you on and it's just not right." She moved off him and sat up, fixing her shirt.

Colin smoothed down his hair, laughing. "You're something else."

"I am?"

"Your brain's at war with itself, and I find it hilarious." Reaching out, he cupped her chin in his hand, his fingertips caressing her skin. "You're not leading me on, but are able to

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enjoy yourself. Relax, let it happen and realize I'm not going to let it go any further."

"What if you don't?" she whispered. "Then I really could get pregnant!"

"It's not going to happen, so relax. Now, we both need to get to bed."

"Where are my clothes?"

"Meds first." He helped her to her feet, wrapped his arm around her shoulders and walked to the door with her. "Are you hungry?"

"No. That chocolate cake for dessert was very filling and wonderful. Chef John's a great cook."

"Yeah, I'm going to miss him."

"Are you firing him?"

"No, but I know they're trying to have kids, and he won't be able to spend as much time here when the baby's born. I like those two a lot. I've been through some tough times and they've always been there for me. I'm afraid he'll quit and move on to something better."

"You never know."

They started toward the stairs and he bent down, picked her up and carried her.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm not letting you go up and down the stairs more than once. Remember?"

"Oh, come on! I'm not an invalid."

"Not at all." He studied her lips. "Far from it but I like this arrangement."

"You do? I feel helpless."

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by Paige Ryster

He stopped walking halfway down the stairs and captured her lips. He kissed her and she wrapped her arms around his neck, kissing him back. He felt so comfortable to her, taking all her worries away and replacing them with lustful thoughts of him lying over her with his naked chest...

He finally pulled his lips from hers and rested his forehead on hers. "I like it when you're helpless."

"You're so hot," she whispered, then returned her lips to his, pulling his head toward her.

He kissed her, then backed away and faced her again. "Stopping you is going to be tough, but I like a challenge."

"It'll be more of a challenge than you'll ever know."

The phone rang and he hurried to reach the bottom of the stairs. He put Sydney on her feet and made it to the phone just as Marjorie picked it up with a grin, glancing at Sydney.

"The Taylor residence." She paused for a moment. "Yes, ma'am. One moment." She covered the receiver and faced Colin. "It's Sydney's mother and she wants to talk to you."

"I'll talk to her," Sydney said, holding out her hand.

"No, remember, you know nothing because of your head," Colin whispered. "I'll take care of this." He took the phone while a devious grin crossed his face. "This is Dr. Taylor."

Marjorie took Sydney to the kitchen and leaned close to her. "What's that about?"

"Colin led my brother to believe I'm pregnant, and possibly to Colin. I'm not and don't sleep around at all. I only just met him last night."

Marjorie hid her laughter. "You're kidding! That's hilarious!"

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by Paige Ryter

"I'm not to know because of my head. My family's going to tiptoe around me so they don't upset me. This would be the first grandchild, too, so Mom and Dad cancelled their trip to Australia for the holidays."

Colin walked into the kitchen laughing. "Oh man. Your mom is so confused! This is great." He turned to Sydney. "I want to get the house ready and have a party next Tuesday night. Can we do that?"

"But that's Christmas Eve!" she said. "My work—"

"I'm taking time off and I'll help."

"Who's invited?" Marjorie asked.

John entered the kitchen and put his arm on his wife's shoulder.

"Everyone in my office, some people from the hospital and Sydney's family. I can't wait either." Colin's grin gave away his devious intentions, making Sydney sigh.

"What do you have up your sleeve?" Sydney asked.

Colin turned to her. "Your mother thinks you're pregnant and she wants to take care of you. She thinks it's my kid."

"What?" John asked Colin. "You just met last night, right?"

"She doesn't know that, and I didn't confirm it or deny anything, just like I did with Dave, Sydney's brother. I said it's confidential. However, it's a secret to Sydney, since she has a concussion. She doesn't remember getting pregnant and thinks everything's status quo." He faced Sydney. "Your parents are coming by tomorrow to see how you're doing."

She crossed her arms. "Lucky me. Where are those pills, because my headache just got a lot bigger. I hope they're not coming when I'm working."

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"They'll be here at eight in the morning."

Sydney grabbed her head and fell into a chair. "Double the dose. I'm going to need it."

Colin chuckled, took her medication from the bar and got her a bottle of water. "This is more fun than swindling your brother."

"What did you say?"

"Oh, nothing. Here you go, dear."

She looked up at him. "Dear?"

"If it's my kid, we have to keep up the charade. So, get used to it."

She shook her head, swallowed the pill and drank the entire bottle of water.

"Good night, John and Marjorie," Colin said. "We'll be up early, working in the basement, but we'll get our own breakfast."

"Yes, sir," John said with a chuckle. They turned and left the room.

Colin helped Sydney to the stairs then bent to lift her, but she stopped him. "No, I'll walk. I'm fine."

"But you won't be helpless then. I like you helpless!"

"Yep. I'm in control and I like it that way." She started up the stairs, and he wrapped his arm around her waist.

"Lightheaded yet?" he asked.

"Uh..." She stopped and lowered her head. "Exercise is killing me here, and it's not even strenuous. You're documenting this, aren't you?"

"Yes. If you were in your own apartment, you'd be dead at the bottom of the stairs, or killed when you blacked out at the

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wheel of your car. She should be sued for malpractice. I don't like it one bit. She should've at least told you to take it easy and not drive for a few days."

"She didn't."

"I know. Are you ready to take some more stairs?"

"Sure." They climbed the rest of the way and she leaned against the wall. He picked her up, carried her to the bed in the guest bedroom, laid her down, and took her pulse.

"Am I dying?"

"Nope. I'll be right back." He left for a moment then returned with his medical bag. He pulled out his instruments, wrapped the cuff on her arm and stuck the stethoscope in his ears.

"But—"

He slapped his hand over her mouth. "SHHH!" He took her blood pressure, then listened to her chest. He pulled out a notebook and wrote some things down. "I'd like to take some blood, and I promise it won't hurt."

"Liar."

"Yeah, and I'm good at it. Just be nice and stay still."

He took a bandage and a wad of cotton out of his kit and got it ready. He tied a piece of rubber around her arm above her elbow, took a needle from the kit and wiped her skin with alcohol. "Just a little pinch, I promise." She held her breath and closed her eyes when the needle went into her arm, because it felt like more than a pinch, making her scream out in agony. She waited until he removed the needle, put a bandage on the hole in her arm and bent her hand up to her shoulder before she opened her eyes.

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"How's your head?" he asked.

"It hurts."

"Stay still for a little bit and I'll be right back."

She heard him go downstairs, making a phone call along the way. She didn't care, but just closed her eyes and kept her arm bent. She hated being sick, hated being taken care of, and hated being a lab rat.

She must have nodded off, because Colin returned to the room wearing sweatpants and a t-shirt. He looked like he'd taken a shower, too. "I'm sleeping here with you."

"Huh?"

"I can't leave you alone. I'll worry about you all night."

"I'm fine."

"What if you get up for a drink of water? You really can't handle the stairs yet. You could pass out, fall down and break your neck."

"Pessimist," she muttered.

"No, I'm a realist. I'll be with you, and if you have to get up, I want you to wake me for anything. I mean anything, too." He helped her sit up. "Do you feel okay?"

"Sort of."

He helped her to her feet and walked with her to the bathroom.

"How much blood did you suck out of me anyway?" she asked.

"Just one vial. That's all." He handed her a brand-new toothbrush and toothpaste.

"Where are my things?"

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"Roaches probably crawled on your toothbrush and I don't feel like getting the one you used this morning from the other bathroom. In fact, I wouldn't doubt it if there were still roaches in those bags. I'm glad I closed them before I took them to the car. Everything's airing out before I bring it into the house. I'm going to have Marjorie wash all your clothes."

"What will I wear in the meantime?" she asked.

He offered her a half-smile. "My clothes."

He left while Sydney brushed her teeth and washed her face. As she was drying off, she stared into the mirror. She looked awful, with gold glitter sparkling in her hair, bags under her eyes and that dreaded white bandage covered by her golden strawberry blonde hair. Tears filled her eyes, because she felt like she had no control over her situation. She had no car, and even if she did, she didn't trust her driving ability. At least she could do her work the next day.

Colin came back into the room with a long t-shirt and sweatpants in his hand. "They'll be big, but at least you'll be warm."

"Thank you," she said, lowering her eyes.

He took a moment to stare at her, then encircled her with his strong arms and held her to his chest, his warmth filling her like a blanket on a cold night.

"I know this is tough, but it'll be fine," he said. "I promise."

She tried to hold back the tears, but it wasn't going well. "I hate depending on people."

He leaned toward her ear. "Have you ever really done it before?"

"No."

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"Then I want you to take it one minute at a time and realize it's not forever. Do you want a shower to get rid of the glitter?"

"That would be really nice."

"Want me to join you?"

She took a step back from him and wiped her cheeks.

"Over my dead body."

He laughed, crossed his arms and leaned against the wall.

"I'll be right here waiting for you."

"I'm fine, really."

"I'm sure, but I can't leave you alone. You've shown me that."

"What about this bandage on my arm from where you drained me of all my blood?" She held it out so he could see it.

"I didn't suck all the blood out of you."

"It felt like it."

"Let me see." He peeled off part of it to check, pulling her skin slightly, then removed the whole thing. "You're fine." His devious grin just wouldn't quit.

"Do you mind if I get undressed?" she asked.

"Nope."

"Alone, please?"

"Darn. I don't get to have any fun." He walked around the corner and she peeked out at him standing against the wall.

She closed the door slightly, undressed and turned on the water in the shower. Stepping in, she didn't realize the floor was slippery. She lost her balance and grabbed the shower

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door. As soon as she caught her breath, Colin grabbed her at the waist.

"What are you doing?" she asked with her back toward him.

"Making sure you don't fall. You lost your balance."

She turned her head toward him, his warm fingers still touching her skin. Breathing deeply, she wondered what he was thinking and if he was staring. "Were you watching me? Is that how you knew?"

"No. I could hear it."

She lowered her head. "This is kind of embarrassing, even more than normal. Do you mind?"

"I'm a doctor. Don't you think I've seen naked people before?"

"Yeah, but not me."

He snorted in laughter. "I can't leave you alone. Just get into the shower and once I'm sure you're fine, I'll leave. I promise."

"Fine. No peeking."

"Too late for that," he murmured with a chuckle.

"Men!"

He continued laughing while helping her into the shower then held on to her until she had her feet firmly planted on the floor. "You okay now?"

"Yes, sir."

He closed the door and she shampooed her hair. The door opened again and he put a chair into the shower from the back, then closed the door again.

"Thank you," she said, sitting down.

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"I should've had them make the glass transparent," he said. "I'm taking notes."

"Oh, I just bet you are," she answered. "Hey, can I remove this bandage on my head?"

"Yes, you can. Be careful not to pull on the stitches."

Sydney peeled it off her head and finished with her hair, watching the glitter go down the drain. She soaped herself up, thinking about the incredibly handsome man standing outside the shower door. She wondered what he was thinking and what he was up to. He probably had an ulterior motive, and if he was like most men, she was sure she knew what it was, too.

She had to keep reminding herself he was off-limits to her, as much as she didn't want to think about it. Her life was out there waiting for her, so she couldn't stay at the house or in his life. He wasn't hers and she didn't fit in at his house, even though she loved his staff and wished she could. She didn't fit in anywhere, and especially not above her social class.

Sydney rinsed the soap from her arms then turned off the shower. The door slid open in front of her while she wiped her eyes with her hands, and a huge towel went around her shoulders.

"Uh..."

"Don't worry." She felt her face being dried and closed her eyes while pulling the towel shut in the front. "I'm good at this part," he said. "I forgot the robe, though."

She opened her eyes and faced him, realizing his hand was held out to help her. The grin on his face was endearing, but his eyes never left hers. Sydney moved the towel to her torso

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and fastened it, then stood up, took his hand and stepped out of the shower.

Colin grabbed another towel and began to dry her hair, standing behind her. He was so gentle that Sydney just closed her eyes, letting him touch her head. He finally stopped, wrapped his arms around her stomach and leaned close to her ear. "You're beautiful."

"I don't—"

"No, don't deny it. You're gorgeous and I know you're way past your comfort zone, but I just wanted you to know that."

With her heart racing, she caught her breath with a small sigh. Her hands stroked his arms surrounding her waist, feeling his warmth, and she leaned her head back, resting it beside his.

"Does that feel good?" he whispered.

"Better than anything. You feel great."

He nibbled on her ear, then kissed down her neck. "We could stand here all night, or we could get into bed and do the same thing. It might be more comfortable in bed, you know. It's warmer at least."

"What a romantic."

He let go of her and chuckled, then picked up his clothes for her to wear. "Want help?"

"No."

"Good. Then I'll help you."

"Scum."

"You bet." He moved her to the closed toilet seat and sat her down, then put the sweatpants on her feet.

"No underwear first?" she asked.

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"You don't have any clean ones, unless you count the ones outside in the snow."

"Snow? My clothes are in the snow?"

"I'm going to freeze those roaches to death." He faced her as soon as her feet were sticking out of the bottom of the gray sweatpants, the rest hanging on her ankles. "I don't ever want you to go back to that apartment."

"But my things!"

"They're just things. I'm serious, too. It's not safe and not healthy there." He helped her to her feet and pulled the sweatpants up for her, tying them at the top. "They're a little bit long, but not bad."

"True," she said. "I can manage the shirt."

"No, I think that's my job, too."

She shot him a knowing look. "Free peek, huh?"

"Not at all. I am worried about you and that's no lie." He put the shirt over her head and pulled her arms through the sleeves. The dark blue oversized t-shirt with the gold logo for his office fell down over the towel. Before she could remove it, he pulled the towel out from under the shirt. "Voila!"

"You're so talented."

"Yep." He grinned then kissed her with a gentle touch, his eyes so piercing, she was sure they saw into her soul. "How's your head?"

She took a deep breath and stopped herself from swooning over him. She had to get a grip. "I'm better actually." She didn't even know if she was or not, but it sounded good.

"I'm glad to hear it. The medication's working. I wasn't sure before because you slept so long. Are you even tired?"

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"I don't know. You sucked so much blood out of me, I can't tell."

He checked her stitches with a grin and dried them, then put something on them. "They're fine, and we're going to leave them out to the air tonight to see how that goes." He picked up a comb from the drawer. "Want me to comb it for you?"

"I'll do it. It'll go faster." She combed her shoulder-length hair while looking at her pasty appearance in the mirror then put the comb back in the drawer.

"Want to do something instead of going to sleep?" he asked.

"Not what you have in mind."

He began to chuckle. "I'm a perfect gentleman."

"Yeah. The only perfect one is dead," she muttered.

Wrapping his arms around her waist from behind, he held her arms. "Take that back."

She struggled to get away, trying not to giggle. "I only speak the truth, and you know it."

"For most men. Not me, and I intend to prove it to you." He took her hand and kissed the back in a very slow and methodic motion, then walked with her to the bed. He pulled back the covers, helped her climb up to the mattress, then covered her up. After he turned off the light, he walked around to the other side of the bed and slid between the covers, facing her. "Tell me about your life."

"There's not much to tell," she said. "What do you want to know?"

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"Everything." He stroked her hair and eyebrows, then kissed her forehead.

"I grew up around here, went to school here, then went to design school in Philadelphia. I got back about a year ago and have lived here ever since."

His arm rested on her waist as he studied her, inches from her face. "What made you return?"

"It's my home. Contrary to popular belief, I love having family around, but they don't like having me." She felt the tears fill her eyes, but held them back.

"Aw, come here." Colin pulled her to his chest and held her. "It's okay and I know that for a fact. Your family loves you more than you know. They consider you to be very independent and give you space. Even your brother was upset that you didn't call him before you did. He wanted to take you to his house."

"Yeah, so I'd clean it for free."

"I don't think so. You're his sister and he does care about you." He kissed her forehead. "I know I do."

She pulled back from him and stared. "Why is that?"

"You're a great person, and you need to know that. Put it this way...if I ever wanted a certain type of woman for myself, your personality is exactly what I'd be looking for. You're tough, yet have a heart of gold. You're not afraid to do anything and are extremely talented. Plus, you're more fun to be with than anyone I've ever met."

She wished she could see his face better, but it was rather dark in the room and she could only see the outlines of his

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features. "If you were a friend of mine, I'd say it sounds like you're falling in love."

He leaned forward and brushed his lips over hers. "Sleep, sweet Sydney. That's what the doctor orders."

She moved away from him and snuggled down under the covers. After a few minutes, she crossed her arms in front of her while she lay on her back.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Out of my comfort zone. I'm not used to sleeping with anyone."

"Oh, I see. Well, me neither. Does that help?"

She turned toward him, knowing more than she was willing to tell. "Why not? I thought you were engaged."

"That's a long story, but needless to say, this was my room. It brings back bad memories of loneliness, but with you here, it makes it all better."

"So you stayed here alone, and she slept—"

"In the master bedroom, because it was her land. I'd just gotten out of medical school, so I had tons of bills. I stayed here to save money and pay for the insurances I had to have."

"Did she charge you?"

"After I started making money, I took over paying the mortgage and many of the bills. I've paid off everything, so now I live here without a mortgage. I couldn't continue to pay for the house every month, because it reminded me of her."

Sydney turned to face him. "I have a question and feel free not to answer it if you don't want to, because it's kind of personal."

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"Shoot."

"Did you love her?"

He was quiet for a moment. "I thought I did."

"I mean, did you really love her? Did you get along and really consider her to be your friend and the only one alive for you?"

He paused for a moment. "I don't think I can truthfully answer that question. I remember the good times, but since I've met you, some of the not-so-good times seem to be coming back to me. There were more bad times than good times, and it's hard to figure it all out." He paused and silence filled the air. "We weren't very good friends."

"I understand, but I'm not sure why meeting me would make you remember the bad times. I hope I'm not doing that to you."

He leaned forward and kissed her. "You're doing a lot to me, and it's all good. Relax and get some sleep."

"Yes, master."

"Better, much better. I should be worshipped."

She chuckled, and he swept her into his arms. "I'm so glad you're here," he said.

"I forgot to thank you for everything you've done for me. I really appreciate it, and thank you. I don't know where I'd be if—"

He captured her lips and intensified the kiss. She threw her arms around him and returned the favor, pressing her body right up against his. It was a very passionate kiss, hot and sensual, their tongues dancing together. His hand went to her side and he began massaging her waist and down her outer

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hip. She wanted more, but knew if she asked, she wouldn't let him stop. She threw her leg over his, getting as close as she could to him. She was on fire, knowing she was in no position to stop. It would have to be up to him.

When he finally released his grip on her lips, he rested his forehead on hers. "Repressed...much?"

"More than you know." She moved her leg off his and inched away from him. "Now you know why I'm not in control. Thank you for stopping me, and for taking care of me."

He grinned. "You're welcome. I like taking care of you, as much as you hate it, and I should be thanking you for being here."

"You're welcome?" she said with a grin.

He chuckled, pulled the covers up over her and lay on his back. "Good night, Sydney. Wake me for anything, and I mean anything, even if you just want to tell me you're ready to go topless on the beach or...something else like you love me."

"Oh, very funny. Good night, Colin—I mean Dr. Taylor, healer and ruler of his domain."

"You got that right!"

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Three Minutes Before Christmas
by Paige Ryter

A piercing buzzer interrupted Sydney's dreams. She opened her eyes and felt a hand stroking her hair. Her pillow was rising and falling, and she touched it to see why. It wasn't a pillow, but a chest. She lifted her head in terror and turned to face Colin, the owner of her pillow. "Oh, my!"

"Yes, you slept on my chest most of the night. Do you mind if I see who's at the door at this hour of the morning?"

"Door?"

"Yes. That was the doorbell."

It rang again, and she moved to her side of the bed. "I didn't know."

Colin got out of bed, turned on the light and grinned. "No problem. Do it any time."

She squinted from the light, covering her eyes. "Did you get any sleep?"

"Sure, and it was the best sleep I've had in a long time." He walked toward the door, turned and blew her a kiss. "I'll be right back."

Sydney got out of bed, checked the clock, and walked to the top of the stairs. Her head hurt, but she just wanted to listen, she told herself.

"Yes, she's upstairs, but still asleep," Colin said.

"I need to see her!" a female voice exclaimed. "I'm her mother!"

Sydney closed her eyes and wished she were somewhere else—even naked on the beach.

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Chapter Five

Sydney took her time walking down the stairs, holding on to the railing and her aching head. It hurt, with a throbbing percussion section of a marching band doing double-time between her ears.

"Why don't you come back at eight?" Colin said. "I'm sure she'll be awake by then."

"No, I have to see my baby now!" Her mother could be so emotional if she wanted to be, annoying Sydney.

"Look, buddy, if you don't let us in to see our daughter, I'll consider it kidnapping and will call the cops."

Great. Her dad was there, too. Sydney took a deep breath and sat down on the last stair with a plop, right near Colin. Her parents were in the foyer and Colin stood beside them. She put her head on her knees and tried to breathe.

"Sydney! Are you okay?" Colin asked, leaning down to her. "You weren't to walk down the stairs by yourself!"

"I don't feel well," she said. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"We'll be right back." He got her to her feet and walked with her at a hurried pace to the bathroom down the long hallway. She knelt in front of the toilet in time for everything to come up.

"It looks like you have morning sickness," he whispered. She could've sworn he was almost laughing.

"But I don't." She rested her head on her arm, draped over the toilet.

"We know that but they don't know that."

Three Minutes Before Christmas
by Paige Ryster

She glanced up at him, the light bothering her eyes. "Go talk to them. I'll be out in a few minutes."

His eyes were so blue and his face so caring, she knew why she really wanted him to be around.

"No, you're my responsibility," he said. "I can wait for you. You're not doing well this morning, are you?"

She had to turn away, he was that caring and compassionate. "No, I'm not. I feel awful." She lifted her head, facing him with squinted eyes.

"What hurts?"

"My head's pounding, and the light hurts my eyes."

"I'm not surprised and I'm sure it's from your concussion. Do you want to go back to the hospital?"

"No, because I'll probably have Dr. Brooks again. She'd kick me out one more time and send me the bill for it."

"You're probably right. Can you make it to the kitchen, or do you want to lie down on the couch?"

"The kitchen, I think. I don't want my parents calling an ambulance."

He helped her to her feet, wrapped his arm around her waist and walked with her back to the foyer.

"Why are you two here?" she asked her parents, trying to keep her eyes open.

"Are you okay?" her mother asked, touching her arm.

"I think so. Why?"

"You need to come home with us, young lady," her father bellowed. "I won't have a stranger holding my daughter hostage in your condition."

"Hostage?" she asked, yawning. "And what condition?"

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Colin shook his head and hid a smile, facing her parents. "Let's have a cup of coffee." He helped Sydney to the kitchen, with her parents following, and flipped on the lights.

As soon as Colin helped her to her seat at the end of the kitchen table, she turned toward him. "Want me to make coffee?" she asked.

"No. You need to take it easy."

"Got it." She yawned and looked up at her parents sitting at the adjacent side of the table. She suddenly felt miserable and put her head in her hands, lowering it to the table.

"Are you okay?" her mother asked.

"I'm fine."

"Is it your head?" Colin asked.

"Yes, but I'll be fine." If she only hadn't gone to the mall on Friday night, she'd be happily in her home counting her money from Mrs. Richman, and would have a few more dollars to throw toward her school debt.

"Sydney," her mother said. "Please come home with us. I can watch you around the clock."

She lifted her head slightly. "No. I'm going back to my place as soon as I can drive, and I'd rather be here with someone who knows what they're doing. No offense, but Dr. Taylor's been very kind and gracious. He's been taking care of me and doing a great job. He's even going to help me with one of my contracts."

"He is?" her father asked. "I think I misjudged you, sir." He got to his feet and shook Colin's hand. "I'm Bruce White, attorney at law."

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Colin grinned. "I don't know if your son told you, but I'm a pediatrician. I can care for your daughter and am friends with her doctor. I rescued her from the mall and feel like it's my responsibility to make sure she's okay."

"He told us a few things—"

"And I'm Doris White," her mother said, interrupting Bruce with a dirty look. She stood and shook Colin's hand. "You can call us Bruce and Doris. Sydney does."

"No, I don't," Sydney replied, still seated. "You're Mom and Dad."

Her mother lowered her head and faced Sydney. "I'd rather you be on a level playing field with us, now that you're an adult."

Sydney hated her mother. "Yes, *Mom*." She was so overbearing and everything had to be her way or else. It made her sick.

Doris sat down again. "Now, we don't talk like that. You know better! You're acting like a child!"

Sydney's head hit the table with a thud, making her wonder if the reason she was in this situation was because her head was hollow.

Colin brought some cups of coffee, cream and sugar to the table and handed them to Bruce and Doris. He bent to Sydney's ear. "Do you want anything?"

"I don't know. My head hurts. It's throbbing twice as much as before."

"How's your stomach?"

"Better than it was, but not that great."

"Do you think you can try to eat something?"

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"Sure, but I can get it." She lifted her head and tried to get up, but he pushed her back to her seat and she let her head fall back to her arms on the table.

"No, I'll get it. Just relax." He walked away and opened the refrigerator door, making some weird noises.

"Nice place," Bruce said. "I bet you paid a fortune for it."

"Sort of," Colin answered.

A toaster popped and something was poured. Just as Sydney lifted her head again, Colin walked to the table and put a piece of toast on a plate in front of her, then placed a glass of water with a pill beside that.

"Is that good for the baby?" Doris whispered, pointing at the pill and looking at Colin, who was standing beside Sydney.

Sydney faced her mother. "What baby?"

"Oh, nothing," Doris said, lowering her eyes.

"That's just something for her head," Colin said.

Doris nodded. "Sydney, eat up. You'll feel better."

The back door to the kitchen opened and Sydney turned to see who it might be. A very large graying woman waddled in wearing a maid's uniform.

Colin turned to her and smiled. "Gertrude! You came back early!"

"Gertrude?" Sydney asked.

The woman approached the table with a scowl on her face. "That's my name, Miss. And who are all these people?"

"This is Sydney," Colin said, touching her head with a grin. "She's staying with me temporarily. It's a long story. And these are her parents, Bruce and Doris."

Three Minutes Before Christmas
by Paige Ryter

"Why are you all drinking coffee at 5:30 in the morning?"

"A little get-together?" Colin offered. "Why are you back so early? I thought you were going to see your son in Florida?"

"Got sick of him, his snotty wife, and bratty kids. I came back early so this place would be clean. I don't trust Marjorie to do it." She wiped her finger across the top of the table in front of Sydney. "I see I'm needed here." She turned toward Colin. "Why are there women's bras on the lawn?"

"Uh..." He turned toward Sydney. "That's a long story, too. There are clothes in the washer and those clothes that are outside need to be washed as well."

"Are they...hers?" Gertrude pointed toward Sydney and Colin nodded. Gertrude got into Sydney's face with a scowl. "Why are you throwing your clothes on his lawn? Are you a groupie?"

"No, ma'am," Sydney said, giving the woman an innocent look.

Colin started to laugh, then poured himself a cup of coffee.

The phone rang and Gertrude walked away to answer it. "Dr. Taylor's residence." She glanced toward Colin. "Yes, he's here. May I ask who's calling?" She paused, handing the phone to Colin. "Answering service. It's an emergency."

He sighed, took the phone and walked away from the table. "This is Dr. Taylor."

"He's really a doctor?" Doris whispered to Sydney. She just didn't get it, even though he'd told her that.

"Yes, he is." Sydney took a bite of the toast and let it melt in her mouth.

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by Paige Ryster

"Wasn't he the man at the mall taking care of you on Friday night when I stopped by?"

"Yes, he was," she answered. "He was playing Santa for the kids."

"Marry him," Doris whispered.

"No, Mom. I'm not playing that game any more for you. You just want me to get married so I'll have kids for you. No."

"What do you mean Dr. Jeffers never showed up at the hospital?" Colin exclaimed over the phone. "We had babies born and he should've been there! Why didn't someone call me earlier?"

"But he's rich," Doris whispered to Sydney.

"I don't care. I don't like rich snotty people and I'm going to be rich some day, too. Just wait. And I won't be snotty."

Colin was upset while pacing and on the phone. "Fine. Call Wilma and tell her to get everyone into the office before seven. I'm not happy and we're having an emergency staff meeting, even though it's Sunday. Everyone. I'll be at the hospital in fifteen minutes. I'll call and find out the status then." He hung up the phone and sighed, turning toward the table. "I have to go. I'm having staffing problems." He walked to Sydney and knelt down to face her, his adorable eyes just inches from hers. "I'll be back before nine. Have Gertrude walk you upstairs to go back to sleep or you can sleep down here. I don't want you alone and I don't want you going steps more than once and definitely not by yourself."

She rolled her eyes. "I'm not a child."

"No, but you get lightheaded when you overexert yourself, especially on the stairs. I worry about you." He lowered his

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by Paige Ryster

voice and glanced around the room. "Gertrude is tough on the outside, but nice on the inside. I'll be back and we'll deal with the decorations then."

"Got it."

He stood up and walked toward Gertrude, who was just entering the room. "I need to talk to you." They left together.

"Why are your clothes outside?" Bruce asked.

"They have bugs. We got them from my place last night and your son's a slumlord. Colin didn't want the huge roaches in his house and I can't blame him."

"Makes sense to me," Doris said, then took a sip of the coffee.

"What exactly happened on Friday night?" Bruce asked.

"Dave asked me to fill in for him so he could play cards. I was wrapping presents, so he could *gamble* his future away."

"I get that part. What happened to you?" Bruce asked.

"Well, I was wrapping a present, and the idiot Dave hired, Justin, hit me in the head with a roll of killer wrapping paper."

"You mean those huge rolls?" Doris asked. "I bet they weigh at least twenty pounds."

