



## Shotgun Nanny by Nancy Warren



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HELP, Annie Mathers scrawled in big black letters. Then she outlined the word in ballpoint until she'd almost carved through to the picture side of the postcard.

She paused, took a sip of cappuccino, then tapped the pen on the blank space on the postcard. Underneath *Help* she wrote *Matter of life and death! Follow me*. She underlined *Follow me* with a dramatic slash of black ink. And, just like that, started to feel better. Action and movement always made her feel better, and as soon as her best friend, Bobbie, received the card, they'd be on their way.

She flipped the card over and discovered the aerial view of Vancouver harbor was marred by the thick ridges her pen had carved. With a sigh, she tossed the card onto the table—Bobbie would think she'd completely lost it. Which might be true.

She picked up a second postcard and made a more conventional start.

*Dear Bobbie. Follow me to Vancouver. I need a vacation! Fly up TODAY. Matter of life and death—Gertrude's.*

*And if that doesn't get you, nothing will*, she thought smugly. Bobbie loved Gertrude—she'd fly up from LA to save her, or at least save her alter ego's sanity. Of course she would. Gertrude had paid the rent several times when Annie and Bobbie had been financially strapped roomies.

Annie glanced up from the table and let the sun settle on her face. Sailboats bobbed beside the dock, rows of white hulls gleaming proudly in the early summer sun. She glimpsed a couple of kayaks scooting behind the brightly colored Aquabus. A soft breeze blowing across False Creek carried the briny ocean smells to mix with the restaurant scents—garlic, freshly cooked seafood, coffee.

The tables on the dock-cum-bistro were filling up with tired tourists and after-work yuppies. Much as she would have enjoyed swapping her empty coffee mug for a glass of wine and some of that mouthwatering seafood for dinner, she really needed to save her cash for the authentic sushi, Szechwan and Thai food she'd be eating once she and Bobbie got to Asia.

Annie signed the card with a flourish, addressed it, licked a stamp and pressed it to the corner of the postcard. She jumped up, obeying an overwhelming impulse to get Bobbie's postcard in the mail, as though she could conjure up her best friend just by popping the card in a bright red mailbox.

She reached down and deposited the backpacking guide to the Orient she'd been reading in her leather backpack, then dropped a tip on the table. Rising and turning in one motion, she collided with a brick wall. At least it felt like one. It was covered in a jean shirt and breathing but was still as hard and immovable as a brick wall.

She glanced into a pair of cool blue eyes set in a face of stone. He looked like a cop or private eye from one of the old movies she loved so much.

Maybe that was why this complete stranger struck her for an instant with an intense sense of familiarity. Even her body acted as if it knew him intimately. A sizzle of awareness zinged through her as she stared at the hard-planed cheeks, square jaw and a nose that would have been classical had it not sported the telltale crookedness of a break sometime in its owner's past. For an insane second, she wanted to lean into him as though he were a safe refuge.

Whoa! She'd definitely been working too hard. She must be nuts to go all gooey over a stranger. A big, handsome, tough-guy stranger who reminded her of her fantasy men—but she knew better. That kind of man only existed in black and white, on a movie screen.

Unpeeling herself from his warmth, she mumbled, “sorry,” with a faint smile and made her way as quickly as she could away from the crowded patio.

MARK S AUNDERS'S eyes followed the woman, her spicy fragrance still in his nostrils. She was dressed in some kind of flowing thing in every color of the rainbow, and as she walked a shaft of sunlight shimmered through the fabric, outlining long slender legs and nicely rounded hips. Not even a superhero's X-ray vision could have caught a better view of the little triangle of fabric that seemed to be her entire contingent of underwear.

On her head was a floppy hat—maybe to keep off the sun, but more likely she was one of those New Age types who always wore floppy hats.

Cute, though. And there'd been a nanosecond when she'd seemed more than cute, when he'd felt an electrifying sense of connection with her. He'd had to quash a bizarre impulse to invite her to join him in a drink.

But he was a sensible man. In his experience, spontaneous acts always led to trouble. Still, it didn't hurt to look. He smiled and turned to take the newly vacated table. And froze.

*Help, he read. Matter of life and death. Follow me.*

The woman was sending him a desperate message, and he'd wasted valuable time watching her rear end.

Damn it to hell.

All his training slammed a lid on his emotions. Adrenaline pumped through his system, but he acted casual. Palming the card, he scanned the crowd to see who might be watching or following the girl. In the few seconds he'd wasted, she had disappeared, and so, it seemed, had anyone who was tracking her.

If only he'd acted on his impulse and invited her to sit down with him, he could have protected her. Damn it, maybe when she'd leaned into him and her green eyes had sparkled into his, she'd been trying to send him a silent message. Which he'd misinterpreted—totally.

Mark reached automatically for the radio at his side and groaned. No radio. He wasn't a cop anymore. When was he going to stop acting like one? He was on his own, no backup.

On the road he paused, eyes narrowed against the sun, allowing his gaze to scan the vicinity. Granville Island on a sunny day in June. What could be worse? Crowds of tourists ambled along enjoying the sunshine, browsing the shops, snapping pictures.

While one lone, sweet-looking woman was facing a life-and-death dilemma.

A hundred women looked like the one he'd bumped into, but his trained eye soon picked her out. It was as though a camera in his head had clicked a picture—he could have given her height, weight, eye and hair color and a reasonable description of her clothing to anyone who asked.

She strode forward with purpose, unlike most of the strolling crowd, and her head moved from side to side as though searching for someone.

Mark watched the people behind her. Many moved in the same direction. It was impossible to tell who might be following her. He pushed away from the protective wall and started walking, careful not to follow too closely or watch her too intently. Instead, he did his best to act like a guy enjoying the island, maybe on his way to buy fresh vegetables at the market.

He tried to formulate a plan as he walked. He had no sidearm, no weapon of any kind except his fists. No backup unless he passed a phone, and even then he didn't know if he'd dare stop—he might lose her in the crowd. If they passed anywhere near his vehicle, he had a whole arsenal of security stuff, but she was headed in the opposite direction. He'd even left his cell phone in the car. Whenever he met his buddy Brodie he came unarmed, just to save himself the grief. In future, he'd take the teasing. But for now, he had to make do with what he had. Nothing.

His mind rapidly sorted possibilities. Drugs? Prostitution? Stalker? She looked pretty Haight-Ashbury, but his instincts told him it wasn't drugs—at least she didn't show any of the signs of a user or a pusher.

Prostitution? She appeared too fresh. He remembered the way she'd smiled at him, her green eyes frank and as assessing in their way as his were trained to be. In fact, her face was as clear in his mind as in that time-stalled moment they'd stood staring at each other.

Her lips, open in surprise, had been soft and pink without the aid of cosmetics. She had a pert little nose with a cinnamon sprinkle of freckles across the bridge and high cheekbones. Under the hat bits of reddish-brown hair stuck out helter-skelter, and there were three silver earrings piercing her left ear, four crawling up the right. But it was her eyes that had captured his fancy. Uptilted and sparkling with life, they'd made him feel momentarily reckless. And he was never reckless.

Had she made someone else feel reckless? A stalker? That was the most likely possibility. She was a good-looking woman, and he'd seen some pretty scary guys go after women who'd dumped them. But, if there was a stalker following the woman, he hadn't shown himself yet.

Abruptly she turned down a side street, speeding like a horse anxious to get to its stable. He picked up his pace, breaking into a run, knocking shoulders and dodging pedestrians as he raced to protect her. One more possibility occurred to him as he rushed forward—this could be a trap.

He halted, confused, as he rounded the corner and scanned the narrow street.

It was quiet, lined on both sides by little arty workshops and small businesses. But she didn't head for one of the doors. Her destination was the mailbox at the dead end of the alley.

She appeared to be alone.

Mark hated blind alleys. Sweat broke out on his brow as he glanced over his shoulder, then perused the surrounding area, focusing especially on the doors and windows. He detected no suspicious movement. It was just a quiet sun-filled alley.

As he watched the woman deposit something in the mailbox, his mind clicked through new possibilities. A ransom? With a deep breath, he plunged into the lane, senses super alert.

She turned from the mailbox and paused as Mark approached her, a half-smile on her face and a gleam of recognition sparkling in those eyes.

“Are you making a drop?” he whispered, putting as much of his body in front of her as possible in an instinctive protective gesture.

She moved closer, and once more that spicy fragrance teased his senses. In a heavy Bronx accent she whispered, “Let’s hope Duey don’t see us together!” She rolled emotion-filled eyes, her whole body expressing fear and dread.

He was keyed up for action, hating the vulnerability of this lane and not knowing who or where the enemy was. “Who’s Duey?”

She laughed, a soft, rich sound that reverberated against his chest. He felt a bead of sweat trickle down his temple. If she went hysterical on him it could place both of them in greater danger.

“No, no,” she said, chiding. “Your line is, ‘Let’s shake the heat, sister, and blow.’”

His line? What? “Ma’am, I can’t help you if you don’t tell me what this is about.”

She took a step backward and glanced around, amusement changing to wariness. “You tell *me* what it’s about!”

Mark also backed up a step, putting more distance between them and forcing a deep breath into his lungs. How had he missed the signs? The woman was a lunatic. He tried to recall if a full moon was expected tonight, but couldn’t. He remembered how they’d all dreaded a full moon on the force. It was always a busy couple of days.

Keeping his voice calm, he spoke slowly. “Where do you live?”

Her brows rose, the green eyes dancing once more. “If that’s your idea of a pickup routine, you were doing better before. Old movies may be corny, but they have the best lines.”

She made to walk past him.

*Old movies?* Mark stepped in front of her, confusion turning to frustration. “Don’t play games with me. I’m an RCMP officer—uh, ex-officer. I saw you drop something in that mailbox.” Realizing he sounded accusing, he softened his tone. “I’m here to help.”

She glanced at the mailbox, then at him, then raised her eyebrows. “Before you arrest me for mail fraud, Mr. Ex, I put a stamp on that postcard.”

“A postcard like this?” He pulled the card out of his back pocket and held it in front of her nose.

She stared at the postcard, raised her gaze to his face, looked at the message she’d written, bit her lip. “You followed me because of that?” Her voice wavered.

Damn if he could make head or tail of this crazy woman. Was she in danger or wasn’t she? “Yes!”

“Oh, I’m *so* sorry—” It was as far as she got. She gave a snort and burst into gales of laughter that seemed to go on forever, echoing off the buildings. “Ow, my stomach hurts,” she gasped after an eon of one-sided hilarity. “Bobbie is just going to die!”

He was getting the feeling that this woman talked about death and dying in a different way than he did. “Is Bobbie the one in a life-and-death situation?”

“What? Oh. No. That’s Gertrude. She isn’t really dying. She’s just tired from working too hard.”

“So, you personally are not in any kind of danger at all?” He wanted to be absolutely clear on this point.

She touched the tip of her tongue to her upper lip and glanced at him from under her lashes. “Not unless you arrest me for writing postcards in bad taste. What would that

charge be, anyway?"

She was so cute he couldn't stay mad at her, especially now he knew she wasn't in danger and his heart rate had slowed to normal. He rubbed his chin, thinking. "We could go with public mischief."

"Public mischief. Sounds serious. And the penalty would be...?"

He did his best to look stern. "They'd throw away the key."

Rich and earthy, her chuckle resonated in his chest. She started walking back the way they'd come, and he fell into step with her.

"I'm really sorry. I figured that postcard would get tossed. I never thought how it might look." Her voice wasn't the broad Bronx she'd first used. She must, he realized, have been mimicking some ancient movie he'd never seen. Her voice was softer, more West Coast. California, maybe.

"No harm done."

"You used to be a Mountie, huh?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"My grandmother just loved Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald. I grew up hearing them sing, 'When I'm calling you-oo-oo, will you answer toooo-oo.'" She leaned into him and sang into his face, pursing her lips and puckering her eyebrows until she could have passed for an old-fashioned movie star.

She trilled the words in a high, clear soprano, and he was so caught up in the feel of her slight body leaning against him and the sweetness of her face that he forgot they'd rejoined the milling crowds. Until he heard a stranger's voice saying, "Yeah. You tell him, girl."

She broke away from Mark with a quick laugh. "Then there's the Musical Ride. I used to think the Mounties was a singing group. Kind of like the Monkees only Canadian. And with horses."

"That's us. Other cops get weapons training. We get voice lessons."

"I learned the truth when I started watching a TV show about a Mountie. The guy was like a real cop, only in that awesome uniform. I just loved that red jacket and those killer jodhpur things. Ooh, and that hat was dead hip."

"That is the RCMP dress uniform. No real officer would wear his dress uniform to work."

Her face fell. She appeared so ludicrously disappointed he wished he hadn't told her. "But then they're just like any other cops."

"Pretty much. Except for the singing."

"Well. First you try and arrest me for mail fraud, now you destroy one of my cherished illusions about the Mounties. I'm just going to have to say goodbye." She smiled and extended her hand. "My car's over there."

He gazed at her hand for a moment. Long, slender white fingers, a couple of silver rings, although nothing on the wedding ring finger, green nail polish. He grasped the hand in his, not at all eager to let it go, wishing he could prolong their acquaintance.

Briefly, he considered asking her out, then remembered what a total fool he'd made of himself. She'd probably laugh in his face if he asked her for a date. Besides, his life was complicated enough these days.

She shook his hand purposefully. Then turned and walked toward a parking lot jammed with cars, her skirt swaying and drifting.

He glanced at his watch and cursed silently. He'd forgotten all about Brodie. Reluctantly, he turned toward the restaurant.

"Hey!" the female voice stopped him, and eagerly he swung around.

A hand shielded her eyes against the sun as she called, "Thanks for trying to rescue me."

"I—" If it were this time last year he'd take a chance and ask her out, even if she did laugh in his face. But he had new responsibilities. Even if the lady was willing, he couldn't get involved with a woman right now. Not with Emily to worry about.

The woman was standing not twenty feet away, waiting for him to finish what he had to say, a slight breeze teasing him as it molded the flimsy dress fabric to her body then puffed it away again. So strong was the urge to close the distance between them that he felt like he was a magnet and she was true north.

"I, uh... Drive safely." He raised a hand in farewell then turned and walked the way he'd come. All the way to the restaurant where the bizarre situation had started.

And there was Brodie, sitting at a table, already halfway through a beer, his sunglasses reflecting the busy scene.

Beneath the reflective lenses, the mustache spread and tilted in a smile. "Did you get your man?" Brodie lifted the beer in Mark's direction.

Mark chuckled. His old buddies on the force liked to tease him that he was like the cartoon Mountie who always saved the damsel in distress and always got his man. He was zero for two today. He hadn't got his man, and he sure as hell hadn't helped the damsel in distress. Good thing he'd handed in his badge last year. "Not today."

"First time since I've known you, you're late."

Mark gestured to a waitress, who was unloading a tray at a nearby table, and sat across from his friend. He needed a beer.

"So," Brodie pressed, "What's up?"

Mark pulled the postcard out of his pocket and pushed it across the table.

Brodie leaned forward to read the card and then went absolutely still. He stared at the words for a few moments, then turned the postcard over and back again before glancing at Mark. "What's going on?" he asked.

Mark blew out his breath in a big huff. "I just made a complete jackass of myself." The waitress approached, and he ordered a beer.

"You ready for another one?" The perky redhead with the Australian accent gestured to Brodie's half-empty glass.

"Yeah," he replied, relaxing once more in his chair.

"Right." She smiled at Brodie, and Mark knew his old buddy hadn't wasted any time missing him. He'd been flirting with the waitress.

"Got her phone number yet?"

"I'm working on it." He pointed to the postcard. "You gonna tell me what's happening? Or do I read about it in tomorrow's paper?"

Mark told him, reliving the entire incident as he did so.

The sun was gleaming off Brodie's white teeth when Mark finished. He could see the physical effort it cost his old friend not to laugh aloud.

"Let it out, man," he said testily.

Brodie laughed, long and rich, stopping once to wipe streaming eyes. "Hey, I'm sorry, Mark. I know how you must feel, but God, that's the funniest thing I've heard all



week.”

“I just don’t get it. Why would a woman write a postcard to a friend and put help and life and death and stuff on it? Whatever happened to weather great, wish you were here?”

“When you figure out what women mean, you let me know. They got no perspective. They break a fingernail and it’s like the end of the world. Then they phone you and say, all casual, ‘Hi, honey, can you fix my car this weekend?’ You ask her what’s wrong with it and she says, ‘Oh, honey, I don’t know. I think the engine fell out.’”

Mark grunted agreement.

“I’ll never figure women.” Brodie sighed. “But it’s fun trying.”

“I’ll drink to that.” Mark picked up the frosty mug that had been delivered and drank deeply.

“What did she look like?” Brodie asked.

Mark closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them. “Caucasian, five-seven, about one-thirty, eyes green, hair brown, age...” He wrinkled his brow. This was always the toughest one. “I’d say twenty-five to thirty.”

“Looker?”

“Oh, yeah.” He snorted; he was beginning to see the funny side himself. “She must think I’m one terrific guy....”

“You acted just like you were trained to. If she’d been in trouble you might have saved her life.”

“You’re not helping.”

“Maybe this’ll help. Two tickets to the Grizzlies game Saturday.” He pulled tickets from his shirt pocket and waved them in front of Mark’s nose. “Basketball’s not like women. There are rules in basketball. The same ones for both teams. And there’s no talking about it.”

Mark grinned. “You’re still steamed at Shelley, huh?”

“Don’t get me started. She wanted me to see a relationship counselor. Says I’m shallow and can’t commit to one woman. This from a gal who makes her living taking her clothes off in front of hundreds of men.”

Saturday afternoon at a basketball game. He didn’t even let himself think about how much he wanted to go. He shook his head. “I can’t. Emily.”

“Can’t your black-belt-in-judo nanny watch her?”

“It’s her birthday party. The first one since...”

“Sure.” Brodie stuck the tickets in his pocket. “Did you call that clown friend of Shelley’s?”

“She’s an ex-stripper. That’s how Shelley knew her.”

Brodie’s eyes widened. “No. How’d you find out?”

“Standard background check.”

His friend choked on his beer. “You did a security check on a birthday-party clown?”

“Good thing, too. Another family recommended a clown who checked out. I got her instead.”

“Her? Is she good-looking?”

Mark rolled his eyes. “Did you ever see a good-looking clown?”

“No. But then I didn’t catch the stripping clown. That could be interesting. Do

you still have her number?"

"I don't know where you find the energy."

Brodie shrugged. "My motto is never pass on a pretty woman. You don't know when the next one's coming along."

Immediately, an image of the woman with the postcard rose in Mark's mind. Damn. He hadn't even asked her name. "I wish you'd told me that an hour ago."

"What? The life-and-death babe?"

"Yeah."

His buddy shook his head. "Uh-uh. You made a total ass of yourself in front of that one. My other motto is, if you fall flat on your face in front of a pretty woman, stay facedown until she's long gone. The good news about Ms. Life and Death is, you'll never see her again!"

## 2

ANNIE TUCKED a stray purple and yellow curl behind her ear, but it promptly boinged out to poke into her ear canal where it would tickle every time she moved. She grimaced with annoyance in the rearview mirror, making her huge red smile look like a burst sausage.

The hottest day of the year, and she was stuck in the tiniest car ever invented—you couldn't fit air-conditioning in it even if you could afford it—and the biggest wig. "Gertrude, honey," she told her clown reflection, "we need a vacation."

The little car crawled up the hill to an address high on the slopes of North Vancouver, just as she'd been told. Told over the phone, which was standard procedure when she took a clown booking for a birthday party, then told again in a follow-up letter containing detailed instructions on how to get to the house where the party was to be held and how to gain entry.

Gain entry? Annie read that part again. More than a simple knock on the door was required. First there was a key code she would have to punch into a security gate to get past the fence. This changed daily, the letter informed her. So they thought she might be a part-time clown, part-time jewel thief?

Okay, ahead of her the gate appeared. She drew her little Smurf-blue putt-mobile up to an alcove that looked like a banking machine. She pushed in her number, waited a moment, and the gates swung open reluctantly.

After all the rigmarole, Annie expected a castle with a moat, at least, but the house was a family-size, modern-looking stone-and-cedar affair. Hardly looked like the Pentagon.

As the gates closed behind her, she started to get a claustrophobic feeling. For a second, she wished she'd turned back when she'd had the chance. The curse of an active imagination and a love of old movies was that she found herself picturing ridiculous scenarios. She was Philip Marlowe approaching the mansion where the two-timing dame

was holed up, cynically wondering if he'd get out with his life.

The truth was even more ridiculous. She was a grown woman in a clown costume, wearing polka dots the size of asteroids.

She parked at the end of the drive and exited her vehicle as instructed. She swapped her trainers for Gertrude's huge floppy clown shoes and shuffled to the door, the plastic rose in her lapel bobbing to hit her in the nose with each step. She dragged her battered suitcase past perfectly manicured lawns, sterile-looking flower beds containing mostly small evergreen bushes, and up three swept steps. By the time Annie got to the intercom buzzer at the front door she was feeling wilted—not only by the heat. She noticed a small camera in the corner above the door and poked her tongue out as far as she could.

The door opened.

And so did her mouth, tongue only partly retracted.

Cool blue eyes, stubborn jaw, brick-wall chest. The guy from Granville Island. *Of all the joints in all Vancouver, I have to walk into to this one....* She nearly giggled hysterically. Brick wall was looking her up and down, noting the suitcase in her hand. He glanced behind her warily and only then opened the door fully.

"Mark Saunders." He extended his hand.

*He doesn't recognize me.* Relief shot through Annie. She went into her clown routine in high gear, suddenly thankful for the hot wig, hot suit, hot shoes, heavy greasepaint.

Behind the human wall, a gaggle of young girls gathered, gawking at Annie.

"Gertrude Smell-So-Good," she shrieked in her Gertrude voice. If that voice was a little more manic than usual, she was the only one who'd know. "Here's my card!" She reached into her pocket and pulled out a big plastic rectangle with her name emblazoned on it. As Mark Saunders reached for it, she squeezed the side, and a jet of water shot into his face. The girls shrieked with laughter—they always did. Nothing made them laugh harder than watching their parents get made fools of.

"Ha, ha." He wiped his face with his hand, still standing in front of Annie, preventing her from entering. "That's not the name I was given," he whispered fiercely.

"It's my stage name," Annie whispered back. "Anne Parker is my real name."

He looked a little foolish and backed away. *Here we go again,* Annie thought as she waddled past him and gave her attention to the girls.

"I hear there's a birthday going on," she shrieked. "Now don't tell me, let me use my magic divining wand to guess who the party girl is." She fumbled in her oversize pockets, watching while the girls snickered and kept glancing toward one slight, dark-haired girl who hung back, blushing. *Bingo.*

Annie pulled out a long plastic rod and made a performance of running it in the air around each of the girls before approaching the shy one. She squeezed the bottom of the rod when she waved her wand over the blushing girl's head, and it lit up and played "Happy Birthday."

Gertrude jumped in the air. "The birthday girl, and don't tell me your name, let me guess...." She waved the wand around, hitting it on her head to make the music stop, then pretended to listen to it. "Ethel!" she cried.

The girls shouted with laughter.

"Oh, dear, that's not it. Wait a minute." She banged the wand against her head

again and listened. "Amelia!" she yelled.

Another storm of laughter.

Again she hit her head with the wand and listened. "Ah, Emily."

The girl blushed more rosily and nodded in a totally adorable way. All the girls were talking at once. Annie turned to ask Emily's father to lead her to where he wanted the performance.

She surprised him watching the shy girl with a smile on his face. It lit him up, that smile.

"Where do you want the show?" she whispered.

When he saw she was staring at him, the smile disappeared. "Right this way," he said, and led the way down the hall, through a space-age kitchen and into a family room complete with bookshelves, TV, fireplace and masses of balloons and streamers. The maple furniture had been pushed to the edges of the room to leave Annie space for her performance, which was a magic show where she pretended to botch most of the tricks.

She had a great audience. The girls loved it, and there was lots of loud participation. When she said she was going to pull a red scarf out of her hat and instead came up with an egg, she knew, when she turned around looking puzzled, most of the girls would yell at once that the red scarf was hanging down the back of her pants.

Annie was surprised that Emily's father stayed in the room to watch the show. She wondered briefly where the mother was. She'd assumed the guy on Granville Island was single, maybe because of the brief tingle of excitement she'd felt when she bumped into him. It was strange and oddly disappointing to think of him with a family.

From in front of the group, she watched both father and daughter. Emily smiled a lot, giggled occasionally but never laughed outright. The father watched his daughter more than the clown. Annie sensed both pride and something almost like sadness when he gazed at his child.

"Now, girls, for my grand finale, I'll need help from everyone." She was handing out balloons as she spoke. "I want each of you to blow up your balloon, nice and big, and tie on a piece of ribbon. Emily and I will be back in a moment with a big surprise."

Annie held out her hand to a stunned Emily, who glanced nervously at her father before accepting Annie's hand. In the other hand, Annie carried her suitcase. "We need to go somewhere where no one will see us change. A bedroom or bathroom?"

"We can go to my room."

"Great, lead on." Annie still held the girl's hand in her own. It was a small hand, fine-boned and fragile.

Emily's room was predictably pink and white. Neat as a pin, with a violin case in the corner. Annie hefted her suitcase onto the frilly bedspread and snapped it open. She pulled out a child's wig and one-size-fits-all child's clown suit. "Put these on as quick as you can," she called over her shoulder, tossing the things behind her. She grabbed false glasses and nose, then two silver and gold capes.

"What's the matter?"

