



Champaign Rose

# Now That We've Found You

by

Marianne Arkins





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Now That We've Found You

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Cover Art by *R.J.Morris*

The Wild Rose Press

PO Box 706

Adams Basin, NY 14410-0706

Visit us at [www.thewildrosepress.com](http://www.thewildrosepress.com)

Publishing History

First Champagne Rose Edition, November 2006

Published in the United States of America

## **Dedication**

To C, D, J and P... I couldn't have done it without you!



“Come *on*, Mommy. Let's go!” Melinda's feet shuffled in place while she tried to drag Sarah off the motel room bed. She was dying to start their vacation, when all Sarah wanted to do was collapse.

“Honey, I've been driving for seven hours. I need a bit of time to rest.” She dug her toes into the carpet to keep from rolling off the mattress.

“Please, Mommy. For a little while?”

Sarah saw the determination in Melinda's face and smiled. Her daughter was a puzzle, even after so many years of constant observation. Physically, Melinda was the image of Sarah with her straight, blond hair and warm brown eyes, but on the inside she was every bit her father. Joe had always been a six-year-old at heart, never able to wait for anything.

On the first morning of their honeymoon, he'd snatched Sarah's birth control pills from her hand. “C'mon, let's start a family,” he'd said, and pitched them into the wastebasket.

If only she'd agreed instead of fishing them out again, she thought and twisted her wedding band around her finger. Then her daughter might have had a daddy for a few more years. As it was, Melinda had been only three when Joe died in that car accident and had few memories of her father.

Melinda climbed over Sarah and gave her Eskimo kisses.

How could Sarah resist her? “Okay.” She rubbed her hands across her eyes, surely removing any last bit of makeup that may have survived the trip. “Just let me stop somewhere for coffee on the way out.” She sat up and twisted her long hair into a loose bun. With luck, the scrunchie would keep it in place, because she just didn't

have the energy to French-braid it.

"Where to first?"

Melinda rolled her eyes, a gesture Sarah knew she did herself several times a day. It was strange to see it on her daughter's face, a little miniature of her own.

"Right. Of course. Dinosaurs, it is."

Most six-year-olds asked for Disney World, but Melinda—a budding paleontologist—wanted the Smithsonian. Go figure.

Sarah let herself be pulled down the sidewalk, trying to guzzle her tepid coffee and not trip over the cracks at the same time. When they arrived at the museum, the caffeine and liberal amounts of sugar she'd added were doing their job. A small surge of energy added a bit of bounce to her steps. She dumped the paper cup into a receptacle and stepped inside, into another world.

Thankfully, the dinosaur exhibit was on their immediate right and the first thing they saw. Melinda gasped at the size of the fossil skeletons and stopped to stare in awe. She grabbed her mother's hand while her head swiveled around, trying to see everything at once.

"Mommy, they're huge." Her voice was a reverent whisper. Eyes wide, Melinda took slow, hesitant steps from one exhibit to the next. Sarah knew then that she wouldn't trade sleep and the dent in their savings account for one less minute here with her daughter.

"Melinda, look over there." Sarah pointed to a large bone situated in the walkway so visitors could touch it. Her daughter hurried over and stroked it as if it were a pet kitten. Sarah noted how Melinda's tiny hand was dwarfed by the bone and moved to place her own slightly larger hand on top of her daughter's.

"Wow." The word came out in a breath of air. "Mommy, do you think... Is this a T-rex bone?"

"Actually," a man spoke from behind them, his Scottish burr musical, "it's the right humerus from a brachiosaurus altithorax."

Sarah jolted in surprise at the sound of his voice,



loud and unexpected in the quiet of the aisle. Melinda turned her gaze to the speaker, a tall, black-haired man in a tailored gray suit.

"That's a veggie-saur," Melinda commented.

"That's right, he *was* an herbivore. You're very smart."

Sarah looked on as the man squatted down on eye level with her daughter and tapped her tiny button nose with his index finger.

"The brachiosaurus was enormous. If you were inside the fifth story of a building, brachiosaurus could peek in through the window so you could pat him on the head and feed him lettuce."