"Probably. I lost my balance and fell against the metal on a table, slicing up my head."

Both of her parents winced, but Sydney continued. "At least that's what I was told. I don't remember it. The next thing I knew, Colin, dressed in a Santa outfit to play Santa to the kids at the mall, was leaning over me with paper towels to my head. I was taken to the hospital, but my purse was in my car, so I had no insurance card. They're going to bill me."

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"Great," Bruce said. "I'll deal with the insurance company and they'll pay for it. But if you can't go steps yet without getting lightheaded, why did they release you?"

Sydney leaned forward. "Colin said the same thing. He's documenting everything about me so he can get my doctor in trouble for discharging me too soon. She even threatened me, because she was afraid I wanted to date Colin. I don't know what she was thinking."

"Your doctor threatened you, then discharged you too soon?" Bruce asked.

"Yes, Dad. It's nasty. Colin's on the board of directors and he's going to guarantee the woman pays one way or another."

"I think I need to take a trip down to that hospital," Bruce said.

"No. Let Colin work behind the scenes and get her in big trouble," Sydney whispered. "If we tip our hand, she'll run. I'm sure of it."

"I'll give him a week then it's mine," he answered in a very serious tone.

"Fine." Sydney drank some of the water and ate some more toast. She knew he could be nasty if he wanted to be.

Colin entered the kitchen dressed in a suit, pulling on his coat. He picked up his cup of coffee and walked to the table. "I have to run. It's an emergency at the hospital. Feel free to stay as long as you like. Gertrude can make you some breakfast if you want."

"Thank you," Sydney said. "Have fun at the hospital."

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by Paige Rytter

"I don't think so this morning. I have to put some employees on notice and I'm not happy."

Gertrude stood at the sink and cracked her knuckles. "If you need me to take care of things, I will, Dr. Taylor. And I mean it too."

"I'm sure you do," he murmured. He glanced at Sydney. "Take it easy. Promise?"

"Yes, sir."

He raised an eyebrow and grinned, but said nothing. She hadn't called him master for a reason, and he knew it.

"Go, already," she said. "A life's in danger."

"Possible chickenpox isn't dangerous, but with this mother, you never know." He took a sip of coffee as he left the room. Standing in the foyer, where only Sydney could see him, he blew her a kiss with a wink. She grinned and stuck the toast in her mouth.

As soon as he left the house, Sydney faced her parents.

"I like him. Marry him," Doris repeated.

"I agree," Bruce said. "At least then your children would have a father."

Sydney had to play along. "What children? I would never have children until I'm married and you know it. You two are insane!"

Gertrude stood at the sink, drinking coffee and laughing. "They think you're pregnant?"

"Yes. Just because I vomited this morning. It's my head, you silly people."

Both of her parents lowered their eyes.

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by Paige Rytter

"You vomited?" Gertrude asked. "Maybe you are pregnant?"

"I'm not pregnant," Sydney replied, turning toward her. "I hit my head and have a concussion. Didn't Dr. Taylor tell you that?"

"Yes, he said you had stitches." She walked to Sydney's right side. "I see the stitches, but I can't think it would make you sick in your stomach now."

"Well it does. I can't go steps very well either, or take a shower." As soon as she said it, she knew she was doomed.

"Who helps you?" Doris asked.

Sydney stuck more toast into her mouth to give her time to think. She couldn't say Colin, or he'd be in trouble.

"Marjorie helped me."

"Who's Marjorie?" Doris asked.

"She's a maid here, and a very nice woman," Sydney said. "She's married to Chef John."

"Oh, I see," Doris said. "So you're really not here alone with Colin at any time."

"Oh, at night she is," Gertrude answered.

Sydney sighed. That Gertrude was going to be a pain, for sure.

"You are?" Bruce asked. "Where did you sleep last night?"

"In the guest room," Sydney answered while yawning.

"Why?" What they didn't know wouldn't hurt them.

"Where did Colin sleep?"

She had this covered and faced her father. "In his bed." Technically, the guest bed was his bed, so she wasn't lying. "Now, I have to get some work done. I have about ten hours

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worth of work to do today. If you guys want to help, I'm going to get a shower then go to the basement and work."

"No, you're not," Gertrude said. "Doctor's orders. He doesn't want you in the basement until he gets home."

"But it's not physical labor," Sydney said, turning toward the old battleaxe. "I'll be sitting and painting. That's it!"

"Toxic fumes?" Doris asked.

"No, Mom, and I'm not pregnant! Why won't anyone believe me?"

"No reason," her mother answered with a grin.

Sydney popped the pill, drank her water and stood up, then promptly lowered her head and held on to the table.

"Are you okay?" Doris asked, holding on to Sydney's arm.

"I'm fine." Her head felt better in a minute, and she took the plate and glass to the sink, facing Gertrude. "Do you know if I have any clean clothes yet?"

"I'll have them in the guest bedroom in about five minutes, but I'm to help you upstairs first."

"I'll be fine." Sydney headed toward the stairs, bound and determined to do this by herself. She hated people doing things for her, and she knew she could do it, even though her head was pounding. She marched up the stairs, followed by Gertrude.

"You don't have to help me," she said to the woman behind her, though not turning around.

"Those are my orders."

"Whatever." By the time Sydney was at the top of the stairs, spots appeared before her eyes, but she was

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determined to get to the bedroom. She strolled inside, sat on the bed and took a deep breath.

"You don't look so good," Gertrude said, shoving Sydney's head to her lap. "Breathe and don't move."

"But—"

"Do as I say. I'm bigger than you and I used to be a nurse."

"That figures," Sydney murmured. "I bet you were well-liked."

"I was the best in labor and delivery. You're really not pregnant, are you?"

"No," Sydney whispered. "But Colin wants my parents to think I am so I can stay here. I wasn't lying."

"Oh, so he's up to his practical jokes again, huh?" she said. "He hasn't done anything like that since before—" She stopped talking.

"Ruth?" Sydney asked, lifting her head.

"How do you know about her?" Gertrude snapped. "No one can say her name in this house!"

Sydney grinned. "Colin and I have been talking about her."

"What about?"

"He said he's remembering the bad times with Ruth now, and it's my fault. I don't know if that's good or bad, but he seemed okay with it."

"It's about time! That woman's been on his mind for too long. He feels guilty for not saving her life."

"Was she here when she died?"

"They sent her home after some chemotherapy. She probably had some time left to live, so she insisted on tilling

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the fields for planting in March the day she came home from the hospital, just in case. She and Dr. Taylor had a huge argument about it, and she ran out of the house. She had lots of fight in her, even after chemo. Anyway, she was on the tractor and got stuck in the mud on a hill because it was a very rainy spring. He was putting on his shoes to go help her, but he didn't get to her in time. The tractor tipped in the mud and fell on top of her. He ran to her and tried to save her, but she was already dead. He blames himself for letting her alone. So, she really didn't die of cancer, but it was a farming accident. No one's allowed to even mention it to him, and he wants everyone to think it was the cancer."

"That's probably why he's so protective of me. He needs to face her death and let go of the guilt. It wasn't his fault at all." They were quiet for a moment and she faced Gertrude. "I need clothes. Can I get them?"

"No way. But I'll help you into the shower if you want. Marjorie didn't help you before, did she?"

Sydney lowered her eyes. "Sort of."

"But she didn't help you into the shower. She's not tall enough. It was Dr. Taylor, wasn't it?"

Sydney hung her head. "It wasn't my idea."

"Oh, I'm sure. I bet he was a perfect gentleman, too, right?"

"Yes, ma'am." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "He wouldn't even let me alone to sleep, but slept right here beside me all night in case anything went wrong. He was a perfect gentleman, too, like you said."

"I figured as much. This used to be his room."

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"Thank you for not saying anything," Sydney whispered.

"I can keep a secret. Now, I'm going to help you into the shower, and I've seen it all before, so don't worry. I want you to sit in the shower. I'll have a chair for you. Then I'm going to get your clothes for when you get out. I'll help you. I've done the same for many women in the hospital, although they're usually snippy. Women in labor can be very nasty."

"I won't be nasty," Sydney said with a grin. She stood up, grabbed on to the post of the bed and steadied herself with Gertrude's help. After a few minutes, she walked into the bathroom. Gertrude got her a robe, and while she undressed, Gertrude started the water in the shower.

"Ready?" she asked after putting the chair back in the shower.

"Yep." Sydney dropped her robe and stepped into the shower with Gertrude's help. She sat in the chair and showered while Gertrude left her alone. It felt so good to have the water falling down on her head. It seemed to be the only thing that really helped.

"Are you okay in there?" Gertrude asked when Sydney was done.

"Yes." Sydney turned off the shower. "That felt great."

The door opened and Gertrude threw a few towels on Sydney, who wrapped a towel around herself and stood up. Gertrude handed her the robe, and Sydney wrapped herself in it, then took off the towels. She helped Sydney out of the shower and walked her toward the sink. "I washed a bunch of your clothes, and I found some bugs still in them when I was outside. That's just nasty! Why don't you move?"

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"My brother owns the apartment complex," Sydney whispered, sitting down on the closed toilet.

Gertrude nodded. "Oh, I see."

"Are my parents still downstairs?" Sydney asked, pulling on her underwear under her robe.

"Yes. They're having breakfast. How do you feel now?"

She yanked on her jeans. "Much better. I'm not going to vomit again, if that's what you're asking."

Gertrude hung up the wet towels while Sydney finished getting dressed. "Do you think you can handle some breakfast?" Gertrude asked.

Sydney shook her head. "No, I'll be okay. I don't want to deal with my parents more than I have to."

"Chef John's here. I called him and he's taking care of everything."

Sydney faced her after she pulled on an old t-shirt. "You called Chef John? You didn't have to do that."

"Yes, I did, and I filled him in on the whole situation. He's glad I called, too." She leaned forward and lowered her voice. "He's running interference for you."

"Huh?"

"They're talking about their trips now, and won't be asking you anything. I'm going to take you to the basement as soon as you're done eating so you can work. I called Dr. Taylor and he suggested it because your parents are making your head worse."

"Great idea," Sydney said with a grin. "I like the way you work. Is Dr. Taylor okay now? He wasn't happy when he left here."

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"His staff at the office have been taking advantage of him for a long time. None of them are pulling their weight, and last night, Dr. Jeffers was supposed to be on call at the hospital. They had two new babies and four patients who needed a doctor, meaning they might be up all night. But the guy never showed, leaving the nurses in charge of those patients. They should've called Dr. Jeffers or Dr. Taylor right away, but didn't. The patients are all fine, but Dr. Taylor's angry and should be."

"I can't blame him. The man should be fired on the spot."

"He can't fire him, because he has no replacements yet. But once he gets them, someone's head's going to roll, and I bet it's Dr. Jeffers' head first."

After Sydney finished getting ready for the day, she and Gertrude went back downstairs.

"So, you saw Stonehenge?" Chef John asked. He glanced at Sydney and winked. She returned his smile, thankful he was helping her out.

"Oh yes." Doris began a long dissertation about England, so Sydney tuned her out. Her plans for the day didn't include her parents, so she didn't want to encourage them to stay. She poured a cup of coffee and sat at the table.

Doris stopped her prattling and faced Sydney just as she was going to take a sip. "Stop!"

"What?" Sydney asked, the cup halfway to her lips.

"Don't drink that!"

"Why?"

"It has caffeine in it."

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"So?" Sydney knew what her mother was saying, but wanted to see what she'd come up with next.

"It won't mix well with your medication. Right, Bruce?"

"I think your mother's right." He reached over the table and took it from Sydney. "Have milk instead. It's good for the ba—"

"—good for your concussion," her mother said, shooting her husband a nasty glare.

Sydney shook her head, stood up slowly, and got a glass of milk. Chef John was trying not to laugh as she stood beside him at the stove.

"Do you think that's funny?" she whispered.

"Oh yeah. I know what they think, and it's hilarious," he whispered back.

"Yeah, at my expense. Have anything to eat?"

"Want a waffle or French toast?"

"Whatever's faster. I have to get out of here."

"Got it." He placed some French toast on her plate with a grin. While she poured some syrup on it, he went to the refrigerator and poured a glass of orange juice, then handed it to her before going back to the stove. He engaged Sydney's parents in some sort of discussion about current events while Sydney finished her meal in record time.

"I hate to eat and run, but I have to get to work in the basement," she said.

"Can we see what you're doing?" Doris asked.

"Sure. Come on down and see it." She drank the rest of her juice, got up slowly from the table, giving her head time

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to adjust, and walked into the foyer. Gertrude met her and showed her the basement stairs off the formal dining room.

After flipping on the lights, Gertrude walked with Sydney down the curving stairs to a huge, beautifully finished basement, with a big-screen television in the corner and couches everywhere. Two couches faced a wall of glass, overlooking the backyard that went on for what seemed like miles and miles. His home must have been sitting on top of a hill, because the basement was at ground level at the back of the house.

A kitchen bar sat behind the couches with weight training equipment on the far side of the room. Gertrude pointed past the weight equipment. "There's a full bath over there if you need to clean up."

"Thanks. This is amazing."

"I think he put everything of yours in the workshop." Gertrude took Sydney through a doorway on the left to a huge room, probably measuring thirty-five feet on each side, with a cement floor and huge tables lining the walls. Her dolls sat on the tables at the walls, and in the center of the room were two long tables, placed end to end with her decorations laying on them. The paints were all organized according to color, with her brushes all sitting beside huge cups of water.

"Someone knows what they're doing," Sydney said.
"Amazing!"

"There are even cloths on the side if you need them." Gertrude pointed to the wall. "If you want to call any of us on that phone, push the button that says local, and you can call any of us at any time. The kitchen is one, the upstairs is two,

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the garage is three, and you're four down here. It's all labeled on the wall."

"I see."

"If you get hungry, there are drinks and food in the fridge and freezer, and snacks in the cupboards. The stove works, as does the microwave. The couches pull out to beds, so feel free to take a nap. There are pillows and extra blankets in the closet in the bathroom."

"Thank you so much," Sydney said. "This place is nicer than my apartment."

"After seeing the bugs in your clothes, I believe you." Gertrude laughed, then turned, said goodbye and left.

Sydney looked over at the children she built. They were in a better place than in her apartment and she couldn't be happier.

She sat down and began to paint, thinking about everything that had happened to her since the wrapping paper attack on Friday night. Colin was quite a catch, and if she could just fit into his lifestyle, he'd be exactly what she was looking for. But he needed a woman by his side who could throw parties, socialize, and be something Sydney wasn't. If he just weren't such a nice guy, she'd be able to move on. But something about him just clicked with her, his touch like molten lava to her heart. She had it bad for him and knew it.

Sydney worked for more than an hour while thinking about Colin, before her parents walked down the stairs.

"Holy smokes, will you look at this!" Bruce said. "I could live here!"

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"Me too," Doris replied. "Think he'll rent it out to us?"

"He has a guesthouse, too," Sydney added, still painting.
"But I've never seen it."

"Does he farm the land?" Bruce asked.

"No, I don't. I rent it out." All eyes turned toward Colin, standing in the doorway, dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt.
"Having fun?"

"Oh yeah," Sydney said. "I'm almost done painting. It's so peaceful and quiet down here!"

"Done?" he asked. "But I was going to help."

"Oh, you can help when we take them to Mrs. Richman."

"Mrs. Richman?" Bruce asked. "That old bitty? She was a client of mine years ago and I almost quit over her nagging."

"Same one," Sydney said.

"Well, we have to get going," Doris said, turning to Colin.
"Thank you for your hospitality, and I feel so much better knowing Sydney's doing well. We'll be in town over the holidays, so if you want to join us, you're both welcome."

"Don't forget the party on Christmas Eve," Colin answered.
"I wanted to invite the people from my office and Sydney's family. Do you think everyone can make it?"

"Yes, I'm sure of it," Doris answered, beaming. "Now that we've met you, we'd love to come."

"Sure," Bruce said. "If you're going to have doctors here, I'll bring my business cards."

"Dad," Sydney said. "No business. It's a party."

Bruce nodded. "Got it. Well, we're off to church. You're both welcome—"

Sydney kept painting. "Have to work, Dad. Sorry."

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"Have a great day!" Both of her parents hugged Colin and kissed Sydney's cheeks, said goodbye and left.

Colin sat down across from Sydney and watched her work.
"Do you have any rules?"

"Stick with basic colors. Red, yellow, green, blue, heavy on the red and green for Christmas."

"Got it. Gold too?"

"If you want. But not silver. Mrs. Richman hates silver. Now tell me what happened to tick you off this morning."

He picked up a paintbrush. "I have lazy employees. One's going to be fired as soon as I have a replacement."

"I understand. Was the kid okay at the hospital?"

"Oh yeah." He started to laugh. "He'd painted himself with jelly then put clear glue overtop to make it look like chickenpox. The mother felt stupid when I peeled the jelly and glue from his hand."

Sydney stopped painting and faced him. "She fell for that? Why did they call you in? It doesn't seem like an emergency to me."

"You have to know the mother. She goes to emergency every week with something. They're tired of dealing with her, so they call us. I also checked on our other patients and drove to the office for a five-minute lecture to the staff. I took the next few weeks off, just so they can prove they're worthy enough to work for me."

Sydney put her paintbrush down and faced him. "Few weeks?"

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"They don't know it yet, but I'm going to stop in and evaluate each of them unannounced. I'm ticked off and they need to know it."

"A few weeks?"

He faced her. "Do you have a problem with that?"

"How can you take a few weeks off? I'd starve if that was me!"

He chuckled. "Be the boss and make them do the work. That's how I'm going to do it."

"What else are you going to do for all that time?"

He grinned. "I have plans. Now, we're going to get this lady out of the way, meet with the other two and get them done. Then we can decorate this place, right?"

"Yes. Do you have any decorations?"

"No. Ruth didn't like holidays because it interfered with her life, and I had nothing when I got out of college."

Sydney grinned. "Want to go shopping?"

Colin shook his head and moaned.

"Great! A willing participant! We'll check the thrift stores—"

"No. I want classy. I want something like you'd see in the magazines, with a huge tree, candles, and ribbons everywhere."

"Dreamer."

He laughed and told her his plans. He was going to have the staff at the house even help out. They only had a week and two days to pull it all off, and with two potential clients in between, it seemed impossible.

* * * *

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Chapter Six

"I'm so glad that's done!" Sydney said as they walked back into the house after going to Mrs. Richman's home. "And we were finished before dinner. You're a great employee, know that?"

Colin closed the door behind them and walked her into the kitchen. "I try. What's for dinner?" he asked Chef John.

"Beef stew and it's almost done."

Sydney took a deep breath and grinned. "Delicious. I can tell."

"Me too," Colin answered.

"So what did you think of Mrs. Richman's house?" she asked.

"I think you did a fantastic job on it. The tree was huge, and it looked great with all the small decorations and white lights. The painting looked like it belonged above the fireplace and the village and train looked real in the fake snow. But my favorite, by far, were the doll children."

"They were cute. I tried to make the kids on the table runner in the dining room look like her grandkids, too."

He reached over and swiped at some dried red paint on her arm. "That was fun, but we're a mess, huh?"

"Goes with the job. I thought it was funny when Mrs. Richman started talking to the dolls. She thought they were her grandkids."

He nodded. "She's crazy, but at least you got paid."

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"Oh yeah." She reached into her pocket and pulled out the check. "I want to write you a check for half of this. You worked harder than I did today."

"No way. I don't want it. I just enjoyed spending time with you." He leaned over and kissed her cheek, making her smile.

He was such a nice man, and even though she couldn't date him for real, she loved the warmth of his touch and longed for more. "I owe you so much," she said. "Thank you from the bottom of my heart."

He grinned. "You're welcome."

She studied him for a moment. He was so sexy, she wanted to kiss him, but with Chef John there, she knew she couldn't.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

She smiled. "Stuff."

"What stuff?"

She winked. "The usual stuff."

He started to laugh and pulled her against his chest, his arms tight around her back. "Tell me or I won't let you go," he whispered.

She laughed, trying to get out of his grip. "I can't tell you," she whispered. "We have company."

"Who?" Chef John asked. "Is there company coming?"

Sydney wanted to die a thousand deaths, but Colin's laughs shook her as she leaned against him.

"No," Colin said. "Call us when dinner's ready." He let go of her, took her hand and walked out of the kitchen, then headed for the living room. He lay down with his head on a

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pillow on one of the couches, then pulled her to lay on top of him, her mouth inches from his.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked.

She felt his heart beating under her, lifting her slightly with each breath. She lowered her lips, caressing his chin with small kisses. Working her way up to his lips, she captured them gently at first, then intensified the kiss by penetrating his mouth with her tongue.

His breathing got shallow, matching hers, until finally, Chef John called from the kitchen, "The stew's ready!"

"Me too," she whispered, pulling back from Colin's face.

"We'll be right there," Colin replied to John, then faced Sydney with a chuckle. "I bet you are. So that's what you were thinking?"

"Yep," she whispered, standing up.

He sat up on the couch and pulled her to sit beside him.

She outlined his lips with her finger, keeping her voice low. "I don't want anyone here to think I'm after you, but you're just so hot, I can't stand it sometimes."

Colin's grin covered his entire face. "But you can't date me."

"No, I can't. It's just not right. It would be like a homeless woman dating some CEO. It wouldn't work and we both know it."

He lifted his hand to her cheek, stroking it with his fingertips. "I think you should explain this attraction to me so I can figure out how to solve your problem." He lowered his mouth and brushed his lips against hers, the heat traveling through her. "Is this how the problem starts?"

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Sydney shut her eyes, completely in his power. "Uh-huh."

He touched her lips again with a gentle but more determined kiss. "Then it progresses more?"

"Uh-huh." Her eyes fluttered open. "You're good at getting information from me. I'm glad you're not interrogating me."

He chuckled. "Call it whatever you want. I get the same result, but think I need more research on this matter. Tell me what you're feeling right now."

She glanced around to make sure no one was near them, then faced him. "You can have your way with me at any time, and I'd be totally compliant."

"Two kisses and you're mine?"

"Pretty much. It's sad, isn't it?"

He chuckled. "Sad wasn't the word I had for it, but whatever works for you." He took her hand and helped her to her feet. "You're in bad shape, and if it wasn't for that head of yours, I'd be forced to help you out."

"Oh, I bet."

They walked to the kitchen and sat at the table.

"This looks amazing," Sydney said, looking at the huge pot of beef stew in front of them. "John, you outdid yourself."

"Thanks." John started to do the dishes.

"Do you think the other clients will like what we did?" Colin asked, changing the subject. He dished some of the stew onto each of their plates, the potatoes, carrots and peas spreading out around the meat.

"Except for the fake snow on the windows," Sydney said.

"But I liked it. It made it look more realistic."

She touched his arm. "You and your snow."

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by Paige Ryter

He chuckled then ran his finger over her stitches. "This looks even better. I think you had a good day."

"Yes, a very good day, thanks to you. And Mrs. Richman stayed away from me. Very nice."

"So what did you have in mind for the other two clients?"

"It depends on what their houses look like."

The phone rang and Colin got up to get it. "Hello. Dr. Taylor speaking." He sat back down in his seat, listening to the caller. "Sure, Dave. Tomorrow night instead of next weekend?"

Those poker games were horrible. Sydney winced and took a bite of the delicious stew. The taste was incredible, the aroma wafting up with the steam.

"I don't know if I have plans tomorrow night or not," Colin said, glancing toward Sydney. "It kind of depends if Sydney needs help or not."

"Go," she whispered. "Take my brother for all he's worth."

Colin tried not to laugh. "Sure, I'll be there." He took a piece of paper off the counter with a pen and wrote down the details. "Got it. See you then and I'll bring Sydney."

"No!" she yelled.

He said goodbye, ended the call, then faced her. "Why don't you want to come with me to the poker game?"

"I don't like my brother. Plain and simple."

"But his wife's going to be lonely. You know that, right?"
He took a bite of stew.

"I hate her too. She's so smug and arrogant. She weighs nothing and has given more to her plastic surgeon than you

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can imagine. There will be smoke there, and they'll be drinking and loud—"

"Not if I'm there. Your health depends on it, and so does mine, actually. I'm so glad you're pregnant. It's going to be a great reason for them not to smoke, at least."

"But I'm not pregnant."

"That's right. Keep up the charade for your family. Good job." He leaned over and kissed her cheek, while John laughed.

"Oh, is that funny?" Sydney asked John.

He turned from the sink and faced her with a grin. "Very funny. He's got your whole family snowed, and he's the good guy who's taking in a stray."

"I'm a stray?" she asked.

Colin grinned. "We all know better here, but your family thinks you're in dire straits. Your parents even cancelled their trip for you, and you'll finally get your Christmas celebration without a banana split. It's something you've always wanted, Sydney, so don't deny it."

"Is that why you did this?"

"Sure, but I didn't do anything. It was all their thoughts, not mine. I never confirmed it."

"How are you going to tell them I'm not pregnant?"

"Let's see...the test was faulty? I haven't thought that far ahead yet."

"Start thinking, bucko," she said. "They're going to figure it out sooner or later, and I'm not going to be losing a child to cover your butt. That's just plain evil."

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by Paige Ryster

Colin and Sydney continued eating. She kept glancing at him, wondering what she was going to do. He felt so comfortable to her, like she'd known him her whole life. She studied his face, realizing he was out of her reach. But she just wanted some time with him. Could she stop whatever she was feeling and turn it off when she went back to her own life?

"I have to leave," John said, putting the last dish away. "Marjorie and I have a date tonight, and we're going out. Gertrude will be back from her break soon to finish the rest of the dishes. I'm out of here. Marjorie awaits!" He laughed, grabbed his coat, and walked to the door.

"Thank you so much," Sydney said. "I appreciate everything you've done for me."

He stopped at the door and turned toward them. "You're more than welcome. It's really nice to be appreciated by guests."

They said goodbye and he left the house.

"That was nice," Colin said.

"I'm just being kind. He's a good guy and so is his wife. They're going to have wonderful children."

"You know it. Most of the people who eat at this table aren't very nice to the hired help, but you've been extremely kind."

"Most?"

"Oh, I'm nice to them. They're my right hand, but people in the past haven't been so kind."

"Like..." She felt like she was pulling teeth.

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by Paige Ryter

"Ruth's family. Ruth was kind of nice, but her family was downright rude. Your family was very nice, though, and even chatted with John for a long time."

She leaned closer. "He was saving me from them. I owe him for that."

"He enjoys it. He loves the company because it gets very lonely here on the days when I'm working. I think the whole staff is happy you're here." He glanced at her while she took a bite. "I know I am."

Sydney smiled. "But you know I have to get back to my life, right?"

"Oh, some day, but not today."

"We really have to talk about this. I'm really not the one for you. You know that, right?"

"No." He smiled, very amused with himself. "I know it takes two kisses and you'll do whatever I want."

"But I'm way out of my comfort zone. You're a doctor and the boss, while I'm a slave to someone else. You don't get this, do you?"

He took a bite of the stew, avoiding her eyes. "No."

"Colin! Look at me."

He turned toward her with a grin on his face.

"You think this is funny?" she asked.

"Yes, I do. People are people, and no matter their social class, they still put their pants on one leg at a time. You'll figure it out, and when you do, I'll be waiting for you."

"Waiting for me? You can have any woman you want and you'll be waiting for *me*?" She pointed toward herself, enforcing her point.

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by Paige Ryter

"Yes, but that's a different conversation. As soon as we're done with dinner, my dear Sydney, you're going to go to bed to get some sleep. I'm going to make sure of it because you were up early this morning. That work was exhausting, and your head's not going to like it."

What an aggravating man! "You're changing the subject on me?"

"Yes. You're tired and not listening to yourself." He took a drink and seemed so nonchalant about everything.

"But I'm not tired. You didn't let me do anything strenuous at all at her place. I wanted to climb to the top of the tree, but no. Then when you almost fell—"

"I was fine," he said. "It was a lot of fun, and I can't wait to decorate this place, either. A huge tree with classy ornaments, lights in every window in the front, red bows everywhere, and of course, snow in the windows."

"You're kidding, right?"

"No, I love that. If we don't have a white Christmas, I want to think it's snowing."

"Sick," she murmured to his laughter.

"Okay, I want to get back to that conversation about the beach."

"The 'Sydney's half-naked' one?"

"Oh yeah. Love that part. Making sandcastles in the sand, making out on the beach in the surf. Great fantasy."

"Does the place have a boardwalk so I can get out of the sun and put on some clothes?"

"Whatever you want. We can go strolling down the boardwalk hand in hand and do whatever you want to do."

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by Paige Ryster

"I want cotton candy," she said. "Blue. Can we do that?"

"As long as you don't throw it in my hair, I'm game."

"Oh, you mean like the paint battle we had in the basement?"

He laughed. "Yeah. But the shower afterward was fun."

Sydney grinned. "You're right. Even though I was held against my will under the water with my clothes on, that was fun. I guess you'll want to do that more often, huh?"

He leaned over and kissed her cheek. "I want to do a lot of things more often with you, but it's too early, and with that head—"

"My head's fine, but you know you have to have a willing participant. I'm not sure if I'm ready for that, even with two kisses. I can't date you anyway."

Colin smiled. "Have you ever considered marriage?"

"To you? I can't even date you!"

"Not to me, but to anyone. For your life. Have you ever considered marriage?"

She finished what was on her plate, took a drink and faced him. "No."

"Why not?"

"I just can't see me as a homemaker. I'm just not the type, and for kids, I don't think I'm motherly at all. I'm probably destined to be alone for the rest of my life."

His face almost looked sad. "Do you even want kids?"

"Sure, who doesn't? But I want them to just appear magically, all grown up, so I don't have to worry that I'm doing a terrible job raising them."

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by Paige Ryter

"Oh, so you're a challenge then." He took a few last bites while she studied him.