Emily stood stalk still, holding the wig in trembling hands. "I can't!" she whispered.

"Can't what?" Annie asked.

"I'm scared. At school, when the teacher made me stand up and introduce myself...I threw up," she admitted with the air of one making a grievous confession.

Annie smiled. “Emily may fall apart in front of people,” she said heartily, “but Guinevere Get-Out-of-Here isn’t afraid of anything or anybody. You put that costume on and you will be a different person.”

Annie took the orange-and-green wig out of the child’s hands, pulled it over her ponytail and eased it over her ears while she talked. “See, each clown has her own personality. Once you’re all dressed up, you look in the mirror, and it’s not you anymore. It’s Guinevere. And you become Guinevere. That’s what’s so great about being a clown.”

The girl’s big eyes were fixed on Annie’s while she pulled on the clown suit and fastened the cape. Annie didn’t usually bother with makeup for the birthday child, but she sensed Emily needed all the help she could get. She dug in the suitcase for her makeup kit and painted a huge red smile and a few thick black lashes around the child’s eyes. “Now the fake nose and glasses,” she said, holding them out.

The girl stood motionless for a moment, biting her lip, but finally reached out and put them on. Annie turned her to the mirror, and Emily gasped, then giggled.

“See, everybody laughs at a clown. When your friends see you they’ll laugh so hard their sides will hurt. You and I, we’ll take advantage of that. We’ll make them do something real silly, then they’ll laugh some more. Trust me, you won’t be shy, you’ll be Guinevere. Here.” She handed Emily a pair of huge polka-dot gloves.

“AND NOW, my assistant, Guinevere Get-Out-of-Here.” With a flourish, Annie ushered the shrinking Guinevere into the family room. Out of the corner of her eye she watched Mark Saunders lean forward and surreptitiously grab a wastepaper basket from the corner. He, too, must have heard the throwing-up story.

Guinevere waddled into the room and was greeted by an explosion of mirth. Under the cover of all that noise Annie whispered, “You see, you *are* Guinevere.”

Emily was one of the quietest assistants she’d ever had, but she didn’t throw up, so Annie figured this was probably good for her. She let her off the hook, and everybody clapped loudly as she took her seat on the floor with the others.

“Okay, girls, you’ve been a great audience. Happy birthday, Emily.” Annie went into her standard exit routine where she pretended to trip so she could fall on the floor and somersault out the door.

She took a huge, theatrical step forward, brought her left foot to tangle with her right, launched herself into the air.

But she didn’t hit the floor.

In a blur of motion and thudding impact, she found herself in the arms of Mark Saunders. Those solid arms she remembered so well were rescuing her again. “It’s part of the act, you idiot,” she whispered. “Now we’ll both have to pretend to trip and somersault.”

“But...” Inches from her face, his eyes looked perplexed.

“Now!” she ordered. She pushed out of his arms and tried to roll, but he got knocked off balance and fell half on top of her.

The pair of them rolled and struggled helplessly on the floor, a flailing mass of polka dots, jeans, purple hair and plaid shirt. The girls thought it was a great exit and laughed harder than ever.

“Welcome to show business,” Annie panted, blinking her huge spiky eyelashes into the face inches above her own. He was so embarrassed his craggy face looked like

somebody had carved a modern Rushmore out of red clay.

"I don't know how to do a somersault."

"Figures," she gasped. "If you could move off me I might one day be able to breathe again."

He scrambled to his feet and helped Annie rise. "Oh, well," she said brightly—he was a paying customer after all, "no harm done. Do you want to pay me now?"

He shot a quick glance toward the bedlam in the family room, and Annie almost laughed. He looked like a hunted animal with nowhere to hide. "Do you have to leave right away?" he asked.

"Well, the show is an hour—I'm already over my time."

"Please, I'll double your fee, triple it, if you'll stay and help me with the rest of the party."

She did feel a little sorry for him. Experience told her the hilarity was approaching the peeing-the-pants stage. As though he sensed her weakening, he added, "My housekeeper was supposed to help, but she had to go home sick yesterday."

Somehow, he was so serious and so desperate standing there, all muscles and he-man tough, totally outclassed by a few eight-year-olds, that she felt kind of sorry for him. "You did say triple?"

He smiled his relief. It was a great smile. That smile did things to her that usually only happened with men like Humphrey Bogart and Gary Cooper. "I'll make the check out now. Pizza's in the oven." Then he disappeared down the hall so fast she thought she'd imagined him.

Oh, well. The triple check would help fund her vacation.

Which was postponed for three weeks. Bobbie had left a message on her service that she'd landed a couple of weeks of work on a TV series. Which was great for Bobbie's career, not so good for the clown with itchy feet. In her usual impulsive way, she'd already turned down every clown booking for the next two months. She might just have to go on ahead to Asia and let Bobbie catch up.

"Okay, girls!" She clapped her huge clown hands to get their attention.

"Everybody visit the bathroom and wash your hands. Pizza's up."

Annie pulled off her huge gloves but left the rest of her costume on. Better not let Mark Saunders in on the secret of who she was or he might take back that triple check.

She took the pizza out of the oven. Pale green plates were neatly stacked on the counter—it looked like the family's best china. She was delighted he wasn't wasting precious trees by using fancy paper plates, but something about using the best china for his kid's birthday party brought a quiver of sadness.

He was trying so hard.

She liked to see a divorced dad pulling his weight. She just wished he'd lighten up a little.

They pranced into the dining room—a noisy, colorful glob of girlhood. Guinevere Get-Out-of-Here had changed into Emily and quietly trailed the noisy mob like a moth following the butterflies.

Annie had the girls seated around the table and loaded with pizza and pop before Mark returned. She pulled up a chair and joined the party, which soon became a joke competition. Knock-knock jokes and what-do-you-get-when-you-cross jokes. Her sides were hurting long before the pizza trays were empty.

MARK HEARD the boisterous mob hit the dining table and managed to botch yet another check so he could extend this refuge in his office. They seemed to be doing fine without him.

When guilt overcame him, he reluctantly crept toward the noise. He couldn't see the clown in the kitchen and felt a flicker of irritation. Shouldn't she be getting the cake ready?

He peeked into the dining room and felt his eyes bug out. There, at the end of the table, his very expensive clown was acting like one of the guests. In fact, she fit right in with a bunch of kids. She was doing an impression of Jim Carrey in *The Mask*. At least, he thought that's what those strange contortions were about. Her audience loved whatever it was, if the howls of glee were any indication.

He'd never seen an adult have so much fun—not that he was sure she qualified as an adult. Unable to help himself, he smiled. As he concentrated on her face, the expressive eyes flashing, it occurred to him that there was something familiar about her. It bothered him, the feeling that he knew her, it hovered in the air like a familiar fragrance he couldn't identify.

His gaze swung around the table and stopped at Emily, who was laughing as hard as anyone. He stood there watching her, feeling the painful love build in his throat. His shy little niece was acting as demented as the rest of the kids. Christy would have been so proud of her.

"I have a joke," Emily said in her quiet way.

The rest of the kids were being so noisy they probably hadn't heard her. He wanted to shut them all up and make them listen to Emily. But as she started to pinken and retreat into her shell, Annie laughingly called, "Quiet, quiet, Guinevere-Get-Out-of-Here has a joke." The smile she sent down the table to Emily suggested a shared secret. He watched the girl's spine straighten.

"Why didn't the boy take the school bus home?" she asked, reddening even more as everyone stared at her.

"I don't know. Why didn't the boy take the school bus home?" the clown repeated in the kind of theatrical buildup that would make the lamest punch line sound like a side splitter. She might be a complete nutter, but he appreciated the kindness behind the gesture.

"Because he knew his parents would make him give it back!" cried Emily.

Groans and laughter greeted her joke, and even after the attention switched away from Emily, the quiet glow in her face remained.

Mark backed into the kitchen and pulled the cake out of the fridge. It was a clown cake to match the theme of the party. He'd even found a clown candle in the shape of an eight. This birthday party was just one in a line of hurdles he'd had to leap since Emily came to live with him. The whole thing was so baffling. What was in, what was out, what was too juvenile, what was too old. He wasn't even sure about the clown cake anymore—maybe he should have gone with the princess.

As he was getting cake plates out, the phone rang.

"I just wanted to wish Emily a happy birthday," Bea croaked. Her normally dour voice sounded like that of a witch. Then a coughing fit rattled down the line.

"How are you feeling, Bea?" he asked, hoping his nanny-housekeeper would have

a miracle recovery by Monday. He was swamped with work. He needed someone to take care of the house and watch over Emily.

“It’s pneumonia. The doctor says I have to stay in bed two or three weeks. I’m sorry, Mr. Saunders.”

Damn. He didn’t have time to do a security check on a temporary housekeeper. Not by Monday.

“You just rest, Bea. Don’t worry about a thing,” he said with false joviality. “I’ll get Emily.”

What the hell was he going to do? The timing couldn’t have been worse. His company had been selected to handle security for a big Pacific Rim trading conference just two weeks away. He’d be working harder than ever.

He was barely into his first day of home life without Bea and he was only coping because he’d convinced the clown woman to stay. Not that she was much use in the kitchen, but she kept the girls occupied, and Emily clearly adored her.

The cake server clattered onto the stacked plates as inspiration hit him. Of course, the clown had already passed his rigorous security screening—and Emily adored her. He peeked around the doorway into the dining room. The clown’s huge smile was smudging. She’d left her pizza crusts on her plate—she was as bad as the girls. Still, it was only temporary.

She wasn’t the woman he would have chosen, but the woman in the purple and yellow wig was about to become Emily’s new companion.

### 3

“BUT I’ M NOT a nanny. I’m a professional entertainer,” Annie protested.

She shook her head so violently her wig slipped, which reminded her how itchy her scalp felt. She wanted nothing more than to get home and take all the scratchy clothes and mucky paint off her face and body, then step into a nice, long shower. The last thing she needed was some big jerk treating her like a baby-sitter.

“So, entertain Emily,” Mark Saunders argued. “You’ll never have a better audience. She thinks you’re fantastic.”

Annie softened for a second. “She’s one great kid,” she admitted.

“It’s only for a couple of weeks, and I’ll pay you the equivalent of two parties a day.”

Annie’s plastic eyelashes scratched her forehead as she widened her eyes in surprise. “That’s pretty expensive baby-sitting.”

They were in the front hallway. She’d been about to leave when he halted her with his request.

Most of the girls had gone home after cake and presents, but a couple had stayed to watch a video with Emily. After the noise of the party, the house seemed amazingly quiet with just the mumble of the TV coming from the direction of the family room.



He ran a hand across his chin. "Look, it's not just that I'm desperate. I...I liked what you did for Emily today. Your first priority is her safety of course, but—"

"Safety? Is Emily in some kind of danger?" She remembered the elaborate precautions to get into the party and felt a prickle of unease and a protective fear for that sweet little girl.

"No more than anyone else," he said shortly. "I just know it's a dangerous world."

"That's right. You used to be a Mountie."

It was his turn to look surprised. He straightened and got all uptight again. "How do you know that?"

Annie smiled mischievously. "We've met before. In fact, I'd better come clean so you can withdraw the job offer."

"I thought I knew you." He peered closely at her face, obviously trying to work out who she was beneath the costume and paint. His nearness sent a weird kind of slurpy feeling through her belly. Which was odd, because big, uptight guys just weren't her type outside a film canister. She always went for the artsy, lyrical ones whose promises were poetry, even if they never came through.

If Mark Saunders ever made a promise he'd stick to it or die trying, which made her feel trapped. Just like he did. No, it couldn't be attraction making her feel this way. She must have drunk too much soda pop.

Resisting the urge to step out of range of all that macho sexiness, she said, "Not really, we sort of, ah, bumped into each other at Granville Island."

"Granville Island..." His puzzled gaze scanned her up and down then narrowed in concentration. She knew the moment he figured it out—an expression of pure horror crossed his face. "You're not the girl with the life-and-death postcard?"

"Yep!"

He groaned. He actually groaned.

"I had a great time. Thanks for having me today." She held her hand over the pocket where she'd tucked that huge check, wanting to leave before he demanded it back. She put her hand on the doorknob and turned it, but the door wouldn't open.

He was standing there looking as if somebody had just told him his parents were really aliens from Mars.

"The door seems to be stuck," she said.

He shook his head like a dog shaking off water. He opened a panel in the wall—Annie wouldn't have known it was there—and punched a series of numbers onto a keypad. This time when she turned the knob the door opened.

"So, will you let me know tomorrow?"

"Let you know what?"

"If you'll take the job."

"You still want me?"

He paused for a moment as if doubting his sanity. She could understand his need to check. Then he shrugged. "I'm desperate."

She bit her lower lip to keep from laughing and got a mouthful of stale greasepaint.

Did she want to wait for Bobbie or didn't she? She'd already sublet her apartment—the guy was due to move in in a week. She had a few bookings that she hadn't had the heart to cancel. If she took the nanny job she could wait for Bobbie and

still do a few clown gigs. Truth was, she could use the extra money for her trip.

She leaned against the door, thinking. He said he was desperate, but was she really his only option? “I know this isn’t my business, but couldn’t Emily’s mother help out?”

A spasm of pain crossed his face. “Emily’s mother is dead.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.” No wonder he gazed at the little girl in pain. She must remind him of his dead wife. “You must have loved her very much.”

He nodded. “Emily’s all I have left of Christy. She and her husband were both killed a year ago.”

“Your wife was a bigamist?” *Wow.*

“No. An archaeologist. And Christy was my little sister, not my wife. She and her husband were on a dig together in Africa. They caught some kind of jungle fever.”

“So Emily’s your—”

“Niece. That’s why I have to take extra good care of her. Her mother entrusted me with her most precious possession. I can’t let her down.”

Annie’s mind was made up in that instant. Mark Saunders might not be able to do a somersault, but he’d taken on a child when he could so easily have sloughed off the responsibility. “I’ll need weekends and evenings off for my clown work.”

“I don’t have a problem with that.”

“What exactly would I have to do?”

“You have to get Emily ready in the morning and drive her to school. Pick her up at the end of school, drive her to her music and dance lessons, prepare dinner. Keep the house neat. School ends in a couple of weeks. If Bea’s still sick, it would be a full-day thing.”

She could see a couple of flaws in the plan already. Cooking and cleaning weren’t high on her list of things she did well. And the word “morning” snagged her attention in an unpleasant sort of way. “When you say morning, what did you have in mind?”

“You arrive at seven. You’ll prepare her breakfast, make sure she has everything she needs and drive her to school by nine.”

She thought it over. She could make it work. Earn some extra cash and wait for Bobbie. “I’ll have to sleep over.”

“Uh—”

Yep. She could definitely make it work. “You have a deal,” she said.

“Do you know any self-defense?”

Her chin jutted up, making the wig itch. “I can take care of myself.”

“And while we’re on the subject, that postcard mentioned life and death.”

“I already told you that was just a joke. I’m planning a backpacking trip to Asia. I was trying to hurry my friend up.”

A gleam of amusement entered his eyes. “I can see that would be a life-or-death situation.” He leaned back on his heels, hands in his pockets, and her attention was caught once more by that brick-wall chest of his. A little springy hair peeked out from the vee of his shirt. *Mmm.* It looked good.

“Come tomorrow afternoon, and I’ll go over some basic self-defense moves.” His words dragged her gaze to his face.

“You’re kidding!”

“I never kid about Emily’s safety.”

She sighed. Short-term pain... "Okay. I'll see you tomorrow."

"I CAN'T BREATHE!" Annie complained, trying to hoist the muscular bulk of Mark Saunders off her solar plexus. It was getting to be a bad habit.

He rolled smoothly to his feet. "That was better. You put up more of a struggle. Let's try it again. The trick is to go for my vulnerable areas and get me unbalanced."

"You don't have any vulnerable areas. And I'm the one who must be unbalanced! Besides, you're three times my size." She grabbed his outstretched hand and hauled herself to her feet with a groan. "This is hopeless."

"I'll give you a hint. The bad guys don't usually go for people bigger and tougher than they are. They go for the smaller and weaker."

"Hey, I'm not weak!" she said, stung. "I take yoga and I run." *Sometimes*. He was starting to tick her off with his cocksure attitude, tossing her around his basement gym like a rag doll. Just once, she was determined to land *him* on *his* back.

"That's what this little exercise is all about." He talked to her as if she were completely dense, which ticked her off even more. "Sure, I'm bigger. But you're quicker and more agile. You can use those things to your advantage."

"And I can do a somersault," she replied cheekily.

He rolled his eyes. "That should come in real handy if you're being attacked."

She felt hot and sticky. She yanked off her sweatshirt. Under the cropped tank top, her sports bra was maiming what it was meant to support. She slipped her hands under her shirt and tried to rearrange things. A dark vee of sweat marked the front of her top, and she was breathing heavily.

Mark Saunders's gray T-shirt hadn't even come untucked from his sweatpants.

With a prickle of awareness, she noticed that he'd stopped talking and stilled. She glanced up to find his gaze aimed at where she was rearranging her underwear. Which upped her irritation level another notch.

"See something you like?" she asked with saccharine sweetness.

His gaze dropped lower, from embarrassment, she was certain. Then his eyes widened. "What is that?"

"My birthstone. A diamond for April." She fiddled with the gem nestling in her pierced navel. "Actually, it's a zircon. Can't afford a real diamond. Like it?"

He seemed transfixed. "You let Emily get one of those things and you're a dead woman." His voice was ferocious, but he couldn't drag his gaze from her glinting belly.

She might know squat about judo, but she knew when a man was getting turned on by her. A testosterone haze shimmered around him like an aura.

She swayed her hips with gusto, hoping the jewel in her navel would catch the light and blind him while she moved toward him as seductively as she knew how.

Letting her mind drift to Rita Hayworth, Ava Gardner, Hedy Lamarr, she imitated exotic and smoldering.

It appeared to work. He seemed completely mesmerized. In that moment, control of the situation began to shift her way.

"Did anyone ever tell you you should relax a little?" she murmured in a throaty purr.

"Frequently." His voice was unsteady, and for the first time since the self-defense lesson started, his breathing was fast.

She glided to a stop in front of him, gazed into eyes that were sending her a whole host of steamy messages. Her breath caught as responsive shivers raced over her skin. Damn. Hedy, Ava and Rita had taken over her mind. Big, tough he-man Mark was their kind of guy. Not hers. She had a point to make, she reminded herself. But still, she was kind of getting into this.

Those cool blue eyes could turn amazingly hot, scorching everywhere they gazed. He might be a bit of a stuffed shirt on the outside, but those eyes hinted at something wild hiding inside. Something that could be altogether exciting, and maybe just a bit scary.

She smiled her sexiest smile and leaned into him. For just a moment she let herself enjoy the way he made her feel—safe, feminine, wanted. It was a totally sexy combination, and if she didn't do something soon, she'd forget to make her point.

That mesmerizing gaze held hers, and he lowered his head slowly. Her lips parted all by themselves, tingling with the anticipation of his kiss.

Hanging on fiercely to her self-control, she hooked her leg around the back of his calf, pushed against his chest and toppled him like a three-hundred-year-old redwood.

"Timber!" she called softly as he crashed to the floor.

#### 4

"NOW, CONCENTRATE." Mark had his security expert voice on again, and it probably fit him better than his birthday suit. She'd been concentrating so long her brain felt like it was going to implode. "When you leave the house, enter the security code to open the door."

"Yeah, I remember from yesterday."

"Good. Here's the code." Slowly, he reeled off a list of numbers.

"Wait a sec." She dug into her bag and rummaged for something to write on. She came up with a program from a play she'd seen at the Arts Club Theater and a purple felt pen. "Okay, tell me the numbers again."

"You can't write them down." Mark leaned against the wall and crossed his arms, a pained expression on his face. "That's why we have secret codes. So they'll be secret."

"Look. I already memorized the code to get in here. Why can't I use the same one to get out?"

He opened his mouth to argue, looking so frustrated she thought he might burst. A staccato beeping came from somewhere. Annie glanced at the wall panel, feeling hot and panicky. This was way too much for a girl who never bothered to lock her car door.

"Yeah," Mark said, and she realized the beeping had come from a cell phone he'd had hidden somewhere on his person. Maybe his shoe? Never had she believed she'd end up living in the middle of a sitcom, but that's what this baby-sitting gig was starting to feel like.

She watched him talking on his phone, a frown gathering, and wondered if she'd imagined the almost-kiss earlier in his downstairs gym. It was as though falling to the

ground had knocked out the sexy, passionate man who'd been about to embrace her. When he'd stood, the polite, impersonal brick wall had been in place.

"It's not—" He stopped talking and listened intently. Then let his breath out in a huff. "All right. I'll be there as quick as I can." He flipped the phone into a square so tiny it wouldn't have a hope of being recovered if it ever found its way into her bag. She watched, disappointed when he didn't stick it into the heel of his shoe.

"You even have the same initials," she said with a giggle.

"What?"

"You and Maxwell Smart."

He was getting that expression on his face again, like she was some airhead dimwit. "Who?"

"You and Maxwell Smart. From 'Get Smart.' I bet Mark is your code name." She dropped her voice and struck a sultry pose. "And you can call me Ninety-nine. It's my secret code name. I'd tell you my real name, but then it wouldn't be a secret anymore."

A pause ensued. She had a strong feeling he was counting silently to ten. "I don't have time for this. I have to go. I'll change the outgoing code to match the incoming one, but only temporarily. I'll expect you to memorize a new one in two days. Now, if somebody gets to the door and you don't like the look of them, push this button."

"The green one."

"Yes."

She depressed the button, noting as she did so that her nail polish needed a touch-up. Judo wasn't the best activity for a manicure. Then she jumped out of her skin. From somewhere, a ferocious dog was barking its head off. She glanced around quickly. It sounded as if it was under their noses. "What the—"

"Realistic, isn't it?" Mark managed a teensy, tiny smirk.

"You have a fake dog?" She could not believe this guy.

"It helps deter prowlers. You can also activate it from this remote." He handed her a key chain with several buttons, including a green one.

"And the blue button?" She motioned to the one beside the green button.

"That activates the security system from a remote location. Just in case you forget to activate it when you leave the house. Which I'm sure you won't." His expression warned her she'd better not.

"I'm scared to even ask what the red button does."

"That's the panic button. You'll find them all over the house, as well as on the key chain as a remote personal alarm. Push that button, and help will be on its way immediately."

"How will you know where I am?" She shook the key chain. "Does this thing have a phone in it?" That would be cool. A Barbie-size cell phone.

"It contains a personal tracking device."

Only the fiercest act of will prevented her from rolling her eyes. "Naturally."

"Here's a cell phone for you to use. That button there gets you directly to me."

Another small square of black plastic appeared in his hand. Where did he hide those things?

"Cool."

He glanced at his watch. "Any questions?"

"Yes." She gestured to the wall panel. "What's the deal?"

His lips thinned. "There's a break-in somewhere in America approximately every twelve seconds."

"Not in this neighborhood."

"I don't care if you think I'm paranoid. I—I can't let anything happen to Emily. I promised her mother." He shook his head as though to clear it. "I look after what's mine. And Emily's the most precious thing I've got. Think whatever you like about me, but you'll do this my way. Do we understand each other?"

"Yes." She squelched the *sir* just in time. He was never going to help Emily by keeping her a sheltered princess in an impregnable castle. Still, he was right about one thing. He was the boss, and Annie had agreed to take on this assignment. She'd have to do it his way.

"Right. Um..." He looked embarrassed.

"Don't tell me. I can't shower without an armed guard?"

She wished she'd bitten her tongue. His gaze jerked to lock with hers, and she had a sudden vision of them both in a steamy hot shower. She could imagine his strong but gentle hands soaping her naked body while hot water streamed over them. She could as easily imagine taking the bar of soap from him and rubbing it all over that chest and down...

She knew darned well he was picturing the same thing. His eyes had that intense sexy expression he'd worn in the gym when he caught sight of her belly ring.

She was amazed, and a little scared, at how attractive he could be when he let his sex appeal surface. She had to remember he was a guy who liked his women locked in a fortress. Too bad, because the eyes told her there was a completely different man hiding behind the tough-guy exterior. That shower might be pretty entertaining.

He shook his head and glanced past her. "It's about today. There's a problem at work. I know you don't start work until tomorrow, but—"

"You want me to start today." She pretended to think about it, just to make him squirm a bit. "Luckily for you, I don't happen to have a clown booking today. I'll do it, but don't make a habit of this."

He smiled his relief and gripped her shoulder in what was probably supposed to be a warm, friendly manner. She wondered if he'd leave a bruise. Or a scorch mark. So much pent-up sexiness—if that guy ever let go of his iron control he'd flame like a blowtorch. "Thanks. I owe you."

"Don't mention it." Besides, it would give her a few more hours to cram for her new assignment as Special Agent Annie. She hoped Emily could help her sort out all these gadgets before her uncle figured out there was a darned good reason Annie had picked clowning over national security as a career.

It had to do with electronics. Anything to do with gadgets and gizmos made her nervous. She was more a simple-living kind of gal.

Mark trotted happily down the hall to his bat cave while she contemplated the electronic junk in her arms. Which button made the dog bark?

As he was leaving a few minutes later, Mark stopped at the front door and fiddled with the control panel for a while. "I've changed the code, so incoming and outgoing match. Just for two days."

"Yes, sure." Damn. She couldn't remember the first code. No way she was letting on, though. She'd figure something out.

“The fridge is stocked with food. Just make dinner for Em and yourself, I’ll grab something out.”