Melinda giggled at the idea. Sarah kept a cautious eye on the pair, suspicious of any stranger who would butt into their conversation. As if he'd sensed both her gaze and her apprehension, he turned to face her. He smiled before standing and extending a hand. The corners of his cobalt eyes crinkled at the sides and, when Sarah tipped her head back to look up at him, she noticed several permanent lines there—as if smiling was a habit of long standing.

"I'm Doctor Duncan MacPherson. I'm a guest speaker here this week."

She gave him a tight smile and shook his hand, surprised by an awareness that made her heart pound. How could she be attracted to a man she'd just met when no one else in the past three years had even made her look twice?

She tugged her hand away to twist her wedding band and tried not to feel as though she was cheating on her husband. "I'm Sarah Kirkman, and this is my daughter, Melinda."

"Hi!" Melinda stuck her hand out to be shaken, too. "You sound funny."

"Melinda!" Sarah reprimanded her daughter, but Dr. MacPherson only laughed and gave her small hand a shake.

"Oh, I don't know," he replied, deepening his already strong brogue. "I think you sound a wee bit strange yourself."

"How come you know so much about dinosaurs?"

"Well, lass, the museum invited me to come over and give a talk about my favorite subject. I'm a paleontologist. Do you know what that is?"

Melinda all but bounced out of her shoes at his words. "Yes! That's what I want to be. Mommy says I have to study very hard in school and learn lots of stuff like math and science."

He gave a somber nod of his head. "Your mother is absolutely correct. It's a lot of work, but I certainly think it's worth it."

Sarah watched the interplay with interest. Because Melinda didn't have the opportunity to interact with men on a regular basis since Joe died, she was usually overly cautious of men. That she was so comfortable with Dr. MacPherson was both strange and fascinating. Sarah wondered if children had a sixth sense like dogs—could they tell when someone was kind and honest? Regardless of how Melinda felt, Sarah was disconcerted and desperate to get away from this man who stirred her feelings.

"Doctor, please don't let us keep you from your work." She placed a hand on Melinda's shoulder to stake out her territory. "I'm sure you're busy."

"Actually, my next lecture isn't until tonight. I was headed out to lunch when I overheard your daughter and stopped to chat."

"And educate," Sarah added.

"Habit. I am a professor, after all." He shrugged, a look of embarrassment crossing his face. His eyes crinkled again. "I hope I didn't annoy you. That wasn't my intention."

Melinda tugged on his jacket hem. "What else do you know? Have you ever dug up any fossils? What's it like?"

Before he could answer, his stomach growled as

though he had a tiny dinosaur hidden beneath his shirt. Sarah took the opportunity to pull Melinda back against her, holding her firmly in place. It was time to end this odd interlude. "We're keeping you from your meal. I'm sorry."

"No need to be. Maybe I'll see you around." When he rubbed the top of Melinda's head, his fingers brushed against Sarah's abdomen and sent her heart leaping to her throat. "I'm always interested in guiding up-and-coming paleontologists. And their parents." He lifted his gaze to Sarah, and she froze, unable to tear her eyes from the question in his.

Melinda grabbed his hand with both of hers and held on to him as if her life depended on it. "You can't leave. Not yet. I want to talk to you some more."

"Melinda." Sarah tried unsuccessfully to separate their hands. "I'm sorry, Doctor."

Duncan made no effort to free himself and gave Sarah a wide grin. "You seem to say you're sorry a lot. Why don't you say 'yes' instead?"

"Yes?" She tipped her head to one side and felt the scrunchie slip from her hair at the movement. "To what?"

"To my invitation to join me for lunch. We can eat in the Atrium Café downstairs."

"Oh, but—"

"Please, Mommy?" Melinda turned her brown-eyed-puppy-dog gaze on Sarah, who squatted down to pick up the scrunchie from the floor in an effort to avoid the issue.

She stood slowly and twisted her hair back into a knot. When she finally looked at the man opposite her, she saw amusement dancing in his eyes—along with attraction and a challenge.

"Repeat after me, Mrs. Kirkman. 'Yes.'"

The doctor held on to Melinda's hand while she danced in place. He extended his free hand toward Sarah, and she knew she was outgunned. If she were being honest, she'd admit that she wanted to spend more time with the doctor as well.

She sighed and placed her hand in his. "Yes."