"What did that mean?"

"Nothing," he said, grinning.

"Look. I'm not the girl for you. I'm your friend and not in your social class. Besides, my bills have to be paid off and I have goals to meet. I probably should even pay you for taking care of me."

"No payment is necessary to me. I don't understand why you can't date if you have bills."

"It gets too complicated. I want to be free of everything so I can concentrate on what I really want out of life."

"Makes sense. But what if some man found you and didn't want to wait?"

She drank some water and faced him. "What are you saying?"

"Hypothetically, of course."

"Are you so sure it's hypothetical?" she asked, his face giving him away. "Because if you're going to play poker tomorrow night, you don't have a very good poker face."

"Yes, I'm sure it's hypothetical. What if some man found you to be exactly what he was looking for and was really ready to settle down?"

"Well, assuming you're not asking for any reason in particular, then he'd still have to wait. If he's not willing to wait for me, then that tells me he doesn't think very highly of me at all."

"Oh, I see. Even if your life was in order, your bills were paid and you just got a big paycheck?"

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by Paige Ryter

She shook her head in disbelief. "I can't think that far in the future, so I don't even try. But that would certainly change things, if I was worthy of him to date." He was talking about himself and she knew it. But he wasn't listening to her. It would never work between them, as much as she was drawn to him.

With his eyes darkening as he gazed at her face, he lifted her hand to his lips and kissed the back of it. "You're more than worthy. You work harder than anyone I know and I don't care if you're rich or not."

"But your coworkers would."

"It means nothing to me. My coworkers aren't my friends."

The phone rang again and he rose from the table to answer it. "Hello, Dr. Taylor speaking."

As soon as the other person started to talk, he held the phone away from his ear and put it on speaker.

"Who do you think you are?" the woman shrieked on the other end of the phone.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Colin took a piece of paper and a pen from the desk in the kitchen and wrote 'Dr. Brooks.'

Sydney raised an eyebrow. So she had the gall to call him at home?

"Yes, you do, Colin," Dr. Brooks said. "You know I wanted to go out with you ever since Ruth died. A young girl gets hurt and you're all over her in an instant. I bet she's even staying at your house!"

He glanced up at Sydney. "I don't know what you mean. Who?"

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"Sydney White. You know exactly what I mean. You were both at Mrs. Richman's this afternoon. She called me and told me. We go to the same country club. How dare you? And you told Mrs. Richman that Sydney might pass out? I should report you to the AMA for lying!"

Colin wrote on the paper, "It wasn't a lie," then sat back down at the table. Sydney knew it wasn't a lie, almost passing out a few times from just standing up.

Dr. Brooks continued. "If I ever see that girl again, I'm going to let her know who's boss. She's nothing more than a gold digger and a slut. And you know you're not allowed to date patients."

Sydney's mouth hung open, the tears filling her eyes. Colin took one glance at her face, turned the speaker off and put the phone to his ear. "Wait just a minute. First, she wasn't my patient—"

He listened for a moment and rose from the table, his back to Sydney. "I may have taken vitals, but she wasn't my patient. I was being a Good Samaritan. And furthermore, you have no right to call me at home with stupid accusations like you're throwing around. I tape every conversation coming into and out of my house for insurance purposes, and trust me, my lawyer will hear about this one. I'm not going to tolerate this one bit. My personal life is none of your business..."

Sydney got up from the table. She walked out of the kitchen, through the foyer and started up the stairs as fast as she could go. She pushed herself to make it to the top of the stairs, ignoring the stars in her eyes and the pain in her head.

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She closed her eyes for a second, then forced herself to go the extra steps down the hallway to the guest bedroom.

She made it to the bed, then felt lightheaded, letting her head drop to the covers while holding on to it with both hands. The tears kept falling, but she just wanted to pack and get out of there. She wasn't after Colin and that stupid Dr. Brooks was an idiot if she thought Colin would ever go out with someone like her. She fought to hold back the tears, finally feeling a warm hand rub her back.

"My lawyer will be in touch," Colin said, then turned off the phone. He leaned down to her ear and stroked her hair. "Are you okay?"

"Oh yeah. Run-of-the-mill stuff. Nothing unusual at all." She turned her head away from him and wiped her cheeks, her head still on the bed.

"I was asking about your head because I can only imagine what you're thinking otherwise. She's a liar, Sydney, and don't even give her comments a second thought." He lifted her onto the bed and laid her down on a pillow. Sydney covered her face with her hands, trying not to sob.

"You could lose your job just because I'm here," she said. "As soon as my head stops being weird, I'm going to pack and go home. I don't belong here."

Colin sat on the bed near her head and moved her hands away from her face. He lay down beside her, his face hovering over hers. "I wish you wouldn't. Yes, John and I brought your car here, but I don't trust you to drive. I really like having you at my house. You've brought happiness back to my life and have given me a reason to go on. Dr. Brooks

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can't do anything to me. I'm sure of that." He leaned down and touched his lips to hers. "Please stay here with me? Even if she came to the house, your car's not out front."

"What did you do with it?" she asked.

"We put it in the garage. You really need a new car."

"I know. Some day. After my loans are paid off and I can afford a life."

"This might be a bit premature, but I can afford a life for you."

Sydney sat up and faced him. "I'm not even going to answer that, so don't mention it again, got it?"

He started to laugh. "Yes, ma'am, but—"

"No buts. No way, no how. You're just rubbing it in my face that I'm not rich like you. If I really wanted to, I could ask my parents, but I wouldn't dare. It's my life and I'm going to take care of myself. I don't want to owe anyone anything, and that's that."

"I admire you. I did the same thing and it took years. I'm just saying not to turn something down because of your pride."

"Pride?"

"Stubborn pride, too. I think you're worse than me!"

"That does it." She got off the bed, the tears filling her eyes. "I'm going home. Have fun at Dave's tomorrow and don't lose your shirt." She opened the drawers and started to get her things out of the dresser.

Colin's hands on her arms stopped her from moving. He turned her toward him, his hands holding hers. "No."

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"No what?" She faced him, her tears falling down her cheeks.

"Don't go. I need you here more than ever. Don't leave me, please?"

"Colin—"

"You don't understand. For years I wallowed in my self-pity, for someone who didn't even love me. She was in love with the idea of me, but not me." He reached up and touched her hair. "But you—you aren't like that at all. You don't like the idea of me, but you do like me—a lot. I can tell. You might have stubborn pride, but, Sydney, that's what makes you so tough and so attractive at the same time. You just don't get it, do you?"

She pulled her hands from his, crossing her arms. "No, I really don't get it. What's your plan for me, anyway? Why am I here?"

"Well, for one thing you really can't go a flight of stairs without getting lightheaded. It's getting better, but you really shouldn't be alone yet." He pulled her into his arms, moving his hands to her back, while facing her. "But I really want you here for me. You're so beautiful both inside and out, and the best thing that's ever happened to me."

"I've only known you two days and you're basing your admiration for me on that?"

"Yes, because I think I know you well enough to see what you're really like." He outlined her lips with his finger. "You're exactly what I was looking for before I even met Ruth."

He was getting to her, knowing exactly what buttons to push so she'd be in his power. As soon as he leaned in for a

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gentle kiss, she knew she was in deep. She tried to make herself move, to back off or to slap his face, but just couldn't do it. She was afraid she was falling in love with him—the hero who saved her life.

His gentle kiss turned passionate, and she felt herself melt and return the kiss against her wishes. If it just didn't feel so good, she would've walked out that door, the door that led to her independence, her freedom...and her car.

"Better now?" he asked, backing away from her.

She couldn't open her eyes or stand on her own. "Wow."

Colin laughed and hugged her. "I guessed as much and that was only one kiss. I didn't even get to the second one."

She wrapped her arms around him and pulled him close to her, her head against his chest, considering him in her bed for more than a sleeping partner.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked.

"Uh..."

He pulled his head back and faced her. "Yes?"

"Ummm..."

He caressed her cheek, his eyes meeting hers. They were so blue, she wasn't sure what spell he had her under.

"I'm thinking about the glitter from Beatrice," she blurted out.

Colin raised an eyebrow. "Glitter? You give me a kiss like that and you have glitter on your mind?"

"Oh yeah." She needed some distance or she'd have him undressed on the bed in a minute. "What did she say about the glitter again?"

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by Paige Ryster

"Let me remember. Something about your wish being granted with the potion, making you happy?"

Good. At least he was distracted from her thoughts. "What do you think that meant?"

"That she's a crazy old lady who likes to throw glitter water on people. I'm still finding pieces of glitter in my hair, and I've had a few showers." He reached up and ran his fingers through his hair.

"Yeah, one hot one while holding me under the water, too." She hid her mouth, her face heating up. Colin chuckled.

"But the water wasn't that hot." He paused and smiled. "Oh, I get it. So that's what you were thinking about?"

"What?"

"Taking another shower with me," he said.

"Actually, I was wondering why you didn't take more advantage of the situation and undress us both, but that's a different issue."

"Advantage? You have a concussion! I'm not taking advantage of you, and I told you it would all be your decision after you get over the concussion. All you need on top of your headache is some mind-blowing sexual experience—"

"Mind-blowing? Do you really think it'll be like that?" She hoped she could get the excitement out of her voice, but it wasn't working, just from the smirk on his face.

"Oh yeah." He walked her back to the bed and sat her down, then knelt in front of her with that adorable face, those strong cheekbones and that devious smile facing her. Oh, she was in trouble.

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by Paige Ryter

"Let me tell you about mind-blowing," he said. "I've had this fantasy—"

"Fantasy? With me?"

"This fantasy happens at the beach. You and me, naked, in the sand."

"Grainy, sand fleas, and sunburn. Not comfortable at all."

"Realist. Bear with me, please?"

"Yeah, sure. In the sand and I'm already ticked off about it." She snorted in laughter.

Colin grinned. "How about moonlight, on a towel—"

"Birds hanging out and flying overhead. You know what they do when they fly."

He stood up, frustrated. "Okay, forget that fantasy. I have to come up with another one. How about a cabin in the woods with a fireplace, naked, covered by a warm blanket?"

"Closer," she said. "I kind of like the beach better, though, but prefer to be naked in a hotel room."

"Now we're getting somewhere," he said with a grin. "How about a hot tub?"

"Why are you putting me through this? It's not going to happen, you know."

He smiled. "Not yet, but some day."

"Some day? What do you have up your sleeve?"

"Nothing tonight." He leaned over and kissed her forehead. "I'm off to take a very cold shower. Want to join me?"

"Cold? In winter?"

"Trust me. The colder the better."

She grinned. "You're frustrated?" She fell back in laughter, teasing him.

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by Paige Ryter

"You think that's funny?"

She stopped laughing and sat back up. "Yep. Reminds me of this one guy I dated...oh, never mind that one. He's in jail for soliciting a prostitute now...or was it murder?"

Colin shook his head with a grin. "I'll be back. Don't go anywhere. I'll have more of the hotel fantasy for you when I get back."

"Then you'll need another cold shower."

"Maybe." He winked and left the room.

Sydney grinned. Score one for her. She decided to stay with him one last night, so she got ready for bed and pulled down the covers. As soon as she slipped between the sheets, warming her toes, he walked into the room, threw all the covers off her, and pulled her out of bed.

"What's going on?"

He lifted her and carried her to his bedroom, not saying a word, because his lips were on hers the whole time, making her stomach drop and her toes curl. He laid her down on the silken white sheets, soft beneath her hands.

"What are you doing?" she finally asked when he let go of her.

"What I should've done from the beginning." He got into the far side of the bed, pulled the covers over her and kissed her forehead. "You belong here with me, at my side."

"I do? Why is that?"

"Oh, no reason." He grinned, turned out the light, and threw his arm over her. "Remember. If you get up for anything tonight, wake me."

"What? No fantasy talk?"

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by Paige Ryter

"Oh, I'm still working on that, but it'll be a show, not a tell. I can hardly wait, too."

"Great. Show and tell. I'm back in kindergarten. Do I get a lollipop if I'm good?"

He chuckled. "Oh, you'll be good. Very good. You may even score a candy cane or blue cotton candy for it."

"Psycho."

"Good night, Sydney. Sleep tight."

She looked down at his arm, still covering her. "I don't have much of a choice, considering you're holding me to the bed."

He kissed her cheek and within minutes, he was snoring. She must've worn him out with all the times she made him climb the Christmas tree. It was fun watching him do her work, with her as the boss. She went easy on him, too, for his first day, but the next time, she'd make it tougher just to see if he could keep up.

She watched him sleep for a while, trying to figure him out. He was becoming a fixture in her life, and it was going to be tough to get on with her life when she left his home. He'd mentioned marriage to her, making her wonder if he was planning something. She'd have to turn him down, knowing things weren't normal for them. She longed for normalcy and the chance to get back on her own two feet before she agreed to anything.

She stroked his hair while he slept, wondering what it would be like to wake up to his sexy face every morning. She put the thought out of her mind and closed her eyes.

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by Paige Ryter



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"Sydney, you have to get up!"

She rolled over and moaned. "Why?"

He leaned up to her ear and talked in a low voice. "You have a doctor's appointment at eight. Remember?"

"With you? Are you playing doctor with me?"

"No, silly. With Dr. Weston."

"Are you going to be there to cheer him on?" she asked, slurring her speech.

"Oh yeah. I'm going to have him tie you down."

"That's sick! I should've figured you for the voyeur type."

He laughed and put his arm over her, then tickled her other side. "Get up, sweetheart."

She opened her eyes and turned her head toward him. "Sweetheart?"

"A term of affection for someone just like you. It fits you like you wouldn't believe."

"You'd better not let Dr. Brooks hear you say that, or you're in big trouble, mister. She's your sweetheart, remember?"

"No, I have other terms for her and not nearly as nice." He rolled her to the edge of the bed. "Now, get up or I'll drag you into the shower again, but this time it'll be a very cold naked experience."

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She rolled back to her warm spot on the bed and closed her eyes again. "You wouldn't."

He was carrying her before she realized he was being serious. "But—" she argued.

"Oh, it's too late." He flipped on the water, stood her up, and grabbed her wrists, his face close to hers. "Your last chance. What'll it be?"

"I'll be nice?"

"Promise?"

She pulled her hands from his and ran out of the bathroom. "Nope! I'll do this on my own!"

He grabbed her arm just as she rounded the corner of the guest bedroom, where Marjorie and Gertrude stood inside the doorway. Sydney stopped abruptly, making Colin run right into her.

"Uh..." She didn't know what to say, looking at their stunned faces.

"Carry on," Colin said. "We were just checking up on you. Good work." He pulled Sydney back to him and walked with her to the bedroom, while the two women in the guest bedroom laughed.

Sydney turned her head toward him. "You're going to make them think we—"

"Don't worry about it. I'm making sure you get a shower, because we have to be at Dr. Weston's office in a little over an hour. I've already had a shower." He pointed to his clothes. "See?"

"I get it. But can you turn up the heat for the water?"

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by Paige Ryter

"It's already hot," he whispered. "Trust me. Very hot. Even if there was no water, it would be hot with you around."

She ignored his innuendo. "What'll I wear when I'm done?"

He pulled her into the bathroom. "Naked. Dr. Weston likes all his patients to be naked." He shrugged. "It's a fetish of his."

"I figured it would be more your type of fetish than his," she whispered.

He winked. "Only for very special patients like you."

She undressed while he went to get her some clothes, then she got into the shower. She started to shampoo her hair and soap herself up, when he popped his head around the curtain and raked his eyes over her with a grin.

"Keep it to yourself," she said.

"I just wanted to make sure you're okay."

"I'm fine." She turned from him and continued her shower. When she turned back around, he was still staring.

"Go away, please?"

"No. I have to make sure you don't fall. That's my primary objective."

She closed her eyes and tipped her head back into the water. "And secondary?"

"You don't want to know."

"I should've figured. Typical male." She finished her shower and he pulled the curtain back and dried her off.

"I can do that, you know."

"So can I and it's my turn." He helped her get dressed as fast as possible. They went downstairs, ate some breakfast, and were out the door.

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"I don't get it. Dr. Weston works in emergency, right?" Sydney asked while he drove.

"He also has an office and sees patients when he's not in emergency."

"Is that normal?"

"No, but he used to be an ER doctor and misses it, but doesn't miss all the hours. So he does both, because they're down in numbers in the ER."

"So can he take out these stupid stitches in my head, too?"

"Not yet. It'll be at least a week for those things."

"But everyone's going to stare!"

"Tell Justin the idiot."

He took her to Dr. Weston's office, and as soon as they entered, the nurse ushered them inside. She got Sydney's height and weight, then took her back to the examining room where she dressed in a gown and Dr. Weston did her physical. After he was done, he sat her up and faced her. "Get dressed. I want to talk to Colin." He faced the nurse. "Don't let her alone."

"Yes, sir," the woman said.

"Am I going to live?" Sydney asked.

He chuckled. "Yes, and I'll get back to you with your test results."

He walked out, and after the nurse helped Sydney dress, Dr. Weston and Colin walked back into the room.

"Hey! How are you doing?" Colin asked with a grin.

She crossed her arms and stared at him. "What are you doing in here?"

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"I've been invited to discuss your head, but I'm not your physician. I'm just an observer."

"Great. I have a fan club."

"You bet." He winked and Dr. Weston laughed.

"Have a seat," Dr. Weston said to her, pointing to the table. The two men talked for a few minutes over her chart before Dr. Weston faced her. He looked at her stitches, checked over her head and smiled toward Colin. "This looks good."

"What did Colin tell you?" Sydney asked.

"Everything. I don't think he left anything out, either, including how you can't go up steps because you get lightheaded. Didn't Dr. Brooks tell you to take it easy?"

"No, sir."

"You should've been told that when you were discharged so you'd remember it."

"She didn't," Sydney said. "Unless I forgot, but I'm pretty sure I didn't. I told Colin everything she said right after she said it."

"I'm sure she didn't mention it," Dr. Weston said. "So, is everything else normal?"

"I guess so," she said. "What do you think, Colin?"

He crossed his arms. "Other than being stubborn and wanting to do everything by yourself, we have a few issues."

"Nice comment," she muttered. "I should recommend you for diplomat of the year."

Dr. Weston chuckled, took her blood pressure, and continued with her other vitals. "We checked your blood from the weekend and you're fine, with nothing to worry about. We

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checked for anemia, because you get lightheaded, and you're at the low end of normal. I'm going to see what your blood results look like today."

Sydney's cell phone rang. She tried to reach it from the table, but was too high up. Colin caught her just as she was about to fall and handed her purse to her. She flipped open the cell phone and answered it.

"Sydney White."

"This is Mrs. Oberman, a friend of Mrs. Richman, and I just saw what you did for her. I'd love it if you'd come to my house and help me out."

Sydney looked up, seeing both men just staring at her. "I can see you in about an hour. What's your address?" She grabbed a piece of paper and a pen from her purse and wrote the information as fast as she could, her two observers still watching her. She thanked the woman, ended the call, and faced the men.

"Another job?" Colin asked.

"Yeah. She liked what I did for Mrs. Richman."

Dr. Weston shook his head and looked disgusted. Colin just stared at him, having an unspoken conversation, before Dr. Weston continued. "I recommended a two day stay in the hospital for you, just from the location of the wound and since you passed out when you fell. There's a bump there, but it seems to be going down. Do you have any problems remembering anything?"

"I still don't remember being hit, or even that my purse was in the car."

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"That's true," Colin said. "She didn't know it the next day, even though she left it there."

"Dr. Brooks should've had her stay longer," Dr. Weston muttered.

"Maybe she was distracted?" Sydney said.

Dr. Weston shook his head. "We have papers printed up for concussions so the patient knows how to care for their head. You should've been given a paper for your wound, too." He consulted his notes and talked to Colin for a moment, then faced Sydney. "I think you're fine, but I don't want you doing anything strenuous at all. I don't see any more swelling, so I think when you hit your head, the metal did most of the damage. However, because you passed out, I'd like you to stay away from driving and stay with someone for at least a week longer."

"A week?" she said. "But I have to get back to my life!"

"I don't think you're ready for that yet." He glanced over at Colin. "What do you think?"

"I can't input a diagnosis and you know it," he answered.

"I know, but do you agree with me, informally?"

"Yes, I do. I've seen her first-hand not able to go steps, and haven't allowed her to do much at all. I don't think anyone else would be able to fight her stubborn streak like I can, because I always have Gertrude and John for backup."

Her hands flew to her hips. "Wait a minute. Who died and made you boss?"

"Irritable, too," Dr. Weston said to Colin. "Has she been like that long?"

"Not really. It's a new one, maybe a day old?"

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"Irritable?" she asked. "Do you think it's possible that I want my life back?"

Her cell phone rang again, and just as she was about to answer it, Colin grabbed it and turned it off.

"That was my phone! How dare you do that?"

"You're busy. You don't need another client right now, and don't need to deal with your family."

"Yes, I do...I mean I do need another client! I don't need my family, that's for sure." She held out her hand. "Can I have my phone back, please?"

"No. You have enough to deal with right now." He glanced at Dr. Weston. "Do you want to add any naps to the list for her?"

"Sure. Sounds good to me. Want to make it a morning one and an afternoon one?"

"We could start with afternoon, then if she gets snotty, make her take a morning one too," Colin answered.

How dare he? This was just ticking her off. "I'm right here!" Sydney said, waving. "Why not ask me!"

Dr. Weston stared at her, glanced at Colin, who nodded, then wrote something on her chart. "How many headaches do you get?" he asked her.

Before she could even open her mouth, Colin began to talk. "Every day. I called you with the prescription I gave her."

Sydney grunted and held her head. They were giving her a headache and that was for sure. Colin wouldn't even let her answer Dr. Weston's questions. She might as well walk out of

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the office. "Since you two want to talk about me, can I leave?"

Dr. Weston ignored her, facing Colin. "Keep the medications up, and it'll help. Dizziness?"

"Lightheaded," Colin said. "I haven't seen explicit dizziness."

"Can I talk here?" She hated being the center of their discussion, just sitting there and listening. Why were they ignoring her like this? "Can you at least help me get off this table so I can leave?" She moved to the edge, but Colin grabbed her arms and pushed her back to her spot.

"Stay put. You don't remember as much as I do."

Dr. Weston faced Sydney. "I don't trust your judgment either." He turned to Colin. "It's a good call. I agree with your assessment, down to the fatigue and slight sensitivity to light."

"When was I sensitive to light?" she asked Colin.

"Yesterday. It's better today."

"I'm sure there was a reason for it...but I don't remember."

"She vomited yesterday," Colin added. "Her parents were visiting—"

She faced Dr. Weston. "They'd make you vomit, too."

Dr. Weston chewed on the end of his pen. "Could be the medication."

"From the night before?" Colin asked. "Nope. Don't buy it."

Dr. Weston faced Sydney. "Tell you what. If you don't want to stay with Colin, then I'll put you back in the hospital. It's your choice."

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"Back with Dr. Brooks in the hospital? No way! She'd treat me badly and I wouldn't be able to stay anyway. Besides, I'm fine. You two are overreacting."

"No, you're not fine," Dr. Weston answered. "You're still having symptoms of the concussion and you should still be in the hospital. You need someone to watch over you, and it sounds to me like Colin's the best person to do that right now, because you're right about Dr. Brooks. If you went back, she'd make sure you'd be out, just to save her own job." He thought for a moment. "Would you rather stay with a family member?"

That was a fate worse than death. "No. Definitely not."

"Then stay with Colin. He's a nice guy and has staff to help him out when he's not there. It's like a free hospital stay, but better."

Colin was nodding and grinning, but Sydney just wanted to smack him. She sighed and stared at the duo of evil doctors in front of her. "Fine. For how long?"

"Just a week, then I want to see you back in here."

"What time?"

"Next Monday, early. Tell the receptionist you need the first available time slot. Fair enough?"

She wrote it on the piece of paper. "I don't have much of a choice, do I?"

"Sure. I can put you in the hospital with Dr. Brooks if you want, or you can go back to your apartment, pass out and potentially die. It's your choice."

"Great. A comedian."

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Worry covered his face. "I'm being serious, Sydney. If you live on the second floor and there's no elevator, like Colin tells me, you could die from falling. That's no lie. It's your health and the best thing for you is to do as we say."

"Fine. Am I allowed to work?"

"Honestly, I'd rather you not. Anything strenuous can hurt you. You've had a major hit to your head, and you need to take it easy. I'd call that client back and reschedule."

"Reschedule decorating her house for Christmas? What am I to say—sorry, we'll have to move Christmas this year because of my head? I'd lose a client and my business. You have no idea what you're saying!" The tone of her own voice and stress level made the pain unbearable. She lowered her head and closed her eyes, her hand flying to the stitches that felt like they were going to burst.

Colin stood up and helped Sydney lie down on the table. "I've got work covered for her. We're compromising. She's painting, and I'm doing the climbing and heavy lifting."

He turned toward Colin. "You took off work? The superman of the hospital?"

"Yep. A few weeks, sort of."

"Well, keep up the good work with this one, and let me know if there's anything else happening. That prescription should help, but time is the best thing for this, as you know." He turned to Sydney. "Tell Colin if you're seeing double, or anything else happens out of the ordinary. If so, we really want to see you in Emergency again. He can call me at home and I'll be your doctor so you don't have to see Dr. Brooks. What she did to you just wasn't right."

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Sydney nodded, the pain still throbbing in her head and tears threatening to fill her eyes.

Dr. Weston turned to Colin. "Don't forget the meeting we're going to call about this."

"Right. I'll have everything ready."

Dr. Weston stood up and Colin walked in front of Sydney, then bent to her face. "Do you feel better now?"

She closed her eyes. "No."

"It's time to go."

She sat up and he helped her off the table. She lowered her head, and almost fell, the pain was that unbearable.

As Colin held her up, Dr. Weston bent to look into her eyes. "Dizzy?"

"Not really." She closed her eyes and waited for it to pass, then opened her eyes to face the good doctors.

"Yep. A week, at least," Dr. Weston said. He lifted her head and stared at her eyes, then glanced toward Colin. "Have fun with that one. She's got attitude."

Colin laughed. "Not really."

Sydney took a deep breath and let Colin hold her up. Otherwise, she'd be on the floor and knew it. They were right and she needed to depend on him just a little bit longer.

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Chapter Seven

The woman was rich, there was no doubt about it, but the home needed to be updated. It was dark, and there wasn't much time until Christmas to make it seem less depressing. Why did people wait until the last minute to call her for their decorating needs?

"Well, Mrs. Oberman," Sydney said, looking at the old home. "I think if you have just a few things, it'll look very Christmassy. A tree, a few poinsettias, and maybe something on the railing going up the stairs."

"I want as much as you did for Mrs. Richman," the old woman demanded.

"That took me over a month to do," Sydney replied. "I don't have much time and I have two more clients as well." Sydney reached into her purse. "So, if you want the name of someone who can do what you want in that amount of time, I'm willing to give you her name."

"No! I want you to do it. Just give me whatever you can do in a short time and I'll be happy."

Sydney grinned. Worked every time. "Sure. I should be out of here in two days, tops." She glanced over at Colin, whose eyebrows were raised, surprise covering his face. Sydney reviewed the budget for Mrs. Oberman and discussed a few other details, then left the home with Colin.

As soon as they were in the car, Colin shook his head and took a big breath. "You're good. I should hire you for my personnel director."

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"Call their bluff and be ready to walk if need be. My first rule. I don't like being manipulated by clients and won't stand for it."

"I agree. Now what's next?"

She checked her watch. "Your office. It's time to make them earn their bucks."

He grinned. "I like the way you think." He made a u-turn in the street and headed back to his office. The sky was sunny, and the small amount of snow left on the ground had begun to melt. He pulled into the parking lot across the street and watched the front door.

"It's about ten," he said. "I want to see who's leaving for lunch right now. They've been taking two-hour lunches and I'm not happy. I give them an hour."

"An hour? I'd give them half an hour. They're close to restaurants and people need them."

"Yeah, but it's a stressful job and they really need the break. But two hours is too long."

They watched for a moment until a woman walked out of the building, checking both ways as soon as she got outside. She lit a cigarette, then ran to her car and drove away.

"Linda Holmes. Good doctor, lousy employee." He pulled out a piece of paper and made a note. "Do me a favor and keep an eye on her. I want to know what time she comes back." He opened his door and started to get out.

"Where are you going?"

Colin looked back over his shoulder. "To check up on everyone. I'll be back in a little bit."

"I'll keep watch."

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"Thanks." He walked across the street, stopping only for traffic, and went to the back of the building. Sydney felt like an undercover cop while she watched.

After about ten minutes, Colin came walking back to the car, then got into the driver's seat.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Linda has a patient waiting for her. She's in big trouble, because the patient's been waiting for forty-two minutes already. I think it's time to dock pay for late appointments, don't you?"

"Yep. If I were manager, I'd be monitoring all the appointments and have a survey for the patients. If the doctor was late, I'd give them a free visit and dock the doctor." She chuckled. "Dock the doctor. That's too funny!"

"That's going to be the name of the new plan," he said. "I called a meeting for tomorrow morning."

They waited for quite some time, until finally, Linda pulled back into the parking lot. Smoke poured from her open car window while she waited an extra five minutes.

Colin checked his watch. "The mother of that two-year-old has been waiting now for about an hour. Linda's going to hear about this one. That's just unacceptable."

He got out of the car and crossed the road, waiting for Linda to get out of her car. She finally waltzed out, grabbed a bag from the back seat and started to eat something from the bag.

"Why would she smoke *then* eat?" Sydney said to herself. "That seems a little bit odd, unless she's trying to cover the smoke smell."

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The woman entered the building and Colin checked his watch. He made a phone call, then walked around to the back of the building. He was gone at least ten minutes before returning to the car. As soon as he got into the driver's seat, he turned the key and pulled out.

"Yes?"