She flashed him a big phony-reassuring smile and hoped to goodness there wasn’t some kind of kryptonite lock on the fridge. Also that Emily believed, as Annie did, that food closest to its natural state was healthiest. That was about all she knew how to cook.

“WHAT IF I hatched a frog from a chicken’s egg?” Annie mused as she tore spinach for a salad.

“Are you a witch?” Emily’s eyes widened, not with fear but fascination, as she glanced up from the 3-D castle puzzle she’d received as a birthday present.

Annie chuckled. “A few of the guys I’ve dated might say so. But I was thinking about adding some new tricks to my clown routine. What do you think if I took an egg like this one—” she lifted an egg out of the carton, squinting at the white sphere while she pondered “—and cracked it, and out jumped a frog?”

“Would it be a real frog?”

“No. Probably a plastic one.” She pictured it in her mind, but it didn’t seem right. “Oh, I know. How about one of those rubbery ones. I could make it look like it was leaping out of the egg.”

Emily’s face creased into a puzzled frown. “But frogs hatch out of slimy ponds, not chickens’ eggs.”

“I know. That’s the point of the trick. It’s supposed to be funny.”

Emily gazed at Annie in a way that made *her* feel as if she’d hatched out of a slimy pond.

“Okay. It’s not funny. What if I juggled eggs and—”

“Frogs.”

“—broke one.”

“Juggled them.”

Annie paused, her eyes widening. “Did you say frogs? You mean juggle frogs?” She started to chuckle. “That’s different. But if I drop one nothing happens. Where’s the magic in that?”

“It could go ribbett.”

“Wait. I know.” Annie started getting that quivery feeling she got when she was onto something. “I could start with eggs, and every time I drop one it hatches into a frog.” What would the logistics be? She started working it out in her head, ripping spinach leaves while her mind drifted.

After a while, Emily’s voice interrupted visions of cracking eggs, hopping rubber frogs, ribbeting chickens, clucking amphibians...and came back to earth. “What?”

“What are you making?”

“Spinach salad. What’s the face for? It’s very nutritious.” She glanced at the bowl and saw a mass of tiny green bits that looked like used green tea leaves. She’d been so busy fantasizing about her new trick she’d turned the spinach into dark green mush.

A glance proved she’d missed not a leaf. Trying to hide her dismay, she opened her eyes in an assumption of innocence. “It’s like coleslaw,” she assured Emily. “Only with spinach instead of cabbage. You’ll love it.”

“Could I have a hot dog?”

*Oh, Lord.* Day number one, and she was a complete disaster as a nanny. “Hot

dogs are junk food.”

“I’d eat it all up.”

She nibbled her lip. Mark Saunders had given her thousands of instructions on how to protect Emily with her life but no information at all on what he expected in the way of meals.

As though reading her mind, Emily said, “Uncle Mark and me eat hot dogs all the time when Bea’s not here.”

*Oh, ho.* So Mr. Brick Wall indulged in junk food, did he? It wasn’t much of a weakness, but it was something and certainly made him more human. “Tell you what. If you promise to eat the spinach slaw, I’ll give you a hot dog with it. Fair?”

“I guess.” Her charge eyed the bowl of green stuff doubtfully. Annie had to admit she’d prefer a hot dog herself. But she raided the cupboards and started throwing things in—raisins, pine nuts, chopped oranges and some kind of bottled gourmet salad dressing she found in the fridge. When she’d finished, her spinach slaw was really quite delicious.

Her confidence rose when Emily sampled it and declared it “kinda good.”

“Look how pretty it is on your uncle’s green plates,” Annie said as she dished up. The dark green spinach appeared designer coordinated against the pale green pottery plates she’d noticed at the party. She’d assumed it was the good china, but there didn’t seem to be anything else in the kitchen. It struck her as odd that a bachelor would bother with nice china, but she was beyond being surprised by Mark Saunders.

“It’s not Uncle Mark’s china. It’s my mom’s.” Emily corrected her in a matter-of-fact tone.

“I’m sorry, Emily. I didn’t know. Would you like me to use something else?”

“Uh-uh. I like this. It helps me keep remembering Mom and Dad. Mom and me went shopping and I helped pick the china. Green is my favorite color.” She fetched knives and forks and set the table as though it were a chore she performed every day, while Annie felt tears prick her lids at the thought of this poor little girl who’d lost both parents so suddenly.

But Emily seemed to be coping well. Apart from the shyness, she was able to talk about her parents, and obviously that would help her deal with her grief. Good for her. And good for Mark Saunders for understanding that she needed to use her china now, when it gave her comfort, not store it in a box for when she was older.

Automatically, Emily set the table for three.

“I don’t think your uncle’s coming home for dinner. He said he’d grab something out.”

“He always says that. Bea makes dinner for him anyway. And he always eats it.”

“Hope he likes omelettes and spinach slaw,” she mumbled, cracking more eggs into a bowl.

“He pretty much eats anything,” Emily assured her.

“He hasn’t tasted my cooking.”

Minutes later, Annie choked on her spinach slaw. “Oh, my God!” She gasped as a light began flashing rhythmically from a wall panel just above one of the ubiquitous red panic buttons.

She dove across the room for her backpack and frantically started tossing things to the ground searching for the multi-buttoned emergency key chain thingy she’d scoffed at earlier.



Here it was, her first day on the job and already they were having a break-in. Just her luck.

From the corner of her eye she saw the flashing stop. Great, the intruder had disarmed the system already. Must be a professional. She recalled all those scary thrillers where the bad guy cut the telephone wires just before...

"Emily. I want you to go upstairs to your room and lock the door."

"Did I do something wrong?" The small face creased with worry.

Annie mustered a brave smile, but it felt kind of wobbly. She turned her bag upside down, then shook it until a cascade of stuff came tumbling out. Where was that key chain? "No. I'll explain later."

"But Uncle Mark's home. Can't I say hi to him first?"

A feeling of immense relief washed over Annie at the news.

Mark was here.

He'd be more than a match for any scary burglar or phone-line cutter. Then, an instant later, relief turned to embarrassment as she realised there was no break-in. That flashing light must have signaled Mark's return to the house.

"Looking for something?" Amusement tinged the deep voice coming from the kitchen doorway.

"Just my sanity," she mumbled as she stuffed things into her bag. Her passport, traveling toothbrush—she'd been wondering where that was—wallet, half-used pack of tissues, an open roll of mints with a grubby gray mint peeking out the top.

She felt him behind her. He dropped to his knees and started handing her things. The sound of a chair dragging on the ceramic tile floor caused her to turn her head until she caught the enticing rear view of Mark Saunders and nothing but.

His head and arms were under the table as he gathered more of her stuff. Toned and muscled, his back end was rivetting.

He emerged backward from under the table, a bottle in his hand. He glanced at it and raised his eyebrows. "Water purification tablets?"

She shrugged. "I travel a lot. I like to be prepared for anything."

"So I see," he drawled, discreetly handing her the object in his other hand. An open box of condoms.

She would not blush. She was a modern woman of the twenty-first century. A third-millennium crusader for women's rights. A woman in charge of her own life and her own body.

She blushed hotter than a vestal virgin at an orgy.

Rising in one clean motion, Mark turned to his niece. Even with his back to her, Annie was certain he was grinning. "How was your afternoon, Em?"

"Good. We were thinking up new tricks for Annie. Do you think frogs hatching out of chicken eggs would be funny?"

"Sidesplitting."

Officially, she hadn't even started the nanny job yet, and already she wanted to quit. Having fastened the bag, she rose and fetched his plate with the slaw already on it and pulled the omelette out of the warm oven. "Here's your dinner."

He glanced at the plate. "You shouldn't have bothered." And the way he said it she knew he meant it. Maybe he suspected he was about to lose his desperation nanny, for he suddenly smiled that killer smile that reached right into her heart and gave it a hug.

“But thanks. It looks great. I’ll just go wash up.”

By the time he got back, Annie’s color was back to normal, her heart rate was back in the training range, out of the imminent cardiac arrest zone, and she was able to face him across a small table with a semblance of calm.

“Did you get things sorted out at the office?” she asked, sounding just like one of those sitcom moms from the fifties. She noted the horrified fascination on Mark’s face as he examined the green stuff.

Manfully he shoved a forkful of mush into his mouth, and she had to hold back a smirk when his face flooded with relief. “This is delicious,” he said in obvious surprise.

“It’s an old family recipe.”

“Today went fine. My company’s handling the security for the Pacific Rim trading conference in two weeks. Things are pretty hectic.”

“Wow. I’m impressed.”

“I will be, too, if we get by without a disaster.”

There was a small pause. “Does that red light go on every time somebody comes in the house?” she asked, not wanting to be caught making a fool of herself a second time.

“Yes. I had it wired so you always know when somebody comes in or goes out.”

“And if it’s a burglar?”

“Major alarms go off. Here, at the police station and at Saunders Security.”

“Just so I know and don’t go making a fool of myself again.”

“Sorry.” He compressed twitching lips. “I guess I didn’t get a chance to finish showing you around the security system.”

“Uncle Mark, where’s Annie going to sleep?” Emily asked.

Those innocent words sent an invisible sizzle crackling through the atmosphere between the two adults. Mark glanced Annie’s way, his eyes smoky with desire. The effect was amazing. Her heart rate kicked up again, and her breathing rate increased.

She was getting a whole cardiovascular workout just having dinner with these people.

She willed herself to stop the blush from rising to her cheeks. Oh, God. Maybe he thought she’d brought condoms for his benefit, when the truth was she hadn’t even remembered they were in her bag until they’d turned up under the kitchen table with a few other escapees from the backpack.

“Well, uh…” Mark began.

Cutting him off at the pass, just in case he had any suggestions she’d rather Emily didn’t hear, Annie said, “I would have put my stuff in one of the spare bedrooms, but I wasn’t sure which one.”

There were two bedrooms apart from Emily’s, which she’d seen, and Mark’s, at the other end of the hall, which she hadn’t. Emily had pointed out the closed door, and even though she was curious, she hadn’t wanted to pry.

There was a second bedroom next to Emily’s that was a sort of playroom for the child, with toys, a desk, bookshelves stacked with an entire library of books—mostly educational and the classics. She’d bet her purple and yellow wig he’d bought the works from a specialty kids’ store.

The other bedroom was set up with bedroom furniture and boasted its own bathroom. Obviously it was the guest room, but it was way too close to Mark’s room for

her peace of mind.

“Why don’t you take the guest room?” he asked.

*Because we’d be sharing a wall, and I’d never get any sleep.* “I thought you might be expecting guests.” She shrugged. “I could put a cot or something in the room beside Emily’s, then I’d be there if she needed anything in the night.” As opposed to being available to him if he needed anything in the night.

“I don’t think we have a cot.” Amusement dawned in his eyes as if he’d figured out what was causing her hesitation. The glance he flicked her way was pure challenge. As if he were daring her to take the room next to his.

Annie had never turned down a challenge in her life. She forced a carefree smile. “Oh, well. I’ll take the guest room then.”

When they’d finished their dessert of sliced apples and oranges, Emily asked if she could be excused to do her homework.

“Sure thing,” her uncle replied, giving her ponytail a playful tug as she walked past on her way out of the kitchen.

Annie rose to collect the dishes and almost collided with Mark, who was bent on the same task. “I’ll do the dishes,” she protested.

He shook his head. “Ground rules. Once dinner’s over, you’re off duty. I do dinner dishes.”

She watched him collect Emily’s pale green dishes with exquisite care. “Am I allowed to help?” she asked softly.

“Optional. Your call.”

She helped him stack the dishes on the polished granite counter then dried while he washed. He’d explained he didn’t put the green dishes in the dishwasher, to help preserve them. Always the protector, she thought, enjoying the sight of his square, masculine hands covered in suds washing Emily’s dishes with such care.

It gave her the same kind of sensation in the pit of her stomach that she got seeing a big hunky man with a baby. The occupation didn’t make him less rugged or tough—it emphasized his masculinity.

She enjoyed watching soap bubbles gather around his knuckles, the way the water pasted dark hair to his forearms, the way the muscles worked together in such harmony as he methodically washed and rinsed each dish. He washed everything by hand, even the things that could easily have gone in the dishwasher. Annie had no idea whether he did this every night or whether he was enjoying working side by side as much as she was.

“You live in a family home in the suburbs, you own your own business, you even do dishes. How come there’s no woman in your life?” Maybe it was insensitive and prying of her to ask, but the question had been bothering her since the birthday party.

He glanced up from the dishes. “I didn’t always live like this. A year ago I had a condo in Kitsilano.” He mentioned the trendy part of town near the university almost with regret. “I was an RCMP officer and a single guy living in a city famous for beautiful women.”

“Really? Vancouver’s famous for beautiful women?” Darn. She should have checked that out before she moved here.

“I bet more men’s magazine centerfolds come from Vancouver than any other city,” he informed her with obvious pride. “Not that I personally know any,” he hastened to add.

“Naturally.”

“My friend Brodie dated a centerfold once. She was a nice girl.” He shrugged, scraping a glob of egg stuck to the frying pan. “Then Emily came to live with me. Things changed.”

Now that was an understatement. He’d given up his lifestyle and changed to a safer job for the sake of his niece. *Wow*. A memory of her dad, who’d left his family when the responsibility became too much, flashed across her mind, and she felt a frown develop.

But that was silly. Her dad was a great guy, as fun and adventurous as she was. He hadn’t been cut out for permanence any more than she was. Emily was pretty darned lucky that Mark was cut from a different cloth. “It’s been quite a year for you.”

“Yes. And obviously, I can’t get involved with a woman while Emily is still settling in.”

“She seems pretty settled to me,” Annie said, and then, panicking that he might think she wanted him to get involved with *her*, she quickly added, “I mean, she’s able to talk about her parents quite naturally and seems like a normal eight-year-old. She’s a little shy, but lots of kids that age are.”

“I’m glad you think so. I don’t know much of anything about kids. I pretty much bought out the bookstore on parenting books and stuff about the grieving process. And there’s some good information on the Internet.”

She stifled a grin. She might have known he’d search out an instruction manual on how to raise a child.

Once all the dishes were put away and the kitchen was spotless, its high-tech patina gleaming, an awkward pause ensued.

Annie had no idea what to do next. She had the sense that whatever she did now would begin the laying down of a routine, and she wanted it to be the right one. Something that put lots of space between her and Mark Saunders. A man like him could trap a woman like her into the kind of life she never, ever wanted.

“Well,” he said. “I usually read to Emily at night and then it’s lights out at eight-thirty. I’m getting behind on my paperwork, so I’ll probably spend some time in my office.” He gestured down the hall in case she’d forgotten where it was.

She nodded. “Maybe I’ll just go up and say good-night to Emily first, then.”

“Sure. You know where the family room is if you want to watch TV or some old movies or something.” He grinned, and she knew he was remembering their insane conversation at Granville Island that first day. “And help yourself to the gym downstairs if you want to work out.”

Yeah, that’d top her fun-things-to-do list. “Thanks. I’ll probably unpack and get to bed early.” She gave a theatrical groan. “I’ve got an early start in the morning.”

“The early clown catches the frog.”

“Was that a joke?” Her eyes bugged wide open. She had a feeling her mouth had done the same.

“A pretty lame one,” he said sheepishly.

“It’s a good start. Shows you have a sense of humor. You’ll need it if you’re going to be living with me,” she assured him. Then, seeing the startled expression in his eyes—which could go from arctic to meltdown in about three seconds—she hastily revised her statement. “I mean staying in the same house. Temporarily.”

“WHAT’S THE DIFFERENCE between a clown and a wizard?” Emily asked when Annie entered her room.

The child was in bed with a book about a child wizard propped on her chest. Annie had read the series, and as she recalled, the boy was an orphan, too.

Cuddled in Emily’s left arm was a very ratty, clearly much-loved stuffed lion with an advanced case of mange.

“Well, a wizard has magical powers. A clown’s job is to make you laugh.”

The child stroked the lion’s patchy tail while she considered this. “But you do magic, too. Do you have a racing broom? Magic potions and spells that turn people into animals?”

“No. My magic is just pretend. When I make things disappear, I really hide them when the audience isn’t looking. I’ll show you sometime if you’re interested.”

“Really? Would you show me how to do a magic trick?”

“Sure. Maybe we can work on some tricks you could show your friends.” She glanced surreptitiously at her watch and discovered it was eight-fifteen.

After a hasty good-night and a peck on the cheek, she made her way to the safety of the guest room, where she spent seven or eight minutes unpacking her backpack into the empty drawers of the pine dresser.

It took another good minute to unpack her toiletry bag in the bathroom. That done, she glanced at her watch.

Eight twenty-five.

What on earth was she going to do with herself? Normally she didn’t go to bed until well after midnight and rarely woke before eight in the morning.

Luckily, the guest room came equipped with a clock that looked like it required an advanced degree from MIT to operate. Fiddling with that until she thought she had the alarm set for six forty-five a.m. helped use up another few minutes. Then she heard Mark’s low voice saying good-night and Emily’s soft reply. His tread descended to the main floor.

By eight thirty-five she had all the bed’s pillows piled behind her back and her feet up while she tried to read her guidebook to Asia.

Usually butterflies of excitement flitted in her stomach when she read about all the exotic and exciting places she’d be visiting soon. But somehow, tonight, it couldn’t grab her attention.

Her mind kept drifting to one brave little girl and one very sexy ex-Mountie. The little girl brought a rush of feeling that was both unfamiliar and unmistakably maternal. The ex-Mountie brought on feelings that were definitely not maternal.

With a sigh she put down the book. She felt restless and keyed up. Maybe she should go out. But she no sooner had the idea than she abandoned it. She’d have to

remember too many codes.

With a sigh, she hauled herself off the bed and went to stare out the window. She saw what any prisoner must see—a fence and a gate. Heavily secured. She felt what many prisoners must feel—a sense of claustrophobia and an almost irresistible urge to escape.

“What have I done?” she asked the moon that taunted her from its position of utter freedom outside the gates.

She was going to go bananas if she stayed cooped up in this room all night. He’d mentioned old movies. Maybe she could go out and rent one, or better still, maybe he had a movie station or satellite dish.

If she was very quiet and kept the sound down, he need never know she was there. With that in mind, she crept down the stairs. As she made her way to the family room, she passed the kitchen and caught Mark in the act of building himself a very large sandwich.

Mayonnaise and mustard jars, a package of what looked like luncheon meat, a block of cheese, a pickle jar and a decimated loaf of bread were lined up neatly in front of him. As she watched, he cut the triple-decker sandwich with the precision of a surgeon and chomped into it.

She let him chew unobserved for a moment, frankly enjoying the sight of his enjoyment. A little daub of mayonnaise spotted his upper lip, and she watched, mesmerized, as it rode up and down with his rhythmic chewing.

Did she move? She didn’t think so, but suddenly the chewing stopped and he turned his gaze her way.

She had to laugh. His expression was exactly that of a little boy caught red-handed in some mischief. “My cooking’s not enough for you?”

“No. I mean...” He replied thickly, then swallowed and wiped his mouth with a paper napkin. Without the mayonnaise on his lip he appeared all grown up again. “I, uh, get hungry sometimes in the evenings.” Sheepishly, he gestured to the sandwich fixings. “Want one? I do a terrific club sandwich.”

Affecting an air of virtue, she shook her head. “I never snack.”

“Most important meal of the day.” He stood there, too polite to take another bite, and she stood there, watching him.

A moment passed.

“Did you want to make some tea or something?”

She started. “No. I, uh, just came down to watch a movie. If you have anything good.”

“I’ve got the best DVD collection in town. Schwarzenegger or Van Damme, take your pick.”

She smiled politely. “Do you have anything else?”

“I’ve probably got some Stallone somewhere.”

If she hadn’t witnessed him make a joke earlier, she might have fallen for it. But his expression was too innocent.

“I’ll just look under that pile of *Sports Illustrated* and *Muscle Car* magazines and see what I find,” she replied.

He chuckled. “The movies are in the bookcase. If you need help give me a shout.”

“Thanks.”

When she got to the family room she discovered he hadn't lied. He did have a good representation of the three actors he'd cited. But he also had a wide range of titles from sappy romantic comedies to intellectual European cinematic statements.

Gleefully, she pored through the romantic comedies, pulling out several of her favorites. She loved everything about old movies, especially those with cover pictures of the stars. Clark Gable, William Holden, Cary Grant all grinned at her, vying for her attention. What bliss.

"Find anything you like?" a much more contemporary but equally sexy man asked from the doorway.

"So many men, so little time," she replied dreamily.

"Well, you've got all night."

Was there a hidden message? Was he suggesting she could move on from celluloid men to the real flesh-and-blood thing if she wanted? Was the ex-Mountie coming on to her?

Hard to say. When she turned to see, he was gone.

She curled up on the couch and prepared to escape. While the black-and-white images flitted across the screen, she was in the best of all possible worlds, where women always looked elegant, always thought of something appropriate to say, and in less than two hours had the impeccably dressed hunky hero eating out of their hands.

Sure it was corny. And she enjoyed every single minute of it. When the music reached a crescendo and the couple kissed, she sighed aloud with pleasure.

Then heard a very unromantic snort from behind her.

Startled, she turned to find Mark staring at the screen with an expression of disgust on his face. "Real men don't kiss like that," he informed her.

"Too bad they don't."

"He's so scared he'll muss her hair he's hardly even touching her. What kind of kiss is that?"

She leaped to her feet. How dare he make fun of her favorite movies? "Tough talk, mister. I'd like to see you do any better."

"Oh, yeah?" He was teasing her, but there was a disturbing glint in his eye.

Her heart took to hammering away at her ribs as she tried to think up the kind of comeback Jean Harlow or Katharine Hepburn would have lobbed his way. But, naturally, her mind was blank.

Before she could think up a suitably annihilating retort, it was too late. He was in front of her, his hand cupping the back of her head while she gaped at him.

"First you muss the hair," he told her in a voice that sent shivers racing through her as his fingers slid through her curls.

"Then you get in real close." He fit his body against hers, and she forgot about the urge to tell him off. Ooh, he was warm. And rock solid. Everywhere their bodies touched, she tingled.

"Then you smudge her lipstick." His tone dropped to a sexy growl. She opened her lips to tell him she wasn't wearing lipstick, but before she could form a single word, it was too late.

He was kissing her.

His other arm came around her back, pulling her closer.

It had started as sort of a joke, but the minute their lips touched the joking was

over. This was serious, high-voltage necking. And he was right, she admitted dimly, a designer dress and thick lipstick would definitely get mussed. In fact, everything from her hair to her heart rate was getting seriously mussed.

His tongue teased her, just tracing the edges of her lips before plunging deeper with gentle control.

Her arms went around his broad back and clung, pulling her body further into his embrace. Desire roared to life until she ached with it, wanting him here and now, right on the floor in front of the flickering TV screen.

Their tongues teased and played while the pressure built until she couldn't stand still. Her pelvis started wiggling against his, where she could feel his own pressure building. She hadn't felt this excited in a very long time. Somewhere in her foggy brain, she reminded herself that this was a bad idea, but she was having too much fun to care. She'd worry about that in the morning.

Just as she thought about using her one effective judo move to get him on his back on the floor, he began to pull away.

A little panting moan left her lips as he stepped back.

Even as she put her hands around his neck and tugged, trying to get back to that warm and infinitely exciting clinch, he was gently loosening them and putting them at her sides.

"That's my idea of a real kiss." He tried to sound casual, as if he'd just been demonstrating what he meant. She wasn't fooled for a second. She heard the sexual need in his tone as clearly as she felt its echo inside herself.

"Keep working at it. You might have something there." She affected the same casual air, but her voice was a dead giveaway.

He kept walking backward until he'd left the room. As she heard him return to his office, she flopped to the couch on rubber legs. Yep, she'd been right. Kissing Mark Saunders had been a very bad idea.

OF COURSE she couldn't sleep. She'd known she wouldn't. When she wasn't worrying that she'd sleep through the alarm, she was thinking about Mark. Recalling the strength of his arms around her, the amazing passion of his kissing. He'd stuffed that shirt with a whole lot of raw sexual energy.

Intellectually, she understood why he'd broken off the kiss just when things were getting exciting. It was very controlled of him. Very sensible. Naturally, it would be awkward for them to start an affair while she was his employee and Emily was asleep upstairs.

If he hadn't called a halt, she would have. Another minute and she absolutely would have pulled away.

About as easily as she could eat just one truffle and put the box away. Munch a single potato chip. Watch only half a good movie. She stuck the pillow over her head and groaned softly. Truth was, she'd been his for the taking. And they both knew it.

Who knew why? He wasn't her type. But, in flashback images, she saw him when they'd been throwing each other to the ground in the self-defense class, remembered the sight of his soapy forearms, slick and wet and muscular. But mostly it was the expression in his eyes that fascinated her. They could be colder than steel, and harder, or they could be so hot they got her blood simmering.



A quick fling with him could be fabulous. But she didn't need a degree in psychology to see he wasn't casual. About anything. It was a very good thing he'd pulled back after no more than a little necking. Let a man like that in her life, and it would be nothing but trouble.

He was a hunk of major proportions. But he was resistible, as long as he didn't do anything stupid like put on his RCMP dress uniform.

## 6

"WHAT?" Annie dreamed she was in the middle of a war. Sirens screeched, guns boomed, voices commanded. She wanted to run and hide, but she couldn't get away. She dove for cover in some kind of cave, and it was better for a while.

"Annie!" She was shaken by the shoulder.

"No! Don't shoot!" she mumbled, opening her eyes to blackness, her heart pounding.

Where was she?

"Annie, wake up." It was a command. Mark. She'd recognize that deep, sexy voice anywhere.