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The next few hours passed by in a blur. Sarah tried to keep up with her daughter and the doctor while they carried on an incredible, and confusing, conversation. She was amazed at how much her daughter knew about dinosaurs and the time period they populated. Melinda held her own pretty well with Doctor MacPherson.

After they'd finished lunch, Duncan offered to take them on a guided tour of the museum. Sarah agreed, because it would make Melinda's day far richer. And, she admitted to herself, she wasn't quite ready to say goodbye.

She found herself relaxing in his presence and no longer jumped at the little touches he bestowed. In fact, she found herself looking forward to them: a hand on her waist to guide her down the corridor or on her shoulder to bring her attention to a particular display.

Each spot still burned, and she could only imagine how she would respond if there hadn't been clothing between her skin and his.

As they finished with the first floor, Duncan glanced at his watch and shook his head. "Time for me to go, I'm afraid."

"Oh." Melinda's one word held a wealth of sorrow.

Sarah said nothing, but wanted to grab on to this moment forever. "You've been so kind, Doctor."

He reached out with a finger and brushed her jaw. "It's Duncan, remember?"

She closed her eyes and stored away the memory of that touch, the first intentional one he'd made. "Duncan. Thank you for taking this time with us."

"I did it for me as well, Sarah. You and Melinda are a joy to be with." His intent gaze heated her skin, and she knew she blushed. "I enjoyed every minute. In fact..." He reached inside his jacket and rooted around in his pockets until he found what he looked for. "Ta da!" He waved some bits of paper, a huge smile on his face.

"What's that, Doctor Duncan?" Melinda jumped in the air, trying to reach the items he held just out of reach, giggling the entire time.

"Tickets for my lecture and an event I have to attend. I'd love your company for a wee bit longer." Though he answered Melinda, his eyes were on Sarah.

She tried to hide the leap of excitement she felt at his words and turned her attention to her daughter. "Think you can stay awake that long, baby?"

"You're the one who's tired, Mommy. Not me."

"True. Then I guess we'd love to go."

"Fantastic." He held out the tickets, but when Sarah extended her hand, he took it with his free one. "You intrigue me, Sarah."

Flustered, Sarah said nothing in response. After a long moment, he placed the tickets in her hand.

"Thank you, Duncan."

He released Sarah's hand to put his own on Melinda's head, giving it a gentle rub. "It's a selfish act. I want to see you both again. Let me walk you to your motel?"

Sarah shook her head. "We're fine, and you're going to be late if you do."

"Then I'll see you tonight." He turned and walked away without a backward glance. Sarah watched until he disappeared around the corner.

"Mommy, let's go home and get ready." Melinda tugged on her arm. "Do we have enough time?"

"Over an hour, baby." They walked out the exit and back to their motel room.

Sarah had second thoughts about seeing the man again. Being around him had already stirred up too many conflicting emotions. Just remembering his laughter sent tingles dancing the jig up her spine—a sensation she hadn't felt since before the accident that took her husband from her.

It wasn't that she'd vowed to spend her life in mourning. At the urging of friends and family, Sarah had tried to date again, but not one first date had made her

want to try a second. Joe had set the bar too high. And yet this stranger...

Maybe it was his accent. American women were programmed to find accents sexy, she decided, thinking of Sean Connery. That must be it, since Duncan wasn't extraordinarily handsome. Oh, his face was appealing but not stunning. His blue eyes twinkled and were brilliant against his fair skin and black hair, hair that looked as if he'd run his fingers through it hundreds of times. It needed a trim, she thought with a half smile. Clearly, he needed someone to tend to the little details.

He knew she was widowed. Melinda had mentioned it that afternoon, and when the subject arose, he'd looked at Sarah and then her wedding ring. His eyes had narrowed thoughtfully before he'd returned his attention to her daughter.

Besides, he'd said he was booked on a flight home to Scotland in the morning. Obviously there was no future for them anyway. So why bother going tonight?

"Mommy, wear this one." Melinda shoved a black sheath at Sarah. It was a basic dress, one she always packed just in case. "And these." A pair of low-heeled black sandals joined the dress on the floral bedspread.

"What about you?"

Melinda smiled, and a tiny dimple—Joe's dimple—flashed in her cheek. "I'm wearing this." She held up a yellow sundress and leather sandals. "With my white sweater. It's going to be so much fun to see Doctor Duncan again. And we're going to be beautiful, Mommy."