"An hour and ten minutes. That's unforgivable. I saw what happened when she walked in, too, because I followed her. The mother was ready to pull her hair out and the kid had wet himself. He's toilet training. There's a meeting tomorrow morning at seven, and my staff is calling five other doctors to interview." He glanced at Sydney. "I'd never have known any of this if it wasn't for you. I'd have been called into that room to pick up her slack, not knowing she wasn't doing her job."

"I didn't do anything."

He faced her, looking rather pensive. "You're so good for me, you have no idea. I need to make you a permanent fixture."

"Like a faucet?" she asked.

"Yep. Pretty and shiny." He laughed. "What are you hungry for? I told John we'd be out for lunch."

"Really? I can get away?"

He raised his eyebrows and watched her. "You like your independence, don't you?"

"Is it obvious?"

He chuckled. "How about burgers?"

She smiled. "Sure. Anything, and I'm paying."

"Not even a remote possibility of that," he murmured with a laugh.

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"Why, because I'm too poor?" The thought had crossed her mind before, just wondering what he really thought of her.

"No, because you did some good work for me."

She didn't like his attitude. Sitting back, she glanced at his grin. What did he really think of her, anyway? Was she a waif he pulled in from the cold? She knew any type of relationship with him wouldn't make it, because he was on a different social level than she was.

She was back on the fence about him, given that comment about her paying for lunch. It was like an emotional war to her, because she was really attracted to him, but given the circumstances, it just wouldn't work.

He drove down Columbia Avenue looking for a great burger place, finally stopping at a sit-down restaurant. He helped her out of the car and they entered the building, which was very crowded. As they waited to be seated, Sydney leaned against the wall and closed her eyes. Her head was killing her, but she didn't want to tell Colin.

"Are you in pain?" he whispered, his arm going around her shoulders.

She opened her eyes. "I'm fine."

"You don't look fine. You're very pale again. Does the light bother your eyes?"

"I'll be fine."

Colin studied her face. "Are you tired?"

"I'm fine."

"If this isn't a good idea, we can just go home—"

"No, I'll be fine. Just let me rest here for a little bit." She moved her head to his shoulder and closed her eyes.

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"If you want, you can sit in the car until they call us. I'll come out to get you."

He wasn't going to be satisfied with her trying to rest. She backed away from his arm. "I'm better now."

He put his arm around her waist and pulled her to him. "I don't believe you one bit. Let's get something to eat. That might help."

The hostess approached them and took them to a booth. Sydney sat on one side and he was on the other, just staring at her face. "Do you feel any better yet?"

"Yes. Much better." She wasn't lying, but hated it when she didn't feel well. She didn't like the attention and just wanted to be herself again.

After they ordered their burgers, Colin pulled out a piece of paper and a pen, then faced Sydney while waiting for their food. "Describe to me what you want to do for Mrs. Oberman."

"Tree with decorations, candle sconces, and holly up the banister. I'm also thinking about stockings, just to give it a homier look, and mistletoe above the door."

"Mistletoe?"

"It makes it fun at Christmas."

"I like that idea." He grinned, made a few notes, then looked up. "Do you want to get her a real tree?"

"No, fake. It's more symmetrical and easier to decorate, plus, she won't have to remember to water it. She didn't seem to be too with it to me, and I'd never forgive myself if the tree caused a fire. It can't be any tree, though. It's got to be an expensive one."

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"Got it. Let's get two. One for my house and one for the client. Think they'll fit in my car?"

Sydney nodded. "Sure."

The waitress brought them their drinks and smiled at Colin. She touched his shoulder and even winked. Sydney was ready to take her down. As soon as she walked away, Sydney leaned in close. "Do all women flirt with you like that?"

"Like what?" he asked, still writing a few things.

"Didn't you see that waitress smile and wink at you, and even touch your arm?"

"Oh, that? I ignore it. It's no big deal at all." He went back to his drawing, fixated on making the picture of the tree look just right on the paper.

Sydney touched his hand and lowered her voice. "See why I can't date you? You draw women in like flies!"

He lifted his eyes and faced her. "And I ignore them. They're nothing to me, all fluff and no substance. That's why I like you. You like me for what's inside and not just what I look like or my job. You're also very honest. There's nothing superficial about you."

Sydney sat back. "But what if you find a beautiful woman who likes you for what's inside too?"

He leaned up and stroked her cheek. "I already did."

She found herself grinning and fought back the tears. He was so nice to her, she didn't know what to do.

Colin began drawing again. "Now what about the other client?"

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"I'm to meet with her tomorrow. I should have most of the things done for Mrs. Oberman by then."

He lifted his eyes. "No, you're not. You're taking an afternoon nap right after lunch."

"I can't." She sipped on her soda.

"You have to. It's the doctor's orders, remember? Tell me what to buy and I'll do it."

Sydney sighed. "You can't. Men don't have the shopping gene."

His face registered surprise. "We don't?"

She laughed just as the waitress brought them their meals. The woman made sure she touched Colin's hand. "I hope you like it."

He withdrew his hand from hers and grabbed Sydney's hand instead. "I'm sure we will."

Sydney's heart melted. He'd included her in his life!

The waitress glanced at Sydney, stuck her nose into the air with a huff and stormed off.

"No tip for her," Colin said, chuckling, then reached into his pocket. "I have something for you."

"Oh, I hope it's pretty and shiny!"

"Do you like pretty and shiny things?"

"It all depends. If it's a fender or a faucet, no. What did you have in mind?"

He grinned. "A lot of things." He pulled out a small bottle, opened it and handed her a pill. "Do you still have a headache?"

"Sort of. I don't think those things are working. It's been what...seven hours?"

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Colin began to chuckle. "Try about four. What time do you think we got up, anyway?"

"About two in the morning. I guess I'm a bit confused."

His eyebrows furrowed slightly. "Very, but it goes with your head. I'm not surprised."

She took the pill, washed it down and started to eat her meal. Just as she bit into her sandwich, someone walked up to the table. "Will you look who it is?"

Sydney raised her eyes and saw Dr. Brooks standing right beside their table.

"How cozy is this?" the woman asked. "Does she have her hand on your wallet yet, Colin? She doesn't even look sick to me."

"This is a business meeting, if you don't mind," Colin answered, ignoring Dr. Brooks' little dig. "Sydney's an interior designer and she's helping out at my place." He pulled out the piece of paper he'd been writing on and showed it to Dr. Brooks. "That's a Christmas tree, in case you can't figure it out. I was telling Sydney what I wanted."

"But you never decorate," she said, lifting her eyes from the paper.

"I have some employees that need to be rewarded and I'm having a party this year."

"A party? Who's invited?" she asked.

"My staff and friends," he answered.

"No one from the hospital?"

"Not really. Now don't you have some place to go? We need to discuss money and that's never pretty."

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"You're right about that. Ta-ta!" She walked away with a grin, and Sydney just shook her head then leaned forward, her voice low.

"You're good. She wanted to bring me down in front of you and you stopped her without even mentioning the phone call or fighting with her."

"Oh, that's easy. Get professional with her and she'll fold. She nothing."

"Considering how she treated you on the phone yesterday and how she's behaving now, I'd think she was nuts."

"She is nuts," Colin whispered. "Don't trust her. I wouldn't doubt it if she tried to come to the party."

"Wouldn't she need to know the time and place?"

"She has friends, Sydney. Powerful friends and they'd all tell her. She'd know about the party even if I hadn't told her."

They kept talking about the party and what might be needed, while finishing their meals. Afterward, they stopped at a craft shop, and on the way home, pulled into a fast-food restaurant. Before Colin got out of the car, he looked over at her. "I'm getting a soda. Want something?"

"Sure. Bottled water, because I don't trust tap water."

"You look tired, so you just sit here." He walked away and went inside, then returned a few minutes later, handing her a cup of water.

"They didn't have bottled?" she asked.

"Yes, but I asked them to put the bottled water into a cup. I figured it would be easier to drink in the car."

"That was nice of you." She sucked down half the cup while he drove to his home, glancing at her frequently.

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"Are you thirsty?" he asked.

"Yes. That takes a lot out of me." She finished the water.
For some reason, it really hit the spot.

"Watching people not doing their jobs and shopping makes you tired?"

She covered a yawn. "For some reason, I'm really tired today."

"How tired?"

"Really tired." She yawned and put her head back on the seat.

A devious grin covered his face. "Good. That sleeping pill is working already."

"Sleeping pill?" she asked, her mouth not wanting to work.

"I slipped it into your water. It dissolved really well, too."
He seemed so proud of himself and she just wanted to slap him.

"Scum." She felt her eyes go shut.

* * * *



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Sydney awoke to a huge Christmas tree in the corner of the room in front of her. Colin was hanging the decorations on the tree they'd just bought that afternoon, and the lights were lit. It was dark in the room, but the fireplace was blazing. It made her feel like she was finally home, even though it wasn't her house.

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"What are you doing?" she asked, throwing off the cover on top of her.

Colin turned around and faced her with a grin. "Waiting for you to wake up. How do you feel?"

She sat up and lowered her head to her hands. "Ticked off. Why did you spike my water?"

"Oh, you remember that?"

"Yes, and I'll never forget it, either. That was just mean."

"You're supposed to take a nap and I was just being helpful. Aren't you happy I could help you out?"

She lifted her head an inch, then lowered it. "Where did you get the sleeping pill?"

"There's a pharmacy beside my office." He sat beside her and wrapped his arm around her. She leaned against him, and he pulled her head to his lap, stroking her hair while she lifted her legs up to the couch. "So do you like the tree?" he asked.

"Yeah. It looks great." She covered her yawn. "But you didn't put the star at the top. Want me to do it?"

"Over my dead body. I'll have John help me."

"Chicken. You're just afraid I'll make it look better than you will."

"Yeah, right. Let's go with that. How's your head?" he asked.

"It hurts. When did I get the last pill? Twenty hours ago?"

"Try about five. We have to go to your brother's soon. Do you want something for dinner?"

"Not really."

He patted her stomach. "Oh, you poor pregnant thing."

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She grabbed his hand and threw it off to his laughter. "That's not funny. So when are you planning on telling my family you made it all up?"

"I'm not. I never told them you were pregnant. I said you had a condition. That's much different."

"But you didn't stop them from believing it. How is that different?"

He leaned down to her face. "I never lied. But I did get your parents to spend time with you over the holidays."

She glanced his way. "Are you sure that was your goal? Or was it to keep me here?"

"Keeping you here is a different issue. I don't want you alone for Christmas or Christmas Eve. Oh, and I spread the word at the office about the party, too. Everyone knows to be here on Christmas Eve at five."

"That's not a problem." She closed her eyes and started to go back to sleep while lying on his lap.

"Sydney," he whispered.

"What?"

"Your brother wants to see you."

"No, he wants your money," she said. "It has nothing to do with me."

"You can sleep on his couch if you want."

"Thanks."

He sat her up, stood and helped her to her feet. As soon as he walked her into the kitchen and helped her into a chair, her head hit the table with a thud. He'd really knocked her out and she wasn't happy about it at all. She made a mental note. Doctors are nasty and play by their own rules.

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She felt herself doze off until someone rubbed her back.

"Wake up," Colin said.

She lifted her head. "Where am I?"

"It's dinner time."

She opened her eyes and looked up to a huge sandwich and a glass of milk.

"For the baby," he said with a chuckle, pointing at the glass.

"Scum."

He laughed, put a headache pill in front of her, and she sucked it down with the milk.

He sat down with the same meal for himself and she forced herself to eat. "That sleeping pill was nasty. Don't ever do that again, please?"

"I'll think about it."

She raised an eyebrow. "You'll think about it?"

"Yes. It's effective and you never know when it's happening." He ate some more and almost laughed at her. "You're really quiet when you're sleeping."

"Nice comment. Are you running for friend of the year now?"

"Oh, I think I have that already locked up."

"Or you should be—"

"Everyone has to put in ten grand tonight," he said, interrupting her. "How much money do you think I'll win?"

"These guys are all businessmen, from what I've been told. They're all loaded, and they think you're a bad player."

"I'm going to let them think that, too. It'll make the win so much sweeter."

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She sighed. "Just don't lose your car or the house, please?"

"I'd never do something quite that stupid. I love my car." He laughed and she knew, just from that comment, she was in for a tough night of him losing. She couldn't let him give it all to her stupid brother.

They finished their sandwiches and left for Dave's house. Sydney dozed off after a few minutes of driving. She was in the middle of some nice dream when Colin shook her.

"Sydney. It's time to wake up."

Her eyes flew open and she faced him. "Why?"

"We're at Dave's house."

"Darn. I was hoping that was just a nightmare." She closed her eyes, and her car door flew open.

"Time to stand up."

"I hate this."

"I know," he said, helping her out of the car. His arm went around her waist as she trudged up to the door, which Dave opened before Colin could even knock.

"Look who's here!" Dave said. "Colin and Sydney!" He ushered them inside with a cigar in his mouth.

As soon as they walked into the house, Sydney's head felt awful. She grabbed on to Colin's arm and lowered her head against him, covering her nose.

"Guys, the cigars have to go, or we're gone," Colin said.

"What?" a man at the table exclaimed. "But I just lit up!"

"Go outside. I'm serious. Sydney can't take the smoke."

She covered her mouth and closed her eyes. Waves of nausea hit her, so she ran into the bathroom, kneeling at the

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toilet and dumping her dinner. For some reason, that smell was just obnoxious.

Colin walked into the bathroom and shut the door. "Good 'morning sickness fake out."

"I'm not faking it. Whatever you slipped me has given me the worst medicine head. I can't think straight. It's giving me an upset stomach."

He pulled out his paper and pen and began to write. "I bet it was the sleeping pill. You're very sensitive to medications."

"Do you think so, Mr. Genius?"

He chuckled. "Ready to face your family?"

"Are the cigars gone?"

"Yes and they sprayed the room to cover up the smell. You saved their lives, and mine. Thanks." He helped her to her feet, and she washed her face.

"To the couch for you," he whispered.

"You couldn't just leave me at home, could you?"

He chuckled. "I can't leave you alone. I'm your extra appendage."

"I want it cut off," she whispered. "I'm fine by myself."

He smiled, took her arm and helped her to the couch, then walked over to the table. "Who's playing here?"

Sydney didn't care, but listened to Dave introduce everyone anyway. "Howard, Orville, Abe, you and me."

"Got it," Colin said.

She knew most of the rich businessmen at the table and hated everyone except for Colin. She was on the fence about him.

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Dave explained the game while Sydney closed her eyes. The sound of chips clinking together made her hope Colin wouldn't do something stupid. She didn't care if the rest of them lost the shirts off their backs. It would serve them right.

The door to the house opened after a while. "I brought food. Where's Sydney?" It was her sister-in-law, Margaret.

Certain everyone pointed toward her, Sydney ignored them all. It was easier to deal with everything if they all thought she was asleep.

"Sydney. Are you okay?"

She opened her eyes and saw Margaret peeking over the couch. She was a beautiful woman, all made up and everything that plastic surgery could fix was fixed.

"I'm fine."

"Can I get you something to drink?"

"Got any alcohol?" Sydney asked.

"No alcohol!" Colin yelled.

"You don't even drink," Dave said.

Sydney sighed. "Oh yeah. I forgot."

"You forgot?" Colin said. "Now you're forgetting things?"

"Looks that way." She closed her eyes again. After a few minutes, she felt someone walk in front of her.

"Sydney." It was Margaret, and Sydney opened her eyes. "Eat something. You'll feel better." She was holding a piece of toast on a plate in one hand and a glass of ginger ale in the other hand.

Sydney wasn't going to win this battle. Colin probably put Margaret up to it, so she sat up and took the two things from the woman, lowering her head.

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"Not fair!" Colin yelled. "I lost again?"

The other men laughed and Sydney shook her head, then took a bite of the toast.

"You might be calling a cab to go home," Margaret whispered.

Sydney sighed. "Maybe. Will you at least drive me home?"

"To Colin's house?"

"No, to my apartment. He won't let me be alone, and I really need to go home to get my mail and make sure no one's broken in." She took a sip of soda.

"No, my place," Colin said, from the table. "If you're going home, it'll be with me."

"Why?" Howard asked.

Sydney heard whispering.

"Oh, I get it," Howard answered. "So you got hit on the head, huh?"

Sydney glanced toward the table. "Yeah. The wrapping paper of doom."

"Come to Papa!" Colin yelled. The men all moaned as the chips were pulled across the table. Colin was done losing and Sydney was ready to leave.

Margaret sat beside her. "How do you feel?"

"Terrible. Colin gave me something to make me sleep and now I feel lousy."

"Oh, I understand that. A medicine head."

"Yes." Sydney lowered her head. She ate the rest of the toast and drank some of the ginger ale. It helped a little bit.

Margaret faced her. "Do you have morning—"

"Margaret!" Dave exclaimed.

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"Oh, right," she answered. "Would you like something else to eat?"

They were all insane, falling into Colin's little plan of deception. Colin began to chuckle, sounding so proud of himself. She wanted to kill him for playing such a mean trick.

Sydney finished her ginger ale, handed the glass to Margaret and lay back down.

"I'm out of this one," Colin said. He walked up to Sydney, grabbed a quilt and put it over her.

"Thanks," she said.

"Any time. Are you better now?"

"Yeah. Let's go dancing."

"She's delirious," Margaret whispered.

Colin laughed, went into the kitchen for a drink then returned to the couch. Margaret walked away, and he sat on the floor in front of Sydney.

"You okay for a while?" he whispered.

"If I die, donate my body to science. They need a perfect specimen."

He began to laugh as he drank a cola. "I'm sure they'd love to have you, too. Is it the sleeping pill?"

"Either that or I'm really sick. Maybe I got something in that hospital. I've heard stories—"

"It's the medication. You haven't been out of the hospital long enough to get anything from your short stay. Do you want something else to drink?"

"No. I just want to die."

Colin chuckled. "Not on my watch, you're not. Dr. Weston wouldn't forgive me."

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"So are you winning?" she asked.

He leaned forward and started to whisper. "Sort of. I'm in a good position and put myself out of this hand on purpose."

"Psycho."

He leaned forward and laughed, stroking her hair. "How's your head?"

"It hurts. I think I threw up the painkiller."

"Get some sleep, if you can. It's the best thing for you right now. I don't have anything else to give you."

"Maybe she's pregnant!" Howard yelled. Dave and Margaret whispered something to him, and Sydney just sighed and shook her head.

"This is your fault," she whispered.

"He's the dad?" Howard said with a chuckle.

"No!" Sydney said. "I'm not—"

"New game." Colin stood up. "And the stakes are raised."

"Oh brother," Sydney said under her breath.

They played for a while and the conversation started to get heated.

"I'm out," Howard said.

"Me too," Orville added. The two men went outside, letting a bunch of cold air come into the house. Sydney pulled the quilt up over her as she shivered. It finally got warmer and she closed her eyes again. This was miserable. Colin should've left her at his home.

The men played for a few more minutes until Abe finally folded. It was down to Colin and Dave.

"I'm out of chips," Dave said.

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"Oh, let's play for something other than chips," Colin said. "How about property?"

"But the chips in the middle of the table should be about forty thousand or so—"

"Closer to fifty, but who's counting," Colin replied.

Sydney wanted to say Colin was counting—counting cards, but he was having too much fun.

"All right," Dave said. "What did you have in mind?"

"Well, I just happen to have the deed for my property with me," he said.

Sydney sat up and faced Colin, watching as he put a piece of paper into the middle of the table full of poker chips.

"Your house and land?" she exclaimed. "That's worth what...five million?"

"At least," Colin said, holding his cards close to his chest. "What'll it be?"

Dave sighed. "Well, I have that apartment building Sydney lives in. That's probably the closest thing I could wager."

"No!" Sydney yelled. Colin shot her a nasty glare and she moaned. Both of them were insane.

"I don't like this," Margaret whispered. "Colin could lose his home."

"Yeah, or worse," Sydney said. "I could lose mine."

"Relax, Sydney," Colin replied. "I'll take care of you at my place. You'll never be homeless."

"Yeah, and that's worrisome in itself," she muttered. Colin just chuckled and blew her a kiss. She shook her head, trying not to smile at him. Encouraging him would only make it worse.

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Dave turned to his wife. "Get me the deed to the apartment building from the safe deposit box."

Margaret left the room just as the other men came inside and Dave explained what was happening. They all sat down and watched until Margaret returned and handed him the paper. Sydney bit her lip, worried about the entire game. She should've grabbed Colin's hand and gotten out of there before then, but he wouldn't have listened. This had gone too far. She had to do something.

Sydney slowly got up from her seat, held on to the couch and her head, then walked to the table. "I have to say something here."

"Stay out of it," Dave said. "It's not your problem."

"Yes, it is," she replied. "Whoever wins, either Colin will be out of his home and property or I'll be out on the streets. Think about this. Don't be stupid!"

The two men looked at their cards, then stared at each other over the mound of chips and two pieces of paper on the table.

"Shut up, Sydney," Dave said.

Colin didn't take his eyes off Dave. "I have to agree with him. Just go back to the couch and take a nap."

She stared at the men in front of her in surprise. Why did they do this? Was it a macho thing or something? "You're both very stubborn! Do you know that? What happens when one of you wins? What about the loser?"

"We play again next week," Dave said. "And he'll try to win it all back." He started to chuckle, so sure he was going to win.

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"But he counts cards!" Sydney said.

"Cool!" Dave said. "Hey, Colin! Want to hang out in Vegas with me?"

"No, I've kind of been banned from certain casinos out there."

"Aren't you worried that he cheated?" Sydney said to Dave.

"No. He couldn't cheat in this game because no one showed any cards. It's a counting-proof game."

"I can't believe this," she said, turning to Colin. "That's a beautiful home and property! Are you really willing to lose it?"

"First, I'm not going to lose, and second, it's just stuff. I always told you it didn't feel like home."

"*Look!*" Both men turned their attention to her. "I love you both dearly—" She covered her mouth with both hands and stared at Colin.

His mouth fell open and his eyebrows rose. "You do?"

Sydney backed away and lowered her voice. "It's the medication. Carry on."

"That I believe," Dave answered. "She definitely doesn't love me. We're enemies and have been since she kicked me out of the womb. She wanted to make a 'grand entrance.'"

All the guys laughed and Sydney fell onto the couch, her head in her hands. What had she done? She shouldn't have let her emotions get the best of her, and now she was going to pay. Colin thought she was in love with him, which she knew, deep down, was the truth, but would never admit it. She couldn't lead him on, knowing that once she was allowed to be independent, they'd drift apart. He was way above her,

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socially, and she'd never fit into his lifestyle or with his friends.

"I think we have everything in," Dave said. "What'cha got?"

"Oh, you go first," Colin said. "It's your property...for now."

"For now?" Sydney asked, turning toward him.

"Yeah," Colin answered. "Show me your cards."

Sydney got up and approached the table again. Dave laid down his hand with a grin. "Read 'em and weep. I'll try not to put too many plastic reindeer on your roof so the neighbors won't complain. Margaret, start packing—we're moving up to a mansion."

Dave started to take the chips, but Colin just grinned and touched his hand. "Not so fast." He laid down his cards on top of the chips. "I believe I've won, right?"

All the men stared at Colin's cards, all the same suit and all high cards. Sydney didn't know the rules of the game, nor did she care. However, from the expressions of surprise on all of their faces, she was sure she was now going to be homeless.

She plunked down on the end of the couch. Colin hated that apartment building, and knowing him, he'd bulldoze it and turn it into farmland. "Oh, no," she moaned. "I'm out of a home!"

Colin pulled all the chips to him and smiled. "It's been great playing with you guys."

"I can't believe it," Dave said with a grin. "I finally unloaded that eyesore off on someone!"

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"My apartment building?" Sydney asked, lifting her head.

"Oh yeah. Couldn't have happened better, either. This is *great*. That thing was such a money pit, too!" Dave started to laugh. "Thank you, Colin. Any time you want to come back, you're more than invited. Bring your friends, too."

"Hey, speaking of friends," Colin said. "I'm having a party on Christmas Eve. I could set up a game in the basement if you want."

"Who's coming?"

"All of you and your families, some doctors from our office, and a few from the hospital. Oh, and your parents, Dave."

"I smell money!" Howard said, rubbing his hands together. "Count me in!"

"What, ten grand for starters again?" Dave asked.

"Sounds good to me. I'll pass the word," Colin answered. "Oh, and I'm going to invite one of Sydney's clients, too. Her husband looked like he was loaded."

"Mrs. Richman?" Sydney asked.

"Yep. Keep her occupied upstairs and we'll collect downstairs from her husband. Perfect cover," Colin answered with a grin.

Sydney was disgusted. They all threw around thousands of dollars like it was water, and she had to pinch every penny. Life didn't seem fair, and now that she was sure she'd be homeless, it couldn't get any worse.

"You'll be fine," Margaret whispered to Sydney. "I won't let him sign over the deed."

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"Can you meet me before Christmas so I can give you the apartment complex?" Dave asked Colin. "I'll have my lawyer there."

Margaret sighed and plopped down on the couch beside Sydney. "I tried."

"Sure," Colin answered Dave, reading over the deed. "I'll get my lawyer involved, too." He lifted his head and smiled at Sydney. "Want to do lunch with some lawyers?"

"No," she answered. "Dave didn't tell you but his lawyer is my dad. No. I don't want to do lunch."

"Oh yeah. I forgot that part," Dave said, looking at Colin. "So, we take Mom and Dad out to lunch. Deal?"

"Sure," Colin said. "They're fun people."

"Oh brother," Sydney muttered, her hands covering her face. "Now I know they're all certifiable."

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Chapter Eight

"Sydney! How do you feel now?"

Her mother was at the door on Tuesday morning, bright and early. Sydney was pulling on her coat, ready to head out to decorate Mrs. Oberman's house. Colin had just gotten home from his staff meeting and stood behind her.

"Mom, what are you doing here?" Sydney asked, shivering in the cold from the door standing wide open.

Doris shut the door and handed Sydney a huge crock-pot, covered in aluminum foil. "I brought lunch." She stared into the living room. "You've been decorating, I see. I hope you're not overdoing it."

"No, Mom. We're just heading out to decorate another home."

"But I'm here now. You don't need to go out. We need to have a mother-daughter chat."

"What about?" Sydney asked.

Doris began to whisper. "The birds and the bees."

Colin snickered, took the crock-pot, turned and headed for the kitchen. When he got there, he laughed so loudly, Sydney spun around to see if he was okay.

"I wonder what's so funny," Doris said.

"Oh, John and Colin were telling jokes earlier and I think he's still laughing about them." She turned back to her mother. "I hate to break this to you, Mom, but I already know about the birds and the bees."

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Doris stared at Sydney's stomach. "Obviously, but I'm talking about after the baby's born. I brought a few things in the car for you. I'll be right back." She spun on her heel and left the house.

Colin walked back into the living room, still laughing. "Do you want me to take care of Mrs. Oberman's house so you can bond with your mother and learn the facts of life?" He all but bent over in laughter, with John joining him from the kitchen.

"Very funny. She wants to give me things for the baby. What am I to do?"

Colin wiped the tears in his eyes from the laughter. "Let me handle this."

The front door opened and Doris brought a baby carrier and bags into the house. "I just got a few things, but we can get more when you're closer to your due date."

"Mom! I'm not pregnant!"

"Sydney, it's time to come back into the real world and face facts. Dave told us you had a condition and you're pregnant."

"He's mistaken. You're all mistaken!" Sydney replied. "Now take these things out of the house before I get—"

A knock at the partially opened door made the thing swing wide open. "Colin! Mommy's here!"

Sydney stared at the good doctor, whose skin had gone pale. His mouth was hanging wide open, the look of surprise covering his face. "Mom?"

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"Yes, dear. It's time for your father and me to visit. Every year, a week before Christmas." She stared at him. "You do remember, right?"

"But you haven't visited me for four years now!"

"Well, Ruth didn't like us." She looked at Sydney and Doris. "Who are these people?"

Before Colin could introduce everyone, a tall heavy-set man, the spitting image of Colin, walked through the door.

"Hurry up, Helen. I'm not getting any younger."

"I'm coming, Harold!" she bellowed.

"Are you leaving?" Colin asked, almost smiling.

"No, son. We have so many suitcases in the car." Harold stared at Sydney and Doris. "Who are these people?" He looked down at Doris' hand, still holding the baby carrier.

"Who has a baby?"

"She's going to have a baby," Doris said, pointing at Sydney. "And we don't know who the father is."

"No, I'm not!" Sydney exclaimed. "Mom, I'm not pregnant!"

"But you have that concussion and don't remember any of it, according to Dave."

Helen's face turned confused. "Who's Dave?"

"My son, her twin brother," Doris answered, pointing toward Sydney.

"Who are all you people?" Harold asked. "What's going on here?"

Colin leaned over to Sydney's ear. "All we need is your dad yet."

Sydney shook her head. "He's at work—"

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The door flew open. "Doris, I need help!"

"Speak of the devil," Sydney murmured.

"Who are these people?" Bruce asked. He dropped a bassinette on the floor and all four of the parents started to talk at the same time.

"I need a drink," Sydney muttered, leaning close to Colin.

Colin put his arm around her. "I'll join you."

John left the kitchen and stood behind Colin and Sydney. "This is more excitement than I've had in a long time. Want me to make popcorn so we can watch?"

Sydney started to chuckle. "Sure. Throw some of those sleeping pills in with it and maybe they'll shut up for a while."

"I'll handle this," Colin said, taking off his coat. He let out a loud whistle and all four parents stared at him. "That's better. Everyone to the kitchen so we can explain what's going on."

The door opened slightly. "Colin? Why are there cars—"

"Janet?" he asked.

The older woman with her brown hair up in a bun walked inside and smiled. "Helen, Harold, how are you doing?"