Batting him away dislodged the pillow that had somehow got on top of her head, and she discovered daylight streaming in her window. She was in bed, and Mark was switching off the screeching alarm.

Never at her best in the morning, she struggled to her elbow to try to figure out what was going on. Then remembered belatedly that she'd been asleep in bed. Sleeping as she always slept—naked.

Trying to work up a good glare was tough on so little sleep. She settled for a peevish tone as she yanked the covers to her neck. "What are you doing in here?"

"I just about banged the door down trying to wake you. I have to leave, it's seven-thirty."

"Seven-thirty?" She rubbed her eyes. "But I put the alarm on for six forty-five."

"I know. It's been ringing for forty-five minutes." Pointedly he faced away from her.

"I'm not a morning person," she admitted on a yawn. Like he hadn't noticed.

"Directions to Emily's school are on the kitchen counter," he told the open doorway. "Make sure you check in with me by three-thirty. I'll want to be certain Emily's home from school."

"Yes, sir," she said to his back, sorry he couldn't see her salute.

"HEY, E M!" Annie called, waving madly to the slight figure ambling up the school path alone.

The serious little face broke into a smile when Emily saw Annie, and her slow steps quickened to a run. "Hi."

“It’s such a great day, I thought we’d head to the beach. I’ve packed us some snacks and a Frisbee. You could invite some friends if you want.”

The smile widened. “The beach? But aren’t you going to make me practice my violin?”

“Sure. When the sun goes down. This city gets enough rain, you have to get out when the sun shines.”

Small white teeth worried a small pink lip. “But I have some reading to do, and I didn’t finish all my math in school.”

“We’ll get your homework finished first, then we’ll play. Come on, we’ll have fun.”

“Okay.”

“Do you want to invite some friends?”

The little girl glanced at clusters of noisy kids streaming out of the school, then shook her head. “No. Could it be just us?”

“Sure.”

In minutes they were off. Being a responsible nanny, Annie slathered sunscreen all over her charge and stuck a baseball cap on her head. The afternoon passed swiftly while they read, practiced times tables, played some Frisbee, even braved the cool Pacific waves all the way up to their ankles. When they got hungry they munched apples and cheese and drank the bottled lemonade Annie had brought.

By the time they returned home, sandy and giggling, it was almost six o’clock. “Do you like tofu?” Annie asked as she approached the gate.

Her companion glanced doubtfully at her. “I don’t think so.”

Annie was still trying to convince her young charge of the benefits of soybean products when she realized she didn’t have a clue what the code was to get into Fort Knox.

“I don’t suppose you know the code?” she asked.

“No. I’m not allowed to come home alone.”

She was about to start guessing when the gates opened. Slowly, like the jaws of death. And there, standing in the drive like the angel of vengeance, was Mark Saunders.

If Emily hadn’t been sitting in the car, Annie might have bolted, so angry did he look. His feet were planted wide, his arms crossed in a way that reminded her he’d been a cop. Waves of fury emanated from him.

She zipped through the gate and parked next to his vehicle, wondering how he’d known she’d forgotten the code.

“Hi, Uncle Mark,” Emily said. “We had the best time. Annie took me to the beach.”

His eyes had been boring into Annie’s with retribution. He turned to his niece, his expression immediately softening. “That’s great, Emily. I need to talk to Annie now. Can you go inside?”

The child looked uncertain. “Sure.”

“It’s okay, Em,” Annie reassured her. “You’ll get that tofu before you know it.”

Mark waited until the child was inside then turned to Annie, his face blazing with anger. “How could you do this?”

“I’m no good with numbers.”

His teeth ground audibly. “You didn’t need a number to report in. You push a

button. It's *almost* idiot-proof."

Her hand stole to her mouth. She'd forgotten to phone him at three-thirty. That's why he was so bent out of shape. "I'm sorry. I forgot."

"I might be able to forgive you if you'd answered the cell phone."

"It never rang." Really, who did he think he was? "Maybe instead of piling insults on me, you should check your equipment."

He pulled the phone from somewhere and waved it in front of her face. "It rang."

"Okay. So I forgot to take the phone." She was starting to get irate. "Emily had a wonderful time today, and she's perfectly safe. Don't you think you might be taking this security thing a little too seriously? The term is guardian. Not guard."

Beneath the anger, there was real worry in his eyes, and she wished she knew how to help him. "I couldn't get any work done. I couldn't concentrate, not knowing if she was all right...if you were both all right." He'd been worried about *her*, too? A flicker of warmth kindled inside her. It had been a very long time since anybody had worried about her.

"I'm sorry. Really."

"What about her homework? Her dinner?"

"We did her homework at the beach. Dinner's not going to take long. Trust me."

His eyes bored into hers, revealing anger and confusion. "I want to, but you make it tough."

Before she could retort, he'd turned on his heel and stalked into the house.

THE GERMAN SHEPHERD stared hard at Mark through bright, intelligent eyes, never moving from his seated position even though he quivered with alertness.

"He's a beauty," Mark said to the trainer, resisting the urge to run his hand over the silky fur. This was a trained police dog, never meant to be a pet. Only amazing good fortune and Brodie had made him aware that a couple of this season's dogs hadn't made the final cut for the K-9 squad.

Usually there was some slight flaw that made the dog ineligible for the crack dog squad. Mark was here to find out just where this one had failed. And if the animal would be any help in keeping his wayward nanny on a leash.

"What's his name?"

The uniformed officer who'd brought the dog out consulted a clipboard. "Kitsu."

At his name, the dog perked his ears even higher, but he never moved. Mark liked his discipline. Already he was getting a good feeling about this dog. Still, it wouldn't do to be too hasty. "Why didn't he make the cut?"

The officer flicked through several pages on the chart. "You could call the regular trainer. He's on shift again Tuesday. Kitsu got top marks for just about everything. But there's a note at the bottom in handwriting. 'Dog distracted on occasion.' And a word I can't read. Looks like 'squiggle.'"

With a shrug, the officer handed the clipboard to Mark, who flipped through it. The dog was clearly intelligent and had taken well to basic training. He was noted as being outstanding in scent training. He could be a first-class tracker, or maybe a bomb or a drug sniffer. Obstacle course, apprehension, all good. His lowest mark was in obedience training, although he still scored pretty high.

Mark had no idea what "squiggle" meant. But he wasn't looking for a dog who

could sniff out drugs, only one who could guard two wayward females. His ferocious-looking presence would be a deterrent to potential troublemakers.

“Mind if I put him through a few paces?”

“Be my guest.”

Mark approached slowly, letting Kitsu get used to him. He clipped a leash to the collar and stood to the right of the dog. “Heel,” he commanded, and began walking. The dog followed, sticking close to his left heel, keeping perfect pace with Mark.

On and off the leash, the dog was perfectly obedient. Stop, sit, stay, come—Kitsu followed each command immediately and thoroughly.

At the end of the session, the dog gazed at Mark expectantly, tail wagging and sharp brown eyes never leaving his face.

“He looks like he’s trying to tell me something.”

“He wants his treat. Here.” The trainer tossed a dog cookie Mark’s way, and Kitsu’s tail wagged harder. Still, he waited until Mark offered him the bone-shaped biscuit before delicately taking it with those sharp teeth and then crunching it.

The session over, Mark allowed himself a few minutes to pat the dog. “Good boy.”

Already he could feel some of the tension leaving his shoulders as he thought about this dog watching over Annie and Emily. Annie was clearly too much of a flake to take the protection part of her duties seriously. He’d spent a big part of a sleepless night thinking about getting someone else. But every time he reached the decision to hire another nanny, he remembered the way she was with Emily.

In the fun-and-games department she couldn’t be beat. Emily was acting more carefree than she had in a year. And, he had to admit, he enjoyed having a clown around the house. He never knew what she’d say or do next. She was fun, funny and sweet. This morning, she’d not only managed to get out of bed on time, she’d made pancakes for Emily and then decorated them to look like cartoon characters.

She’d cooked him one in the shape of a Mountie.

And she’d done it all while wearing some kind of tight skimpy top that definitely didn’t have a bra underneath and a pair of shorts that showed off her slender long legs and her belly ring.

He’d almost choked on that Mountie.

Oh, he liked having Annie around, all right. And he knew she was good for his niece in many ways. If he could just assign a deputy to ensure their safety, he could quit worrying. Maybe Kitsu was the perfect answer.

“Think you can look after my girls?” Mark asked his new guard dog.

The intelligent eyes gazed at him, and Kitsu uttered a short, sharp sound, something between a yap and a yowl.

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

Giving the dog one last rub on the head, he turned to the stand-in trainer. “I’ll take him.”

“ANNIE, LOOK.” Emily’s voice was full of excitement.

Annie had never heard her so animated. She ran to the front of the house where the door was wide open for once and halted at the sight of Emily and Mark, both staring at a dog.

She leaned against the doorway, watching as Emily slowly approached the animal. Mark spoke softly in the voice he used exclusively for his niece.

The child glanced to where Annie stood, and her smile was brighter than the sun. "I always wanted a dog."

Annie felt her smile grow as she watched the trio on the lawn.

Dog? Her goofy smile started to stiffen. Was that rigid canine shape really a dog or was it a garden statue? It sure didn't act like any dog she'd ever seen. Where was the barking? Jumping? Licking? The running around wildly that she always associated with puppies? Because if the German shepherd wasn't a puppy, he sure wasn't far from it. "How old is he?"

"Ten months," Mark replied.

"He's kind of quiet."

"He's just shy. Aren't you, boy?" Emily spoke with confidence as she approached the animal. His eyes were alive, and his ears perked up, but if he wasn't carved from stone, he was doing a darn good imitation of it.

Mark's voice continued, and Annie was almost certain he was giving some kind of instructions. Like how to plug the thing in or activate it in case of burglary.

Emily reached out and stroked the dog's head, and a quiver ran from its nose down its back. But still it remained sitting, watching Mark. Impulsively, Emily threw her arms around the dog and hugged its neck.

"No Em. You shouldn't do that." Mark's voice sharpened.

"Why not?" The smile faded in an instant. "Isn't he ours to keep? Oh, please say we can keep him, Uncle Mark. I always, always wanted a dog, but Mom said no because we traveled so much. I promise I'll feed him and walk him every day and—"

"Yes. We can keep him." Mark dropped to his haunches, and Annie walked over to join the group on the lawn. "But he's a very special kind of dog. He's a trained guard dog."

A groan escaped her lips before she could suppress it. Emily wanted a pet, and he bought an attack dog. "Great, just great."

Mark glared at her, then turned his attention to his niece. "His name's Kitsu."

Emily laughed. "He knows his name. Did you see the way his ears moved?"

"That's one rambunctious puppy you've got there," Annie said softly so only Mark would hear.

The jingle of keys got Mark's attention. "What are you doing?"

She widened her eyes. "I'm pushing the green button to make him bark."

Mark snatched the key chain away. "He's a real dog. Quit ruining Emily's fun."

"You wouldn't know fun if it bit you in the—"

"Annie! I admit I got him to protect Emily. And you. The way you go through life worries me. So he can be a pet and a guard dog. What's the big deal?"

"You just don't get it." Emily wanted a dog she could play catch with, run around the yard with, whisper her secrets to and sneak up to her room to sprawl on her bed, muddy paws and all. She didn't want a dog that was like Mark only with pointy ears and a tail.

She gave the dog a reluctant pat on the head and announced she was going in to finish preparing lunch. As she entered the house she overheard Mark telling Emily how smart Kitsu was. "He can walk, sit, heel, lie down and stay."

“Sounds like a barrel of laughs,” she muttered as she stomped to the kitchen.

“CAN WE TAKE Kitsu with us to the park after lunch?” Emily asked Annie.

That dog, if that’s what it really was, was giving her the willies, sitting on the kitchen floor and staring at them while they ate. “I don’t think—”

“It’s a great idea,” Mark interrupted. He caught her gaze and shot her one of those I’ll-talk-to-you-about-this-later looks.

“He won’t fit in my car,” she complained.

“You can use my vehicle.” His tone told her he didn’t want to hear any more excuses, so she pursed her lips and forked her salad.

“Can you come, too, Uncle Mark?”

“Sorry, Em. I have to work.”

“But it’s Saturday.”

“I know it is. But I’ve got a lot to do getting ready for the big conference. You have fun without me.”

*Ha.* Annie grumbled the entire time she packed a dinner picnic and changed her clothes. She couldn’t believe she’d been manipulated into taking a police dog to a picnic. And that was after she’d been conned into working on a Saturday when she was supposed to have weekends off. Not that she had anything better to do, as it turned out. And he was paying her time and a half. But still, it was the principle of the thing.

“Well, we’re off for an afternoon of human and canine frolicking,” she announced to Mark in a syrupy voice as they were leaving the house.

He took the picnic basket out of her arms and hefted it toward his truck while he shot her a sideways look. “That’s what you’re wearing for a day at the park?”

She glanced down. Her paisley-printed Capri pants were zipped. Her purple crop top was clean. Her purple sandals with the big plastic daisies were on the correct feet.

“What’s wrong with it?”

“There’s so much skin showing.” He dropped his voice. “And I can see you’re not wearing a, um...” His gaze fastened on her chest.

“A bra, Mark. It’s called a bra. I hardly ever wear them. Too restricting.”

“It’s a good thing I got that dog to protect you,” he grumbled, forcing his gaze straight ahead.

“From who? You? You’re the one who can’t keep his eyes to himself.”

The picnic basket landed in the back of his SUV with a thump, and she knew the flush on his face wasn’t from exertion. At a single sharp gesture from him, the statue dog came to life and launched itself into the vehicle.

She lifted her sun hat and slipped on dark glasses while he closed and locked the rear door.

He held the keys out almost reluctantly and, as they dropped into her hand, she stuck her chest out as far as a 32B with attitude would go. “Any more orders?”

He took a single step forward. It brought his chest to within almost touching distance of hers. Just a whisper away from contact, she felt the heat coming off him. Smelled the clean laundry and all-male scent of him. How could he infuriate and excite her at the same time? It just wasn’t fair.

“Just one. Don’t forget your poop and scoop bags.”

HOW ON EARTH had she gone from being a professional children's entertainer to being a professional poop scooper?

If she had any sense at all, she'd be in Asia. Maybe she'd practice her Japanese on Kitsu and totally confuse him.

Once they reached the park, Annie's annoyance began to lift. It was a beautiful sunny day, and children, lovers and families with real dogs played Frisbee, lounged on blankets and were having fun. The smell of barbecuing meat wafted in the air, and the sound of laughter drifted to her ears.

Annie found a spot near the middle of the huge field and laid out her red and white striped picnic blanket. Emily stood, holding the leash, and Kitsu halted obediently beside her.

"Help me unpack, then we can play some ball."

"Can I let go of the leash?" Emily asked in a doubtful tone.

Annie glanced at the motionless dog. "Yeah. I doubt if dynamite would move that dog without a command. Sit, Kitsu," she said in what she hoped was a commanding tone. The dog seemed to consider her for a few minutes, head cocked, before reluctantly complying and sitting rigidly, eyes on the alert, nose sniffing the air.

"Kitsu's so smart," Emily gushed. "He knows Uncle Mark's his master."

Annie had a suspicion the child was right. Just to be certain he'd obey, she took the leash and draped it over her wrist while she dug into her pack for the ball.

Emily meanwhile had opened the picnic basket. "Yum. Fried chicken." The rustling of cellophane informed Annie that her charge had already found the after-dinner treat. "And jujubes!"

"Those are for after dinner, Em."

"Can I have just one now? Please?"

"Well. Okay. Just one. I know that ball's in here somewhere," she grumbled. A shrill yap made her jump. Her bag tumbled to the blanket.

She was just in time to see the well-trained statue dog undergo the most amazing transformation into some kind of uber-beast. Instinctively she gripped the leash tighter as she watched those powerful legs crouch and prepare to launch the dog into motion.

"Kitsu, no!" she shouted even as the dog catapulted into action.

She felt her arm tugged practically out of its socket as she was yanked forward by an animal who was all muscle and speed.

"Stop, Kitsu! Heel!" Emily yelled from behind her while Annie brought her other hand around and tried to haul on the leash.

"Scuse me," she panted as she found herself dragged across a neighboring blanket and stumbling over a couple in a romantic clinch.

Dimly she wondered if the dog had sniffed out drugs or illegal weapons or whatever it was he'd been trained to sniff out.

“Heel!” She leaped over a ghetto blaster like an Olympic hurdler.

“Stay!” She ducked to avoid a Frisbee to the head.

“Sit! Roll over! Play dead!” Nothing slowed the galloping stride of the most powerful dog she’d ever seen in deadly pursuit of what or whom she couldn’t see.

Did the police dog have to pick now to go on duty? Didn’t he know he’d flunked out of police dog school? Whatever he was racing toward, she didn’t want her young charge involved. “Em,” she called breathlessly over her shoulder, “stay back.”

If she hadn’t glanced at Emily, following as fast as her much shorter legs would go, she might have seen the hedge.

“Look out!” Em screamed.

Too late. Laurel leaves and branches whacked her shins. With no breath left to yell at the infernal dog, she hung on grimly to that leash, grimacing in pain as he hauled her through the hedge. One of the perky plastic daisies in her sandal caught, and with a painful wrench she felt the shoe yanked off her foot.

“I’m going to kill you,” she panted, so winded her threat came noiselessly from a parched throat. Another field, complete with a crowded children’s playground, met her gaze, and desperately she tightened her sweaty hold on the leash.

What was the dog after?

There were no drug dealers or desperate criminal-looking types in her range of vision. In fact, all she could see was one wildly scampering squirrel.

The poor little thing looked like it was running for its life.

It couldn’t be.

But it was. Even as the furry little creature veered wildly to the left, the crazed dog followed, closing in on that flapping bushy gray tail.

She wasn’t sure which was worse, to be dragged into a drug ring or to witness the slaughter of an innocent woodland creature. The innocent woodland creature had a certain amount of native cunning, however, and headed straight for the crowded playground.

Limping and hopping from bare foot to flapping sandal, Annie screamed a warning. And suddenly, she was dodging swinging swings, dragged under a climbing apparatus and yanked through the sandbox. She had to give the dog some credit—he’d managed to carve a path between all the children. But still, as she sailed out of the playground, a glob of gum sticking to her foot, the sounds of screaming kids and yelling parents pursued her.

Beyond the dog’s heaving flanks, the squirrel dashed madly for a stand of trees. Kitsu lowered his muzzle, and she saw that only inches separated those bared teeth from his quarry.

With the last of her strength she tried to put on the brakes, digging one naked heel and the back of one flimsy sandal into the patchy grass.

For her trouble, she was toppled onto her knees and dragged forward. But she had managed to give the squirrel enough time to scamper up the trunk of a huge Douglas fir.

She may have thought the chase was over, but Kitsu had other ideas. Around and around the tree trunk he dragged her, a dog possessed. Barking and jumping, teeth snapping toward where, high in the branches, the squirrel began a high-pitched chattering.

Annie glanced up and was hit on the forehead with a well-aimed acorn. The



squirrel seemed to have an arsenal of various missiles. Down rained acorns, peanuts, walnuts, a popcorn kernel.

That was the last straw. She'd saved that squirrel's life, and it was bopping her on the head with nuts.

She let go of the leash. "Knock yourself out," she told Kitsu. "I am out of here."

Turning, she massaged her sore shoulder and prepared to limp back the way she'd come. Somewhere in the bag she'd abandoned on the picnic blanket—if it was still there—was the magic key ring with the panic button. Let Mark come and collect his wretched beast.

She hadn't gone three painful steps when she saw Emily, hair flying behind her, hot on their trail.

Even in her fury, she managed a small smile. That girl was a trouper.

Emily was breathing hard when she caught up. Unable to speak, she collapsed in Annie's arms and watched Kitsu's insane behavior. He'd managed to wrap the leash so tight around the tree trunk that he almost strangled himself every time he leaped up, barking, while nuts rained down on him.

"What are we going to do?" the child asked in a worried tone.

"Do they make dog meat out of dogs? Or is that just horses?"

"Annie! You wouldn't?"

"With my bare hands."

"Kitsu!"

The dog spared her a glance, tongue hanging out, tail wagging, before resuming its pursuit of the treed squirrel.

"Come on," Annie said. "We'll go back and phone Mark."

"We can't leave Kitsu. Something might happen to him."

"We couldn't be that lucky."

"Please, Annie. Please. He'll get tired in a few minutes."

Privately, Annie thought it would take a rifle full of buckshot to get that dog away from the tree, but she kept her opinion to herself. "I guess I could use a few minutes to rest," she agreed and dropped to the ground, picking at the glob of gum welded to the bottom of her foot.

"Want a jujube?" Emily asked, gesturing with the package she was holding.

"Why not?"

The cellophane rustled, and Emily handed her a bright red candy.

"Look."

The dog's attention had been diverted. Instead of straining to get up the tree, he was straining toward the package in Emily's hands. "Do you think he wants a candy?"

"It's worth a shot."

The girl paused, open bag in hand, and a glimmer of worry crossed her pink cheeks. "Is it good for dogs to eat candy?"

"At this point I'd happily feed him arsenic."

"Kitsu, want a jujube?"

Amazingly, the dog did. He whined and pulled at the leash he'd managed to wrap snugly around the tree trunk until he was half choking himself trying to get to the shiny treat.

Emily approached him, holding out the sweet, which the dog snatched daintily

from her fingers and greedily devoured, whining softly for another.

Annie was on her feet by this time, finding the end of the leash and walking in circles until it was free of the trunk.

Emily began dropping jujubes in a trail leading away from the squirrel, and the dog followed, gobbling each one.

They retraced their steps with the perfectly docile Kitsu, giving the playground a wide berth and silently praying they wouldn't meet any more squirrels.

When they returned to their blanket, miraculously everything was still there, but neither of them wanted to risk another squirrel incident, so they packed up everything and lugged it to the truck.

"Pass me a cranberry juice, Em," Annie said once they were all buckled in.

"Uncle Mark doesn't let me have food or drinks in his new truck," Emily warned her, as they drove off, her brake foot uncomfortably naked against the pedal.

"Really? I'll have a piece of chicken, as well. And have one yourself. I'll deal with Uncle Mark."

She didn't exactly *try* to get the steering wheel shiny with grease. But if Mark was stupid enough to stick them with the hound of the Baskervilles as a picnic companion, what could he expect?

THE BIG HOUSE seemed empty and quiet. Mark almost used the word lonely, but that was ridiculous. He'd just got used to Emily being there all the time. And since Annie had moved in, it was like living in the middle of a circus. No wonder it was quiet without them.

He should relax now that he had a police dog guarding the pair of them, but somehow it was impossible.

Annie had been in such a snit with him she hadn't left him any dinner, he noted when he opened the fridge hopefully. He could have cooked himself something, but it was just as easy to phone and get a pizza delivered.

He'd just sunk his teeth into a big gooey slice with all the toppings when he heard the door. He glanced at his watch and allowed himself a smug smile. They were earlier than they'd said they'd be. Kitsu was already making a difference.

As he was mentally congratulating himself on getting the animal, Emily and Annie walked in.

Walked was actually an inaccurate term. Annie limped—painfully, it seemed to him. Her hat and glam sunglasses were gone. As was one sandal. The other was muddy, and one half-plucked daisy hung by a thread. Those tight short pants she'd left the house in were grass-stained, and one knee was torn right out, showing a patch of grazed skin. Even the tight top he'd disapproved of mere hours ago wasn't perky anymore. It had a lot of threads pulled, and globs of dirt and some kind of vegetation stuck to it.

Emily looked better—but not much. Maybe they'd been playing baseball?

But one glance at Annie's face had him revising that idea.

She was wearing a scowl that warned him that whatever had happened, it wasn't a friendly game of baseball, and somehow it was all his fault.

"How'd it go?" he asked.

"Not well," Annie answered, slumping into a chair with a groan.

"It wasn't Kitsu's fault," Emily wailed.

Mark closed the pizza box. He was getting a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach. “What happened?”

Annie was pulling things out of the sole of her foot. Slivers maybe, the way she was wincing. He directed the question to his niece.

“He was really good, Uncle Mark. Until he saw a squirrel. Then he kind of went nuts and chased it.”

“Kitsu chased a squirrel?”

“Yes.”

“Didn’t you call him to heel?”

“About a million times.”

“And?”

“He, um, he ignored us.”

“But he’s a trained police dog. He’ll always come to heel.”

Annie glanced up at that, and he noticed her face was streaked with mud. “Not if he sees a squirrel, he won’t,” she assured him.

Suddenly, he remembered the police trainer’s report. And that notation he couldn’t read. It had looked like “squiggle.” Maybe the word that trainer had written was “squirrel.”

As though she’d read his thoughts, Annie said, “I think we now know why Kitsu flunked police dog school.”

“You’d better tell me exactly what happened,” he ordered with a sinking feeling in his gut.

By the time they’d finished their recital he knew he had no choice but to get rid of Kitsu. The guard dog was worse than useless. By dragging Annie all over the park, he’d effectively left Emily completely unprotected.

“But he came right to heel as soon as I gave him a jujube,” his niece assured him, as though that would make Mark forgive the wayward canine.

He took a long pull of the beer he’d opened a few minutes ago, when the world had seemed normal. “I’m sorry,” he said. He wasn’t really sure who he was apologizing to—his niece or his shoeless nanny. All he knew was he’d made an uncharacteristic, but colossal, error in judgment. He’d been so eager to make everything work out, he hadn’t researched the dog properly. He shuddered to think what disasters could have occurred because of his haste.

“Emily, honey, I need to speak to Annie alone for a minute.”