Unexpected tears filled Sarah's eyes, and she leaned over to hug her daughter. *This* was why she was bothering to attend both functions tonight, to make good memories with Melinda. "You're always beautiful."

"Dr. Duncan said he wished he had a little girl just like me, remember? He sounds lonely, mama. Maybe we can make his night good for him."

Sarah nodded. Maybe they could.

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After Duncan's lecture, he escorted them to the Marriot for the fundraiser. Sarah strolled quietly down the sidewalk, Duncan and Melinda hand in hand beside her. Melinda was skipping, still full of energy despite the nearness of her usual bedtime, singing a counting song. Duncan joined in, his deep voice carrying a perpetual undercurrent of laughter. He was the happiest person Sarah had ever seen.

"We're here!" Melinda stepped through the front doors of the hotel and stopped dead at the sight of the enormous grand lobby. "Oh."

"Nothing like our motel, huh, baby?" Sarah smiled over the top of her daughter's head to share the moment with Duncan.

"Wait until you see the ballroom, lass, it's even grander than this." Duncan offered his elbow to Sarah, and she slipped her hand through the crook and rested her palm against his forearm. Even through the black tuxedo jacket, the warmth of his skin heated her fingertips, and she tingled at the contact.

They proffered their tickets to the woman sitting at a table just outside the door and headed inside. Duncan quickly found their assigned table and pulled a chair out for each of them. Melinda plopped into her seat and started playing with the ornately folded napkin in front of her. Sarah couldn't stop staring at the scene before her.

It was an impressive picture, like something out of a movie. The other guests were dressed in gowns and tuxedos, making Sarah feel self-conscious in her sturdy shoes and practical dress, even if she had spruced it up a bit with a scarf and cameo brooch. She was well outside her comfort zone.

As if sensing her uneasiness, Duncan leaned in and whispered, "You look gorgeous, don't worry." The caress of his breath on her ear caused an eruption of goose bumps down her arms, which she tried to erase by rubbing her arms roughly.

"Cold?" he asked. Before she could answer, he

shrugged off his jacket and draped it around her shoulders.

She pulled the lapels together and inhaled his scent, a deep breath that both soothed and stimulated her. "Thank you." She looked at him, wondering if her attraction to him showed. When the twinkle in his eyes darkened, she knew it must, and she wondered if he felt the same.

After dinner, the fundraising began in earnest. Sarah loved watching the auction best—silent, intent people who moved to the front rows to bid insane amounts of money on things they didn't need.

She and Melinda laughed together at some of the subtle gestures the oh-so-cool bidders used. Melinda hit it off with the other couple at the table, Dr. Jamie Phipps and her husband, Rick, both of whom Duncan knew well and who had three kids of their own.

"We're glad to see Duncan here with someone." Jamie smiled and patted the back of Sarah's hand. "He's been alone too long. Now go dance with the man and put him out of his misery."

"Ah, Jamie. You read my mind." He stood and held a hand out to Sarah. "Dance with me?"

Sarah's heart pounded in her throat at the thought of being held in those arms, even just for dancing. It was an easy decision. "Melinda, stay with the Phipps for a minute, okay?"

"Yes, Mommy." She scooted her chair closer to Rick and proceeded to draw tic-tac-toe playing boards on a paper napkin.

Sarah smiled, feeling safe leaving her daughter with the couple at their table for a few minutes. She didn't, however, feel so safe about dancing with this man who perplexed her so much.

Duncan took her hand and guided her to the crowded floor. The band started a song that sounded like something from the forties as Duncan turned her into his arms. Her heart did a flip-flop and landed firmly in her



throat when she realized how perfectly her body fit to his.

He was an exceptional dancer and only chuckled when she stumbled against him now and then, or trod on his toes. Joe hadn't had a bit of rhythm in his body, so dancing wasn't something she'd indulged in for the past decade. She was sorely out of practice.

Nervous, she blurted the first thing she thought of. "My husband couldn't dance. I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize, Sarah. My toes are fine." His fingers caressed the small of her back. "You miss him."

It was a statement, not a question, but Sarah felt obligated to answer. "Sometimes it seems as though he's just around the corner, and if I turn it, I'll see him again."

"How long has he been gone?"