"We're fine," Helen said. "But why are you here? Ruth died two years ago."

"I know, but I've been visiting Colin every year around Christmas since she died, just to see how he's holding up."

"Who are you?" Doris asked. "And who's Ruth?"

"Ruth was engaged to Colin before she got cancer and died," Janet said. "She owned this farm and willed it to Colin, but he paid the family for it. Ruth was my daughter, and my only family left. My husband left me after Ruth died, so I only

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had Colin left. I consider him my son-in-law, even though they never got married."

Sydney felt the shock cover her face. Ruth's family was still in contact with him? She turned toward him and could only stare. He faced Sydney and shook his head slightly.

"We need to go to the kitchen," John said. "I think it's time we had a little chat, because I know Colin and Sydney need to go work."

"Who's Sydney?" Janet asked.

"To the kitchen!" John yelled, leading the way.

Everyone followed, and as Doris and Bruce tried to pass, Sydney pointed toward the baby items. "I'm not pregnant. Don't bring it up because it's not true. Ruth's mother is hurting and you'll make her very upset if you do."

"I don't believe you, but I'll respect your wishes," Doris said.

As soon as Sydney took off her coat and entered the kitchen, she saw John on the phone. "Hurry up. You don't want to miss this, and bring Gertrude with you. It's the most exciting thing to happen since Sydney got here."

Sydney chuckled at him, and as he hung up the phone, he grinned and winked. She liked John, and he was right. This was going to be good. Now if she could just keep her mother's mouth shut, she'd be fine.

Colin stood at the end of the table and motioned for Sydney to join him. She walked to him and he pulled out a chair, then sat her firmly in it.

"Do you want something for them to eat?" John asked Colin.

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"Yep. Coffee, tea, anything you can find."

John grinned. "Coming right up. I have just the thing."

Marjorie and Gertrude walked into the kitchen and headed toward John, trying not to laugh.

Standing beside Sydney at the head of the table, Colin faced everyone. "I'm glad you could all be here, so I can set some things straight. I'd like to introduce everyone." He glanced down at Sydney and smiled. "This is Sydney White. I met her last Friday night at the mall when she suffered a concussion. Because of a problem at the hospital, she's been staying with me and I've been making sure she doesn't fall down stairs and can get better."

"Is she your girlfriend?" Janet asked.

"No," Sydney answered, glancing up at Colin. She didn't want Ruth's mother to be upset, so she had to deny anything was going on.

Colin looked down at Sydney. "That's still up for discussion."

"No, it's not," Sydney said. "As soon as I can get back to my life I will. Dr. Taylor's helped me out tremendously and I thank him, but I need to get my life in order first."

"Sydney, don't be stupid!" Doris said. "He wants to date you, so date him already. It's obvious to everyone that you're in love with him."

"Don't put words in my mouth," Sydney said.

Colin leaned over and faced her. "But just last night at the poker game, you said—"

"It was the medication," Sydney answered, shooting him a dirty look.

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"Well, he loves you, too," Helen said. "I know my son and can tell when he's smitten."

"You are?" Sydney said, turning toward him.

He grinned, but couldn't say anything because Janet started to cry. "Does this mean you moved on from Ruth? You're not my son-in-law any more?" The tears flowed down her face.

Sydney sighed, glaring at her mother.

"Don't cry because I'll get to that," Colin said. He pointed at Doris and Bruce. "These are Sydney's parents, Doris and Bruce, and they live around here. Bruce is a successful attorney, and they have one other child, Dave, who is Sydney's twin."

"And older by three minutes," Doris said, beaming. Sydney sighed, mortified by her mother.

Colin laughed at Sydney, then pointed toward Harold and Helen. "These are my parents, Harold and Helen, and they live in upstate New York. My father's a surgeon and my mother's a nurse."

"Hello, Sydney," Helen said. "I agree with your mother. Date Colin. Not only does he love you, but he's loaded."

Sydney sat back, trying not to show her true feelings. She pasted a smile on her face, and felt Colin's hands on her shoulders. Money wasn't even close to being a factor, and would never be, in Sydney's mind. She wasn't a gold digger, but more upset because he was rich.

"And last, but not least, is Ruth's mother, Janet." He turned to Doris and Bruce. "This was Ruth's land and we were engaged. When she died two years ago, I died right along

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with her. But, since I met your daughter on Friday, I have to say I'm much happier and would love to date her."

"But Colin, we were family!" Janet stared at Sydney. "You're replacing Ruth already?"

"No one could replace Ruth," Colin replied, then glanced down at Sydney. "However, I can't continue the way I was, alone, with nothing to look forward to. Can you blame me for wanting to date again?"

"We're not dating," Sydney insisted.

He tightened his grip on her shoulders. "Yes, we are. You just don't know it yet."

She looked up at his grin. "How could I not know it?"

"It's your concussion," he said, touching her stitches.

Doris sat up and grasped Sydney's arm. "Just like she doesn't know—"

"Mother!" Sydney said. "It's not true and I told you—"

"What's not true?" Helen asked. "What were all those baby things doing out in the foyer?"

"Sydney's pregnant," Doris said. "And she doesn't know who the father is because she doesn't remember getting pregnant." She leaned forward toward Helen. "It's the concussion," she whispered.

Helen, Harold, and Janet all showed utter surprise on their faces.

John and Gertrude brought a tray of coffee mugs, coffee and tea to the table, trying to contain their laughter. "Coffee or tea anyone?"

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"I'm not pregnant, Mom!" Sydney exclaimed. "How many times do I have to tell you that? Take all those baby things back because I don't sleep around."

Colin started to laugh, turned from the table, and helped John.

Sydney spun around and faced him. "And it's not funny. The joke's over and it's not true."

"What joke?" Doris asked.

Gertrude and Marjorie brought plates and forks while John brought a huge coffee cake to the table and dished everyone a slice. "Sydney, do you want some?" he asked.

"No." Her head fell to her hands. She was frustrated, disgusted and didn't want to deal with all these people.

"Are you okay, dear?" Doris asked. "Is it morning sickness?"

"Ugh!" Sydney had had enough of her mother, ready to throw her out the door.

Colin knelt beside her. "Is it your head again, or your stomach?"

"None of it." She just wanted to cry. She considered getting her car and just driving out of there, but knew she may not make it alone with her head.

The phone rang and Colin walked over to get it. "Dr. Taylor." He glanced over at Sydney. "I see. I'll be right there." He hung up the phone and faced the family members. "I have to go into work, but I'll be back within an hour or so." He walked to Sydney and helped her to her feet. "I have to talk to you, alone."

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She wiped her eyes, and he took her into the office beside the bathroom, closing the door behind them. The pictures of Ruth were still everywhere, making Sydney realize he still hadn't moved on.

He pulled a chair up to the desk and sat her down, then sat in the big chair behind the desk, rolling it in front of her. He took her hands, holding them tightly. "This is too much for you to handle, isn't it?"

"Why?"

"I have to make Janet and my parents realize I've moved on from Ruth. I can't live in the past. Does that make sense?"

She looked at all the pictures of the dead woman in front of her. "But you haven't moved on," she whispered. "She'll always be a part of you. Even in this room, she's everywhere. I don't belong here."

He glanced around the office. "You're right, and she is here. I used to come here and talk to her, as stupid as that sounds." He faced her again. "But, Sydney, she's not in my heart. You are. You fill my heart and don't ever forget that. You do belong here. Now, my parents usually stay a day or two, then head off to visit my aunt in Washington, D.C. Can you handle them being here just a few days? If not, I'll put them in a hotel."

"I don't think that's my decision. I don't live here and I can just go home with my parents."

"No!" He took a deep breath. "You don't understand. I want you here. I don't want them here. You're going to be the buffer between them and me."

"But upstairs—"

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"You'll have to sleep alone. I can't let them think we're sleeping together. I'll have Gertrude help you in the shower, but it'll just be for a few days. I promise."

"This is very weird." She checked her watch. "I really have to go to work."

"I do too. That was the office calling. There's someone coming to interview in about half an hour and I have to be there. I don't want you going to Mrs. Oberman's alone."

"But I have to work, Colin. I can't take time off like you do."

He thought for a moment. "Tell you what. I'll drop you off at Mrs. Oberman's house, but I don't want you doing anything strenuous."

"What about the family?"

"John can entertain them."

"Can we leave now? I just don't want to deal with anyone."

He touched her cheek. "I completely understand, and I couldn't agree more. None of this was my idea, but sometimes, life throws you curveballs and you have to step up to the plate."

"So you like baseball, huh?"

"Better than football, but that's beside the point. Also, I know you won't like my parents one bit. They're rich and stuffy, and love to throw their money around. That's how I know I'm nothing like them. I rebelled against that lifestyle and I'm just an average guy."

She wiped a tear. She really didn't belong here or in his life. "Maybe I should go home with my parents?"

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"I wish you wouldn't. John, Marjorie and Gertrude know how to handle them, so I promise they'll help out." He checked his watch. "I really have to go, and I'll drop you off."

She lowered her head. "Thanks."

He pulled her to her feet and gave her a kiss. "I promise it'll be fine. I'll find things for my parents to do in the evenings so they won't be here. During the day, we'll get your two clients finished up and go shopping."

He was so good to her, she couldn't stop the tears from falling.

"Are you going to be okay? You're kind of emotional." He grinned. "Kind of like a pregnant woman."

"Very funny," she said. "You're just so nice and my head hurts again from everything. Maybe I should go back into the hospital and take my chances with Dr. Brooks?"

He grinned and covered her lips in small kisses. "No way, lady. Your place is by my side and I mean that." He backed off and wiped her tears. "You've already had some medications, so can you deal with Mrs. Oberman. Or do you want to wait for me?"

"I'll deal with her," Sydney said. "It's my job and I need the money."

"I understand." He opened the door to the office, and walked with her out to the kitchen, where all the guests were talking and laughing. Colin walked closer to the table and addressed the five parents. "We have to leave, but make yourselves at home." He looked at John. "I'll be back after we take care of one of Sydney's client."

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"No problem," Helen said. "We'll take care of everything. Have fun!" They ignored Colin and Sydney and went back to their chatting and laughing. Colin and Sydney walked into the foyer and put their coats back on. He held the door for her and they walked out to his car.

"How weird was that?" Colin asked.

"For once, I'm glad my parents were there," she replied.

He helped her into the car and drove her to Mrs. Oberman's place. They got the decorations out of the trunk and took them into the house. Sydney returned with him to the car, making sure everything was out.

He pulled her into his arms and faced her with a grin. "I'll be back in a bit. It's just an interview, and if the guy's right, he's hired on the spot."

"I wish I could help you."

"Me too," he said, then glanced at the old house. "And I wish I could stay here and help you. I won't be long." He kissed her, then backed away with a grin. "I'll be back." He got into his car and blew her a kiss as he drove away.

Sydney went into Mrs. Oberman's house and began to work while the woman followed her everywhere.

"So is that your husband?" the woman asked.

"No," Sydney said. "He's just a friend." She started putting garland on the staircase, but the woman wouldn't quit.

"Friends don't kiss like that. What does he do for a living?"

"He's a doctor," Sydney said, concentrating on her work.

"A doctor? Marry him. Don't be stupid!"

Sydney stopped working and faced the woman. "You sound just like my mother."

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The woman started to chuckle. "Your mother's smart. He's in love with you. Can't you tell that?"

"He's not really in love with me but just thinks he is. I'm just a friend."

"Whatever you say. Wish my husband was that friendly." Mrs. Oberman walked away while Sydney kept working. The woman was nuts. Colin wasn't in love with her, but just looking for a replacement for Ruth.

After about an hour, the doorbell rang, and Mrs. Oberman answered it. Colin walked in, his hands flying to his hips as he stared around the decorated home.

"I said to only do the little things. You've done everything!"

"Not quite," Sydney said.

"Are you going to marry her?" Mrs. Oberman asked.

Colin smiled at Sydney. "Had a busy time, huh?"

"You have no idea."

He turned to Mrs. Oberman. "We haven't known each other long enough, but she's amazing." He faced Sydney. "What else is left?"

"The star and the stockings," Sydney answered. "Then we're done."

"Sit." He took her to the couch and forced her to take a seat. "Tell me what to do."

"The star on top of the tree and stockings on the fireplace."

Mrs. Oberman sat down beside Sydney as soon as Colin started up the ladder.

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"Marry him," Mrs. Oberman whispered. "He loves you so much, and you'd be stupid not to take advantage of that."

"I just met him," Sydney whispered. "He's helping me because I have a concussion."

"Take my advice," she said, standing. "You'll regret it if you don't."

He finished working on the two jobs, and after Mrs. Oberman handed Sydney a check, they said goodbye and left.

"That went quicker than I thought it would," he said, driving away. "What happened before I got there?"

"She kept talking to me, so I worked harder to get out of there earlier."

"Your head's not going to like that one bit," he said. "After lunch, I want you to take a nap."

She closed her eyes. "You won't have to beg me one bit. So did you hire someone?"

"I had two candidates, and one just wasn't up to par. He was a doctor with no experience and hadn't taken the boards to be a pediatrician yet. I told him to talk to me after he became a pediatrician. The other guy was in an established practice, but didn't like the politics of the business. He also wants to work less hours. I offered him a job and he took it, but will only be working part-time. He's older and wants to retire in about ten years. It's nice to have backup, but I still can't fire my problem staff."

"That's a shame," she said. He turned on some jazz music and Sydney drifted off to sleep. She woke when the car stopped, unbuckled the seatbelt and opened her door.

"You're awake?"

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"Sure. How long was I out?"

"About fifteen minutes. I was having a nice conversation and you didn't even answer."

"So the conversation was nice without me?"

He chuckled. "Well, it was a little bit one-sided, but at least no one disagreed with me." As soon as she smiled, he leaned over and gave her a kiss. "We can't do that inside, or our mothers will be planning a wedding and Janet will start to cry."

"I know. I hope no one's been killed in there yet."

"Oh, it's fine. I called John when I was at work and they're all getting along. Your mother is quite the socialite."

"That's an understatement."

He opened his door and stared at her. "Can you stand up?"

She couldn't even move her arms, let alone stand on her own. "I'm just so tired."

"Wait for me and I'll help you."

She closed her eyes, and, after a few moments, he helped her to her feet, then walked her toward the door. "I don't like this," he said. "Do you have that other client yet?"

"Not yet. She never called me back."

"If she does, I don't want you taking the job. You need time off and I'm serious."

"But I'll be bored and really need the money. I can't just sit around all day, you know."

"I'll be with you. We'll find something to do, and there's always my family."

She smiled. "Lucky me."

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As soon as Colin opened the door, laughter poured out from the kitchen. John ran toward them, looking concerned. "I had nothing to do with this. Don't blame me."

"What's wrong?" Colin asked.

"All three of the women want to make lunch to go with the chili Sydney's mom brought, and they've made a huge mess in the kitchen. Both of your fathers were kicked out and are watching some game in the basement."

Sydney sighed. "I'll deal with them, but I'll need backup. Call Gertrude."

"Oh, she tried already. Those three are like sisters, jabbering away and laughing like crazy. I've never seen Janet so happy."

Colin faced Sydney. "Want to go out to eat?"

"I want to go to bed. Is that an option?"

He smiled, removed her coat and his own, then walked with her into the kitchen. Flour filled the air and empty cabinet doors hung open. Every inch of counter space was filled with a dirty plate, bowl or pan.

"What's going on?" Colin bellowed, his hands on his hips.

The women stopped chattering and faced him, covered in flour, dough, and who-knows-what-else.

"We're making you some Christmas cookies," Helen said. "Relax. It's not a big deal at all. Sydney, do you want to help us?"

She leaned against Colin. "No, thanks. I'm exhausted."

"The pregnancy," Doris whispered to Helen. They started to laugh, joined by Janet.

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Colin glanced around the room. "Have you been nipping at some eggnog by chance?" He pointed toward the multiple boxes of the stuff on the table.

"Oh, just a bit," Janet said. "John went to get some for the party next week."

"We'll all be here," Helen said. "Your father and I are going to visit my sister, then come back in time for the party. I can hardly wait."

Colin faced Sydney, rolling his eyes. "Oh, me either." He faced the women again. "What's for lunch?"

"Sandwiches and chili." Doris pushed past them with a tray. "It's on the table right now." She walked to the basement door. "Lunch!"

Sydney held on to her head from the noise, her eyes filling with tears. Colin pulled her into his arms and against his chest. "I know. I agree. I think we need to get a hotel room."

"We could go to my place."

He leaned down to her ear. "No, that's okay. I guess I need to take charge here and get the sauced women out of the kitchen. Can you eat some lunch?"

"Sure."

Harold and Bruce walked up from the basement, laughing very loudly, each holding a beer in their hands. "Good game," Bruce said. "Hey, Colin, when did you get home?"

"A few minutes ago. Did you know what was happening in the kitchen?"

"Sure. Let the hens alone and we'll go downstairs." He looked at Sydney, still leaning against Colin's chest. "You need to go to bed. You don't look that great."

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"Thanks, Dad. I appreciate the vote of confidence."

The three women walked into the dining room, all laughing hysterically. Sydney held on to her ears and Colin walked her to the table. He helped her sit on the end chair, then sat down right beside her on the adjacent side.

The room was filled with noise, and it was all Sydney could do to eat. Tears filled her eyes from the pain in her head, and she just wished everyone would go home. She wanted to go back to her apartment, just for the peace and quiet. As much as she wanted to be surrounded by family at this time of year, it was more than she could handle. Maybe her wish of being with family wasn't something she really wanted after all?

Colin got up from the table and brought her the medication for her headache, sitting down beside her. "As soon as you're done eating, I want you to go to bed."

"Upstairs?" she asked, popping the pill.

"I'd rather you stay down here, so I can keep an eye on you. Do you think you can stand the noise from the kitchen if you sleep in the living room? I don't want you going steps."

"Sure. I'm done." She got up from the table and walked into the living room, followed by Colin. He helped her to the couch and covered her up, the noise escalating in the dining room. "Do you have any earplugs?" she asked.

"No, but I'll tell them to keep it quiet. My mother can't handle her liquor, and she knows better. I'm more worried about John having to deal with them. I'm thinking of giving him the afternoon off and making them clean the kitchen for him. That's ridiculous."

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"He looked happy," Sydney said. "I think he's enjoying it, too."

"Probably." He knelt in front of her. "Get some sleep and I'll keep an eye on you."

"Is everything okay here?" Harold asked.

"She's not well. I wish I could take her back to the hospital for some peace and quiet," Colin said, standing up.

Harold stared at Sydney's face. "Why don't you? Is it the money? Colin can pay for it, I'm sure."

Rich people. She hated them. "No, it's a long story," Sydney said. "And involves a nasty doctor there."

"Oh, I see," Harold answered. "Did you take her vitals?" he asked his son.

"Not yet today, but I will as soon as I know everything else in this house has calmed down. Who thought to give Mom eggnog?"

"It was her idea and she forced John to get some. She threatened him with his job if he didn't."

Colin's face turned angry. "She what? She has no right!"

"I know. I told John to get it, and I'd make sure he got a raise. I know he'd never lose his job here."

"You're right about that." Colin shook his head. "When do you guys leave?"

"You want rid of us so soon?"

He smiled. "No, I want to know when my kitchen will be back to normal."

Harold started to laugh. "We'll be gone Thursday, then be back for the party on Tuesday. But we'll be staying with Doris and Bruce that night, so you can stay here alone. We've

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already been invited and they have plans for a party after the party, and even invited Janet." He leaned close. "They want to fix her up so she'll let you two alone."

Colin smiled. "Nice going." He glanced down at Sydney. "Get some sleep and when you wake up, we'll watch football."

"Good," she said. "I'm missing all my games."

He started to laugh, then walked away with his father. The noise in the dining room suddenly died down. Sydney was sure Colin and his dad had things well under control. She felt herself drift off to sleep, but knew she'd wake up to more drama than she wanted, just knowing her mother was there.

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Chapter Nine

Her eyes opened, but Sydney didn't know where she was. It took her a minute before she realized it was Colin's living room, and one light was lit. There was no noise in the whole house and she wondered if they'd all left her.

She sat up, her head feeling much better.

"Oh, you're awake." She turned her head to look behind her and saw Colin walking in from the kitchen. "How do you feel?"

"Better, thanks. Did you kick everyone out?"

"No such luck," he whispered. "They're all downstairs, drunk as anything. They're all staying here tonight, so we have interesting sleeping arrangements upstairs."

"Were you drinking too? You sound insane."

"No, I wasn't drinking because I had to be the designated driver."

"What?" she asked.

"I know. We didn't go anywhere, but they thought it was a good idea."

"Where's John?"

"I sent all of them home for a break. They wanted to stay because it was fun to watch the five drunken people try to bake cookies, but I told them to take time off."

She started to sit up. "I'll clean up the kitchen."

"No, it's done." He walked around the couch and sat beside her. "Dad and I took your vitals, with Mom watching to make sure we did it right."

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"Huh?"

"Mom's a nurse, remember? She's very bossy, too. Anyway, we decided you're okay and you don't need to be in a hospital, but we don't want you taking on another client."

"But I need the money!"

"It's not worth your health. Your cell phone rang while you were asleep and I answered it. It was the last client, and we all decided we'd do the work for you."

"What? You can't do my work!"

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because it's my job! I can't have you doing that."

He took her hand and faced her with the most adorable and serious look ever. "Consider this payback for giving me something to look forward to. You can come with us, but I don't want you in the same situation you're in now. You were in bad shape after that client today, and you didn't even work more than two hours. Your health is worth more to me than any old client's house for Christmas."

"But I have to pay my bills."

"We'll talk about this again, but for now, you need to eat dinner."

"I want to talk about this now."

"No. You're tired, hungry, and not thinking clearly. You'll still be in charge, and we're meeting with the lady in the morning at her house. All of us."

"What?" She pointed toward the basement door. "Those nutso people are coming with me?"

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He started to laugh. "Yeah. I know. But they all insisted. They're having the time of their lives and it's all thanks to you."

"Because I went to sleep?"

He helped her to her feet. "Yep. It's all good, and all your fault." He walked her into the kitchen. "It's about eight at night. What are you hungry for?"

She grinned his way. "Besides you?"

He started to laugh and kissed her cheek. "They didn't slip you any of that eggnog, did they?"

"I hope not with that medicine."

He warmed up some homemade chicken soup, and they sat at the kitchen table talking about the five crazy people in the basement.

"They've been playing board games down there," Colin said. "You know, if only one set of them had shown up, they wouldn't have had as much fun? They're having a lot of fun, just laughing and drinking. Your mom is funny when she drinks, and so is mine."

"I'm glad someone's having fun," she said.

He held on to her hand. "Are you having fun?"

"Well, considering all I do is work and sleep, it's a tough thing to figure out. You tell me."

"We have fun together, right?"

Sudden sadness filled her thoughts, making her eyes fill with tears. "Sure. You're a great guy and some day you'll make some girl very happy."

He searched her face, then wiped a tear from her cheek. "Do I make you happy?"

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"Yes, you do, but that's a different discussion. After I go back to my life, you'll drift away and I'll be alone for Christmas again next year."

He wiped another tear from her face. "Not if I can help it. No more banana splits and football snaps for you." He studied her for a while. "Are you going to be okay?"

She finished her soup. "Sure. I'm fine."

"Good. Because tonight, since I only have four bedrooms upstairs, you're sleeping with me."

She lifted her eyebrows and faced him. "I am?"

"Yes. It was Dad's idea, too, to keep an eye on you. Your mom agreed, and they don't want you going steps by yourself at all, so I'm to make sure you stay put."

"Was this before or after all the alcohol consumption?"

"During. Right now, they wouldn't care. Are you ready to go visit with them for a little bit?"

"Are they loud?"

"No, they're pretty much passed out. Tomorrow should be very quiet around here because they'll all have hangovers."

"Did they make cookies?" she asked.

"Yes, they did, and they're really good, believe it or not. They tried to write the recipes for John, but their writing is a little bit illegible." He helped her to her feet. "Let's go say goodnight."

"Goodnight? I just woke up!"

"I know, but we can go upstairs and no one will know what we're doing." He waggled his eyebrows and she started to laugh.

"You're a naughty Santa," she whispered.

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"The naughtier the better," he replied, his arm going around her.

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"What do you think?" Colin asked Sydney as soon as they all walked into the home of Edwina Stewart early the next morning. She was an older woman but very thin and wiry.

"I think we have a lot of work to do," Sydney said. The place was sparse and contemporary, containing one main room with twenty-foot ceilings, white walls, white carpet, and white furniture.

Sydney squinted from all the white in the room. "Mrs. Stewart, do you like white?"

"Love white. Do you think I can have a white tree with white lights, too?"

Sydney grinned. "Have you ever considered a different color for your home?"

"A...different color?" she asked. Her face looked like she'd been asked if space aliens had landed or something.

"Well, considering Christmas trees are green, maybe green, or red for Christmas?"

The woman looked around the room. "Green? Red? It might make more people visit. Last year, they all wore sunglasses."

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Sidney shielded her eyes from the white. "I can see why. Do you mind if we decorate the way that would make it attractive to guests?"

Edwina checked her watch. "Go ahead. I trust you, after seeing Mrs. Richman's house. I'm not into children, though, but if you keep with a contemporary theme, that would be fine. I have to run some errands and go to the gym, but I'll be back."

"How long do we have?" Sydney asked.

"I'm throwing a party tonight, so take as long as you need before the party. The caterer will be here any minute and will be working in the kitchen."

Sydney smiled. "We'll be done in no time." She turned toward the five musketeers, all with half-closed eyes from their hangovers. "I'm going to need help."

"We'd love to help," Helen said. "Does anyone have any aspirin?"

Doris dug in her purse and opened a bottle, passing pills out to everyone. Sydney removed some paper and a pen from her purse, then sat with Colin at the dining room table, writing what she needed.

"I think we should give her a traditional tree, and everything should have a natural feel to it. Everything simple and elegant, in red, green, and gold."

"Sounds good to me." He leaned close to her ear. "How do you feel today?"

"Much better. Your home cure last night really helped."

"Home cure?"

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She leaned up to his ear. "Cuddling in bed last night. I've never been more comfortable or relaxed in my life."

"It helped me, too," he whispered. "These people are stressful."

She grinned, then wrote a list for the store, handing them some cash because it was a business expense. Colin and the men left with the list, while Janet, Helen and Doris sat around the table and Sydney explained what would happen. As soon as the caterer walked into the house, Sydney met with him to find out about the menu, trying to integrate everything together.

"So, when's the wedding?" Helen asked Sydney.

"What wedding?"

"Your wedding to Colin. I need to plan some things with Doris and work it all out so it'll be a huge event."

Great. Sydney just sighed. A wedding was more than she ever wanted to deal with, and having the two mothers involved meant instant disaster.

"That should've been Ruth and Colin," Janet muttered. "I don't know why they took so long to consider marriage."

"Because Ruth had to get her fields in order first, then she got cancer and had chemo, making her too weak to get married," Helen said. "She didn't want to be a cancer patient walking down the aisle."

"Did she tell you that?" Janet asked.

"She and I had a lot of chats. What's important here is that Colin has moved on and you need to realize that. That poor boy has been blaming himself for so many things, it's time he get back into the game of life."

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"But where does that leave me?" Janet asked. "He was like a son to me." She stared at Sydney. "This is your fault."

She faced the woman with surprise covering her face. "My fault? I'm not even dating Colin!"

"Oh, but you want to. I bet it's his money you want, isn't it?"

"No," Sydney answered with a clenched jaw. "Not at all. That's one of our disagreements. I don't like rich people."

She knew as soon as it came from her mouth, she was in trouble.

Helen's eyes all but bugged out of her head, her face turning red. "You don't like rich people? Does that mean you don't like us?"

"Or your own family?" Doris asked.

"No, that didn't come out right," Sydney said. "Oh, never mind."

"No, tell us what you mean," Helen said.

Sydney faced the two women with a sigh. "When I was in the hospital, my doctor accused me of going after Colin because he was rich. She was snotty and threatened me, then discharged me too soon. It's people like that I don't like." She hoped she'd dodged a bullet.

"Oh, I understand now. It's not rich people, but social climbers with attitude," Helen said. "We know those types, don't we, Doris?"

"More than you know, and we agree," Doris said. "Not all rich people are like that."

"No, they're not," Janet said. "So, after you're married, can I still visit Colin?"

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Sydney was sure this wasn't getting through to her. "I'm not getting married because I have things to do first. I have to get my life in order before I can consider getting married."

Janet leaned forward. "What things? Do you have other boyfriends?"

"No, they're all business related. That's why this client was so important."

"Oh, I see," Janet answered. "So Colin's free to date again?"

"It's all up to him." Sydney didn't know what this woman was planning, but it wasn't going to be pleasant.

Helen turned to Sydney. "No, you're dating my son. I won't have it any other way."

"I agree," Doris said. "He'll give your child a name."

"I'm not pregnant," Sydney said to her mother. "I don't know why you can't get that through your head!"

"Ruth should've been the pregnant one by now," Janet said, sighing. "I don't know why she didn't want kids. She really messed up by dying." Sydney's head started to ache, but Janet continued. "If Colin has kids, I want to be their grandmother."

"But you're not related to him," Helen said. "Why would you want that?"

"He was like a son to me. Now that he's single again, I want to be part of his life."

"What part of his life?" Helen asked. Something was going on, and Sydney was going to find out somehow.

"Oh, you know," Janet said. "I think the world of Colin. Always have."

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Helen crossed her arms. "How much do you like him? He could be your son, he's that much younger than you."

"He's a great person..."

The front door opened and the men walked in. Colin was laughing at the two fathers, trying to bring the big Christmas tree through the door.

Sydney smiled at him then put everyone to work. "The tree goes in the living room area."

"Where?" Colin asked.