“It wasn’t Kitsu’s fault, Uncle Mark. Really it wasn’t. I’ll go feed him his dinner now.”

“All right,” he said heavily.

He waited until she’d left the room. “I’ll return him in the morning.”

Annie glanced at him, her green eyes shining out of a grubby face. “I need a bath.” That was all she said.

A few minutes later, Emily bounded into the room, the German shepherd at her heels.

His tongue lolled out, and his eyes gleamed with innocence, as though he hadn’t terrorized a small furry animal, frightened a playground of little children and dragged Annie for miles, ignoring every command he’d been taught.

Tail wagging, he approached Mark with the tired whine of a dog who’s spent a

satisfying day. He lay at his master's feet, his head on his paws, and dropped to sleep.

Emily glanced from Annie to him, a worried look on her face. "You won't...you won't do anything, will you, Uncle Mark?"

"I'm sorry, Em, but Kitsu's going to have to go back."

To his horror, tears flooded Emily's eyes and spilled over onto her cheeks. "No! It's not fair." She'd been so brave all year, though he knew her little heart had broken when her parents died. He cursed himself for letting her get attached to the dog so quickly.

"Please, Em," he heard himself pleading. "Try to understand."

"You promised we could keep him. You promised." And with a heartrending sob, she threw herself into Annie's arms.

Over Emily's head, Annie shot him a look of reproach. But what was he supposed to do?

Frustrated beyond bearing, he took in the sobbing child, the glaring nanny and the snoring dog.

It was all too much.

While every sensible instinct told him he was doing the right thing in returning the beast, his softer emotions overruled him.

A tense minute passed for everyone except the happily snoring beast.

"Oh, all right," he snapped. "I'll give him one more chance. Just one."

Like magic, the sobbing stopped. Emily lifted her head from Annie's shoulder and turned a wet but smiling face his way. "Thanks, Uncle Mark. He'll be good from now on. I know he will." She jumped up and came over to give him a hug before dropping to her knees and giving the dog an even more loving embrace. Kitsu roused himself enough to stop snoring and lick her face with his huge tongue.

Determined to assert his authority in some small way, Mark ordered her to bed after her busy day, and without any argument or delay, she went. Followed by the useless watchdog.

He turned to his nanny with a feeling she wasn't going to be so easy to pacify. "You have a piece of peanut shell in your hair."

She grunted. "I probably have half of Stanley Park in my hair." Sitting slumped in one of the overstuffed chairs in the family room, she appeared much younger. And very, very cranky.

"Why don't you go and have that hot bath?"

With a tired sigh she nodded and rose.

"Do you want a glass of wine to take up with you?"

"I'll have it afterward. I hope you buy your wine by the gallon jug."

He half smiled as she limped out, so tired she didn't seem to notice she was wearing just one sandal. The plastic daisy bobbed hopelessly. He had a feeling he had as much hope of hanging on to his nanny as that shoe had of hanging on to that daisy.

A moment of panic speared him. What would he do without Annie? He was already down one guard dog. He had to find a way to stop Annie from quitting. He wracked his brain.

Could he flatter her into staying?

Beg her?

Change the outgoing code so she'd never get out of the house?

He'd start with flattery, he decided, and move on from there if he had to. He paused as he began assembling a tray of wine and glasses, remembering the sight of her grazed knee. Before he started on flattery, he'd better apply first aid.

It made an odd collection, once he had everything assembled in his rarely used sunken living room. A good bottle of wine, glasses, some slices of pizza on a plate, a first-aid kit. She was probably feeling the way he used to after a difficult arrest. Not only tired, but bruised. The way she'd been rubbing her shoulder, she could have strained the muscles. He went back and dug out the rubbing alcohol.

He put a jazz CD on, soft and soothing in the background. Then paused.

Would she think he was trying to seduce her?

He couldn't take any chances that she might misinterpret his intention. Irritably he jabbed the button, choking the sultry singer in mid croon.

He grabbed all the stuff and stomped to the familiar shabbiness of the family room.

And tried to think up something to say that would make her stay.

When she came into the room half an hour later, he still hadn't thought of anything. He glanced up, hoping inspiration would hit him, and noticed she was wearing the same multicoloured dress she'd worn the day he met her. Had she dressed up? For him? Damn. Maybe he should have stayed in the living room, after all.

She winced as she walked, lifting the hem of her dress impatiently until it was several inches above her knee, where the grazed skin was inflamed. "Ouch. I can't stand to have anything touch it."

"Don't you have a bathrobe?"

"Yep. It's somewhere in Spain. Madrid, maybe, or Barcelona. I never did figure out where I left it." She shrugged. "I never replaced it. It's just one less thing to lose."

What kind of woman didn't want a bathrobe? he asked himself. A woman who didn't want to be encumbered, that's who. A woman who would look at him and his life-style and see one big encumbrance.

She sat down, and he shifted an ottoman under her outstretched leg.

"First things first," he said, gesturing to the bottle on the table. "Red all right? Or I've got white in the fridge."

"Red's great."

He poured each of them a glass of Merlot and let her take a sip before clicking open his first-aid kit and dropping to his knees on the floor at her feet.

An amused smile flickered across her face as he cleaned, creamed and bandaged her knee. He did his level best not to notice how warm and soft her skin felt beneath his hand or to see the little patch of goose bumps that rose when he applied the antiseptic lotion.

Once he'd covered the grazed skin with a bandage, he couldn't smell the antiseptic anymore. Only Annie. And she smelled so good, warm and still damp from her bath. He caught the scent of tropical fruits and the nearer scent of woman.

He gently lifted the foot he'd seen her limping on and studied the sole. "What's this red patch?" he asked, concerned.

"Bubble gum," came the succinct reply. "I had to scrub with a nail brush to get it all off."

"Ouch. You've got a few slivers here, too." He shuffled through his first-aid kit.

“What are you planning on doing with that needle? And those tweezers?”

He grinned at her. “Drink some more wine. You won’t feel a thing.”

“That’s what my first boyfriend said,” she mumbled.

Deciding the safest response to that was none, he got to work, carefully digging splinters out of her foot. Apart from a little squirming and some mild whining, she let him get on with the job.

She had very nice feet. Not shapely like a dancer’s, more broad and sensible, like a woman who does a lot of walking. Or running. The pads were firm and a little callused, the toes square and somehow sexy.

And he tried to forget all about the long, luscious legs they were attached to.

“That was a good thing you did. Letting Emily keep the dog.”

He glanced up, a frown pulling his eyebrows together. “It was moronic.”

Her gaze locked with his, and a sweet smile lit up her face. “No, it wasn’t. Losing Kitsu would have broken her heart.”

“That dog is a completely useless protector.”

She tilted her head. “Oh, I don’t know. I think it’s safe to say we’ll be protected from marauding squirrels with evil intentions.”

He allowed himself a stiff grin and, putting her foot gently on the floor, flopped to the couch beside her. “It’s not squirrels I’m worried about.”

“You’re worried about everything from unfriendly aliens to the bogeyman.”

A spurt of righteous anger filled his gut. “I promised her mother—”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ve heard it. Do you think her mother meant for you to wrap that child up in cotton wool and never let her experience life?”

Dull anger kept him silent.

“Do you?”

More silence.

“Life is risk, Mark. You’re not helping Emily, keeping her trapped in this fortress. You’ve got to let her live.”

“Mighty fine talk from a woman who’s so scared of commitment she doesn’t even own a bathrobe.”

He had the dubious satisfaction of knowing he’d managed to make Annie as mad as she’d made him. Her cheeks flushed, and she glared. “What does my bathrobe have to do with anything?”

“It’s just so easy for you to waltz in here for a few weeks, load me up with advice and waltz out. I’ll be seeing Emily into adulthood. I doubt you’ll make it through the week.”

Her mouth opened and closed a few times. With shock, he noticed her eyes fill with tears. Her head drooped, and she said sadly, “You’re right. I guess things aren’t working out that well.”

Belatedly he remembered he was supposed to be flattering her to make her stay, and here he was damned well taunting her to leave. What was Plan B again? Oh, yeah. Beg.

She drew a deep breath. “Mark, I—”

He had to stop her before she quit. He had to. He grabbed her hand. “Please. Don’t let Emily down. She really needs you. It’s just a few more weeks until Bea gets back.”

She shook her head sadly. "I don't think—"

"I only let that useless dog stay because I knew I could count on you." *Liar.*

It worked, though. Her eyes opened wide. "You did?"

"Yes, ma'am." And in a way, he realized it was true. Annie would do her best to look after Emily. He just wasn't convinced her best was good enough.

"Well..."

He could tell he needed to give her something more than flattering words to prove how much he trusted her. He gulped. "I'll take the outgoing code off the door."

"You will?" Amazement shone in her eyes. He wasn't surprised. He was amazed himself. What was he doing?

"Sure. I'll have one of the guys come in and rewire it."

She smiled at him, a perky, provocative little smile that reminded him how cute she was and that her skirt was still pulled halfway up her thighs. "And I'll try harder to call in on time."

"Deal." He shook the much smaller hand he was still holding.

"And this is for letting Em keep Kitsu," she said, then leaned forward impulsively and kissed his cheek.

At the feel of those soft, sweet lips brushing his face, something happened. It was as though all the plucking splinters and dressing wounds had been an unusual, but very effective, form of foreplay.

For the moment her lips touched his cheek, he was lost. The soft brush of moist skin was as erotic as the most brazen caress. He'd been as restrained and as circumspect as any Canadian Mountie could be. But underneath, he was still a red-blooded male, and if the lady was going to start kissing him, well...

Her lips hovered for a moment, leaving his cheek but not pulling away. Not yet.

He tugged the hand he was still holding and she tumbled against his chest with a little coo of satisfaction. He turned his head, and she turned hers until their mouths met.

Hungrily.

## 8

ALL THE pent-up urges he'd been suppressing roared to life. He wanted to crush her body against him, but knowing she'd been battered by her little walk in the park with Kitsu, he held her gently, crushing only her lips beneath his.

She didn't seem to mind the crushed lips. In fact, she pushed her body closer to his until he couldn't restrain himself any longer and pulled her in tight. As her breasts flattened against his chest, he was glad for once that she wasn't wearing a bra. The natural feel of the flesh plastered to his chest and the two points tormenting him as she moved herself against him were wildly exciting.

All the sensible reasons they shouldn't be doing this were as easily crushed as her lips beneath his. She opened her mouth to him, and he didn't need a second invitation.

Plunging his tongue inside, he found her hot and sweet. As intoxicating as the red wine he could taste on her tongue.

A low, rhythmic thumping came to his attention. It was too slow to be the beating of his heart. He pulled himself reluctantly away from Annie's mouth and glanced around to see Kitsu's tail thumping the floor in greeting. His muzzle pointed to the doorway where Mark was just in time to see a flash of white that looked suspiciously like his niece's nightdress.

"Emily?" he called softly.

No answer.

Annie sat up, her eyes huge as she, too, stared toward the doorway. "Do you think she saw us?" she whispered.

"It's a distinct possibility," he admitted, and swore softly. He was always so careful. Not that his love life had seen much action since Emily moved in with him, but what there was had always been conducted elsewhere. His nanny had a way of making him lose his head so badly he felt like smacking it against the wall to try to scramble his brain into shape.

"I could go up and talk to her." Annie sounded full of doubt. Her hand crept to her ear, and she started fiddling with the array of silver earrings.

He tried to recall what he'd read in all those childrearing books about how to handle situations like this, but he came up blank and decided to go with his gut instinct. "Let's just leave it for now. We don't know that she even saw anything. If she brings the subject up, I'll have a talk with her."

"You will?" Annie sounded shocked.

"Sure, why not? It won't be something I'll look forward to, but if she has questions, she deserves straight answers."

"My dad..." She stared at the dog, snoozing on the rug.

"Your dad what?" he asked, sinking back on the couch, knowing his niece had doused his plans for the evening. And a good thing, too. He must have been out of his mind to consider sleeping with Annie, a woman who abandoned men like bathrobes. Still, he was only human, and his body ached for her. If he couldn't make love to her, at least he could talk to her, and the serious tone of her voice told him she was thinking about something important.

"My dad never did any of the difficult jobs in our house. That was always my mom."

"When you say difficult, you're not talking about taking out the garbage, are you?"

She laughed softly. "No. My dad's the most fun person I know, but he can't take responsibility. My mom had to do everything from manage the family finances, which weren't pretty, to the discipline, to the dishes. And she got so resentful she started nagging my dad whenever he was home." She shrugged and shot him a bitter smile. "So he just stopped coming home."

"Nice guy."

"He is." She fired the words back. "He's just not cut out for the domestic scene. And I'm totally like him. I'm lucky I could learn from his mistakes. I'm not cut out for the family thing, either."

"Maybe you underestimate yourself," he said softly. Wondering who he was



trying to convince.

“UNCLE MARK?”

“Uh-huh?” He glanced up to find Emily hovering in his office doorway, fiddling with the ear of her stuffed lion. She’d carried that mangy thing around for weeks after her parents died. It gave him a start to see her with it again. Apart from sleeping with it every night, she’d pretty much detached herself from the flea-bitten creature. His gut felt queasy. She must be here to ask him what had been going on in the family room last night. He only wished he knew.

“I was wondering...”

“Yes, Em.” He braced himself for what was coming. Please God, don’t let the conversation lead to where babies came from or some mortifying aspect of femaledom he didn’t feel qualified to answer. He marshaled his thoughts rapidly, trying to prepare a few answers. *Yes, I was kissing Annie, because I like her very much. Sometimes when grown-ups like each other...* The queasiness grew worse. This was going to be a lot tougher than he’d anticipated.

“Um, could I send Bea a get-well card?”

“What?” Could he possibly have heard right?

“Bea. I want to send her a card.”

Relief made him able to breathe again. “Well, sure. But I think she’s almost better now.” Emily had probably just crept down to check on Kitsu and never noticed him and Annie tucked away on the couch. They had been pretty quiet. He slumped in his chair, vowing never to make out with Annie or anyone else again unless it was behind locked doors.

“I know. But I feel bad I never sent her one before.”

“I sent her some flowers from both of us.”

“But I really want to send her a card. Just from me.” She glanced up, and he noticed a certain determination around the jaw that reminded him of her mother. He knew that expression well. Unless he wanted a knock-down, drag-out fight, that little face was going to get its way. And it was a perfectly nice idea.

He tweaked her hair. “Sure thing. We can go to the store and pick one out or we can make something on the computer.”

She smiled right back at him. “Let’s make one on the computer.”

It didn’t take them long to make the card. Then he helped her print the address on an envelope and stamp it.

“I can mail that for you tomorrow, Em. I bet Bea will be thrilled you thought of her.”

Her face flushed. “No. I want to mail it. Please, Uncle Mark? Annie can help me tomorrow.”

With Annie’s help, Bea might get the card in time for Christmas, but if it made Em happy to do it all herself, he was proud of her just for seeing the project all the way through. Yep. Her mother’s determination would take her far.

He watched her carry the card to her room and shook his head. He’d been ready to talk about grown-ups and sex and all she wanted to do was make a get-well card.

Kids.

“ANNIE?” Em’s voice rose a little at the end in a way Annie was beginning to recognize as uncertainty.

“Mm?” They were adding toppings to pizza crust, each decorating her own. Annie added a couple more crescents of red pepper to the clown lips on her face. She had no idea what the finished product was going to taste like, but it sure looked cute. Red cabbage made awesomely curly purple hair.

She’d found some olives for eyes. Black would have been best, but as they didn’t have any, she’d made do with stuffed green ones, kind of liking the red dot of pimiento for the pupil in the eye. Her clown pizza had red tomato cheeks, green pepper eyebrows and mozzarella cheese face paint.

Emily was attempting to render Kitsu in pizza. The result was interesting, to say the least, and since she’d promised to eat it, as well as the organic salad, Annie let her use chocolate-covered peanuts for eyes and cover some of the cheese with chocolate powder for his fur.

“We’re having a take-your-mom-to-school project where we get to invite our moms to come and talk about what they do. If you don’t have a mom, you’re allowed to bring another grown-up lady who’s special. And I wondered if I could bring you?”

“You want to take me to school with you?” Annie was surprised at the rush of warmth she felt at the compliment. Emily thought of her as a special woman in her life.

“Oh, yeah. Most of the moms do boring stuff like lawyer and dentist and stuff. Everyone would think it was so cool to have a clown.”

Well, that brought her ego down a notch. So it wasn’t that she was so special. It was because she was a clown that Em wanted her at school. “When is it?” She’d love to come, but she had to remember that she’d be on her way soon. They both had to remember it before there were any hurt feelings.

It was easy when it was a man she was leaving behind. But she’d never left a child before. She’d tried to stop herself from getting involved, and Emily from getting attached to her, but she wasn’t sure she’d succeeded.

She was going to miss Emily, she suddenly realized.

And Mark? a little voice in her head whispered. What about him? Did she think she could just waltz out of his life with no regrets?

A red pepper strip snapped in her fingers.

It wasn’t fair. She’d been very, very clear with both of them that she was on her way to Asia. This was a temporary thing. What was Emily doing asking her to be a stand-in mom? What was Mark doing kissing her breathless and then leaving her so full of sexual cravings she couldn’t sleep?

Didn’t they have any consideration for her feelings?

She was going to have to be firm. Make it clear that there was to be no emotional entangling happening in the next few weeks.

“Em, I…” She started forcefully enough. Then unfortunately made the mistake of glancing at the little face gazing at her.

“I, uh…” She had to refuse. It wasn’t fair to raise any unrealistic expectations. But the pool of warmth kept growing. Emily saw her as a mother figure. “When is it?”

“In two weeks. Just before school ends.”

“I’d love to come.”

The grin of delight made her glad she’d accepted.

And it was pretty cool that Emily saw her as a mother figure. A sensible older woman she could confide in.

“Will you wear your costume?”

Annie giggled at her own absurdity. Em wanted Gertrude. She didn’t see Annie as any kind of mother. Who would? “If you want me to.”

The violent nod sent Emily’s ponytail bobbing.

“Tell you what, why don’t we both dress up and we’ll do a couple of those tricks we’ve been practicing together?”

“That’d be sweet!”

She couldn’t resist leaning down and giving Em a hug. But she had to make absolutely sure the child didn’t get any wrong ideas. “You know I’m not here for much longer. Bea will probably be back soon.”

A funny expression crossed Emily’s face. The kid looked like some shifty character in the movies caught in a lie. But that was just her mind playing tricks on her. Probably she was projecting her own guilt. She knew she was a better nanny than Bea. Well, unless a cutthroat gang of ninja fighters decided to invade North Vancouver. Then Bea would have her beat hands down in the nanny department.

“But what if Bea didn’t come back? Then you could stay.”

“I can’t Em. I...I’m not a real nanny. I do birthday parties.”

“But you can do both, just like now.”

“I’m also going on a trip. To Asia.”

Em spooned mustard onto the pizza, drawing marks on Kitsu’s fur with her fingertip. “You could go any old time. Don’t you like me?”

“Of course I like you.”

“Don’t you like Uncle Mark?”

In spite of herself, heat rushed to her face. Did she ever like Uncle Mark, and if she didn’t get out of there soon, something more than necking on the couch was going to happen between them. “I like your uncle just fine.”

“He likes you, too. I can tell.”

“Let’s get these pizzas finished, then we can take Kitsu for a walk.”

“We’re out of jujubes. We’ll have to stop at the store first.”

Annie had a funny feeling she’d forgotten something, then with a start glanced at the clock on the stove and saw it was already four o’clock. “Oops, better report in to our parole officer.” She’d been a lot better about remembering to phone Mark at three-thirty—or thereabouts. Calling in half an hour late was practically on time.

“What?”

“Why don’t you call your uncle and tell him how your day went?”

“Okay.”

She heard Em’s sprightly rendition of her day’s events, then the voice turned accusing. “But you’ve worked late every night this week. Can’t you get home early? Please? I want to show you how smart Kitsu is. We play catch with the rubber squirrel Annie bought him—”

The child turned from the kitchen phone to Annie and rolled her eyes. “Yes. A rubber squirrel.” She sighed. “Okay. See you later. Bye.”

Annie felt her forehead crease. Every night since the one they’d spent kissing on the couch, he’d had to work late. She wished she knew whether it was the conference

keeping him busy, or whether he was trying to avoid her.

This thing between them was driving her crazy. It didn't matter how late he worked, she heard him come in and move around his room late at night. Then she'd imagine him in his bed just a wall away from her. Did he sleep naked? Or was he a pajamas guy? She'd wonder, and then she'd start thinking about how much she wanted to be in the same bed with him.

As little as they'd been together in the past few days, she'd felt his presence every moment he was in the house. Glanced up to find his eyes on her, so deeply blue and smoldering she felt scorched.

And frustrated.

She wasn't like this. She was a normal, uncomplicated woman who liked sex. All this denial was definitely not healthy. He had a door that locked, and she had an escape hatch in the form of a trip to Asia.

A brief, uncomplicated affair was what they both needed. And tonight seemed like a good time to get started.

Once the decision was made, a delicious thrill of anticipation washed over her.

He was the one with the Mountie training, but she was the one about to get her man.

Just as Annie and Emily were leaving the house, the phone rang. Emily answered it. "Hi, Brodie." She listened for a moment then turned to Annie. "Uncle Mark's friend Brodie left his tennis racket here. He's going to play tennis and he wants to come pick it up."

"But we're just leaving."

Emily handed her the phone. "He wants to talk to you."

"Hello?"

"I hear you're beautiful," said the confident masculine voice on the other end.

She laughed. "Have you been talking to my mother?"

"No. To the most serious man in the world. If he says you're beautiful, you are. How 'bout I come round and see for myself?"

Mark had told his friend she was beautiful? She felt the compliment and was more flattered than she cared to admit. His friend was the kind of man she understood. Easy and casual. She knew instinctively he'd never try to tie her down. Quite the opposite, she suspected. Her kind of guy.

But not today. "Sorry, Emily and I are just on our way out."

He cursed softly. "I booked a game for this afternoon and forgot my racket was at Mark's place."

"Why don't I leave it outside the door?"

"It's a very expensive racket."

"I'll hide it behind the juniper bush out front, then," she said, improvising.

He sighed noisily. "I'd rather you gave it to me in person."

She glanced at Em, already waiting by the door, Kitsu on his leash. "Maybe another time."

"You got a date, babe."

"What are you laughing about?" Em wanted to know when Annie put down the receiver.

"Men, honey. Men."

After they found the racket and hid it behind the bush they got into Annie's little car and backed out. Only then did she remember the cursed security gate. Brodie was on his way, and she had no way of getting hold of him. She tapped the steering wheel in frustration, determined not to give up their afternoon outing because of Mark and his security paranoia.

Glancing around the car for inspiration, she noticed she'd left her white trainers in the back. Perfect. After backing the car out past the gate, she grabbed a shoe and hopped out, then wedged it into the gate so it couldn't close completely. The door of Fort Knox was still locked, so there was no way burglars could get in. With a clear conscience she drove to the beach, where they'd never yet seen a squirrel.

While they walked Kitsu, keeping pockets of jujubes handy and a weather eye out for furry-tailed creatures, Annie plotted Mountie seduction.

She didn't own a negligee and somehow disliked the idea of a contrived seduction scene. She finally decided she'd beard the lion in his den, as it were. She'd go knock on his door once he was in bed. She had a strong feeling that would get her man. Especially if she walked in on him in her usual night attire.

Nothing at all.

A brisk wind churned the choppy waves, and dark clouds scudded across the sky, but Kitsu was well behaved, and Em had an idea for a new trick. She wanted to make pencils disappear when she brought Annie to school.

"That's pretty easy," Annie assured her. "We'll need a big handkerchief and a few hours' practice. We can also pluck an eraser from behind your teacher's ear if you want."

They giggled and planned until the first fat drops of rain plopped on their bare heads. "We should have brought an umbrella," Em wailed as the smattering of rain turned into a downpour.

"I don't own an umbrella."

"Uncle Mark does. He has lots."

"Why am I not surprised? Come on, let's run for the car."

"BAD NEWS, M ARK. He's confirmed," said Amanda Kelly, his executive assistant, sighing and leaning into his office.

"The dictator?"

She nodded. Amanda looked as tired as he felt.

"Damn." He rubbed the back of his neck. Security planning for the conference had been going too smoothly. Now they'd have to add extra security for the unpopular dictator whose health had been failing and whom Mark had hoped would stay home. Mentally he began reviewing the extra precautions he'd need to take.

There'd be more political and law-enforcement liaisons to be added to the equation, tighter security all around. His job had just got a lot bigger. "Right. Set up a meeting with—"

He was interrupted by a redheaded, red-faced home security monitor, who brushed past Amanda. "Mark, your home gate's been breached."

He was on his feet and running. His team knew what to do without being told. What he needed to do was get home. An overwhelming fear began to build in his chest as he raced to protect his girls.

While he drove home as fast as he dared, he tried Annie's cell. No answer. His

home phone. The service.

He decided to drive by his house and make a visual assessment of the situation, then he'd put a plan of action together based on what he could see.

He drove by the house, careful not to draw attention to himself by traveling too slowly, and squinted against the ominous gray clouds.

It didn't take long. A familiar running shoe propped the gate open. He slammed on the brakes and began cursing. And put an immediate plan together. Simple and expedient.

Fire the damn nanny.

## 9

"YIPPEE, Uncle Mark's home," squealed Emily as they drove through the gate.

A delicious quiver of anticipation danced in Annie's belly. He'd come home early today of all days. It was like a sign that they were meant to get up close and personal tonight. She had all evening to seduce him in subtle little ways. She could hardly wait to get started.