"Over here," Sydney answered. She got them situated, having them decorate the tree in white lights and gold trim.

She had Janet hang mistletoe by the front door, while Helen and Doris put Christmas knickknacks and things out for the table. They added a few other decorations and candles, while Sydney supervised.

Edwina entered the home just as the tree was being finished and the red ribbon was put up the staircase.

She dropped her packages as tears filled her eyes. "It looks like...Christmas!"

"Is it okay?" Sydney asked. "Do you like it?"

"I love it! It's all natural, too, and I love the look! You're one fantastic decorator, Sydney, and your crew is amazing." She took out her checkbook and wrote Sydney a check, adding some extra for the speedy service. "Any time you need work, you let me know. I'm sure you'll have more clients after my friends see this place." She looked around the room. "As a matter of fact, I'm getting tired of white. Some day, I want to re-do this place in a different color. I'll call you."

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"Thank you so much," Sydney said. "Just let everyone know I'm available."

They all said goodbye and piled back into the cars. As soon as they returned to Colin's home, Sydney pulled them all together and thanked each one of them, taking out her checkbook. "I'd like to pay you all for your work. I couldn't have done it without each of you."

"No way," Harold said. "That was fun. It's more fun than sitting around here doing nothing."

"I agree," Bruce said. "Who wants to go bowling?"

The group of five all headed for the door, excited to be leaving again.

"I guess we're alone," Sydney whispered to Colin as soon as they were out the door. "Unless you want to go bowling."

"No way," he said. "You need a nap, and after spending too much time with them, I need one, too."

"I'm really not tired."

He smiled. "Good. Want to make out?"

"I like the way you think," she said, grinning.

He pulled her to him, his lips capturing hers. He was on fire, heating her throughout. He backed her into the living room, and they ended up kissing on the couch, with him lying on top of her.

"I wish we didn't have to stop," he whispered, kissing down her chest.

"Me either," she said. "But you know they could be back at any time."

"It's riskier," he whispered, putting his hand under her shirt. "Do you think you can date me now?"

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"I'll think about it," she said. "What are you doing?"

He smiled. "See if you like this." He moved his hand up her stomach and slowly outlined her bra. He moved the strap off her shoulder and massaged the skin on her shoulder, moving the material down off her breast.

Sydney closed her eyes and smiled. "You're so gentle."

"Colin," John said, walking out of the kitchen.

He sat up as fast as he could, smoothing his hair, while Sydney pulled her bra strap back up. He held her shoulder down on the couch. "Yes, John?"

"What do you want me to make for dinner?"

"Whatever you want. I think the parents will be back by then. They're out bowling."

"Where's Sydney?"

He glanced down. "She's taking a nap."

She grinned and blew him a kiss.

"What were you...oh...I get it." John started to chuckle. "I'll be in the kitchen, and Marjorie and Gertrude should be done with the upstairs soon."

They'd been caught! Colin slapped his palm over her mouth when Sydney started to giggle. "Sure. No problem. Sydney's already asleep, and I'll probably watch TV."

She couldn't control her laughter, especially when he touched her side, tickling her.

"She sounds like she's asleep," John said with a grin.

Colin smiled and stared toward the kitchen, then leaned down and faced her, his hand still on her mouth. "He's gone now. Where was I?"

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"What if we get caught again?" she whispered. "And what about my head?"

"You're right. Time to get everyone out of the house and get you feeling better. Waiting for you is driving me nuts."

"I know what you mean."

He leaned down on top of her again, his face dangerously close to hers. "Marry me?"

"What? Are you insane?"

"Not at all. Marry me?"

She started to laugh, suddenly realizing that he wasn't joking. Studying his face, she lost her grin and furrowed her eyebrows. "You're serious?"

He lifted her hand and brought it to his mouth, giving it a gentle kiss. "I just want you to put it in the back of your head for now, but don't really want an answer."

"But that's not the first time you mentioned marriage. You've been thinking about it for a while, haven't you?"

"Since I met you." He touched his lips to hers, then leaned back and smiled.

"But it takes time to get married. First you have to be in love—"

"Not a problem," he whispered.

"Colin, you've been dodging that question for a while. Are you in love with me?"

He smiled. "It's kind of early to tell you that, but I'm as in love with you as you are with me."

"Oh, we're in trouble," she whispered, then bit her lips, feeling her face heat up.

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by Paige Ryter

He leaned up with a smile, kissed her with determination and faced her. "I thought so. You love me a lot."

She couldn't answer his question yet. "You really do love me?"

"Yes, I do love you," he said. "But it's really early to tell you that, so keep it to yourself."

"I want to tell you that I feel the same way, but things keep getting in the way."

He started to laugh. "Like your head?"

"Yes. I have to think this through. One minute you're the most important person, and the next, I realize I'm not for you and can't possibly be in love with you."

"You're hilarious. You have me on such a pedestal, I find it very funny. I'm no different than you are, and some day soon, you're going to realize that."

"I don't think so," she answered. "I'm destined to be alone."

He started to laugh at her. "Get some sleep." He stood up, put a blanket over her and knelt beside her head. "I need to check up on some of my people. I'll be back, sweetheart." His lips brushed against hers again, and she pulled him to her, dipping her tongue into his mouth and losing herself in the moment.

"Have fun," she whispered after letting him go.

He stared at her, then outlined her lips with his finger. "I wish I could tell you something."

"You can tell me anything."

"Not this. It's too soon."

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by Paige Ryster

"But you can talk about being in love with me and asked me to marry you? Are you on drugs or something?"

"*Something* is right."

He left the house and she closed her eyes. Whatever he was holding back, it was big. It worried her, making her wonder if staying in his house was a good idea after all.

Her dreams started out nice and pleasant, with Colin and her walking along a beach. They talked about their lives together, until a tidal wave rose above their heads and crashed onto them. She grabbed for his hand, but he slipped away from her. For some reason, she could see him under the water, watching him go. She tried to get to him, but he disappeared within seconds. She cried out for him, until suddenly, someone touched her cheek.

"Colin!"

"I'm right here. What's the matter?"

She opened her eyes and saw him staring as he knelt beside her. A stethoscope was around his neck with a blood pressure cuff wrapped on her arm.

"Where am I?"

"In the living room. Did you have a nightmare?"

"You were swept away by a huge wave."

He grinned. "I was? That's why your blood pressure was up. What happened?"

"I lost you." She felt tears on her cheeks and swiped them away. "It was so real!" She glanced around the room, happy it wasn't the beach.

"I'm fine. We didn't have lunch yet. Want some?"

"What time is it?"

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by Paige Ryter

"About one o'clock. Are you hungry?"

"How long have you been gone?"

"About two hours. I interviewed a guy and hired him. I'm almost to the place where I can fire some people." He checked her eyes with a small light and sat back. "You'll live."

Sydney sat up. "That's good to know. Are the parents back yet?"

"No, but they called. They're going to see a movie and throw popcorn in the theater while sitting in the back."

"Unbelievable. I'm glad they're having fun, though."

"John made us some lunch. Do you want some?"

"Sure." They went to the kitchen and ate a quick lunch, then watched television in the living room for a while. She leaned against his shoulder and closed her eyes.

"Are you in pain?" he asked.

"Definitely."

He took her hand and helped her to her feet. "Come with me. I want to try something for your head." He walked with her up to his bedroom and turned on the overhead light because the sun had already set, then closed the door. "How does your head feel?"

"It hurts. When did I get a pill last?"

"You shouldn't need to depend on pills all the time. I want to try something untraditional. Are you game?"

"It all depends on what you want to try."

He smiled. "I promise it's innocent." He turned on the light beside the bed and flipped off the overhead light. Beside the bed sat a CD player, and he hit play.

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by Paige Ryter

Soft jazz music filled the air and Sydney smiled. "You like jazz, don't you?"

"It's the best. I've been reading on the internet about alternate forms of therapy, and I wanted to try this one out."

"What did it say?"

"I'm so glad you asked," he said. "It said you're my guinea pig." He sat her on the bed and bent to face her. "Do you trust me?"

"That all depends. For what?"

"I thought so. You're going to be a challenge." He lowered her to the bed and lay down beside her. "I want you to relax, more than you were relaxed downstairs when you were sleeping."

"How much more relaxed can I get than that?"

"You were having a nightmare. That's not relaxation, but stress. I want you to relax, and I want to help you."

She raised her eyebrows. "Sex?"

Colin started to laugh. "No, and I promised you that. Remember?"

"You're right. So what do I do?"

"Just trust me and keep your eyes closed. Think happy thoughts about the beach."

"You mean like that tidal wave that washed you out to sea or the topless Sydney fantasy?"

He smiled. "Make it a beautiful countryside in the springtime."

"Fine. I trust you." She shut her eyes, and he outlined her face with his hand, then moved to her eyebrows. He stroked

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her hair and she felt the warmth of his touch return when he caressed her cheek.

He leaned forward and whispered into her ear. "I want you to trust me more than you've ever trusted me before."

"Uh-huh." She was in his power. He rolled her to her stomach, pulled her shirt out of her jeans, then straddled her.

As soon as she tensed up, he leaned up to her ear and stroked the back of her hair. "Trust me," he whispered.

She relaxed again, and he touched her back and the sides of her waist. He massaged her skin in gentle circles, giving her a warm comfortable feeling while he whispered.

"Springtime, soft music, my voice." He moved up her back, gently touching her skin, each movement like the warmth of a summer night or a soft down quilt.

Sydney's head floated in the clouds, her thoughts a million miles away. She felt her breathing slow and imagined standing at the top of a big hill, feeling the breeze while watching it rustle the leaves in the trees. Colin was with her, talking in his soft voice the whole time, telling her to breathe deeply and enjoy the experience.

He took her right arm out of the sleeve of her t-shirt, then her left, but she didn't care. He put her arms down at her side and continued to massage the rest of her back, finally leaning up to her ear. "Keep trusting me. Nothing's going to happen and I want you to relax."

She said nothing and felt him unclasp her bra, move it from her skin, and take her arms out of the straps. She didn't even care. She was on the top of the hill, looking at the fluffy clouds in the sky and listening to the sound of the jazz music.

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She felt him put some sort of warm oil on her back, making her moan her satisfaction, the scent of roses filling the air. He continued stroking and kneading her skin and muscles in a gentle motion, and she felt herself drift in and out of consciousness. He knew how to get to her, and she loved every second of it.

He finally moved beside her, his head at her ear. She opened her eyes while he stroked her hair and her eyebrow again.

"How's your head, sweetheart?" he asked.

"What head?"

He chuckled. "Your sore head. Remember?"

"Not at all. It all feels so good, I've forgotten. But did you have to undress me?"

"Yep. It's part of the therapy."

"And a free peek."

"Oh, that's not new to me. I've seen you before, remember? You're beautiful and I mean that. No, this was just to relax you for your head. Are you ready to go to sleep now?"

"Can I do the same for you?"

He smiled. "Not tonight. I want you to sleep well and not get overexerted. You overdid it yesterday and Dad and I were both worried about you." He kissed her lips so gently, she moaned. "At least I know you trust me. I don't think you would've let me undress you when I first met you. You really can't love me until you trust me."

"Do you trust me?"

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by Paige Ryter

"With my life. You're the type to take care of me as much as I've tried to take care of you."

She smiled, feeling such inner peace.

He leaned closer to her and brushed his lips on hers. "Are you okay?"

"Very happy," she said. "And it's all your fault."

"My fault?"

"Yes. Now if I could just get you to be a better landlord than my brother—"

"Not a problem there. I have plans for that place."

"Like what?"

"Tear it down and start all over again. But the place would be much classier and there would be no rodents or roaches."

She covered her naked breasts with her hands and sat up to face him. "You want to tear down my apartment building?"

He glanced down at her and smiled. "You don't have to hide from me."

"I know, but this is just weird. Now you didn't answer my question. You're going to tear down my apartment building?"

"I'm thinking about it. I spoke with a few people today and have some contacts to do just that."

"Where will I live?"

He smiled and moved her back to the bed. "I have plans for you, sweetheart. Don't worry about it at all. Besides, the apartment job won't happen for a while yet. You'll have time to...find another place."

"What are you planning?"

The door opened downstairs, with laughter and singing filling the air. The parents were home.

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"Did you lock the door?" she whispered.

"No."

Sydney threw on her shirt, just in time for someone to knock at the door. Her bra was in her hand, and she didn't have time to put it on. "Sydney, are you in there?" It was her father.

"Darn!" she whispered, then turned toward the door. "I'm getting ready for bed. Why?"

"I wanted to see if you're okay. Is Colin in there, too?"

Colin shook his head.

"Uh, I think he's in the bathroom. I was asleep." He got up from the bed and tiptoed into the bathroom, easing the door shut behind him. She got off the bed and walked to the door. As soon as she opened it, she realized she still had her bra in her hand, so she put her hand behind her back. "What did you need?"

"I wanted to see if you're okay."

"I'm much better. I took a long nap. Did you have fun?"

"What's behind your back?"

She threw the bra with as much force as she could, hearing a groan behind her. She turned to see Colin throw the bra from his face to the floor. He stifled his laughter, and walked up to the door.

"What was that?" Bruce asked.

"Oh, nothing," Sydney answered. "Did you have fun?"

He grunted, looked behind her and faced her. "It looks like your bra."

"I was taking it off just as you knocked. Those things are so uncomfortable. Know that?"

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"Not really." He sniffed the air. "What's that smell?"

"Oh, my new shampoo," she said, lying. That oil on her back was bound to get her into trouble. She could feel it seeping through her shirt. She shot Colin a nasty glance and he bit his lips, trying not to laugh.

"Interesting scent. It smells like one of Doris' oils." He shook his head. "Anyway, we had fun. I won a game, Harold won a game, then we went out to eat. We're going home. Will you be okay here?"

Colin glanced at Sydney. "We'll be fine," he said. "I'm going to see if they need me downstairs." He walked past Bruce and laughed as soon as he got to the stairs.

"What's so funny?" Bruce asked.

"I have no idea, but my head's feeling much better," Sydney replied. "I think that sleep helped." The massage with the rose-scented oil didn't hurt either.

"Harold and Helen are going home tomorrow and I think Janet's going home tonight. You should say goodbye to Janet before she goes."

"I will. I've been asleep so much I really haven't gotten to know her at all."

"It's fine. We're going to fix her up with someone."

Sydney walked to the stairs and looked down the long flight. She started to walk down each step, holding on to the railing.

"You're not to go down the stairs alone yet, are you?" Bruce said, walking beside her.

"No, but what Colin doesn't know won't hurt him."

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"It won't?" Colin said, running up the stairs. He grabbed on to her waist from in front of her, stopping her from walking.

"I said you weren't to do that alone. Remember?"

"I remember you being a tyrant about it," she said.

Bruce started to laugh, then went the rest of the way.

"Why did you do that?" Colin whispered.

"You put that oil on my back and it tickles! How would I explain that one to my dad if he tried to help me?" she whispered.

He started to laugh, helping her down the stairs. "You're right. How's your head?"

"Better," she said. "Any time you want to do that again, feel free."

"Want a full body massage?" he whispered into her ear.

"Full...body?"

"It's innocent...for now."

She started to laugh. "Do you want one?"

"More than you can imagine. And not innocent."

They reached the bottom of the stairs and said goodbye to Janet and Sydney's parents. Colin and Sydney got a quick bite to eat, then joined Harold and Helen in the living room.

"So, how's your business doing?" Helen asked Sydney.

"It's fine. I'm trying to build up clientele so I can get repeat visitors."

"Do you live around here, too?"

She glanced at Colin. "Yes, I live in an apartment building that was owned by my brother."

"As of Monday, it's mine," Colin said, putting his arm on Sydney's shoulder.

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"You're going to be a landlord?" Harold said. "On top of your practice?"

"Sure," Colin answered. "I've got plans for that place." He turned to his parents. "What are your plans for the New Year?"

Helen glanced at Harold. "I think you two have decided that for us."

"We have?" Colin asked. "Why is that?"

"Well, it seems you're getting married."

"Am not," Sydney said, glancing at Colin. "We're not even dating."

"Why do you say that?" Harold asked. "You two are awfully chummy for not dating."

Sydney faced him. "I can't date your son. As soon as I can get back to my life, he's going to forget about me and move on. It's bound to happen."

"Why do you say that?" Helen asked. "We know our son pretty well, and he's not going to let you go."

Sydney glanced at Colin again, who was nodding and smiling. "I told you that," he said. "You're the best thing that's ever happened to me."

"And you know why I can't date you, too. Colin, I'm not in your social class. I'm not a socialite, and not rich. I could never compete with women you work with, and when you see a pretty one, you're going to run off and forget all about me."

She glanced at Helen and Harold, whose mouths hung open in surprise.

"No, I'm not," he said. "We've talked about this more than once and I think you're really tired."

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She turned back to him. "I'm not tired. You just don't get this, do you?"

"Sydney, I don't think you're looking at this clearly," Harold said, making her turn toward him. "Your head hurts and it's clouding your judgment."

"I'm sorry, but it's true." She pointed toward Colin's face. "He's adorable and he can have any woman he wants. Besides, I have to get my life in order before I can even consider dating."

"But he loves you," Helen whispered, leaning closer. "It's really obvious to us. How can you turn that down?"

Sydney looked toward Colin, who was trying to hide his smile, but she couldn't hold back her feelings. "I'm worried that he's on the rebound and just looking for a replacement for Ruth."

Colin sat up and faced her. "You've never said that one to me before. When did this crop up?"

"When I first saw Ruth's pictures in your office. You're trying to move on, and I'm afraid you'll get sick of me when you realize you can have anyone. That's one of the battles I'm having right now."

"I should've guessed." He stood up. "Does anyone want something to drink?"

"I'll have some eggnog," Helen said. "This conversation makes me want to drink."

"I'll have beer," Harold said.

"I'll get my own," Sydney said.

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She started to stand up, but Colin pushed her back to the couch. He didn't look very happy, either. "Stay put. I'll be back."

Harold leaned forward and faced Sydney. "Forget his social standing and this house. Forget Janet and Ruth. Do you love him?"

She bit her lips. She couldn't tell them the truth, and felt the tears filling her eyes.

"Oh, that's a yes," Helen said. "Are you ever going to tell him?"

"He already knows," Sydney whispered, wiping her eyes. "He also thinks of me as a poor girl he took in like a stray. I can't base any relationship on that type of history."

"Oh, I see," Harold said. "Let me tell you something about my son. He was in that same situation with Ruth and felt like the underling. They didn't get along at all, and the last time we were here, he and I had a big fight about her, which is why we haven't been back for four years. She didn't love him but wanted to tell her friends she was marrying a doctor. That's all she cared about."

"So how could I ever fit in? I'm just a replacement woman for her, right?"

"He's carrying all the cards and would never think of you like that. He has a lot of respect for you and your talent. You're all he could talk about when we went shopping today, and he told us all about the things you built for that rich lady."

"It really wasn't that big a deal," Sydney said.

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"It was, to him. You have drive, independence and the personality that won't put up with anything. Ruth had those things, but she was snotty. You're not snotty, and will never be like that," Harold said. "You're no replacement for Ruth and he knows that. You're his friend first, and that means more to him than anything. Don't break his heart, because he finally found what he's wanted all along."

"I wish you lived closer to us," Helen answered. "When we were first married, we were a lot like you and Colin. I had to learn to be social, and fought it every minute. Working at the hospital helped, but when we're home, alone, we're just like you and Colin."

So he was looking for someone like his mother. That's all Sydney could hear.

Colin returned to the room with drinks for everyone. He handed Sydney a cold bottle of water.

"So they get alcohol and I get water?"

"You don't drink, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember, but I might change that thought." She opened the bottle and watched him drink a soda.

"So are you pregnant?" Helen asked.

"No, I'm not," Sydney answered.

"She's not," Colin said. "But her family jumped to conclusions and I never told them otherwise. That way, she'd have her family here for Christmas because she's usually alone with a banana split and a football game."

"They leave you alone for Christmas?" Helen asked. "Your own family?"

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Sydney nodded. "Sure. They've done that for years. My parents travel over Christmas, but since they think I'm pregnant, they canceled their trip to Australia."

"They're not going to be happy when they find out you're not pregnant," Helen said. "Doris has baby names all picked out, too."

"Good luck with that one," Sydney said. "It'll be a long time until I have kids."

"But you do want them, right?" Colin said.

"I told you before that I did, but didn't trust my ability to raise them."

Colin smiled at his mother, who drank her eggnog with a grin. She was planning to have grandchildren, and he was going to help her. But Sydney knew it wouldn't be with her. When she went back to her life, he'd be hunting for a trophy wife to marry.

* * * *

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Chapter Ten

"Yes, that would be fine," Colin said over the phone on Friday afternoon. "I can meet with you after the new year and figure out how to proceed. The new ownership takes place on Monday."

Sydney sat on the couch and watched him pace. It made her sick. He was going to tear down her apartment building and start from scratch. It would be a huge undertaking and would cost millions of dollars.

After his parents left, he'd spent a lot of time working on the plans for the new apartment complex. It was going to be classy and he wanted to hire her full-time to do the design of each fully furnished apartment. She wasn't an architect, but he wanted her to do it anyway.

"Sure. That's fine," Colin said, writing it on a piece of paper while still on the phone. "I'm looking forward to it."

He ended his call and stood beside Sydney. "It's a go, and I can't wait."

"Oh, I can."

"Why is that?"

"Do you really think I can do the apartment job?"

He smiled. "I know you can." He kissed her head, walked out into the kitchen and returned with a bunch of envelopes. "I went to your apartment while you were taking a nap and got your mail. I hope you don't mind."

"No, my life's an open book to you," she muttered.

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"Sure is." He chuckled while handing her the mail, and she picked up the first envelope and opened it. "School bill. Good. I can throw some money into that one." She opened another envelope. "Another school bill. Good." She put them aside and opened the last envelope. "This one's interesting...hmmm..."

"What is it?"

She pulled out the paper and read over it. "Oh no! It's a summons to appear at a meeting for the board of directors at your hospital on December 26th. What did I do? Is it because I didn't pay the bill? I haven't even gotten it yet!"

He sat down beside her. "Don't worry about your hospital bill. It's been taken care of by your insurance."

"Huh?"

"I called your insurance company and talked to them this week. Dr. Weston called, too, and they were more than happy to pay the whole thing. They're going to be talking to Dave about insurance with his company since it happened on company time."

"You did that...for me?"

"Sure did."

"Thank you so much. I'd love to make Dave pay part of it, too. It might make him think twice about the working conditions at that place. There wasn't even enough space to turn around."

"I mentioned it. But this letter's something else and I'm going to find out what's going on. Patients shouldn't be involved in hospital problems." He opened his cell phone and

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pushed the button for someone on speed dial. "I'd like to talk to Rickie in legal, please?"

He walked out of the room and Sydney read over the letter again. What did she do and why would she be called in by a lawyer?

"I see," Colin said, entering the room again. "I think this is the wrong move, and if need be, I'll have my lawyer involved." He glanced at her and shook his head. "Yes. A restraining order. Good idea."

A restraining order? Why would someone put out a restraining order? What was going on?

"Yes. It'll be taken care of." He ended the call and phoned someone else. "Jenny, it's Colin Taylor. I want to talk to Ed." He smiled and left the room again.

She waited anxiously for what seemed like an eternity, when Colin walked back into the room with two bottles of water. He handed her one and sat down beside her, ending his phone call as he did.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Dr. Brooks set up a formal inquiry about our relationship."

"What? What relationship?"

He glanced over at her. "The relationship that you keep denying with your head, but your heart melts every time I touch your hand. The one where you know you're in love with me but worried about so many ridiculous things, it makes me laugh."

She lowered her eyes. "I didn't know we had a relationship." She remembered, but hoped he didn't.

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"You're such a bad liar." His belly laugh shook the couch. "I have you figured out, and I'm finding it hilarious."

"Want to tell me what I'm thinking?"

"Sure. You're so in love with me, you don't know how to handle it. You've never been in this situation before and are trying to figure out a logical reason why, even denying it to yourself."

She couldn't argue with him, but had to change the subject. He was completely correct, and she knew she felt something very deeply for Colin. It was hard to define, but it was very comfortable, something she'd longed for her entire life. Everything between them clicked, which was scary in itself. She also knew she'd been trying to ignore it all week, but it wasn't working.

"What about Dr. Brooks?" she asked.

"Oh. She's calling me on the carpet for caring for you, even though I was saving your life."

At least she'd changed the subject enough so she didn't have to explain being in love with him. "So what's going to happen?"

"We're going to beat her to the punch. I'm going to have to press the issue about her dismissal before her little meeting. I had my lawyer call a meeting for Monday with Dr. Weston, the entire board, and my law firm. It's going to be impromptu, so she doesn't know it's coming. We're waiting until she's on duty and the board is going to post a substitute for her."

"I guess I'll be there."

"That's a good idea. Want your lawyer there, too?"

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"Who, Dad?"

"It'd make it more legit. Want me to call him?" Colin asked. "I like him and don't mind."

"No, it's my job. I hate dealing with him." She just wanted to go back to bed and sleep for a few years until her problems went away.

"Before you call, I have a request for you."

She faced him, dreading what he might have in mind. "Do I have to do it?"

"I'd appreciate it," he answered, checking his watch. "I have to interview some more people for a professional position on my staff, and I'd like you to sit in."

"Why? You already hired some more doctors. What do you need me for? Is it because you can't leave me alone?"

"Yes. I trust your judgment and you don't need as much sleep as you did before, so you're going to get bored sitting here. You read people very well and aren't afraid to speak your mind. I want you to grill this guy more than I do. I'm thinking of bringing you in on staff just for interviewing alone. You know how to handle people."

"Everyone except my family and you," she muttered.

He leaned over and kissed her, making all those feelings of warmth return to her heart and everywhere else. She hated the butterflies in her stomach, because she couldn't control them.

Colin helped her to her feet with a chuckle, and after grabbing their coats, they left the house for the office. Once inside, he walked her to a room in the back, where one man

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was sitting alone, dressed in a suit. One folder sat in front of the man and another on the table across from him.

"Ellison Kane?" Colin asked.

"Yes, sir." The man stood up and shook Colin's hand.

"I'm Colin Taylor and this is my associate in charge of personnel, Sydney White."

What? In charge of personnel? She raised her eyebrows as she turned to him, but he just smiled.

"What happened to your head?" Ellison asked Sydney, looking at her stitches.

"Business accident," she replied in a professional voice. "Have a seat."

Colin glanced at her and almost laughed. She knew this game because she'd been in so many interviews. She had to appear assertive and he'd fold, revealing his true colors.

They sat down across from him and Sydney suddenly felt underdressed in her sweatshirt and jeans. Colin was wearing the same type of thing, but he didn't seem to care. She guessed being the boss had a few perks she hadn't considered.

Colin opened the folder and read over all the pages in front of him. "So you went to school in Philadelphia and just graduated at the top of your class in pediatrics. Good job."

"Yes, sir. I've seen your articles in magazines. Congratulations."

"Thank you." Colin looked up from the papers. "What makes you want to come to Lancaster?"

"I grew up here and love the area. I want to help the Amish, and form a free clinic for the children at some point."

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"I see," Colin said. "That's very honorable. What do you think about accountability by doctors?"

"Accountability?" He shifted his weight to one side and cocked his head. Sydney was good at reading body language and this man was thrown by the question. She was sure he'd never had to deal with it before.

Colin nodded. "Yes, doctors being accountable to their patients. We're beginning a new program here called 'dock the doctors.' If you're too late for an appointment, the doctor's fee is free, and the doctor will be docked. In addition, if you don't take a patient seriously or don't listen to their concerns, the patient can complain and the doctor will be investigated. It's being accountable for your job and to your patients."

The man smiled. "I think that's a great idea! Why wouldn't a doctor be accountable already?"

Colin glanced toward Sydney. "Past issues."

"I have a question," Sydney said.

"Go ahead," Colin answered.

"Let's say a child is misbehaving terribly in the waiting room, then is worse in the office. The parent is in tears and completely embarrassed. What would you do?"

The man sat back at ease. "I've seen that more often than you can imagine. First, I give the kid a toy and get them distracted. I carry toys and candy in my pocket for something like that. Then I talk to the parent and tell them it has to stop. I've set up parenting classes before at school, and it really helps these parents to get together. I've gotten a lot of ideas about many things from these parents and would also

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recommend hiring a psychologist to deal with behavioral problems. Children need to be taught right from wrong and parents need guidance on how to do that."

"What about a parent who thinks they know more than you do? What do you do then?" Sydney asked.

"You mean they try to undermine my professional opinion?"

She nodded. "Yes. Here's a hypothetical situation. Little Johnny's overweight. Mom's overweight, and tells you Johnny's fat because his family's fat. You explain the benefits of being in shape, but Mom's not listening and even tells you you're wrong. She gets indignant in front of the kid, who's also a brat, and tells you off."

"Oh." He sat up, facing both of them. "I know that type of mother. I've dealt with them before. First, you never let a conversation get to the point where you're the loser. You make sure you get your point across in a professional manner. I'd have pamphlets in each office to help back me up, and write it all down for them to remember. But you never engage them in a shouting match. I've even paged myself to get away from a situation just to let them calm down until I can talk to them."

"You're hired," Colin said.

"Don't you want to talk about salary?" Sydney asked Colin.

"His desired salary's written on his form, and it looks fine to me. Right within our guidelines."

"Oh." She looked over his shoulder at the paper. "Can I have that salary, too?"

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He chuckled, stood up, and shook Ellison's hand. "It's been nice meeting you. When can you start?"

"Monday?"

"That would be great," Colin answered. "We have rotations at the hospital, too, when we have patients admitted."

"I hoped so. I'm looking forward to it."

"Looking forward to rotations?" Sydney asked.

Colin shot her a dirty look, then faced Ellison again. "That's great. Come in here at seven on Monday morning and I'll have the paperwork all ready for you. See Sandy at the front desk and tell her you'll be working with us so she can get everything ready."

He smiled. "Thank you so much. This was the best interview I've ever had." He said goodbye and walked out the door.

Sydney got up to leave, but Colin pulled her back to her chair. "Not so fast."

"Why?"

"We have someone else to interview. And don't ask about rotations for this one. The other questions were good, but I want them to know they have to do rotations and not be surprised."

"Why would they want to do that?"

He leaned closer to her. "It's good to network for the company, and the hospital's the best place to do it. Also, it's good for them professionally. Also, the patients have their regular doctors watching over them, and it'll give me time off at night. Now where did you think up that question about behavior?" he asked.

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"I hate moms who bring their brats everywhere and can't control them. I wanted to know what he'd do about it, and if he'd let some pushy mom tell him what to do."

Colin smiled. "You'd make a great mother."

"Oh, I don't think so."

"Yes, you would, but that's a different conversation. Now, I see good things about to happen to this business, and it's all because of you. I liked what that guy had to say, too, because it'll put us ahead of other pediatricians if we have an instruction manual for them in parenting classes and a counselor to deal with problems."

A woman walked into the office wearing a beautiful business suit with manicured nails and perfume that arrived before she did. The woman raised an eyebrow when she glanced at Sydney, taking in her appearance from top to bottom with cruel judgment in her eyes.

Colin stood up and shook her hand. "I'm Colin Taylor and I own this business."

The woman shook his hand, wrapping her other hand around his. "Hello. I'm Janice Davina. *Dr.* Janice Davina. It's so nice to meet you, Dr. Taylor. I've heard all about you."

The way she said it, it almost sounded sexual. Sydney faced Colin, wondering if he knew her or something.

Colin's eyebrows rose. "You have?"

"Sure," Dr. Davina answered. "You've been written up in national magazines for being dedicated to your job." She grinned and slightly licked the red lipstick covering her lips. Sydney wanted to deck her.

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Colin let go of the woman's hand and turned toward Sydney. "This is Sydney White, in charge of personnel."

Sydney shook her hand, which felt like wet milquetoast. This lady needed to be chewed up and spit out. Sydney was pleasant and greeted the woman, but wanted to give her an angry look and cover her nose to stop the perfume from permeating her brain instead.

They all sat back in their seats while Colin read the folder in front of him. "So, tell me, Dr. Davina, you got your degree in Minnesota. What brings you to Lancaster?"

She reached over and touched his hand. "I'm curious to move to a small community where you can get to know your families better." Her eyebrows went up and she gave Colin the once over—twice. He sat back, removing his hand from hers.

Right. She was looking to settle down with some good-looking rich man and it looked like she was targeting Colin. The woman had probably done her homework on Colin from the magazine articles, making her more like a stalker.

Sydney felt the hair go up on the back of her neck and moved her elbow to the back of Colin's chair beside her, leaning on her hand. He glanced over at her, but Sydney just smiled. She had to protect him from Dr. Janice Davina.

Colin continued. "And I see your desired salary here, but it's over twice our recommended salary for beginning pediatricians. Why do you think you deserve that amount, if you're just out of college?"

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"Because I was told I could make that much, and know I'm worth it." She winked at Colin and Sydney was ready to smack her.

Sydney moved her arm from his chair and placed her hand on Colin's thigh under the table, then spelled the word 'no' on his leg with her finger. He nodded, continuing to read the woman's folder. "Tell me what kind of work you did in Minnesota?"

"I was involved in emergency services and counseling for patients involved in crisis situations."

"How did that relate to pediatrics?" he asked.

"Most of them were teens, and teen pregnancies. I also worked in the pediatrics unit at one point and dealt with their babies."

"How did you deal with the teen pregnancies?" Sydney asked.

"I talked to the girls, did their exams, and sent them to a counselor."

"What did you say to them?" Sydney asked.

"Well, considering it was their choice to be there, it wasn't too hard to make them feel guilty about it."

Sydney's eyebrows rose. "You made them feel guilty? What if they were raped?"

The woman shrugged. "Their choice."

Sydney sighed and moved her chair closer to Colin. He grinned at her, then looked through the papers in front of him again.

"What do you think of going on hospital rotations?" Sydney asked.

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"That wasn't in the job description," the woman said.

"Yes, it was," Colin answered. He rolled his chair over to the desk on the side of the room and pulled out the notice. He pointed it out to the woman, who looked surprised.

"I don't think I can do that," she said.

"Why?"

"I have an agenda for my life, and I need my evenings free." She stood up. "Thank you for your time." She grabbed her coat and walked out the door, leaving Sydney stunned.

"Over rotations?" Colin asked. "It's once or twice a week if we have the staff and only if needed!"

"She wasn't right. She was looking for her marriage license, Colin. She'd done her homework on you and you were marked. If I wouldn't have been here, she would've flirted like crazy to you."

He turned to her. "Like you want to?"

She pointed toward herself, stunned. "Me? I'm not a flirt."

"Oh really? What was up with you leaning on my chair, your hand on my thigh and you almost sitting in my lap, then?"

"I was protecting you from her."

He leaned closer. "Or were you doing it for yourself?"

"Do you really think I'm a flirt?" She batted her eyelids for effect then threw her leg over his.

He glanced down at her leg and began to laugh as he stroked her inner thigh. "Oh, you're not a flirt at all. Honestly, you need to step it up a bit, babe. You could take notes from that last one."

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She removed her leg and put her hands on her hips. "Oh really? And who would I flirt with who's worthy enough?"

He started to laugh. "This is from the same woman who said she wasn't worthy enough for me. That's almost hilarious."

"The only reason I said that was because you're rich and I'm not. I'm not in your social class. Remember?"

He stopped talking, trying to hide his grin while he faced her. "Oh, I remember, and that's your head talking. You're so confused right now, you don't know what to do. I'm just waiting."

"Uh..."

"I'm right and you know it." He leaned closer. "It's tough when you're in a war between your head and your heart, but it's fun to watch from the outside."

"Psycho."

He stood up and put his papers on the side desk. "That's all we had to do here."

"It is? Don't you want to check up on your people?"

"I have a spy doing it for me," he whispered.

"Who?"

"Personnel lady. She's back from a few days off. She's reporting to me every chance she gets."

"Oh, how many are on the chopping block?"

"Two. So we have to hire at least one more before I can do anything to build up the staff so I can work less."

"Why do you want to work less? Are you planning on having a social life?"

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He started to laugh. "I already have one, in case you didn't notice. I'm ready to make my life more of my own and not be beholden to my job. It's time to start living, and it's all thanks to you. I've never been happier."

She grabbed her coat and walked out the door with him. What was he talking about, anyway?

He stopped her in the empty waiting room and stared at the bare walls. "This needs something, don't you think?"

"Yes. It needs more patients."

He grinned. "That's not what I was saying."

Dr. Davina walked out of the bathroom and headed toward Sydney and Colin. She touched Colin's arm and leaned up to him. "I'm so sorry it didn't work out. Maybe we'll meet again some time?"

"Maybe," he said. "But I'm taken."

She stepped back. "Taken? Really? But you're not wearing a ring!"

"Not yet," he said. "But I will be soon."

Sydney's eyebrows rose in surprise. Who was he dating that she didn't know about? No wonder he wanted to take his life back for himself. That also meant time away from her, she was sure of it. She was sure he'd finally found that cute woman in his social class and she was out the door.

"Too bad," Dr. Davina said. "Have a good day!" She walked out the door and Sydney faced Colin.

"Who is she?" Even though she tried, she couldn't keep the jealousy from her voice.

He turned her back to the waiting room. "I want wooden or painted kids in here. I want them playing on the wall, and I

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want some as statues so the kids can climb on them. I want a small stage with two stairs and rubber mats and any theme you can think of so they can feel like they're at home."

"Who is she? Who are you marrying?" Sydney whispered.

He laughed, then stopped suddenly with a grin. "Are you jealous?"

"I just feel stupid if I'm keeping you from her. When are you seeing her?"

"During your naps, obviously."

She felt her mouth fall open, staring at him. He was still laughing at her and it made her sick. "So that's why you want me to take those stupid naps?"

"Sure." He started to chuckle, but she didn't see the humor. It was time for her to go home. She was no longer welcome in his house.

They left the office, but the ride to his home was very quiet.

"Penny for your thoughts?" he asked.

"I have none...for you."

"Why not?"

She remained silent. If he couldn't figure this one out, he was stupider than she thought.

"Sydney, talk to me. What's the matter?"

She crossed her arms and looked out the window. Tears filled her eyes and she swiped a few from her cheeks.

He stopped at a red light and pulled her chin to him.

"You're crying? Are you in pain?"

Yeah, from him. He was nothing but a pain to her. He only thought about his business and his money. Typical rich man,

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using the poor waif. She turned away from him, but he pulled her chin back to face him.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"Oh, that's huge if you say that. What happened?"

"Nothing." She stared out the window. "I really need to go back to my apartment."

"That's not good, Sydney. You're still not doing well."

She said nothing.

"What did I do?" he asked. "You were fine in those interviews. That lady was flirting with me, then walked out of the office. After she left, we looked at the waiting room, the lady returned and flirted some more. I told her I was taken to get rid of her—" He stopped talking and looked over at her. "Did you believe me when I said I was seeing someone when you were asleep?"

She wiped a tear but said nothing.

"You know who it was, right?"

The tears started to come faster, and she couldn't keep up with it. Colin pulled into his driveway, turned off the car and wrapped his arms around her. If she weren't so angry, she'd have melted from his compassion, but she had to put that aside and break all ties to him. She wasn't going to be his pet project any longer. Her head had to win this war, and she knew it.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Sure, I always cry like this. I'd like to go home, please?"

"Not until we talk this out. No way. Then if you still want to go, I'll follow you in your car."

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She looked up at him. "I'm allowed to drive?"

"If you want, but just short distances. I think you'll be fine." He kissed the side of her head and looked into her eyes, sweeping the hair from her face with his fingertips. "Now, what is it?"

"Nothing."

"Are you upset because you think I have someone else, and I'm just keeping you like I'd keep a stray pet?"

She just stared at him. He was good, but she couldn't show it on her face, even if he could read her mind.

"Sydney, you're no pet. You're the world to me, and have been since I saw you in the mall, before you even got hurt. Do you happen to know why Santa was away from the North Pole and the kids had to wait in a very long line?"

"I figured you had a break."

"Yeah. Second one in half an hour," he muttered. "I had to see you. I was watching you from the food court."

"Santa was watching me? Was it to see if I was naughty or nice?"

He smiled. "Yes, and the jury's out on the naughty or nice part, but it's all good. That's how I saw the whole accident. It wasn't really an accident either. You told Justin to get to work and he deliberately picked up the paper and hit you on the side of the head. I told Dave that, too, but he didn't believe me. I grabbed some paper towels and ran to your side when I saw you hit your head. I'm glad I thought ahead to get them, too, because the thud when you hit the table was really loud. I was sure it was a concussion."

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She was stunned. "What were you thinking? You didn't have to get involved at all."

He tightened his hold on her and moved his face very close to hers. "I saw a beautiful woman with fire in her eyes take charge of that business. I was thinking of what to buy to get wrapped, just to meet you."

"You were?"

He stroked her cheek. "Yes, I was. I had to time it right to get you, too, and that was the challenge more than the present. I didn't want to get stuck having Justin wrap my present, and there was only one line. I was going to buy myself a new watch, but tell you it was for my dad, even though he doesn't need one, then find something else to buy just to get you to wrap it."

Unbelievable. "So you really weren't a Good Samaritan when you helped me out, but a stalker?"

"I wasn't a stalker, but it was my opportunity to meet you. Now, who do you think I'm seeing when you're asleep?"

Sydney shook her head. "I have no idea, but you're ready to marry her."

"No, I'm not quite ready to marry her, but I am seeing someone."

Sydney moved away and stared out the window, tears teasing her eyes. "Well, you don't have to kick me out of the house. I'm ready to go. I'm not going to get in the way of you and some other woman."

"You're jealous?"

"No. I'm a third wheel and you feel obligated to take care of me. Why, I have no idea."

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Colin chuckled. "No obligation at all. You don't get this, do you?"

"No, sir."

He tipped her head toward him with his finger at the bottom of her chin. "Sydney, you were the one I was seeing when you were asleep. You're the reason I wake up with a smile on my face in the morning. You're the one who's given me meaning again, and you're the one I want. No one else, and I promise."

"Me?"

He nodded and chuckled. "Do you think any other woman would ever let me sleep next to you, even if it was only to make sure you were okay? Do you think a girlfriend of mine would allow me to help you into the shower, or take care of you like I have?"

"I guess this concussion has gotten in the way of my better judgment because I never thought of it that way."

"Trust me, sweetheart, you're it. I'm seeing you at your worst time, too, which I find very interesting. Even when you're down, you're always looking for a way to make things better and are still working much harder than you should. Most people would act like they were still in the hospital if they were in your position, but you refuse to be like that, wanting to do things for yourself."

She smiled as he wiped her tears. "Thank you."

He captured her lips in a big kiss, the type that starts out sweet and turns to passionate. She moved to his lap, between him and the steering wheel, wrapping her arms around his neck, their tongues connecting in such a way to make the

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electricity fill her. She didn't care about the differences between them, but just that he was so good for her soul and made her happy.

"Oh, what you do to me," she whispered in a low breathy tone.

He pulled his face back to see her, grinned and kissed her again. Just as he moved down her chin and neck, a car horn blasted, making them both jump.

An expensive black car had pulled up beside them. Sydney could hardly make out the driver's face in the near-darkness of the setting sun. The person had a camera to their eye, took a few shots and drove away.

"What was that?" Sydney asked.

"I think I know." Colin pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and flipped it open while Sydney got off his lap. "Ed, it's Colin. I know you're at home, but I was just the victim of a private investigator's camera." He listened for a moment. "Yes, and it wasn't good, either. I have a feeling I'm in trouble."

Sydney knew right away who was doing it. Dr. Brooks.

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Chapter Eleven

"You're free, Sydney. All your test results came out okay, and you can come and go as you like, but I still want you to take it easy." Dr. Weston's words on Monday morning were like beautiful music to her ears. Even though she wanted to cheer, she felt sad because she could finally leave Colin's home and go to her apartment. Alone. For Christmas. Just like normal. She didn't even want the banana split and football this year, but just wanted Colin, even if it was just for fun. She still couldn't date him, but she loved being with him.

They had spent the weekend with Colin's lawyers and Sydney's dad, strategizing for the meeting that afternoon. Dr. Brooks didn't have a leg to stand on, and all the lawyers knew it. Sydney just wanted it all to go away to spend Christmas with Colin. She didn't want to deal with the party the next night, or the rich people playing poker in the basement.

"Thank you, Dr. Weston," she said.

Colin walked into the examining room and plopped into a chair.

"How was the meeting?" Sydney asked.

"The apartment's mine," he said. "Took about three minutes, tops, and your parents say hello."

"Ready for this afternoon?" Dr. Weston asked him.

"As ready as we'll ever be," Colin answered. "One o'clock. Don't be late, either."

"I won't. I already have the afternoon off, and this time it'll stick."

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"This time?" Sydney asked.

Dr. Weston nodded. "She's pulled this before and got a doctor axed, too. She was after him about a year ago, after she saw him talking to a nurse in the hallway. That's all he was doing. Talking. But she decided she wanted him, so she had him followed on dates with his girlfriend, who wasn't a patient and wasn't even working at the hospital. She made up some story that if the woman ever was his patient, he'd be violating his agreement with the hospital, and the man lost his job. He was immediately hired by another hospital and we lost one of our best oncologists because of it."

"I remember that," Colin said. "So it was just a matter of time until she did the same thing to me. You were just 'convenient,'" he said to Sydney. "She used you to get to me."

The men left the examining room while she got dressed in her regular clothes instead of a gown. Dr. Weston had taken the stitches out of her head, so she could go back to her old life. It would take a few months for her to get completely back to normal, but at least she could go stairs and be independent.

After dressing, she walked out to the waiting room, where Colin was talking to Dr. Weston about Sydney's case.

"Keep up the good work with her," Dr. Weston said. "You saved the hospital from a lawsuit, and they should be thanking you this afternoon."

"Who me?" Sydney asked.

"Yes, you," Dr. Weston said. "You could've sued the hospital and Dr. Brooks for malpractice."

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"I'd never do that." What type of person did they think she was?

Colin put his arm on her shoulders with a grin. "I know that, but any other person would have. If she does that to someone else, the hospital's in big trouble. So think of this meeting as saving them from headaches in the future."

"Yeah," she answered. "Those headaches aren't fun, either."

Both doctors laughed and Colin shook Dr. Weston's hand. "Until this afternoon."

They thanked him and said goodbye, left the building and got into the car, heading back toward his home.

"So at one, we have a meeting," he said. "What do you want to do before that?"

"I have to get some more things for your house."

"Let's go."

"No. Alone. I really need a few minutes of independence and it has nothing to do with you."

He smiled. "I understand. My sparrow with the broken wing wants to soar again. You'll come back to my house, right?"

"I'd love to," she said. "But I don't feel right sleeping there any more."

He shook his head and frowned. "What can I do to get you back in my bed? I liked you there, knowing you're not living with roaches, rodents, and weird neighbors. It was so nice not to be alone and I haven't slept that well in years, maybe even my whole life. I'll even give you a massage again."

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"I know I'd feel less guilty if I had my own place back. I shouldn't be staying at your house. I have a reputation to uphold, you know. My family thinks I'm moral, remember?"

"Except for the pregnancy," he said with a grin. "I can't blame you but I'd love to have you back." He pulled up into his driveway and they walked into the house. He took her keys from the kitchen and handed them to her. "I'll be waiting for you for lunch."

"Thank you." She kissed him goodbye, walked out to the garage and got into her car. He lifted the garage door and she drove away, her muffler making horrendous sounds. She was free, but felt such longing for the place she'd called home for the past week or so. However, she had a mission to fulfill and couldn't let her emotions get in the way.

Sydney drove to the mall and walked around looking for a Christmas present for Colin. She owed him so much that she'd planned to spend a bunch of money on him to let him know she cared and really did love him. He was the one she'd been looking for all her life and no man could ever compare to him. She was ready to take their relationship to the next level, whatever that was. It was terrifying, because she knew she couldn't compete with his standing in life or with the memory of Ruth in his mind. Even though she was out of her comfort zone, she couldn't lose him. It would break her heart.

Unable to find something suitable, she finally walked outside and saw the perfect gift across from the mall at a small store. She could hardly wait.

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"Colin, I'm sitting outside your new acquisition, and it's boarded up," she said over the phone.

"My new acquisition? From my meeting this morning?"

"Yep. All boarded up." She got out of her car and walked up to the front door of her apartment building. "It says 'condemned' on the front."

"Dave," he muttered. "He did this, I'm sure. He probably had the city inspectors out there this past week and did this. Some practical joker. Come back here and we'll figure this out."

This couldn't be happening. "But this is my home! My mail—"

"Not your problem, it's mine. I'll take care of it. I just got that property this morning, and already it's a headache."

"Now I'm a nuisance, aren't I?" she said.

"No way, sweetheart. No way, ever."

"Did you do this just to get me back to your place?"

He chuckled. "It's a great idea, but no, I didn't. Wish I'd have thought of that."

"Great." She talked to him while driving back, the overcast sky making the trip seem dreary. By the time she got to his place, a few flakes of snow had fallen, but melted quickly in the warmth of the day. She ran into the house with a few packages, putting them on the couch.

"What did you get?"

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"Pretty things for your house." She kept the bags closed. He tried to take them from her, but she moved the bags away.

"What stuff?"

"You'll see." She checked her watch. "Lunch is on me."

"But Chef John's here."

She walked out to the kitchen and saw John looking in the refrigerator. "Did you start anything yet?" she asked.

"No. Any ideas?"

She opened her wallet and gave him a hundred dollars. "Take Marjorie and Gertrude out for lunch. We'll be out, too."

He stared at the money in his hand, his mouth hanging open. "Thank you so much!"

"Merry Christmas, John. I know the party's going to be a hassle for you, so let me know if I can help you out. In the meantime, enjoy your time off."

He smiled, gave her a big hug and walked away. She turned and walked right into Colin.

"That was really nice of you, but you really didn't have to do that," he said. "Your bills—"

"Let it go, Colin. Come on, we're going out," she said, grabbing his arm. "We have about two hours until the meeting. We're taking my car."

His feet stayed put and even though she tried to pull him toward the door, he wouldn't budge. "Are you sure we'll make it?"

"Who knows? I have a tow truck on speed dial. It's an adventure."

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He crossed his arms. "We'll take my car. Tell me where I'm driving."

She sighed. "You won't take no for an answer, will you?"

"Nope."

"Fine. We're going to the Up and Coming Steak Experience. I have reservations."

He raised his eyebrows. "Reservations? That's a nice place."

"Sure is. I've never been there, and we're going. It's time I started living and worry about my major debt later."

"I like your attitude."

She was back and it felt good. Granted, she didn't have a place to call home, but she'd figure out what to do. Right now, it was time to take Dr. Brooks down, and she needed to have the energy to do it. No one messed with Sydney White or her friends, and that lousy witch had better know it, too.

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"We've called this meeting so we can discuss some problems with our staff." Don Hanes, chief of staff, sat at the end of the long conference table. Colin was surrounded by three lawyers, while Sydney was at the other end of the table with her father. Dr. Weston was beside one of Colin's lawyers, with Dr. Brooks across from Colin. Other members of the

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board were also present, filling in the gaps. Dr. Brooks looked angry and shocked that the meeting was happening at all.

"Dr. Brooks," Don said. "We understand that you have a pending case with the board about a problem you've witnessed."

Colin leaned over to Ed, his main lawyer, and they whispered a private conversation. Dr. Brooks glanced at Colin, then addressed Don.

"First, I'd like to state that I'd like to have my lawyer here," she said.

"This isn't a court room, and we'd just like the facts."

"Fine," Dr. Brooks answered, shaking back her hair. "On Friday, December 13, Sydney White was admitted to the hospital after falling and hurting her head. Dr. Weston examined her and sent her upstairs to spend the night. Dr. Taylor decided to check on her all night, even though he wasn't her attending physician."

"Why did you do that?" Don asked Colin.

Colin sat up. "I was the one who saw her fall in the mall after being hit by a huge bolt of wrapping paper. I was being a Good Samaritan, and wanted to make sure she was being cared for." He glared at Dr. Brooks. "I'm glad I did, too."

"What does that mean?" she snapped back at him.

Don sighed. "Colin, do you want to tell everyone what happened?"

He nodded. "I saved her because she had a contusion on the side of her head and had been knocked unconscious. I called an ambulance and they brought her here. Dr. Weston treated her in emergency and did a fine job. I sat in on the

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visit, just to tell him what had happened, since it was her head and she didn't even know her address. She was taken to her room and I checked to make sure her vitals were stable. I wanted to make sure that the person I saved would actually live through the night."

"Why?" Don asked.

"Because I knew Dr. Brooks was on call that night on that floor. We've had past problems and I wanted to make sure the patient was safe."

Don raised his eyebrows. "Past problems?"

"All documented through the years," Colin said. "Little things, but not acceptable."

Dr. Brooks' mouth dropped, and then she shot him dagger eyes.

Colin stared right back at her, then turned toward Don. "Anyway, I checked up on Sydney, even though she's not my patient. I was on call for my patients and only on the next floor up. The next morning, Dr. Brooks released Sydney without even checking her cognitive functions or telling her how to care for her head. I took her to my home because she couldn't find her purse or her keys. She'd left her purse in her car, and her brother and I found her keys in her coat pocket. So in my opinion, she never should've been released from the hospital after an overnight stay of less than twelve hours, and the doctor who did so should be responsible for any problems occurring after she was released. She wasn't even told to make sure she wasn't alone."

"No directions at all?" Don asked. "But we have things printed out for concussion patients and if they'd been

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unconscious you'd think at least a two-day stay would make sense." Don turned to Dr. Brooks. "Why did you release her so early?"

"Uh..."

Don turned to Sydney. "Can you tell us what happened?"

"I'd like to tell you, but I'm worried about the repercussions. I've been threatened."

"Threatened? Nothing will happen to you at all. We just want your side of things."

"Fine, but I want Dr. Brooks to stay away from me."

"Why?"

"She's a scary person, sir," Sydney replied. "And I was afraid to come back here because she'd be mean to me again."

"Me? Scary?" Dr. Brooks asked.

Don shot her a dirty look, then turned back to Sydney. "What happened?"

"I don't remember the accident, but Dr. Taylor was dressed as Santa at the mall, helping with the kids. I woke up to see Santa's face. He asked me my name, and I wasn't sure of the answer, but my coworker told him. I was taken to the hospital and admitted, even though it wasn't my favorite thing to do. Anyway, they woke me all night, which made me angry. I wanted to call a client the next morning, but wasn't allowed to. Dr. Taylor walked in and helped me call my client to tell them what happened so I wouldn't lose my job. After that, Dr. Brooks entered the room—"

Three Minutes Before Christmas
by Paige Ryster

"I want my lawyer," Dr. Brooks cried out, getting to her feet. "I won't sit here and listen to lies without my lawyer present."

Bruce put his arm around Sydney and whispered into her ear. "It's a ploy. She knows she's been had. Keep talking."

"To continue," Sydney said, a little bit louder. "She came into my room—"

"No more!" Dr. Brooks exclaimed.

"And looked at my stitches and into my eyes, then discharged me. She told me to get out—"

"I'm done here!" Dr. Brooks started toward the door, but two of the board members moved to stand in her way.

"Sit down, Dr. Brooks," Don said. "Or I'll have you fired on the spot for being insubordinate."

She did as directed, and Don turned toward Sydney. "You were up to the point where she checked your head and eyes."

"She told me to get out of the hospital because she thought I was after Dr. Taylor. She said she'd been trying to date him for years, and wasn't going to let me stand in her way. The way she worded it, it sounded like a threat. I hardly even knew Dr. Taylor, and considering I'd just suffered a concussion, taking him from her was the farthest thing from my mind."

Don turned toward Dr. Brooks. "You're threatening our patients? He only just met her and wasn't even her doctor! What are you thinking?"

Dr. Brooks lowered her head.

Colin sat up and started to speak. "I'd like to add that she called me at home and threatened me and my job. I have the

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tape of the phone call if you'd like to hear it. Her private investigator also took pictures of Sydney and me."

"Kissing," Dr. Brooks said, lifting her head and pointing at Sydney. "She's been living at his house since she was discharged."

Dr. Weston leaned up to the table and faced Don. "She couldn't manage on her own and couldn't even manage going stairs, because *someone* discharged her too soon, after I'd recommended at least a two-day stay. She lives on the second floor of an apartment with no elevator." He began wagging his finger at Dr. Brooks. "Dr. Taylor saved you and the hospital from a lawsuit that would've happened if she'd fallen. I examined her on Monday of last week, and she was confused, lightheaded, and certainly not able to go out on her own. If Dr. Taylor wants to date her, that's his business. He's a pediatrician, not her doctor, and she's certainly old enough to make her own decisions."

"I agree, Dr. Weston." Don turned toward Colin. "I wish you'd have come to us earlier, though. We'd have put her back into the hospital for free and cared for her around the clock with a doctor who didn't have an agenda."

"Yes, sir," Colin said, lowering his eyes.

"I'd like to say something," Sydney said. "Dr. Taylor and Dr. Weston wanted me to go back to the hospital, but considering the way I was treated, I was worried I'd see Dr. Brooks again and I refused. Dr. Taylor took exceptional care of me, and even took time off from his job to make sure I got better. So don't reprimand him at all."

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by Paige Ryter

Don faced her. "I wonder how many other patients have been treated like this and felt the same way, worried about going back with a doctor who was nasty." He turned toward the rest of the board members. "I'd like an investigation of some sort to find out patient satisfaction when they leave. I don't want our patients afraid of their doctors."

Don paused, then glared at Dr. Brooks. "I think you're suspended without pay until further notice, and as for the meeting you've called for Thursday, it's been cancelled. We're going to have another hearing to discuss your future with the hospital with the tape of the call to Colin's house, and you may have your lawyers present. Call off your private investigator, because we don't care what Dr. Taylor does on his time off. And furthermore, I won't have any more accusations going around my hospital about people dating people. It's their business, whether they're patients or not. The contract with the hospital about dating patients and ex-patients was rewritten in September, anyway, and it's null and void."

She lowered her head, tears running down her cheeks.

Don turned toward the other board members. "Are we in agreement?"

They all nodded.

Don turned to Sydney. "It is with our deepest apologies that you were treated like this, and we'll pay for any expenses you incurred because of the injury once you were admitted."

"That's really not necessary," she said.

"Yes, it is, according to our legal bylaws," Don said. "We don't want to be sued."

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by Paige Ryter

"I'm not going to—"

"Just hold on there, Sydney," Bruce said. "Take it, and move on."

She faced her father. "No. I'm not like that, and I won't do it. My insurance and your son are going to pay anything that's not paid."

"My son?"

"Yes. He owns the wrapping business, so it's all his responsibility. I'm not going to let the hospital pay out more and raise people's expenses just to make you happy. Sorry." She glanced at Colin, who was smiling.

"I guess I raised you right," Bruce answered.

Don shook his head with a grin. "The meeting is adjourned. If you have any other comments, bring them to me privately."

Everyone got up to leave, including Dr. Brooks. She walked over to Colin, they exchanged a few words, then she walked out of the room.

Colin met with his lawyers and thanked each of them, then walked over to Sydney and Bruce. "Thank you both for being here."

"No problem, but we could be richer." Bruce stared at Sydney.

"Dad, let it go."