Even Kitsu was happy. He leaped from the tiny hatchback and jumped and danced toward the front door. He acted more like a puppy and less like a guard dog every day, she was pleased to note.

Checking to make sure her belly ring was in plain view and suddenly not minding so much that her shirt had got plastered to her body by the rain, she followed, wondering who belonged to the red sports car parked beside Mark's SUV and very much hoping the owner wasn't female.

Emily was in the door ahead of her, the dog bounding behind. "Hi, Uncle Mark. Hi, Brodie," she called in her singsong voice.

When she followed Em into the kitchen where two powerfully built men were drinking beer, Annie discovered two things. One, Brodie matched his voice. He was slick, from his groomed mustache to the tennis whites he managed to wear with a rakish air. From his position, lounging against the counter, predatory hazel eyes scanned her openly and shouted, "Come to bed," loud and clear.

The second thing she noticed was that Mark was in a fine temper. His eyes were cold, hard, blue ice chips in a face of stone, the jaw so powerfully clamped she was surprised she couldn't hear his teeth cracking under the strain.

There were dents in the beer can he was gripping—dents just about the size of his fingers—and, far from lounging, he paced until he caught sight of her, then stood rigid as a totem pole and glared at her.

Seemed like her seduction wasn't going to be as easy as she'd planned.

"Hi," she said breezily.

"I see my friend here didn't lie. Hi, beautiful, I'm Brodie." He came forward with a cocky stride and an easy grin. Handshakes weren't usually sexy in her experience, but

he managed to make his a come-on.

Mark reminded her forcibly of a volcano about to blow. “Don’t you have a tennis date?” he asked his friend pointedly.

Brodie gestured with his beer can toward the nearest window, where drops of water splattered the pane. “Rained out. Besides, I wanted to meet Annie.” He shot her a killer grin.

She returned it.

And heard a metallic ding as Mark added another dent to his beer can. “You’ll have to postpone it. I need to talk to Annie.”

“Look, buddy, it’s my fault. I forgot about the gate. How was she supposed to know emergency alarms would go off at mission control?” Brodie asked in a tone that suggested he was repeating himself.

Alarms? Mission control? Oh, no. She’d done it again. With a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach, she conceded that propping Mark’s high-tech security gate open with a shoe probably hadn’t been all that smart. She faced her stone-faced employer. “I’m really sorry. I never thought—”

“That’s exactly the problem. You never do think. You just take off from one irresponsible, harebrained act to another.” His words blasted her like a blowtorch.

“Uncle Mark, she didn’t—”

“Go to your room, Emily. This doesn’t concern you.”

Both females stared at him in shock. He’d never used that tone with his niece before.

“Don’t you yell at Emily!”

“She’s my niece, not yours!” he shouted back.

“You better not do anything mean to Annie,” Emily contributed. And with that she burst into tears and dashed out of the room.

Kitsu, not to be left out, rushed into the fray barking and growling at all of them indiscriminately. Then, catching sight of his rubber squirrel in the corner, he took his frustrations out on that, gripping it fiercely in his teeth and shaking it back and forth, growling ferociously the entire time. Having made his point, he glared at the three adults and trotted after Emily, the mauled and sorry-looking rubber squirrel hanging from his mouth.

“The dog takes that round,” Brodie commented.

Mark glared at him. “Would you take a hike?”

“Uh-uh. I wouldn’t miss this for anything,” Brodie said, lounging once more.

“I don’t see what the big deal is,” Annie said, starting to get seriously steamed. “The doors to the house were all locked.”

Mark took a step toward her, and she fought an impulse to step back. She’d never seen him so mad. “The deal is, one—” he slapped one forefinger against the other “—when you breach the system you compromise everybody’s safety. Two—” he banged his middle finger “—false alarms are expensive and time-consuming. Three—” his ring finger took the strike “—I’ve got a dictator coming to town—”

“To take lessons from you?” she interrupted.

A soft chuckle came from Brodie’s direction. “I think Annie takes that game.”

“Four,” Annie shouted, so angry she felt like throwing things. One bullheaded ex-Mountie, for a start. “You are such a pigheaded, Neanderthal control freak, you can’t

stand to let anybody out of your sight.”

“Set.” Brodie mimed a tennis serve, but the two combatants were so intent on each other, neither paid attention.

“I don’t dare—every time I turn my back you do something stupid.”

“The only stupid thing I ever did was take this job in the first place. Let me remove my harebrained, irresponsible, *stupid* self from your presence. I quit.”

She grabbed her leather bag and stormed blindly toward the door. She heard Brodie’s voice like a sports announcer’s. “And match!”

“Where do you think you’re going?” She heard Mark stomping behind her and swung around. But before she could launch another verbal assault, Brodie was there taking her arm.

“She’s coming for dinner with me.”

She opened her mouth to refuse, then heard Mark say, “Oh, no she’s not.”

She gave Brodie her most dazzling smile. “Thanks, I’d love to.”

HE PACED the house like a caged beast. He was going to fire her.

How dare she quit on him?

And as for that Brodie... When he got his hands on his former friend the man was going to be sorry he was ever born. Only Emily being in the house stopped Mark from jumping in his vehicle to go after his former nanny and his former friend.

Instead he was stuck at home, cursing and waiting, knowing she’d probably end up in Brodie’s arms for the night while Mark was the one who’d been aching for her ever since the moment he saw her. Maybe he was a Neanderthal, but if Brodie laid so much as one finger on her, he’d...well he’d think of something.

He made his peace with Emily, assuring her Annie would be back soon and hoping beyond hope he was right.

Then he went back to pacing. It was stupid to torture himself this way. He should start planning for the dictator’s arrival at the conference. He should do some paperwork.

Work out.

Get some sleep.

Still, he paced. And wished he hadn’t gone off the deep end. It was just that he’d been so damned worried. And scared that something had happened to them.

For the hundredth time he peered into the night. Her car was still there, so she’d have to come back sometime. He really didn’t want it to be tomorrow morning, in Brodie’s passenger seat.

She was right. He did worry too much. And she was responsible in her own way, he had to admit. He shouldn’t have lost his cool. When she came back, he’d apologize.

Around midnight he gave up and had a long, hot shower, hoping to ease some of his tension. Then he shaved. He didn’t stop to ask himself why. As he was drying off, he heard a car engine. A loud, in-your-face sports car engine. He knew that sound.

Bolting naked to the window, he was in time to see the passenger door of the red car open. The indoor light came on, spotlighting what happened next.

Brodie said something, and she turned to him. Even from this distance Mark recognized the sweet smile she turned on his old buddy. She shook her head, then leaned forward and brushed Brodie’s lips with hers before getting out and shutting the car door behind her.



He had his bathrobe on in seconds and pounded down the stairs tying the belt.

By the time he got the door open she'd reached her car, and Brodie was long gone. The fact that her car was her destination, rather than his house, infuriated him all over again. He stomped up to her. "Going to Brodie's place?"

"None of your business."

"You didn't get enough? Mauling each other in his car like a couple of teenagers?" What he'd seen had been a chaste peck, nothing more, and he knew it. But damn if she was getting away before they'd finished the fight they had started.

At first, he thought she wasn't going to answer, then she turned to face him, and her green eyes caught the light of the moon, dazzling him. "Jealous?" she whispered in a voice that taunted even as it thrilled him. Her lips were soft and full, pursed in a sassy way.

"Damn right I'm jealous." He didn't even think, just grabbed her to him tight and kissed her like there was no tomorrow.

She gave a little whimpery sigh against his lips and then wrapped herself around him.

He thrust his tongue deeply, possessively into her mouth, and she licked up and down its length with her own, making him weak in the knees with the power of his desire.

"I'm sorry," he whispered when he came up for air.

"I'm sorry," she gasped in answer, and then they were kissing again.

Cool air currents eddied around them while the heat between them built. Then he felt cool air where it had no business being. She'd taken him in her hands beneath the parted robe.

He groaned helplessly as she touched and caressed him, knowing he had about three seconds of conscious thought left before instinct and desire took over completely.

They'd never make it upstairs, their need was too urgent, but neither would he risk even the remotest chance that Em might look out her window and see them. Annie was leaning against her little car, which wouldn't fit a pair of mating chipmunks, never mind two grown adults.

But his Jeep would.

He grabbed her hands and led her to his vehicle, found the spare key in its magnetized box and opened the back door.

He thought she might balk. Instead she swiftly stripped off her shorts, leaving her in nothing but a cropped, tight T-shirt and one of those thong things by way of underwear. He damn near lost it right there.

But the thing he needed most was upstairs in his bedside table. With a silent groan, he leaned his head on the door frame, which only gave him a better view of Annie, all eager for him in the back seat, the little jewel in her navel winking at him.

Then he remembered. "Your bag. Where's your bag?"

"I don't know. I dropped it, I think."

He found it in seconds on the ground beside her car. Rummaging through, he gave a silent crow of triumph. The open box of condoms was still there. He stuck them in his pocket.

He eased into the back seat, then shut the door with the quietest of clicks, plunging them into darkness. In his haste, he banged his elbow on a headrest, and his

knee got tangled up in his bathrobe.

"I'm too old for this," he grumbled, groping around until he found her breasts. "Or not."

She chuckled softly. "Not too old, but definitely too big. You're squishing me."

With more grunting and shuffling and bumping of body parts, which only inflamed them more, they found a better position, sitting facing each other. Ignoring his cramped knees, he reached out and touched the soft flesh of her thighs.

With a little whimper, she opened her legs to him.

He made her wait just a little bit while he savored the soft tenderness of the inside of her thighs inch by soft, sweet inch, until at last he reached higher and cupped the crisp warmth of her nest of curls.

Even as she sighed against him, his hand stalled. "What happened to your underpants?"

"They melted," she whispered.

When he cupped the moist heat of her, he almost believed it. Beneath his middle finger he felt the slick wetness that told him she was as excited as he. Unable to stop himself, he slid that finger slowly deeper, letting her suck him in like hot quicksand.

Her head fell back, and her hips arched against him. She was so slick and so very hot. Crazy little sounds were coming from her lips, and deep within her he could feel a trembling begin. He plunged a second finger into her, and just like that she shattered.

He leaned toward her, wanting to taste her.

"Wait. Wait," Annie panted, pulling back.

He gazed at her dumbly, knowing he'd gone too far to stop now. She'd have to really, really want to call a halt before he'd give up on what they'd started, and one glance at her heated cheeks and drugged-looking eyes was enough to confirm that she didn't want to stop any more than he did.

What she wanted, he soon discovered, was to take control.

And he was happy to let her.

She straddled him, grunting when she hit her head on the roof, then dug into his pocket and efficiently sheathed him, turning it into a caress that left him burning for her.

She didn't make him wait long, but spread herself over him and slowly eased him into her. He felt the slight pull as she closed around him, so tight, so hot.

He wanted to plunge and thrust wildly, but he held himself rigidly still until she was ready.

"You are so big," she gasped once she held him completely inside her.

"I'm sorry," he said, contrite. "I should have warned you."

She giggled happily. "It's okay. Really."

Then she started moving, and he stopped thinking. And pretty soon he lost all control and plunged and thrust while she rode him until they both cried out and slumped against each other, spent and gasping.

He patted the leather seat beneath them. "Good thing this baby's got four-wheel drive. That was some wild ride."

NOW THAT the first urgency was spent, they had time to go more slowly. But he'd had enough of the cramped back seat.

He dropped a kiss on her tousled hair. "Let's go to my room."

"But Emily might—"

"The door locks. Come on."

While she scrambled into her panties and shorts, he tied his bathrobe, returned the condoms to her bag and locked both their vehicles.

Then they crept into the house and up to his bedroom, pausing outside Em's room just long enough to confirm the regular, even breathing of a child's deep sleep.

Once inside his bedroom, he flicked on the bedside lamp, and she looked around her with obvious interest. "It's nice. Different than I expected. More..."

He watched her eyes scan the Scandinavian decor he'd liked so much he hadn't bothered changing it when he bought the house. Instead he'd purchased pale wood furniture of sleek Danish design to match. "More what?"

"Sexy, I guess."

"Haven't you seen it before?"

"No. I was curious. But I didn't want to pry."

He liked that. That she'd stayed out of his room. She had a lot of class, this crazy clown with the bra phobia. And speaking of bra phobia, he caught the outline of her breasts against the thin cotton of her little shirt, and his libido roared back even stronger than before as he studied the round swell of breast, the peak jutting teasingly forward. His fingers utterly ached to take that tiny peak, and its twin, well in hand.

He shut the door with a click, leaning behind him to lock it securely.

Her eyes widened when she saw what he was doing, and for a second he thought she'd flee. "I'm not used to locked doors." Then she seemed to pull herself together and smiled her tempting smile.

Leaning against the door, he watched her flit around the room, picking up his aftershave, uncapping and sniffing. Turning the security industry magazine he kept at his bedside toward her so she could read the headlines, then grimacing. He could tell her he'd been reading the dullest thing he could find trying to bore himself to sleep when only a wall separated them and he'd been driving himself crazy with images of her naked in that bed next door.

But he didn't. He let her take her time, her hands lighting on his things and passing on, almost like swift caresses. In some women it would be nervousness making them act this way, but it wasn't that with Annie. He felt she was using the opportunity to get to know him better, as though his things gave away secrets to his personality. Which, come to think of it, they probably did. He tried to see his room through her eyes and figured he'd seem as dull as she already thought he was.

Still, she was here with him. And she hadn't come to his room to show him her new juggling trick.

As soon as the tour of his room ended, he planned to prove to her that he had a few tricks of his own.

The way she touched his things was a kind of slow teasing. He was getting turned on seeing her run a finger over his hairbrush. And something tingling in the air between them told him she was getting turned on, too. They'd taken the edge off, but both knew what was going to happen between them—and she'd chosen to draw out the waiting.

"What's this?" she asked softly, reaching for a wooden frame half hidden behind a lamp on his dresser.

"Nothing," he said, grabbing for it.

She batted his hands away as a big grin split her face. Pressing the photograph to her chest, she raised her eyes skyward and cooed, "My hero."

He felt an unaccustomed heat mount his cheeks. He'd been so young in that photo, so proud of his new RCMP dress uniform. He should pack the infernal thing away in a box somewhere.

She gazed at the picture, then at him, then at the photo. "If you ever want to render me completely helpless, a love slave to your every desire, just put this thing on." He thought she was joking until he realized her breathing was getting jerky. Her finger traced his outline in the photograph. "Those jodhpurs. That hat. The sexy red jacket. Those boots." She practically moaned. "Especially those boots."

She began to sing softly, "When I'm calling youooo-ooo..."

He'd had enough of the teasing. "You watch too much TV," he informed her, advancing purposefully. He took the picture firmly from her hands and placed it on the bedside table, then reached for her shirt.

She shot him a perky, provocative glance.

He'd barely been able to see anything in the car. He wanted to see all of her. Taste her, touch her everywhere. Swiftly he pulled the shirt over her head.

As he'd already divined, she wasn't wearing a bra. Two of the most gloriously perfect breasts it had ever been his privilege to see taunted his gaze. Small but firm, they were as perky as her attitude, and as sexy. He leaned in for a kiss, saw her mouth purse to say something and changed direction, moving south to her breast.

She didn't talk, she sang. "Will you answer too...ooh..."

Her voice petered out in a sigh, and he sucked a little harder at the perfect berry in his mouth. A faint scent of jasmine hovered between her breasts as he tongued his way from one peak to the other.

The beauty of a woman who wore so little clothing, he soon realized, was how quickly he could strip her naked. A little yank, and the shorts and thong came off in one motion.

He gazed at her slowly, taking in her beauty leisurely, allowing himself only to look, not to touch—not yet.

Apart from looking both delectable and aroused, she appeared...happy. He'd been with women who dived under the covers and only made love in pitch darkness and those who were coy and provocative when naked, but he never recalled seeing a woman just so darned happy to shed her clothes.

"What are you grinning about?" she challenged him.

"You. You seem to like being naked."

"Mmm, I do." She opened her arms wide and fell backward onto the bed where she shifted luxuriously, her skin pearly against the navy bedspread. "I feel so free and unrestricted when I'm naked. I should belong to a nudist colony."

“Might be kind of cold in a Canadian winter,” he suggested, then grinned. “Course, I’d be happy to warm you up...anytime.”

While he talked he dropped his robe and tried to be equally comfortable in his naked skin while she lay there, inspecting him with unabashed concentration.

HE WAS even more gorgeous out of his clothes than he was in them, Annie mused, letting her gaze travel from his broad shoulders and muscular, hair-sprinkled chest to the flat belly and finally lower.

“Mmm.” She almost purred at the proudly upstanding erection. If she didn’t know better, she’d swear he’d been lifting weights with that baby, it seemed so toned and muscular.

His thighs were a little thicker than average, bulging faintly with muscle. He could probably stop a speeding train with that body, she mused.

Her breasts felt tingly and amazingly sensitized from where he’d sucked at them. They were still faintly damp, and the air caressed them, reminding her of how exciting his touch had been. The sex in his car had been intense and mind-blowing. Now she wanted to take time getting to the main event. She was curiously lazy, prolonging each moment of waiting, loving being here with this very special man.

A flutter of unease crossed her belly. It felt almost like fear, but even as she named the emotion it was gone, and she knew it was ridiculous. She had nothing to fear from her gentle Mountie. It was normal that a healthy, unattached male and female living in the same house would start getting attracted to each other. This was the perfect way to let off a little steam.

He sank to the mattress beside her and ran his fingers over her face in a gesture full of tenderness. She wasn’t looking for tenderness or anything that smacked of deeper feelings, the kind that might get hurt when she said goodbye.

That fluttery, scary feeling returned, even stronger, as a surge of answering tenderness filled her being. Determined to change the mood, she tilted her face, captured a finger in her mouth and bit softly, then started teasing it with her tongue.

He removed his hand and replaced it with his mouth. Just the feel of those strong but soft lips on hers had her melting into him. Warm and hair-rough, his skin rubbed against her while she wrapped herself around him like a vine.

The kiss built from light pressure to a hot, deep mating of tongues. Everywhere their flesh touched she burned, but most especially the soft place between her thighs where his erection naturally seemed to rub back and forth.

It was building up almost too fast. She felt frighteningly out of control and yet achingly empty. She nudged her hips forward, needing him inside her.

But he made her wait. “Not yet,” he whispered, shifting away. Instead he moved his mouth downward. He took about a thousand years getting to her breasts, so long did he spend kissing and nuzzling her neck. Her breasts got another eon of attention, bathed by his teasing tongue while the tormenting heat built and tortured her.

He didn’t seem clued in to how much she needed him right this second. Every time she tried to remind him in subtle little ways, like trying to roll on top of him, he pushed her right back where he wanted her and then, if anything, seemed to go even slower.

The man was completely maddening. She was so frustrated she wanted to scream.

At last he finished with her breasts and moved down—all the way to her ribs.

She wriggled her hips around a little, in case he needed a hint, and she felt him smile against her burning skin. He was torturing her deliberately!

She gasped, “You are going to pay for this.”

Another millennium passed while he kissed and licked every inch of her belly, taking extra time around the belly ring. “I can’t believe how much this thing turns me on,” he admitted.

He shifted away, and she heard the bedside drawer slide open and then the rustling that told her he was protecting her, as usual.

Yeah. Finally.

But not so. He parted her thighs wide and settled himself between them. Then he parted her most intimate place with his thumbs and gazed at her. He was so close she could feel his breath wafting across the burning, needy core of her.

She couldn’t take much more of this. She grasped the bedcovers on either side. “Please,” she begged.

Then his tongue was on her, and she thought she would die right then and there from the intensity of sensation. She was somewhere outside herself, able to hear her sobbing cries and the ragged panting that passed for breathing but helpless—her body belonged to him and he played her like a symphony.

When she was certain she could take no more, he raised himself above her and thrust home, hard and deep. Nobody had ever filled her so completely.

He didn’t close his eyes. They stayed open, gazing right into hers. And because he didn’t, she wouldn’t. So they stared into each other’s eyes while he entered her fully. The fear was back, along with a new emotion so warm she wanted to cry.

She reached up, planning to cup her hand around the back of his head and pull him down to kiss him, but he caught her hand in his and brought it to his lips. She watched the gesture, shocked to notice that her fingers were trembling.

Just as his body penetrated hers, so did he seem to be forcing some kind of penetration into her mind and heart as he was watching her. And she was staring right back, fascinated by the way the black pupils dilated into the blue, blue iris. Iris was exactly the right color, she mused dazedly. His eyes were the smoky blue of the Siberian irises her grandmother used to grow. Old-fashioned plants with great staying power.

A faint sheen of sweat on his forehead told her he wasn’t as in control as he was pretending.

“Annie, I—”

She grabbed his head and planted her lips over his, arching her hips at the same time. A little growl rumbled against her mouth, and then he plunged into her again and again, letting go of all that control.

He was so hard, and filled her so completely, she felt her body clinging to him with each wet slide, arching even as he pounded down. The trembling had spread from her fingers to her entire body. Wordless sounds of pleasure and need filled the air, hers soft and high, his low and rumbling.

It was too much. Her heart was hammering so hard she felt as if she couldn’t breathe fast enough to keep up. She was panting, reaching up, up, up... And then a swamping great wave came under her and lifted her high on its crest. Wave after wave rocked her very soul while she clung to Mark, who rode with her all the way.

The waves continued, ebbing until she was deposited lightly back to earth.

It wasn't just physical. An equally powerful wave of emotion filled her eyes as she lay with her head against his shoulder, watching the sweat-dampened hair rise and fall as his breathing slowly quieted.

She blinked back the tears, refusing to give a name to the emotion that flooded her.

## 11

ANNIE AWOKE with a start, heart pounding.

For a second she was completely disoriented. All she knew was she couldn't move, trapped by warm bonds that imprisoned her so she could barely breathe.

Shaking herself fully awake, she remembered.

A smile curved her lips. She was on her side, tucked into Mark's body, his arms wrapped around her possessively.

Much too possessively. With a jerk, she pulled herself away.

He grunted in his sleep, rolling forward until he was in the spot she'd vacated and she was teetering precariously on the edge of the mattress.

What had they done? What on earth had she been thinking? Mark wasn't a man a girl could have a few laughs with and move on. He was a protector, a possessor, a... There must be at least one more P word that would describe the sense of claustrophobia he induced. He was a—an prisoner. That was close enough.

And Emily. What would Emily think if the nanny rolled out of her uncle's room in the morning?

A squint at the clock told her it wasn't even dawn yet. Carefully, she eased out of the bed and gathered her clothes. She crept in the general direction of the door and after some silent detective work finally located it.

In less than a minute she was in her own room, in her own bed. Alone.

She found she was trembling.

It must be colder in her room.

"HI, GIRLS." The deep voice sent quivers of longing into the depth of Annie's very being. She checked the lentil casserole one more time, hoping the heat from the oven would explain the heat in her cheeks, then turned with what she hoped was her usual cheery employee-to-employer expression.

Unfortunately, he wasn't playing by the same rules. The expression he gave her was intimate and tantalizing. He came so close she thought he was going to kiss her.

She jerked her head Emily's way in warning. "Tell Uncle Mark about your day, Em," she said.

*Later*, his expression promised, setting off an urgent throbbing in her most sensitive areas.

Mark laughed when the child demonstrated the disappearing pencil trick she'd mastered, a carefree chuckle that brought a smile to Annie's face. When had he started to change from the stiff-rumped excop? She wasn't sure, but she had a feeling last night was a part of it.

Strangely, last night had the opposite effect on her. Where she'd been carefree before, now she felt tense. Like a trap was closing in, and she had to bolt before it was too late.

They'd miss her at first, but after she was gone, they'd continue, a healed and better family. She sighed at her usefulness to these two people she'd come to care for, feeling like an angel from TV who fixes a problem then flits away to a new situation next week.

Angel Annie. Had a nice ring to it.

They ate dinner, and nobody whined about lentils. Mark pretended he didn't know Kitsu was watching them like a hawk, not in case some crazed drug dealer crashed their family dinner, but in case a stray tidbit should fall from a plate.

It had become so much a routine that after dinner Emily would go upstairs to practice her violin and do her homework and Annie and Mark would do the dishes together that Annie didn't know how to get out of it without appearing to be avoiding him.

As soon as Em was out of the room, she jumped up and started gathering things off the table, anxious to avoid the intimacy of a tête-à-tête.

It was a useless plan.

"I thought about you all day," Mark growled against the back of her neck.

Darn it all, didn't he know that was probably the third most erogenous spot on her whole body? The whisper of his voice sent tingles all the way down her spine in some sort of biochemical ambush, igniting tiny flames in the top two erogenous zones. Carefully, she put the dishes on the counter before she dropped them.

By that time, he'd taken shameless advantage of the fact that her hands were too full to bat him away and he'd slipped his hand under her cotton sweater. "Do you think Emily's asleep yet?" he whispered in her ear.

"It's six forty-five. I doubt it," she whispered back, her voice husky.

His hands were caressing her breasts, and she could barely think clearly. She had a vague idea she should stop him, but she'd forgotten why.

"My office door locks," he suggested.

She wished he'd stop whispering in her ear like that. It sent more shivers through her body. They could have a lot of fun in his office with the door locked. She forbade herself to even think about how much fun. "We should do the dishes first."

"When did you get so concerned about housework?"

"When did you get so irresponsible?"

"You must be rubbing off on me."

Since his hands were currently rubbing her nipples, she groaned loudly at the horrible pun. She yanked his hands from under her top and thrust a dishcloth at him. "Here. Find something more useful to do."

He gave in good-naturedly, turning on the tap and squirting dish-washing liquid into the sink. Over the noise of running water he said, "I wanted to talk to you, anyway."

"You did?" She was always the one who used those ominous words, *We have to*



talk. They always led into the goodbye speech. Surely he wasn't giving her the goodbye speech? After just one night?

"I always take Em on vacation during the summer holidays. It's getting late, and I've got to book something. I want...I mean, would you like to come with us?"

She felt a curious sensation, as if she were an over-filled balloon and the air was slowly leaking out of her. She fixed all her concentration on the green dish she was drying.

"But, ah, Bea will be back soon."

"I'm not asking you to come as Em's nanny, but as a, well, a friend."

"You mean like a girlfriend?" The words echoed strangely in her chest.

"You're going to rub the glaze right off that plate."

Realizing she was still polishing the same plate she'd started with, she carefully put it down. A glance showed his face wore that earnest, tender expression that scared the pants off her.

"Girlfriend...I guess so. I mean my girlfriend, not Emily's."

*Girlfriend* was one of those terms, like *retirement planning*, that gave her the willies. And yet, even as one part of her shied away in horror, another part was strangely attracted to the idea. A family vacation. She could pretend they were a real family. They'd play all day, and at night she and Mark...

"Where would I sleep?"

"With me."

"But what about—"

"Emily loves you, Annie. This is just a chance for us to have some fun together. Nobody's asking you for forever."

She flinched. There was another word she hated. *Forever*. As in, to have and to hold, forever... A couple of weeks would be just a little taste of forever. If it was only Mark, she might have said yes. But Emily was already getting attached. It wasn't fair to raise the child's expectations when Annie couldn't meet them.

Reluctantly, she shook her head, knowing she had to be strong enough to do the right thing for all of them. "I already have holiday plans. I'm going to Asia."

"Yes. I know. Couldn't you put it off for a couple more weeks?"

Of course she could. She could put it off permanently if she felt like it. They both knew that. But that trip was her escape hatch out of a situation that was starting to feel way too serious.

She sighed. It was the great sex that had got her into this horrible emotional tangle. Yesterday, Mark hadn't been asking her to go on vacation. He'd been accusing her of being a harebrained ninny incapable of looking after one eight-year-old girl. Today he used words like *girlfriend*. Why couldn't he get it through his thick head that she didn't want strings attached to this relationship?

All she wanted was the great sex.

And yet, it was that sense of connection that made the sex so great. *Not sex, making love*, a little voice whispered. And *love* was the scariest of all the scary words.

Her silence had stretched so long that Mark had gone back to washing the dishes. He was stacking them neatly in the space-age stainless-steel drainer. The dishes stood pale green and glistening with water while she stood there stupidly trying to decide what to do.

“I don’t think so. I really need to get going to Asia.”

“I understand.” He glanced up with an expression of pain and resignation on his face, and she had a horrible feeling he did understand. A lot more than she wanted him to.

They continued the dishes in a kind of awkward, stilted way, their conversation sounding like bad dialogue. When they were done he didn’t say another word, just headed down the hall to his office.

And he didn’t invite her to join him.

It looked suspiciously as if she’d just had the shortest affair of her life.

MARK STRETCHED a cramped biceps and yawned as he approached the kitchen. He knew he was overdoing his workouts, but the basement gym was his refuge when he started thinking too much about Annie and how she was sleeping on the other side of the wall from his bedroom.

If she’d stay in her clown costume all the time it wouldn’t be so bad. Like yesterday, when she and Emily had gone off hand-in-hand, big clown and little clown, to Em’s school. Who got erotic fantasies about a woman in size nineteen polka-dot shoes and a baggy clown costume?

Well...he did.

It didn’t seem to matter what she wore, or didn’t wear. He wanted that clown and he wanted her bad.

If he hadn’t botched it so badly the other night, he’d be having her, too. What in blazes had possessed him to invite her on holiday? You didn’t need to be Freud to figure the lady had some kind of commitment phobia.

One night of heaven had been his. Just one glorious night. He knew he’d remember that night until the day he died. And it wasn’t just him feeling as if he’d found the other piece of himself. He was almost certain of that. Annie had felt something, too.

And that scared her.

It wasn’t as if he’d gone down on his knee with an engagement ring in his hand and asked her for a lifetime commitment. It was two weeks in a cabin somewhere, maybe on a lake, where they could hike or fish or go horseback riding.

But, apparently, even a couple of weeks was too much to ask. Those polka-dot shoes were ready to walk out on him and Em, and just keep on walking.

He hadn’t asked for forever, but somehow, the fact that she couldn’t even contemplate being with him a few weeks had soured him on the whole affair. To hell with it.

So, night after night, he punished his body, trying to exhaust himself so he could get some sleep. He couldn’t take much more of this. Walking down the stairs, he stifled a groan. He’d really overdone it last night. No matter how many pounds he bench-pressed, he couldn’t push away the image of Annie naked in his bed.

Even though she was the magician, not him, he felt as if he’d conjured her up when he entered the kitchen and saw her there. His bad mood vanished when he caught sight of her short shorts riding up her thighs. She was leaning over, trying to choose between three bags of coffee.

Plain old Colombian worked just fine for him, but she kept bringing home bags of exotic beans. He wasn’t sure if she was drawn more to the colorful packaging or the name of the blend. Anything with a faraway country in the name seemed to appeal to her,

he'd noted, as did anything with an extraordinary bird or plant in the name.

At the moment she appeared torn between three varieties. "Paraguay Parrot, Rain Forest Mocha, Kenyan Sunrise," she mused aloud, in an eenie, meeny, miny, moe voice, her back still to him.

Her small hand flitted from one to the other until he watched her shoulders shrug and she opened all three, pouring a liberal number of beans from each bag into the grinder. She pushed the button, and the mechanical whirl filled the air along with the aroma that made getting out of bed worthwhile.

A few coffee beans had spilled on the counter. She picked them up, contemplated them, then started juggling them. He loved watching her. She was the only woman he knew who could make brewing coffee a game. She was completely absorbed in tossing and catching the beans in some complicated arrangement. Her pink tongue teased her upper lip as she concentrated, and he felt a rush of heat roar through his bloodstream.

Of course, she'd forgotten all about the coffee grinding itself into dust. In a couple of strides he'd crossed to the machine and pushed the button.

As quiet suddenly descended, she gave a startled, "Oh," and glanced his way.

Beans rained to the floor, rattling like hailstones in the sudden silence.

Their gazes locked.

He took a slow, deliberate step toward her, wanting to run his fingers through her sleep-tousled hair, kiss the soft lips. Under his gaze, her nipples came to attention beneath her shirt, resembling the size and shape of those foolish coffee beans she'd been juggling.

She swallowed. "I thought you'd be working today." She sounded as if she wished he were gone.

"It's Saturday," he reminded her. "We could both use a day off."

"But the conference—I thought—"

"The dictator had a heart attack yesterday. Not life-threatening, but enough to keep him at home. My job just got easier again."

"That's great news. I'll just, um..."

"Have your coffee first," he said and clomped down the hall to his office. She was so skittish all of a sudden and so obviously didn't want him around that he felt as sulky as a bear. And not just any bear. A big, mean grizzly. He would have liked to stomp through the woods roaring for a while, scaring small animals. That's the kind of mood Annie put him in. He knew she was just scared of her feelings, but it didn't make her deliberate avoidance of him any easier to take.

With a sigh, he dumped himself in his chair and sorted through yesterday's mail.

What was Bea writing to him for? Mark wondered as he slit the envelope. He hoped she wasn't quitting on him. With Annie due to leave, he couldn't face finding yet another nanny for Em.

Puzzled, he found a short printed letter on plain white paper, the kind he used in his computer, with a yellow Post-it note attached. "You'd better read this," said the note, and Bea had scrawled her name.

He opened the letter fully and read.

Dear Bea,  
How are you?  
I am fine.

I hope you are feeling beter now.  
We have a new nanny. Her name is Annie and she and me are geting married. Emily is being a bridesmaid. She might wear a blue dress, or maybe green. But NOT pink.  
Anyhow. We don't need you to be our nanny any-moor.  
Your friend,  
Mark Saunders

Dropping his head into his hands, he groaned. That's what the get-well card was all about. Emily had found a way to get Bea's address and a stamp in an elaborate plot to get rid of the housekeeper, thereby making Annie stay. It would be a cute childish prank if it wasn't so damned sad.

In her innocent way, Emily wanted everything to work out like magic. Like one of Annie's crazy tricks where she could wave her magic wand and poof, they'd be a family. Poor Emily couldn't have picked a worse person on whom to pin a mother fixation. Annie couldn't commit to a two-week holiday. How the hell could she ever be a mother? Or a wife?

A little spurt of excitement jabbed his gut at the thought of Annie as his wife. Annie being there every day with her clown pizzas, juggling coffee beans. Annie who made life a game. And yet, for all his reservations, she'd proven to be a reliable companion to Emily.

Okay, so she didn't phone in on time, if at all. He knew she'd do whatever she had to do to keep Emily safe. And she was giving the child something she hadn't had in a while. Fun.

Annie had given *him* fun, too. Not only the roll-in-the-hay kind, but the everyday fun of being alive. Of wondering what she'd say and do next. It might be outrageous, but it would never be mean-spirited or unkind. He glanced at the letter.

Em had a dream, and he'd do his damndest to make it happen. Besides, he could think of worse things than being married to Annie.

She might pretend the other night meant nothing, but he knew better. He'd read the truth in her eyes, felt it in her body. He meant something to her. And so did Em. He wasn't sure how much they meant, but he intended to find out.

Still gripping the letter, he stood.

He found Annie in the family room with a steaming cup of coffee at her side and Walkman headphones stuffed in her ears, maniacally spewing out Japanese phrases in the most execrable accent he'd ever heard.

With a frown of fierce concentration, she barked at the towels she was folding. He translated as best he could, lounging in the doorway, watching. The monologue went, "How are you?" Pause while she listened to the tape, a frown of complete concentration on her face, eyes almost shut. "I am fine. Where are the violets?" That couldn't be right. He watched her do some complicated jaw exercise and rewind the tape. "Where are the toilets."

*Aah.*

"How much...? Too much."

She was really getting into it, he noted. Once more she reversed the tape. "How much?" she asked the blue towel.

Her lips pinched in horrified disapproval. She shook her finger at the red towel.

“Too much! Can you please tell me where is the telephone?” The laundry basket didn’t seem to know, so she moved to the next conversational gem. “My name is...Annie.”

He crept across the room and slipped behind her. Based on what he’d heard so far, he could make an educated guess at what was coming next.

“What is your name?” she asked slowly, her accent improving marginally.

He pulled the earphones from her head.

She jumped, and her head swiveled to look at him.

“My name is Mark,” he whispered in her ear.

She shivered.

If she hadn’t shivered, he would have left it at that. But she had, in a full-body quiver that told him everything he wanted to know about how very aware of him she was. That shiver wasn’t about being cold, it was about being hot. About sex. He nibbled her ear. Made a few suggestions in Japanese that had nothing to do with the price of sushi in Tokyo.

She tipped her head back, regarding him suspiciously. “I understood almost nothing. I think I caught the word ‘bed’ and something that sounded edible.”

He grinned wickedly. “I have a big appetite.”

Green eyes assessed him, as sexy upside down as they were every other way. Suspicion on the surface, with a sparkling interest deeper down. “Why do I think you’re not inviting me out for dinner?”

“I am.” He was surprised to hear the words come out of his mouth. *Duh*. What an idiot! He’d never even invited her out for a real date.

They’d gone from a working relationship to sex to him asking her on summer holidays. He’d completely screwed up the dating road map. Instead of traveling in some orderly sequence he’d taken them on a wild detour. He’d forgotten to ask her for a simple date. No wonder they were so far apart. “I’m asking you out for a date. Dinner and a movie.”

“A date?” A tiny frown formed between her eyes. “Why?”

How the hell did he know why? The offer had popped out of his mouth before he’d thought it through. Very uncharacteristic behavior. Mildly disturbing. Why? Lots of vague ideas swirled around in his head, but he couldn’t grasp anything concrete. He went with something innocuous. “I want to spend some more time with you.”

She lifted her head, picked up another towel from the basket and started folding it. Not very precisely. You could take an entire geometry lesson based on the shapes she’d managed to create in folded towels. “We eat dinner together every night.”

He walked round her and grabbed another towel out of the basket. “Not in Japanese.”

“Huh?”

“We’ll go to a Japanese restaurant. You can order our meal.”

“Really?”

“Sure.” He gestured to the tape machine. “Then you can ask where the bathroom is, tell them your name and complain that it costs too much.”

She shot him a tiny smile, then concentrated on the current parallelogram she was folding. “I just booked my ticket. For Asia.”

He felt as if he’d been punched in the solar plexus. Too winded to speak, he nodded stupidly.

“I leave in two weeks. Your conference will be over by then, and Bea will be better.” She wouldn’t even glance at him. Her words came, low and quickly, while she fiddled with the towel. “I’ve just got one big commitment—a show at the Vancouver Beach Festival next week—then I’ll be off.”

It wasn’t easy to assume a casual tone when he wanted to throw her down on the towels and prove to her just how right they were together, how she should at least give this thing a chance instead of running away. But he managed it. “Then this can be a thank-you dinner, for all you’ve done for us. Next Saturday, after your show.”

“What about Emily?” She glanced up then, and he had the impression she was disappointed he hadn’t tried to argue her out of going.

“Bea can look after her.” He was winging it, but it seemed like a good idea for Emily and Bea to spend some time together. Em had a few things she needed to clear up.

And speaking of Bea, he had her letter still in his hand. He handed the letter to Annie and watched her face crumple when she finished it.

She didn’t say a word, just bolted off the couch and ran up the stairs.

“EMILY?”

Silence.

“Emily?” She knocked on the child’s door, knowing full well she was being ignored. She counted to five then walked in to find Emily curled on her pink and white frilly bed, the ragged lion clutched in her hand. A book was stuck in front of her face, but given that it was upside down, Annie made an educated guess Emily hadn’t been reading it.

“I’m quite busy.” The little twerp could sound as formal and distancing as her uncle Mark when she wanted to. Annie wanted to sigh. Didn’t they have a clue that this was hard for her, too? She caught a glimpse of the woebegone face behind the book, and her throat started to ache. She was no good for them. Why couldn’t they see that? She was a clown, a wanderer, a free spirit. She wasn’t cut out for the domestic scene.

She knew Mark had talked to Emily earlier in the day, and ever since Annie had suffered the silent treatment.

She wasn’t walking out of Emily’s life forever. She needed to make sure Em understood that. She sighed, a big noisy dramatic sigh that finally got the girl’s attention.

Emily’s eyes widened when she saw the object in Annie’s hand.

“Emily, I want to ask you a big favor. I can’t take Guinevere Get-Out-of-Here with me. She’s feeling really sad right now.” She nudged the wig so it drooped over the hanger and onto the chest piece of the child-size clown costume Emily had worn at her birthday party.

Emily stared at her.

She sat on the edge of the bed, and Emily immediately scuttled back against the headboard and pulled her knees to her chest. “You see, Guinevere hates it when I leave her. She thinks I’m never coming back. I thought maybe if I left her with you, maybe hanging in your closet, you could comfort her when she gets sad and remind her that I’m coming back in just a couple of months.”

“But you won’t be staying.”

OF COURSE, it had to be the hottest day of the year.

But then it always seemed like the hottest day of the year when Annie donned her complete clown getup. It might not have been so bad if she hadn't spent the past couple of weeks living in tank-tops and shorts, her feet either bare or in nothing heavier than strappy sandals.

Out in English Bay a boat tooted its horn in a long, loud wail. There were crowds of them out there, but nothing compared to the crowds of people squatting on grass patches, ambling the paved sea walk and lounging on blankets. The well-prepared had brought along picnic baskets and coolers. Those who hadn't brought food and drink were tempted by the sizzle of grilling hot dogs, the odor of popcorn and the tinkling music of the ice-cream vendors.

It was summer, it was a festival and it was crowded.

In spite of the carnival atmosphere and the enormous smile painted on her face, Annie's heart was leaden.

In two days she'd be on her way.

She should wow some of the many Asians in the crowd with her phrasebook knowledge of Japanese, Cantonese and Mandarin. But she couldn't work up the enthusiasm. She'd be using it for real in a couple of days anyhow. What was the point?

She flipped back the orange and purple double frill of her cuff and glanced at her watch. Fifteen minutes till she was on.

Fifteen short minutes to turn one grumpy, depressed and sorry-for-herself clown into a laugh-a-minute magical trickster clown.

She wasn't sure she had that much magic in stock.

She schlepped through the crowd, her ginormous shoes slapping the ground and occasionally getting nailed to the pavement by somebody's foot as she made her sorry way to the big tent. The Celtic fiddling group was hitting the home stretch, and the toe-tapping music had drawn a huge hooting and yahooing crowd. A few flamboyant souls were doing what looked like their own private version of Riverdance.

Silently she cursed whoever put the schedule together. She couldn't possibly follow the fiddlers. She'd fall flat on her greasepainted face. Where was her edge? The combination of stage fright and in-your-face challenge that usually propelled her on stage no matter the odds?

Her heart was breaking. How could she be funny and magical when the very heart that pumped the blood to her vital organs—including wherever her magic was stored—was cracked?

If only she hadn't left Mark and Emily hurting. If only she could leave them laughing, not in tears and painful silences. If only...

Fiddles, flutes, guitars, drums built to a Gaelic frenzy that lifted even Annie's depressed spirits. A few people had caught sight of her at the edge of the crowd and stared. Once in costume, she was supposed to be a clown, and clown she did. Beginning

to stomp her feet to the rhythm, bobbing her head so the rose banged her nose, then rubbing her red proboscis and starting the whole thing over. It wasn't a bad segue, and when she was introduced, most of the crowd, having seen her antics and accepted her as part of the crowd, stayed on to watch.

She scrambled onto the stage lugging her suitcase with her.

Behind her, the musicians were packing up. Knowing that would happen, she'd decided to begin her routine with some stand-up comedy and move into her magic act when she had the stage to herself and room for volunteers.

She stared out at the sea of faces waiting to be entertained. Some of the faces sported zinc stripes over the nose, some had baseball caps, some had a lot of red, burned-looking skin on shoulders and cheekbones. All gazed at her expectantly.

She gave them a huge clown grin and moved to the microphone. In her Gertrude voice she shrieked, "Is it hot in here or is it me?"

A few titters while they waited for her to start making some jokes about the heat. And she had some. She had lots of them. She just couldn't, for the moment, remember a single damn one of them.

Her mind was as blank as the map of China. As empty as her future, stretching endlessly before her while she ran from what frightened her. And yet what she craved most.

Commitment. Love. Everything Mark and Emily represented.

The silence rang in her ears. She dropped her gaze and in a flash of desperation made a performance of lifting her foot and trying to fan herself with her big shoe. She dragged that out for a minute or so, hopping around the stage and trying to flex her foot back and forth rapidly.

A helpless gesture to the audience. She let them know that wasn't working, then tried nodding her head really, really fast. As an improv it wasn't bad, but it was definitely limited.

As the laughter started to peter out, she spoke again into the microphone. "It sure is hot today, it's so hot..."

*Come on, come on.* This had never happened before.

She was getting really and truly hot as embarrassment snuck up on her. She was going to humiliate herself if she didn't grab that elusive routine that was floating around in her head, that word just on the tip of her tongue.

In desperation, she started throwing a few insults at the audience. "How's the diaper rash, sir?" she called to a man who'd gone to town with the zinc on his nose.

The mike screeched, and she jumped in pretend alarm and did another panto routine pretending fear of the thing. Behind her a violin string caught on something and gave a faint whine.

She was close to tears.

Then, glancing up, she saw a very familiar trio hurrying across the grass to join the crowd watching her show. Her gaze caught Mark's, and her blood began to sing. Beside him, Emily gave her a thumbs-up, and even Kitsu had his ears tuned to her.

She could humiliate herself in front of a bunch of strangers, but no way she was going to let those three down. Yanking the mike off its stand, she dug deep into herself. If she had to do an entire improv routine, she'd do it. And have them rolling around on the ground in helpless mirth.



“Who wants to talk about the heat, anyway?”

Then, with an exaggerated wink in Em’s direction, she shrilled, “Knock, knock...”

SHE WAS so full of life, Mark thought, watching Annie cavorting on stage. And talented, he decided, watching her get the crowd laughing with her body movement, her magic tricks and even her corny jokes. There’d been a moment, when he and Em had arrived, when he’d sworn an expression of panic had flashed in her eyes as she glanced their way. But maybe she was panicking because they’d shown up. Maybe she thought they’d try and beg her to stay... Again.

The smile her antics had painted on his face disappeared along with the carefree mood she’d put him in. There were probably fifty or sixty men, women and kids crowded around the tent, and she charmed every darned one of them. In front of him, a little kid clapped so hard, a wad of his cotton candy took flight and coasted to the ground where it was promptly stepped on.

Mark watched a couple of gulls fight over a half-eaten hot dog. There were streams of people in summer gear. Over the bay a Cessna flew a trailing banner advertising a fitness place. You could hardly fit a toothpick between all the people.

Next week it would be a lot quieter. The festival would be over, and life would return to some kind of semi-normal summertime routine.

And Annie would be gone.

He didn’t want his life to return to normal. As he gazed at Annie he knew his life would never be the same. She had changed him in some subtle way he hadn’t even noticed. Made him relax more. Made him believe in happy endings.

Then decided to take a perfectly good happy ending and turn it into a tragedy of unrequited love. Not even Romeo himself could have ached as much for his Juliet on her balcony as Mark did for the clown above him on stage. More clapping. She bowed, then reached for the mike.

“And now, I’ll need a very special volunteer from the audience.” Young hands, and even a few mature ones, shot up instantly.

She shook her head. “I’m sorry, children. The job I have in mind is very important. I’ll need a big, strong man.” A few hands remained raised. The clown put a hand above her eyes as though to shade them and scanned the crowd. Once her gaze skimmed him, twice.

Heads started to turn his way.

Oh, no.

Emily giggled, and before he knew what was happening, she’d clasped his hand in her small one and raised it as high as she could.

“Why, thank you. You, sir, in the back. The one in the blue T-shirt.”

Giggling with delight, Emily yanked on Kitsu’s leash. “Come on, Uncle Mark. You gotta go.”

She was so eager and thrilled that he didn’t have a choice.

He was going to kill Annie.

Feeling like the biggest idiot on two legs, he reluctantly made his way through the crowd and stalked up the stairs to the stage.

He trudged across it, deliberately taking one step more than necessary so he

crowded her. Then he glared with all his might into her painted face.

Her eyes were laughing at him, full of good-natured teasing. When he'd crowded so close to her that he could smell the greasepaint, identify her lashes beneath the absurd huge plastic ones, her eyes stopped laughing, and his breath caught.

For an eternal instant, they gazed at each other, and in that moment he knew he loved Annie, with everything in him.

And it occurred to him, like a lightning bolt out of the clear blue sky, that she loved him, too.

He couldn't believe how stupid he'd been. Everything she'd told him about her past had broadcast a lively fear of commitment, and instead of easing her into a relationship, he'd tried to force her.

Maybe it wasn't too late to get her to change her mind. Maybe he still had a chance, if he could just explain...

"Annie," he whispered, his voice husky.

Her lips parted, and he noticed a smear of red greasepaint on her front tooth. Her hands fluttered up, and he waited for her to touch him. Pink ribbons fluttered from her fingers, and as she caught sight of them, she jerked and glanced around as though she'd forgotten where she was.

He knew the feeling.

"Right," she squealed, and he took a step back as the amplified voice ripped into his ear. "I think you'll be a suitable volunteer." She began walking around him. "What's your name, sir?"

"Mark."

"Mark. Well, Mark, this job requires a lot of strength. Would you curl your biceps for me?"

"What?"

She shook her head at the audience, like he was a big, dumb galoot. "Like this." She demonstrated, bringing her two arms into a classic which-way-to-the-beach bodybuilder pose.

"I'm going to kill you, Annie," he muttered, giving her the most exaggerated pose he could manage, squeezing until his biceps bulged.

"Oh, my," she cooed, "Do you know the story of Samson and Delilah, sir?"

He nodded and went back to glaring at her. "Samson was a very strong man," she explained into the microphone while rapidly unpacking things from the trunk. He could see a big barbell that was obviously plastic. If he didn't love this woman she'd be in serious trouble.

"And he fell in love with the wrong woman."

Was it his imagination or did her voice wobble just a bit? "She found out all his strength was in his hair, and then she cut it off." She brandished the biggest pair of scissors he'd ever seen. "Now, in a moment, I'll ask for a volunteer Delilah, but first, we're going to give our Samson a little help, and make his hair longer and stronger."

And then, with a wicked grin, she started tying on hanks of fake hair with big, pink ribbons. Everybody thought that was pretty funny.

Everybody but him.

She was having a terrific time making a damned fool of him in public. And he was obsessed with having a terrific time with her in private. He had some big plans for

dinner tonight. His future, and Em's, could be riding on it.

He had a reputation for always getting his man. This time he had to get his woman. He just had to. Not only for his sake, but for Emily's. The three of them were meant to be a family. He knew it just like he knew Annie loved him. And that, deep down, she wanted a family, too.

He was going to explain it all to her, sweet-talk her, ease her into things. He grimaced as she tied another pink ribbon into his hair. But first he was going to punish her for this. He was going to punish her thoroughly. He'd deprive her of sleep for at least a week. Make outrageous demands. He'd make her beg....