They walked out of the conference room and Colin left to check up on the doctor for his patients. Sydney and her father walked to the lobby of the hospital and waited for Colin.

"So are you going to marry him?" Bruce asked.

"Who?"

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by Paige Ryter

"Colin...or the father of your baby."

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

"We all know you're pregnant. Who's the father?"

"I'm not pregnant, Dad," she whispered. "I don't know what you're talking about, either."

"Sydney, you had morning sickness, and Dave told us—"

"Dave's insane. I had a concussion. That's it, end of story. He made it all up."

"So Colin's not the father?"

"There is no father! Dad, you know me. Do I sleep around?"

He sighed. "No, but what if you were raped and don't remember it because of the concussion?"

"Don't you think it would've come out in the meeting today?" she asked.

"Well..."

"Dad. Think about it. I just met Colin when I hit my head. Before that, I was working ten- to twelve-hour days, at least. When would I have time to get pregnant?"

"If you were raped—"

"Dad! I wasn't raped," she whispered.

"So why did you smell like rose oil the other night? That's for massages, Sydney, and that's not like you either!"

"Colin thought it would help my head. It was innocent and really did help me a lot. It's untraditional therapy he wanted to try. Heck, he could've done it on the couch it was that innocent." Well, sort of.

"So you're not even sleeping with him?"

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by Paige Ryter

"No. I'm not and I'm not dating him either. You and Mom always jump to conclusions. It's really irritating. Do you know that?"

"We love you, Sydney, and don't want you to get hurt."

"I'm not going to get hurt," she said with a grin. "Don't worry about that." She hoped it was true, too.

Colin approached them as they put on their coats.

"Ready?"

"Sure," Sydney answered. They walked outside and said goodbye to Bruce, then got into Colin's car and headed for home.

"Dad is so sure I was raped," Sydney said, riding in the passenger's seat of Colin's car.

"He is? I didn't tell him anything."

"I know that. First, he thought you were the father, then assumed I must've been raped and don't remember it."

"He's very imaginative," Colin said. "Delusional, but imaginative."

"He also knows about the massage. I told him it was so innocent, it could've happened on the couch downstairs."

"Oh, that would've been interesting. I think you would've had John watching, along with my dad. Your mom and my mom would've had us married that night, with your dad holding a shotgun. No, the couch wouldn't have been a good idea."

"It would've been fine."

"You were half naked! Do you even remember it?"

She smiled. "Yeah, I remember and it was so relaxing and fun. So what did Dr. Brooks say to you?"

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by Paige Ryter

"She apologized and said she never meant to hurt me or my business."

"Oh, that was nice of her. What's going to happen next?"

"She'll be fired—no doubt about it. I have a bunch of things for Don to consider, and this is only the tip of the iceberg. No, she's gone, and as soon as she is, I have a restraining order set up against her for both of us. I still don't trust her, even though she's trying to be nice. I don't want her talking to either of us."

"Thank you. I'm sure she'll be looking for me after I told the truth," Sydney said.

"I ran into one of the board members in the hallway and he was appalled at what she said to you. He offered to help you out for free, just because of Dr. Brooks' attitude."

"I'm okay, other than the imaginary pregnancy."

"That's fine, because this guy's an obstetrician."

They both chuckled.

"How can I get my stuff from my apartment?" she asked.
"I have to go looking for another one now. What a pain."

"Oh. I talked to Ed and someone in the city offices about that. The people have all been relocated on Dave's dime, since he was the owner when all this happened, and all the stuff is being put into storage. I also had all your mail forwarded to my place for the time being because they have no place to deliver it."

"So I'm being held hostage again?"

"No, just your mail."

"Lucky me."

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by Paige Ryter

He pulled up into the driveway and they both got out of the car. It was an overcast day, and although it was almost three in the afternoon, it seemed like nighttime.

They walked into the empty house and Colin went through all the mail. He checked the answering machine while Sydney walked into the huge living room. She had things to do for the party and Colin didn't need to help.

Removing a can from one of the bags, she walked over to the front wall filled with small-paned windows and began painting fake snow in each of the bottom left-hand corners.

"What'cha doing?"

She spun around with a grin. "You liked the snow look, so I'm doing it for you, too."

"Good. It makes it look more like Christmas."

She glanced out the window. "Almost all the snow is gone and it's just muddy. I think it's too warm for a real Christmas snow this year."

"That's okay. At least the people will be able to come to the party tomorrow. I want this place filled."

"So you can win more money at poker?"

"No." He crossed the room and wrapped his arms around her from behind. "So you can have a great Christmas and won't need a banana split and have to watch reruns of men playing football on television, wishing you were the ball for the snap."

She turned and faced him, his arms still surrounding her. "You're doing this party for me? I thought you just wanted my family around for Christmas."

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by Paige Ryter

"The whole party's for you. I'd like to do more for you, too."

"You would?"

His grin was adorable. "You'll see. I have a few errands to run, so feel free to decorate as much as you want."

"Errands, huh?"

He grinned, walked away and picked up his coat. "See ya later!"

She laughed at him while finishing a few details for the decorations. Chef John was going to set out a buffet for the party, so she went over the last minute checklist to make sure everyone would have a great time. She wasn't sure who was invited, but knew Dr. Brooks wouldn't be there, unless she invited herself.

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"Nice place," Mrs. Richman said when she walked through the door the following evening. It was exactly five on Christmas Eve, and a few guests had already arrived. Some soft Christmas music was playing and the table was filled with food.

Cars began pulling into the driveway, and by six o'clock, there was hardly any room to stand in the huge house. Laughter and talking filled the home, and under the mistletoe Sydney had hung, various couples giggled and kissed.

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by Paige Ryster

Colin and a bunch of the men slipped downstairs to the basement unnoticed while Sydney cordially said hello to as many people as she could. As nice as they all seemed, she didn't feel like she fit in, even with her parents. Her sister-in-law, Margaret, was also there, but was laughing with some new friends near the windows and ignored Sydney. With as many people at the party as could fit into the home, she still felt alone.

"We're here!" Colin's parents announced as soon as they walked inside. They shook everyone's hands that they passed, and greeted people as if they'd known them for years.

"Sydney!" Helen said. "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine," Sydney replied with a grin. The woman pulled her into her arms and gave her a fake hug.

"So how's Colin?"

"He's fine, I guess," Sydney said, backing off. "He's downstairs if you want to talk to him."

"And you're not by his side?" Helen asked, taking off her coat.

"No, he's playing poker," Sydney whispered. "Someone has to greet the guests."

"Oh, I see." She turned to her husband. "There's a poker game in the basement."

He kissed her cheek. "See ya later!" He practically ran down the stairs.

"Is Doris here?" Helen asked.

Sydney pointed. "Yes, she's with my dad over in the corner."

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"Have you seen Janet yet?"

"No, I haven't." She looked up and watched Janet waltz through the door. "She just walked in." Doris approached her with some other man, who grinned and kissed her hand.

"Looks like she's on a blind date, too."

"Good," Helen said. "It's time to get her out on her own. See ya later!" She walked away, greeting everyone she met.

Sydney was alone again, so she walked into the kitchen where Marjorie, John, and Gertrude were having a party of their own.

"Hey, Sydney. Everything okay out there?" John asked.

"Yeah. For everyone else."

"What's the matter?" Marjorie asked.

"I don't fit in with these people. They're all so snotty, even my family."

"You'll get used to it," Gertrude said. "I've been dealing with that type for a long time and you get them to talk about themselves. That keeps them happy."

"What kind of friend is that?" she asked.

"None. Trust me," John answered. "Where's Colin?"

"Winning money in a poker game in the basement."

John's eyebrows rose. "Poker? He hasn't had a good poker party here for years."

Sydney sighed. "He won a bundle last week at my brother's house. He even won my apartment building, and now it's condemned."

"What are you going to do?" Gertrude asked.

"Find a new apartment as soon as they're open for business after Christmas."

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They talked for a while more until Bruce and Doris entered the room. "There you are! We were wondering where you went."

"How's the baby?" Doris asked.

Sydney furrowed her eyebrows, just irritated with the whole idea. "What baby?"

"Your baby! You do know you're pregnant, don't you?" she asked.

Colin walked into the room. "John, we need more ice for the guys downstairs."

"Got it." John walked away, and Colin turned to leave, but Bruce stopped him.

"Tell Sydney she's pregnant," Bruce said.

"I'm not pregnant!" she said, hoping they'd finally listen.

"She's not," Colin said. "And I never said she was, either."

"I don't believe you," Doris said. "We saw her vomiting."

"Concussion," Colin said. "Wait right here and I'll get her doctor so you can ask him personally." He left for a moment, returning with Dr. Weston and introducing him as Sydney's doctor to Bruce and Doris.

"Is Sydney pregnant?" Bruce asked him.

"Tell them the truth," Sydney said. "They're dying to have a grandchild."

"No, she's not pregnant." He turned to Bruce and Doris. "Why would you think she is? I even did a blood test and checked it myself."

"She's not pregnant?" Doris asked. "You mean we cancelled our trip to Australia for her and she's not even

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pregnant?" She turned to her daughter in anger. "I can't believe you did this to us!"

"I didn't do anything to you!" Sydney replied. "What are you talking about?"

"Come on, Bruce. We're leaving," Doris said, grabbing his arm.

"No, we're not," Bruce replied. "I've handed out more business cards than you can imagine, and haven't even begun to cover the room. Besides, it's snowing, and you know how slick the roads can get when it starts to snow." They walked with Dr. Weston out of the kitchen, leaving Sydney alone with Colin, Marjorie, and Gertrude.

"It's snowing?" Sydney asked. She ran to the back window in the kitchen and looked out at the snow on the ground, where about a half inch had already fallen. "It's a miracle!"

Colin stood beside her, his arm going around her waist. "Didn't Beatrice say we'd have a miracle for Christmas?"

"I think so. I remember the glitter, and that was forgettable." She turned toward him with a grin. The magic of Christmas and the glitter were true, and she loved him more than she ever thought she could. Her heart had won out over her head. He wasn't like the other rich people, and even though he had a house full of guests and a poker game waiting for him, he took time out to look at the snow with her. What a guy!

He grinned and kissed the side of her head. "I have to get back downstairs. I'm winning."

"Again?"

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"Just lucky, I guess. I'll be up in about an hour and I'll spend time with you."

"Thanks for telling me," she mumbled.

He turned to her and studied her face. "What's the matter? Do you need me up here now? I can quit playing poker if you want."

She grinned to hide her loneliness. "It's okay. Go have fun."

He gave her a quick kiss, left the room and walked out into the hallway.

"I'd better go mingle," she said to Marjorie and Gertrude. The women nodded and took a sip of their drinks.

Sydney left the kitchen and went into the bathroom first. On the way out, she glanced into the office beside the bathroom and all of Ruth's pictures were gone. There were no pictures in the room at all. Colin had moved on and Ruth was finally gone. She turned to go back to the party and ran right into Janet.

"I've been looking for you." She grabbed Sydney's arm and took her into the office, then closed the door. "What's going on with you and Colin?"

"Nothing, why?"

"I'm sure he wants to marry you. Just know he's on the rebound and he's going to change his mind. I want you to know that. I know Colin better than you do and he's hurting."

"I don't think he has marriage in mind," Sydney said. "But I think it should be his decision if he does want to marry someone."

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She stuck her nose into the air. "I'm sure it won't be you. You're beneath him, Sydney. It's time to wake up and smell the coffee. Ruth owned a lot of things and had her life settled, but you can't even decorate a house without getting help. Your business is doomed, and after what I saw, it's not going to get any better. You'll be flipping fries at a fast-food place in no time."

"Are you this nice to Colin?"

"Colin's something special and he deserves a special woman at his side. Not you." She opened the door, and before she left, she turned and faced Sydney. "Get out of his life before you destroy him. He has a lot of potential, and you're only going to bring him down." Sydney watched the woman head down the hall, stopping to talk to Doris as if nothing had happened.

Sydney walked out into the dining room and ate a few bites of appetizers as two women walked up to the table and began to whisper.

"Did you see the tacky snow on the windows?" one woman said to another. "You'd think he'd hire a professional decorator for a party like this, but this is just so ugly! Even the Christmas tree was fake! At least the food's good."

They didn't like the decorations? She and Colin had worked for a long time on them, and he loved it.

She turned toward the front door and saw Colin standing near the mistletoe, whispering to a woman in a corner. It was very intimate, and Sydney was sure they were more than just friends. She turned to walk away, but saw Dr. Brooks hustle

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toward him. As she passed Sydney, the woman touched her arm and faced her.

"You lost, Sydney. You're out of his league and he's mine. Always has been. You're nothing more than a poor little girl, trying to get the brass ring from the rich guy. We all know it too."

"Huh?"

"Just watch." Dr. Brooks ran up to Colin, pulled him to her and kissed him. Sydney felt her eyes mist over as a whole line of women surrounded them, just begging for their turns, too. She couldn't see over their heads because she was too short.

Sydney was crushed as the tears filled her eyes. She grabbed her car keys and left through the back of the house, opened the big garage door, got into her car and drove out into the night. She didn't know where she was headed, but didn't need to be at Colin's house. It was time to stop playing in the fantasy and face the cold hard facts. She was nothing to Colin. He had his own life and she didn't fit in. Janet was right. Sydney would hamper him and bring him down.

The snow had become a storm, and as pretty as it was, driving in it was a disaster. She drove away from the house, out into the countryside, just so she'd have time to think. She headed toward her parents' home in case she needed to get out of the storm quickly, because she didn't have any other place to go, with no place to live. However, since they were angry with her, she may not even be welcome there.

The more she thought about it, the more it made her cry. The only jobs she'd lined up were for Colin. Since he was in

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love with Dr. Brooks and all the other women waiting for him, she couldn't work for Colin. She was out of her league with him and out of a job. Dr. Brooks and Janet were right about that part, because she really didn't fit in with his friends.

The wind whipped through her broken door, and she shivered. She didn't even have a coat on her back, because she'd left too quickly. She reached down to find her purse, but it wasn't there. She hadn't even grabbed that before she left the house.

She had nothing. Nothing but the car that sounded terrible. She didn't even have her cell phone to call a tow truck if she became stranded. She just hoped and prayed she'd get to her parents' house before she ran off the road in the snow.

As she drove on the back roads, her car started to go slower and slower. It made a funny sound, and right as she pulled it to the side of the two-lane country road, it backfired and died. It was now official. She had nothing. Her family hated her, Colin was gone, and now, her last gasp at hope had just died. She tried to start it again, but there was nothing. She couldn't even turn on the car heater, because it blasted out cold air.

Her head hit the steering wheel as her tears burned on her cheeks, then turned cold. She'd done so many wrong things in her life, making wrong choices and turning the wrong way. Nothing ever went right, and no matter how hard she'd try to work, she'd ended up in debt. She'd always be alone, probably just like one of those crazy ladies in her apartment

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complex. All she needed was a coffee cup for a phone and a container full of glitter water.

The air began to get cold and she remembered the old blanket she kept in the trunk. She got out of the car and slogged through the snow to the back of her car in her heels. At least she was wearing slacks, and very thankful for that. She opened the trunk and grabbed the blanket, heading back for the passenger's seat.

The blanket was long, and as she walked, she tripped over the end, twisted her ankle and ended up face down in the snow. She pushed herself up, the snow leaving a cold wet burn on her hands and face, her ankle throbbing in pain.

She crawled into the driver's seat, covered herself with a blanket and shook. There was no place to get help either. This part of Lancaster County was extremely rural, with no houses in sight. With her ankle, there was no way she'd get anywhere.

Her tears flowed down her cheeks. If she only had her cell phone, she could call her parents. Colin was probably on a date with the women from the party, so he was out of the question.

She pulled the thin, holey blanket over her, trying not to shake from the cold. She was soaked and the blanket wasn't doing much to help. If she could just make it until morning, maybe someone would see her and help her.

Sydney closed her eyes and put her seat back. Nothing ever went right, so she just figured she'd die in this position. Eventually she fell asleep, her nightmares about being alone

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all her life filling her head. Even in her dreams, her life was over.

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Chapter Twelve

"Sydney!"

Someone was shaking her, but she could barely open her eyes.

"Sydney! Wake up!"

"Huh?" She forced her eyes open to see Colin standing beside her, his face filled with worry.

"You're freezing!" he said. "You have to get out of here."

"No, I'm fine. Just go back to your rich life and forget about me."

"What are you talking about? Come back to my car and I'll get you warmed up. Your body temperature is low and you could die of hypothermia."

"No, I'm fine. I feel like I'm on the beach. Just go back to your girlfriend and your parties." She closed her eyes again, ready to go back to sleep.

"Sydney!"

He shook her again and she wanted to hit him, but couldn't lift her hand.

"What now?" she asked.

"Please come back to my car with me?"

"I can't. Just go back home and I'll be fine." She turned her head toward him, tears filling her eyes.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Nothing."

She felt herself being lifted out of the car. Snow hit her face, but she didn't want to open her eyes or her tears would

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fall faster. She was placed on a seat with warm air blasting across her and another blanket draped over her. She couldn't open her eyes if she tried.

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Christmas carols filled the air, waking Sydney from a deep sleep. She was covered from head to toe with blankets and could smell the fire in the fireplace. She opened her eyes and saw Colin sitting on a chair in front of the couch, staring at her. Behind him was the lit Christmas tree, with only one other lamp turned on in the big living room.

"You're awake?" he asked.

"Why am I here?"

"I brought you here."

She glanced around the room. "Why? Where did everyone go?"

"They left hours ago. Why did you run away?"

His face looked angry and sad at the same time, and she didn't know how to respond. "I'll call a cab." She started to get up from the couch, but he pushed her back down and sat beside her.

"No more running. I want to know what happened to put you in a situation that bad. Why would you leave here without your purse, your phone, or your coat?"

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She studied his face. "How do you know I didn't have my purse or my phone?"

"I tried to call you and the phone rang from the kitchen, inside your purse."

"When was that?" she asked.

"About ten minutes after I left you in the kitchen. What happened?"

"Well, you walked out and Janet pulled me into the den."

"She did? What did she say to you?"

Sydney lowered her head. "She said I wasn't right for you and I'd pull you down. She said I'm a terrible interior designer, and would be working in a fast-food place in no time."

"That's not true! You're not a terrible interior designer."

"Regardless, I'm to leave you alone because you're on the rebound from Ruth."

"Figures. She made a pass at me."

She lifted her eyes to his. "What? Your ex-future mother-in-law made a pass at you?"

"Yeah. She and I had a big fight. She won't be coming here ever again. Is that why you left?"

"No. After that, I heard some of your guests making fun of the decorations for this place."

"Making fun of them? I liked what we did together! I had a lot of compliments on how great and homey it looks. Did you leave because of that?"

"No. I don't fit in here, Colin. I'm not in your social class and I know it."

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His arm went around her shoulder. "I don't have a social class. Most of those people work with me but they're not my friends. You're my friend, not them. They mean nothing to me, but you mean the world. Is that why you left?"

"No. When I turned around to go back into the kitchen..." The tears started to flow more and his head moved against hers.

"I'm here and I want to hear it. I promise nothing's as bad as you think."

She took a deep breath. "When I turned to go back into the kitchen, you were talking to some lady in a corner."

"Oh. That's Sandy from the office. She was giving me the lowdown on Dr. Jeffers and his drinking habit on the job."

Sydney wiped her cheeks. "Well, Dr. Brooks walked past me and told me I'm out of your league, and she kissed you. All those women were around you and I realized Dr. Brooks was right. You can have anyone you want at any time, and I certainly don't fit in. I'm the stray you took in because you felt sorry for me. As soon as you realize that, you'll be gone. I'm just a replacement for Ruth. So, I grabbed my keys and headed for my parents' house, even though they're angry with me, but the car died halfway and I was stuck. When I got my blanket from my trunk, I tripped and fell face-first into the snow."

He raked his eyes over her. "Are you okay?"

"I think so." She didn't want to tell him about her ankle, which still really hurt.

Colin shook his head. "Dr. Brooks, Janet and those stupid women. I should've guessed. Dr. Brooks crashed the party

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with Dr. Jeffers from my own office. The woman attacked me and I pushed her away, telling her about the restraining order. I told the other women I was taken, too, and they walked away. I kicked Dr. Jeffers and Dr. Brooks out of the house, giving him his notice on the way. He's gone from my office because he's a drunk and doesn't do his job. But to bring her here was unforgivable. After that, Janet walked up to 'console' me and kissed me because her blind date dumped her. I dragged her into the office and told her what a terrible daughter she had and how I'd been controlled by her family for too long, then kicked her out, too."

She wiped her cheeks again, facing him. "So you're not in love with any of them?"

"No way. Are you kidding me? Dr. Brooks tried to get me fired. Janet's over twenty years older than I am. Why would I love someone like that when I have you?"

"Huh?"

He held on to her hand and kissed the back of it. "Sydney, like I told you before, I love you. I've loved you since you asked me for that grape lollipop. You're so much fun to be around, I can't think of anyone I'd rather be with. When I couldn't find you tonight, I thought I'd lose my mind. Your parents, my parents, your brother, John, and I drove all over the county looking for you. We called hotels, hospitals, and anyone else who might know where you went. We were all worried sick and for good cause, too. Do you know you almost died in that car? Your body temperature was down and your breathing was shallow. If I would've gotten there about

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ten minutes later..." His voice sounded like he was going to cry. "Don't ever do that again, please?"

"I'm not Ruth. I didn't leave to be spiteful."

His mouth fell. "What do you know?"

"She didn't die of cancer."

"You know about how she really died?"

"Sure." She looked down and realized she was only wearing a robe. "What happened to my clothes?"

"You were soaked, so I undressed you and wrapped you in something warm." He studied her with a frown. "You left because you thought I wasn't being honest? I've never lied to you, and always included you in everything I could because I wanted to. I kept an eye on you so you wouldn't spend Christmas alone with a banana split and some football player on television. I'll never stray from you and you'll never be a girl to console me on the rebound. You're the best thing that's ever happened to me, ever. Better than any old girlfriend or even my family. I never should've played poker but should've been by your side tonight. I'm sorry."

Sydney felt her mouth fall open in surprise. She reached out and hugged him, the tears falling down her cheeks. "I realized something, too, and when I was freezing to death, as upset as I was, I knew it was true."

"Yeah?"

She backed away and wiped her cheeks. "I love you, too. I have for a while, even though I couldn't admit it. In case you haven't figured it out, I'm somewhat stubborn and very jealous. But I do love you. More than anyone, ever. I consider you my best friend and my soul mate. You're the type of man

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I've been looking for, even though you are rich. I can forgive you for that. You're nothing like those other snotty people."

"Thanks." He leaned forward with a smile on his face and touched his lips to hers. "You're such a wonderful person and I love you for it. Do you want to get something to drink?"

"Well, funny thing about that. When I fell in the snow, I hurt my right ankle and it's kind of throbbing."

He glanced down at her foot, and she followed his gaze.

He reached down, pulled her foot to his lap and examined it as she winced. "Be gentle, please? It really hurts!"

"I promise," he answered. "Swollen, too. I should've noticed that when I took off your clothes."

"Even though it hurts, I'm sure it's just sprained. I'll be fine."

"Are you a doctor?" he asked, facing her with a smile.

"No, but I'm in love with one. That's close enough for me."

He placed her foot on the coffee table, stood up, kissed her and left the room. He returned within minutes with a bottle of water in one hand and an elastic bandage in the other. He handed her the water, then sat down, pulling her foot to his lap. "Nasty, huh? Can you bend your ankle?"

"I don't know. It hurts when I do, but I'm sure it's not broken."

He wrapped her ankle in the bandage, then put her foot on a pillow on the coffee table.

"I have something for you," she said. "But it's in my purse and I don't think I can walk yet."

"I'll be right back." He left the room and returned with her purse, handing it to her.

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She dug inside, removed an envelope, and handed it to him. "This is for future parties, may they all end in good fortune. Merry Christmas, Colin."

"Good fortune? Like the poker game I won tonight?"

"How much did you win?" she asked.

"Only about five grand. We lowered the starting amount for Mr. Richman, then quit early to hunt for you."

"Well, this should be something you'll like. I promise."

He opened the envelope and sat beside her. His mouth fell open and he faced her in surprise. "A pool table and a poker table?"

"You needed it."

He studied the papers. "They're delivering them the day after Christmas." He turned to her with his mouth hanging down. "Sydney, you spent the money you were going to use on your school loans for this. You really didn't have to do that."

"Yes, I did. You helped me earn that money and it was the least I could do. I figured if someone didn't want to play poker, they could play pool, and you could move your weights to that huge workshop."

"But that workshop is for you."

"Me? I don't even live here."

He smiled. "I have something for you."

"Huh?"

"I wanted to wait until Christmas morning, but you're going to be busy then, so here goes."

"I am? What am I doing Christmas morning? The games aren't on and I didn't tape them."

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"No football." He checked the clock above the mantle. "Three minutes before Christmas is close enough." He walked to the tree, picked up a small envelope on top of many presents and sat down. "This is for us."

"Us?"

He handed it to her. "Open it. I've been waiting to give you this for over a week now."

She opened the envelope and looked inside. She felt her eyebrows hit the ceiling and her mouth hit the floor in surprise as she took the papers out and read them. "Two tickets to Hawaii, leaving tomorrow morning?"

"We'd get to build sandcastles on the beach, even with your ankle. And there are no tidal waves predicted. I checked."

She smiled. "My ankle will be better by morning."

He glanced down. "If not, X-rays, and I'm serious."

She ignored him. "Is it a topless beach?"

"Nope." He nuzzled his lips against her neck. "But it's warm, so if you want to undress, I won't stop you."

She laughed at him, then handed the envelope back to him. "But we're not married. It's just not right and you know it."

"I guess I'll just have to take care of that, too." He reached into his pocket with a grin and knelt on the carpet in front of her.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Taking care of that problem. It's pretty and shiny, too, just like you always wanted." He opened a small box in his hand, showing her a beautiful huge diamond ring with smaller

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diamonds on each side. "Sydney Rose White, will you marry me?"

She was shocked, the tears of happiness stinging her eyes and warmth filling her heart. "You know my full name?"

"I asked your mom. It's a beautiful name. Will you marry me?"

"I hardly know you! Dating's one thing, but marriage? What will your friends say?"

He laughed. "I don't care what anyone else says because I love you. You've lived with me for more than a week, and we spent almost every moment of every day together. You're my best friend, Sydney, and I can't say that about anyone else. I think I know you pretty well, and would love to spend my whole life with you. I'm not like those other rich people and you know it. I worked side by side with you and never once said I wouldn't do something. I wore jeans and a sweatshirt to my office to show you I'm not stuck up, and I talk to the hired help as much as you do—always have. Now, get those other people out of your mind and think only about me. You know I'm no different than you or any other average person and will never stray from you. Will you marry me and spend the rest of your life with me?"

She fought the tears of happiness in her eyes, but let the grin cover her face. He was right and she loved him just the way he was. She could live in his world and be his friend, his partner and his wife. "I'd love to."

He slipped the ring on her finger, got up from the floor, sat beside her and gave her a slow and endearing kiss, resting his forehead on hers. "You've made me so happy." The clock

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over the mantle struck midnight. "I'm so glad you said yes. The ceremony is at seven in the evening and it would be awful to be there alone."

"Tonight?"

He moved back and nodded. "In Hawaii. It's been arranged, and all ready to go. I even have luggage for you under the tree along with a few other things like a bikini and a thong."

She began to laugh, leaned over and met his warm lips with hers. "Your complete fantasy, huh?"

"Yep. We only have to sign the licenses and we can get married, then enjoy the rest of the time making out on the beach and getting blue cotton candy."

"And building sandcastles. I guess Chef John won the bet, then."

"What bet?"

Sydney grinned. "Chef John thought we'd be married by Christmas, and Marjorie thought it would be by the end of the year."

Colin smiled. "And you've known that for how long?"

"Since the first night I slept here."

"You've been keeping secrets from me, and still refused to date me?"

"Something like that." She glanced under the tree to a ton of packages. "What will I wear for a wedding?"

"Your mother's wedding dress. She brought it with her to the party because she thought you had to get married and the dress wouldn't fit if you waited."

Her eyes met his again. "They knew about the wedding?"

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"They've known all along. Granted, they thought I was marrying you to give your baby a name, but they like me. Even though you're not pregnant, they still give us their blessing and want a grandchild right away. My parents want the same thing, and think you're exactly what I need. They're also glad I kicked Janet out of the house and out of my life."

"Amazing." This was just getting better and better.

"Now, one more thing," he said. "I kind of did something behind your back and I hope you're not mad at me."

"Go on..."

"I paid off your student loans."

"What? How?" She sat back, staring at him. "Why?"

"I took the winnings from the first poker game and sent it to the place on your letters. I called them yesterday morning and they received payment. You're all paid up and everything you have is yours."

"And yours."

"Oh, no. I want you to have a great honeymoon in Hawaii and you can spend anything you want. If we have to buy extra suitcases from your shopping trips, that's fine, too."

She held his hand, lowered her eyes and put a grin on her face. "I know why those women wanted you." Facing him, the tears of happiness threatened to pour from her eyes. "You're a keeper, and my best friend. Beatrice was right about a Christmas miracle wish and you're it. It truly is a magical white Christmas after all." She leaned over and kissed him

He lifted her into his arms as he stood. "Now, the future Mrs. Taylor, it's time to go to sleep...or not."

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She laughed and kissed him as they went up the stairs to their bedroom, starting their lives together at last, never to spend Christmas alone with a banana split and reruns of football again.

The End

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by Paige Ryter

Author Bio

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Paige Ryter currently makes her home in Wisconsin, and lives with her husband, three teenage children, and various pets. When she's not writing, she likes to watch comedies and science fiction on television, garden, and watch the snow pile up outside the window around five months of the year.

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