Something pulled his attention away from his fantasies. A sound that filled him with foreboding. It was the high-pitched yap of a dog. He glanced at where Emily had been standing at the back of the crowd and saw that she was already being dragged toward a crowded path. Any second he'd lose sight of her.

Bounding up, he shouted, "Emily, let go of the leash."

She turned a half-puzzled, half-panicked face his way, then like a bad vaudevillian performer being yanked off the stage, she jerked out of sight, swallowed by the meandering hordes.

"Em. Stop!" Annie shouted the words into the microphone so they boomed over the gaping spectators.

He didn't wait, but leaped from the stage and hit the ground running, pink ribbons streaming from his hair.

## 13

"SORRY, FOLKS. Show's over. I've got a family emergency." He heard Annie's voice, tinny from amplification, while he shouldered through the crowd in the direction he'd last seen Em.

Even as he focused on tracking his niece, Annie's words hit him. A family emergency, she'd called it. He wondered if she was aware she'd automatically thought of them as a family.

Once this was over, he'd remind her of that. And a few other things. All he had to do was find Em. He wouldn't panic. Annie was right. He was overprotective of Em. She was an intelligent girl, and nobody would tangle with her so long as she and Kitsune were together.

"Scuse me...pardon me." People bumped and blurred past him as he struggled through a sea of bodies, some smelling of sweat, some of suntan lotion, some of popcorn and hot dog.

Who'd have thought that damn useless dog could even spot a squirrel in all the melee? There was some kind of commotion up ahead. Maybe that was them. He sprinted forward, mumbling apologies.

IMPATIENTLY, Annie tissueed off her face paint and struggled out of her costume. Underneath she wore shorts and a tank top. She removed her wig, ran her fingers through her hair and peeled off the false eyelashes. The little trailer, set up for the performers to use between acts, was stifling.

She'd never changed so fast. Not because of the heat in the trailer, but because of the nagging sense of worry. Which was odd, because she never worried. It wasn't in her nature.

Leaving her case in the trailer, she walked the few steps to the tent where she'd performed. Since she'd cut her show short, there was a lag until the next act. She recognized a few of the audience members who'd been watching her perform, grateful she was unrecognizable without her costume.

Annie couldn't believe she'd cut her show short. She had performed through stomach flu, thunder and lightning storms, birthday kids throwing tantrums and having accidents on the floor, and she'd never stopped a show before. Never.

So a kid got dragged off by a dog to go see a squirrel run up a tree. Big deal. Why had she canceled the show?

As she glanced worriedly left and right, trying to stretch her vision, the answer came with a bump of recognition. She'd never felt that sick sense of fear before. Never.

She felt like a...a mother.

Minutes dragged by. She was hot, thirsty and scared. She bought a bottle of water from a passing cart and downed it while she stood, feeling like a small animal was gnawing at her lungs.

A squeal from the microphone caused her to jump out of her skin. She'd been so focused on watching for her missing trio, she'd forgotten there was a stage behind her.

When the folksinging group started up, the crowd in front of the tent began to swell, and Annie found herself pushed farther from the stage. Darn it, she should have kept her purple wig on so Mark and Emily could find her easily. She was dying to get out and start looking, but she knew Em would come back to the tent when she got Kitsu under control, and Mark would head back as soon as he could. As much as she wanted to rush off and start looking, at least to be doing something, she knew she had to stay put.

A song about a wandering Gypsy gave way to a ballad about preserving the rain forest, and still there was no sign of them. Had they found each other and forgotten all about her? For once in her life, she wished she owned one of those hateful cell phones just so she could call Mark and find out where he was.

And then she saw him sprinting her way.

A glimpse of his expression told her he was alone.

Her face must have registered the same information to him, for he didn't even ask, just hauled his cell phone out of his back pocket.

He was breathing heavily, and sweat dripped from his hairline. His pink ribbons lay damp and tangled in his hair.

"Who are you calling?"

"The cops."

"But—"

He turned on her, his expression fierce. "No buts. I've looked everywhere. I can't even raise a signal on her tracking device. Something's happened."

In her heart, she felt he was right, so she didn't say a word, just watched his

fingers jabbing at the phone.

Then she heard a very familiar whine and glanced down to see Kitsu at her side, heaving flanks and lolling tongue...and dragging leash with no Emily at the end of it.

"Mark, wait." She knelt in front of the dog and looked straight into his eyes. "Where's Emily?"

Again that whine, and she almost thought the timbre changed, increasing in urgency. The dog paced restlessly.

She glanced at Mark, who glared at the dog, cell phone still in hand.

"He's trying to tell us something. I think he wants to show us where she is," she insisted, picking up the dog's restlessness.

"You think that hellhound suddenly turned into Lassie?" Without waiting for an answer, he went back to the cell phone.

Ignoring him, she focused on the dog. "This is really important, Kitsu. You have to take me to Emily." At the child's name, the dog gave a shrill yap. "We all love Emily. We have to find her."

"I don't believe this. That dog's useless. You stay here and wait for the officers. I'm going searching again."

"No."

"Look. There's no time—"

"Give Kitsu a chance, Mark. Please."

"You're going to go chasing after goddamn squirrels while Em could be in trouble? I don't believe this!"

"You stay here and wait for the cops. I'm going." She grasped the leash firmly. "Kitsu. Find Emily." And as though she'd pushed her foot to the accelerator, the dog raced off.

She heard muttering that she thought was a string of words Mark would never say aloud in mixed company, then everything was a blur.

She recalled an earlier trip with Kitsu a lot like this one, when she'd been dragged all over the park after a squirrel. For all their sakes, she hoped she wasn't on another wild squirrel chase.

The dog bounded ahead, slowing only when he needed to find a path around children. Every time there was a space, he'd put on another burst of speed.

Only fear and grim determination kept Annie hanging on to that leash. If anything, this race was worse than the last one. There were more people to bash into, more obstacles to be avoided, and even while her heart and lungs labored and her legs scrambled to keep up with the dog, the knot of fear—the possibility that this was all for nothing—cramped her belly.

"Find Emily, find Emily," she gasped over and over, hoping the dog would understand her and stay on task. Wherever they were going, the dog knew the way. He never hesitated. She'd see him sniffing the air and aiming his nose, and then his powerful body followed. Like a bouncing balloon on a string, Annie's much less powerful body jounced along behind.

"Please, let her be all right. Please," she prayed silently.

She stopped saying "excuse me," and the way ahead looked clear. With a sinking heart, she realized they'd left the most crowded part of the park. They were racing along a nearly deserted stretch of seawall, with the ocean on one side and lawn, trees and

apartment buildings on the other. If they were chasing a squirrel, she was going to skin that dog with her bare hands.

Her breath pounded in her ears, and behind her she heard the pounding of footsteps. She didn't have the energy to turn her head, but she knew without looking that it was Mark. Against his better instincts and training, he was giving her intuition and Kitsu a shot at finding his niece.

They'd better not let him down.

She was so mindlessly accustomed to the pace, all her energies focused on following that blasted dog, she almost didn't notice when Kitsu stopped running. A few steps, and she bumped into his warm, hairy body. He was leaping back and forth, his nose pointing over the seawall, while he gave a loud version of his squirrel bark.

Praying silently, she peeped over the side.

And there was Emily, her small body sprawled on the rocky beach.

After the first ghastly stab of fear, Annie realized she was alive and conscious. She was sitting up, her head tipped backward to gaze at Kitsu with a tired smile. Her face was pale, but the relief shone from every feature.

Annie dropped the leash, and the dog leaped to the beach, pacing protectively between Em and the incoming tide. Annie put a leg over the wall and began to scramble down the four or five feet to the rocky beach below. Something dark hurtled by to her left, and Mark almost flew through the air, landing with a grunt.

By the time she'd reached them, Emily's bravery had deserted her, and tears poured down her face while she explained to her uncle.

"I hurt my leg. The tide started coming in. Ow. I can't move."

"Hold still, honey." All vestiges of panic were gone from Mark's face and voice. He sounded completely calm. Annie had to give him credit for hiding his feelings so well. "Did you hit your head at all?" He ran his hands down her arms, the sides of her torso and her back.

"Uh-uh. I just tripped and fell sideways on my foot."

"Which leg hurts?"

"This one." She pointed to the left.

He ran his hands down the right and then much more gently down the left. When he reached her ankle, she sucked in her breath.

Annie sank down beside her and wrapped her arms around Emily, who hugged her right back.

"I was so scared."

Annie squeezed harder. "So were we." Her hands were shaking, and she fought a strange desire to cry, just like Emily. She was so glad to have her back.

"Kitsu dragged me here after a squirrel so I finally let go of the leash, but I was so hot and dirty, I thought I'd rinse my hands and face in the ocean. But I guess my shoe got untied. I don't know. Anyhow, I tripped. And then I couldn't get up. And then the water started coming in."

"You did fine, Em. Just fine." Mark soothed her with his matter-of-fact tone. "I don't think it's broken, probably just sprained, but we'll get it looked at to make sure."

"Kitsu stayed right with me. He must have heard me scream. Then I told him to go find you. And he went." She sniffed. The dog, hearing his name, had come forward to put his wet nose to her cheek. She giggled and hugged the dog to her. "He's a great

watchdog, isn't he, Uncle Mark?"

There was a pause. "The best. But, Em, where's your tracking device?"

"In my pocket. I think I fell on it."

Mark glanced up and caught Annie's gaze. She thought he was going to say something, maybe admit for once that she was right and he was wrong. But when he did speak, it was to issue orders.

"Annie, here's my key. You can bring the vehicle up that road there, and we'll meet you." Rapidly, he described where he'd parked. "Em, I'm going to carry you up to the grassy area. It might hurt a bit, but I'll try not to go too fast. Okay?"

"I'm ready."

Annie waited until he'd scooped up his niece in his powerful arms and started walking toward the closest set of cement steps that provided beach access. With utmost care, Mark picked his way over the rocks while Emily clung to his neck, her lips compressed. Kitsu stayed at Mark's side.

Annie scrambled up to the path and half-sprinted, half-jogged to where he'd left the car.

By the time she'd negotiated her way through the crowded streets, detouring around those that were blocked off for pedestrians only, she was thankful to find the trio of man, dog and injured child just where they'd said they'd be. Even her fear that Kitsu would embarrass himself in front of his master was apparently groundless. Two squirrels wandered the grass, tails twitching, noses to the ground, seemingly oblivious to the squirrel-annihilation machine at Mark's feet.

The dog's eyes were fixed on his quarry, and even as she approached, a small begging whine came from his direction. "Don't even think about it," Mark warned in a voice that brooked no disobedience.

Impressed in spite of herself at Mark's control over the uncontrollable beast, Annie took a good look at Emily. Her color was a lot better, and she was chatting away to Mark with all the semblance of a girl who wasn't in a lot of pain.

"Thanks, Annie," Mark said, "I'm going to drive Em to the hospital and get that ankle X-rayed, just to be safe." He mussed his niece's hair. "I don't think it's very serious, but you'll probably get to lay around for a couple of weeks with your feet up and ignore all your chores."

The girl grinned at him impishly.

He glanced at Annie. "Do you mind getting your own car? I'd like to take Em right to the hospital."

"Of course. I'll meet you there."

He shook his head. Anger boiled up in her chest. If he thought he was going to shut her out now, he could forget it. But it wasn't that. "I need you to take Kitsu home. I can't leave him in the hospital car park. Who knows how long we'll be?"

She really wanted to go with them, just to make certain Em was all right, but obviously Mark was right. Swallowing her disappointment, she nodded. "I'll make dinner." She glanced at Em with a teasing grin. "Something with extra tofu in it."

After the girl had finished with the yucks and gagging motions, she leaned down to kiss her soft cheek. "See you at home."

She helped Mark get Annie settled across the back seat then grabbed Kitsu's leash. She waved until they'd pulled away from the curb, then she glanced at the dog,

knowing they were heading through squirrel territory. “Do I need to put a paper bag over your head?”

A soft whine greeted her. The panting jaws opened in a big doggy grin, and the tail started wagging.

“Trying to butter me up won’t work,” she warned the dog as they started walking. “I’m not the woman I was a few weeks ago. I could flatten you with a well-aimed karate chop.” She paused to inspect the muscled flanks and powerful throat. “Well, maybe.” They walked on companionably.

“I’ll tell you one thing, for sure, without Emily here, I’m not chasing you to hell and back. You go tearing off, you’re on your own. And I gotta tell you, squirrel as a steady diet gets old real fast.”

She wasn’t certain if her threats had sunk in or if they were just lucky enough not to pass any of the bushy-tailed creatures, or whether the dog had just tired himself out. But amazingly, she made it to her car with only one small incident.

She’d stopped to pick up her clown gear in the trailer, and as she wended her way to her vehicle a guy with a huge belly drooping over his jeans and one too many tattoos lurched across the parking lot in her direction. He gestured with the open beer in his hand. “Hey, babe” he leered. “Wanna come to a party?”

“It’s a tempting offer, but no, thanks.”

With a fatuous grin on his face, he kept coming until he was close enough to get a look at Kitsu, who could appear amazingly ferocious when he chose. Teeth bared, hackles up, a low growl took care of the drunken partyer in no time.

“You know, you’re a good dog to have around.”

She opened the rear car door, and he balked. “I know, it hasn’t got the headroom you’re used to. You’ll have to slum it till we get home.”

With a big, huffy pant, he scrambled into the back.

She walked to the driver’s side and opened the door. “I don’t believe it!” He was sitting in the passenger seat grinning at her.

“I guess you earned the privilege. You did good today.” She leaned over and patted him, getting a big tongue slurp for her trouble.

“Okay, Kitsu. Let’s go home.”

But she made a couple of stops on the way.

“HOW DO I STOP her from leaving?” Mark wondered for the thousandth time.

“What are you mumbling about, Uncle Mark?” Em asked from the back seat. Her voice was a little slurred, probably from the painkillers the doctor had given her. As he’d hoped, it was just a sprain. Her ankle, swathed in an elastic bandage, looked huge. Tomorrow he’d have to get her some crutches.

He sighed. Aloud he said, “How do we stop Annie from leaving us?”

In the rearview mirror he caught her puzzled frown. “But you said we have to let her go.”

“I changed my mind.”

She was silent for a moment or two. “Maybe we could phone the plane and tell them Annie’s a criminal and they should kick her off. I saw that on a movie me and Annie watched.”

“Not bad, kid. Apart from the breaking-the-law aspect, it’s a pretty good plan.”



“We could steal her passport.”

“You really are headed for a life of crime, aren’t you?”

“Well, let’s hear your ideas, Mr. Smarty!”

“We could set Kitsu to guard her. Which would be fine until a squirrel came along.”

“I know, I know! We could give away all her clothes.”

“Now you’re talking.”

By the time they pulled into his gate, they’d pretty much figured out a million ways to make Annie’s life hell. Neither of them seemed to care, so long as they could keep her with them. As he turned off the engine, they both fell silent. It had been fun to fantasize that they could make Annie stay, but real life had once again intruded.

Or had it?

He hauled Em in his arms. Just as he got to the front door, it opened. He damn near dropped her. She gasped in his ear, then started to giggle.

Everywhere he looked were balloons.

Not just any balloons. His crazy clown had fashioned balloons into dogs and squirrels. Shiny red dogs, blue dogs, yellow dogs chasing bright balloon squirrels in orange, pink and purple that hung always just out of reach. They chased each other across the hallway floor, hung from the ceiling in a moving tableau.

And there was Annie, a huge smile on her face, holding a balloon doll with yards of toilet paper wrapped around its left ankle. And finally, Kitsu, a big helium balloon that said Get Well Soon attached to his collar.

“How are you feeling, Em?” she asked, handing her the balloon doll.

“Okay. Kind of tired. The doctor gave me some pills.”

“Are you hungry?”

“Yeah.”

Annie then turned her attention to Mark, and he noticed she’d put on some makeup and brushed her hair. Her clothes were different, too. She wore a tight-fitting long skirt in a kind of leaf pattern and a green top that lifted whenever she moved, just enough to give him a glimpse of the faux diamond glinting from her navel.

If he didn’t get that thing between his teeth before the night was through, it wouldn’t be for want of throwing everything he had at her.

He must have been staring. She tugged the top down, as if it would stay there, and said, “Thanks for phoning from the hospital. Dinner’s almost ready.”

“What’s for dinner?” Em asked.

“A special surprise.”

“If it’s green, I’m not eating it.”

“Emily, mind your manners,” Mark chided.

Annie preceded them into the kitchen, and his eyes widened. The table was set with the usual green china and linen napkins, but in the middle were ketchup, mustard and relish, a big plate of pickles and a bowl of potato chips.

He glanced over to where Annie was busy slipping wieners in buns.

“Hot dogs?” Emily exclaimed in awe.

His eyes narrowed suspiciously. “This isn’t some New Age bean-sprout wiener, is it?”

Her eyes danced. “No. It’s a real old-fashioned hot dog.”

“Wow,” Emily said. “The bun isn’t even whole wheat.”

“Come on. I’m not that bad.”

Mark shifted his gaze to Em, who was nodding. “Yes, you are,” they chorused.

“I even got some soda for you, Em. Do you want some, Mark?”

“After the day I’ve had, I need a beer. How about you, do you want some wine or something?”

“A beer would be great. Thanks.”

“Come on, Em, we’ll go wash up, then I’ll carry you to the table.”

IT WAS LIKE so many meals they’d had, and yet so different. For one thing, Em didn’t usually need a second chair with a pillow on it to prop up her leg. For another, Annie was in love. She had to admit it to herself. Not just with Mark, but with Em, as well. She even loved the overgrown squirrel terrorizer who gazed with rapt attention at the hot dogs, though he’d already wolfed down the two she’d slipped him for a reward, plus the jujubes Mark had slipped him when he thought no one was looking.

Maybe it was her new appreciation of her feelings, but the atmosphere around the table was subtly different. They still told stupid knock-knock jokes in between Emily and Mark telling her about the hospital visit. But she found herself superaware of the man across the table. She kept sneaking little glances his way simply for the pleasure of seeing the man she loved.

She hoped he’d like her surprise.

Emily made it halfway through her ice cream before her eyes started drifting shut. Annie and Mark shared the kind of conspiratorial smile she’d seen parents exchange countless times.

He stood and reached to lift Em into his arms while Annie picked up the pillow and supported the foot all the way up the stairs. Once in the child’s room, Em’s eyes half opened as her uncle lay her on the bed. “Don’t forget to phone the plane,” she mumbled to him.

He smiled and kissed her cheek. “Good night, Em.”

“I’ll get her into her nightclothes and then come down to help with the dishes. And, uh, we have to talk.”

“The four most terrifying words in the English language.” He shook his head with a grimace that made her grin. “See you downstairs.”

“No. It’s good—” She started to explain, but he was already gone. “At least, I hope it’s good.”

When she emerged downstairs, butterflies were doing the Watusi in her belly. What if he said no? She bit her lip, knowing she deserved his rejection and deciding she’d have to be forceful about what she wanted.

With his usual efficiency, he was wiping the counters when she got to the kitchen.

“Come on into the living room,” he said.

“The living room?” She’d never seen a soul in there.

“It’s a good place for serious discussions, don’t you think? All that leather.”

As long as she lived, she’d never understand men. What was serious about leather furniture? “You didn’t think my leather skirt was serious?”

“Honey, nothing that small could ever be taken seriously.” Then he grinned at her, and she started to feel woozy. He’d called her honey.

He flicked on a couple of lamps, and soft pools of light appeared. Headed for some kind of mission control panel, he stopped and turned to her. "Is this discussion too serious for music?"

"Uh, no. Not at all."

"Good." Methodically, with the same care and precision he did just about everything, he chose a CD. Soon soft jazz filled the air. He pushed another button, and a gas fireplace added a pool of flickering light.

"How about a cool drink?"

For some reason, she was getting more nervous. It was becoming clear that he had a hidden agenda. Or a secret joke, probably at her expense. She cleared her throat. "A drink would be great. I think I have some beer left."

He returned in a few moments with a bottle that most definitely did not contain beer. Her eyes widened. "Champagne?"

"This is a celebration, isn't it?"

"Is it?" Her voice was squeaky all of a sudden. Maybe she was coming down with some kind of laryngitis. She cleared her throat again.

"We found Emily. And Kitsu finally did something useful." A slow, thumping noise came from behind the couch.

"Did that dog follow us in here?"

"I asked him to. He's a chaperon."

A soft pop, and the wonderful fizz of champagne pouring came to her ears. He handed her a glass that felt cool against her skin. Unable to help herself, she gazed into his eyes, and the butterfly Watusi turned into an acrobatics competition. He touched his glass to hers. "To us."

It was the opening she needed. Taking a quick, delicious sip of the pale gold wine, letting it crackle and fizz on her tongue, she swallowed. Then took a couple more deep sips, hoping to drown those darned butterflies.

He was still watching her, and there was definitely amusement in his eyes...mixed with something she didn't even want to think about. She forgot the speech she'd prepared and skipped to the chase. "I want my job back."

He refilled her glass. She couldn't believe it had been emptied so fast. He must use really small champagne flutes. "You can't have it."

She'd been prepared to have to argue her case, but somehow the bald refusal stunned her. She sipped more champagne while she dredged her mind for the reasons she'd prepared in case he was doubtful.

"I know you think Bea's better qualified in the self-defense department—and I grant you she is. But I really think I'm good for Em."

"You are. That's not the reason."

"Oh. Um, if it's my cooking—"

"Your cooking's fine. A little more fat, a few more grams of cholesterol once in a while might be nice...but overall, no complaints."

"You probably think a clown isn't a very good role model for an impressionable child. However, studies show—"

"I think you're terrific with Em. I already told you that."

"If it's about our personal relationship—"

"Now you're getting warmer," he said approvingly, adding more wine to her

glass. He sank down beside her on the leather couch, addling her brains.

"It's just that—I was scared."

"I know." His voice rumbled deep and rich in her ear, sending little shivers chasing each other down her spine.

"My trip. I, well, I figured out a week ago I didn't even want to go. I mean, I'd love to see the Orient. Traveling is very educational and culturally enriching. And fun. But I was using my trip as an excuse to run away. To avoid responsibilities."

He seemed so calm and quiet beside her, totally relaxed, while she couldn't seem to stop babbling.

"I've loved the time I've spent with Emily. I'd really like to stay."

"How about me?"

"Huh?"

"How do you feel about the time you've spent with me?"

A warm flush stole its way up her body from her toes to her ears. "I, um, enjoyed that, too."

In the same reasonable, conversational tone that made her want to slap him, he continued. "How about making love with me. Did you enjoy that?"

A little whimper quivered through her lips. Unable to form an actual word, she nodded vigorously.

His lips tilted in the semidarkness, and she longed to lean over and kiss them. "I hope you can begin to see why you're completely unsuitable to be Emily's nanny."

That was just so unfair. "But you had sex with me, too. And you're her guardian."

"I'm planning to change that."

Her heart sank. Surely he wasn't even thinking—he couldn't be planning to send Em to someone else. She couldn't let that happen. It would break the little girl's heart.

"I want to adopt Emily legally."

"What are you—"

"I don't think she needs a nanny and a guardian. I think she needs a mother and father again."

"What are you saying?"

He picked up her hand and began toying with her fingers. "I'm saying I love you."

*Ooh.*

"And Emily loves you. She was trying to figure out ways to stop you from leaving. But there's only one thing that will stop you. And that's if you love us enough to settle down. Enough to make a commitment."

"Oh, Mark. I do love you. I do."

He half grinned. "I kind of thought you did when the travel agent phoned and left a message. Something about canceling your ticket."

"She phoned? But I was saving that for my surprise!"

"The thing is, I know you're terrified of commitments, and marriage probably terrifies you more than anything. If it was just me, I wouldn't care. But Emily needs someone who'll be there permanently."

"Are you asking me to marry you?"

"Yes."

She waited for the fear to grip her and choke the life out of her. But it didn't

come. She played a game with herself, waiting for it to happen. She tried to put all her scary words out there at once. “So, I’d be your wife. You’d be my husband. We’d wear rings and have anniversaries and life insurance policies and, ah, retirement plans.”

He nodded gravely.

She gulped. “Mutual funds, a dental plan, his and hers towels?”

“I might have to draw the line at the towels. But I do have full medical coverage.”

“More children?”

“It’s a definite possibility,” he agreed.

“So I’d be, like, a mother?”

Little gleams of blue fire burned in his eyes. “You’re the most likely candidate.”

It was a miracle! She didn’t feel even a twinge of fear, only a strange kind of elation. She could imagine it all. Children, grocery lists, dentist appointments. Golfing in her golden years with this man and actually having a pretty good time. Of course, she’d have to buy him outlandish golf shirts, just to keep things balanced.

“You won’t mind being married to a clown?”

“Not if she’s you.”

She chuckled. “Life is going to be pretty interesting.”

“And a whole lot of fun, my love. A whole lot of fun.”

He leaned forward and kissed her, then reached into his pocket to withdraw a jeweler’s box.

She eased open the box, and the unmistakable dazzle of diamond sparkled at her.

“An engagement ring?”

He grinned and shook his head.

She took a closer look and started to laugh. “I thought you hated my navel ring.”

“Are you kidding? I’m crazy about it. And I think it’s time you had a real diamond in your navel.”

“Sometimes you’re not such a stuffed shirt, after all.”

“By the way, that ticket’s not canceled. It’s postponed. For your honeymoon. Japan, Thailand, Europe—anywhere in the world, you just pick your favorite place.”

“How about right here,” she murmured, pulling him down on top of her.

Shotgun Nanny

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