"Three years. It's getting easier." Easier by the moment, if the goose bumps and butterflies were any indication.

"Good."

The music slowed further, and Duncan's steps began to sway. She dropped her head to his chest, surprised to hear the speed of his heart when, outwardly, he seemed so calm. She freed one hand and laid it on his chest, the pounding beneath it calming her nerves somehow.

He reached between them and covered her hand and held it against him and then laughed softly. "I'm nervous."

"Why?" The word was a breath of air.

"I can't remember the last time I met someone who affected me the way you do."

She looked away, terrified to respond to this man, but unable not to. "Duncan, you're leaving tomorrow."

"And for the first time, I'm not missing home." He danced her to a far corner of the room. "Sarah?"

She lifted a hand to his cheek. "Oh, Duncan, I feel it too. But you're leaving, and I'm going home to Boston."

He dropped his forehead to rest against hers, and they stood, silent and still, for an endless moment. The band struck up a lively tune, startling them, and he lifted

his head to look at her. "Why don't I walk you back to your motel?"

Sarah fought the tears that threatened. "I think that would be a good idea."

They gathered Melinda and started on the short walk back to the motel. Melinda was finally starting to wind down, and Duncan cradled her drowsy body against his chest for the trip. Sarah watched as Melinda snuggled into his embrace, trusting that he would keep her safe. A part of her wished it was Joe holding her daughter. Joe that she felt this desire for. She shouldn't be burning for another man the way she did.

She let Duncan into her motel room, and he laid Melinda gently down on one of the beds. She put a finger against her lips, pulled him back out the door and closed it quietly behind them.

"Thanks for a wonderful night, Duncan. Melinda and I will never forget it."

"Neither will I, Sarah." His usually cheerful eyes were sad, and it tugged at Sarah's heart. "Nor will I forget you."

"Oh, Duncan."

"One kiss, Sarah? To say goodbye?" He brushed her hair back from her face, and she nodded. What else could she do?

Her eyelids fluttered closed when he dipped his head to kiss her softly, a brief breath of a caress. She hardly had a chance to register the touch of his lips before he pulled away.

She kept her eyes closed, not wanting to see him walk away. After a moment she opened them, expecting to be alone in the hallway. She wasn't. Duncan stood a few feet away with his back to her, unmoving.

"Duncan?"

"I've never wanted to stay in America, Sarah, as many times as I've been here. Scotland is my home, and my heart tugs me in that direction. How is it that, after only a few hours with you, my heart is torn in two for the

first time?"

"I wish I could ask you to stay, but I can't," Sarah said. "That wouldn't be fair to either of us."

He marched to her side, grasped her arms and yanked her to him. "This is what's not fair." He sandwiched her between his long, hard body and the wall, crushing her lips beneath his own. He caught her startled gasp with his mouth and smothered the sound, desperation and desire evident in every move.

Sarah grabbed hold of him, not certain her legs would support her another moment. She drowned in his kiss, unable to breathe, to think. She responded move for move, her tongue wildly mating with his, pressing closer and closer still, desperate to somehow become part of him.

When she thought she could stand no more, he pulled away and ran shaking fingers through his hair. She slumped backward against the wall, then slowly slid down to sit on the floor.

The door to Sarah's motel room opened, and Melinda peeked out. "Mommy? Are you okay?"

"Fine, baby, just taking a rest." Sarah hoped her voice didn't sound as unsteady as she felt. "Did we wake you up?"

"Nope. I had to pee." She wandered over and plopped herself down into Sarah's lap, snuggling close.

"Honey, Doctor Duncan needs to leave." Sarah wished her stomach didn't feel like a stone dropping to her toes at those words. "Do you want to say goodbye?"

Suddenly energized, Melinda scrambled out of Sarah's lap and leaped at Duncan, who caught her awkwardly. "You can't go now." She threw her arms around his throat in a stranglehold. "Not now that we finally found you."

"Ah, lassie, I'm afraid I have to." Duncan pressed a kiss onto her soft blond hair. "But I'll surely miss you both."

"Will you call sometime? Can I send you drawings? Can we come visit you?"

Duncan's blue eyes peered sharply over the top of Melinda's head, caught Sarah's gaze and held it. "My answer is 'aye' to all of your questions, and if you let me go for a wee moment, I'll give you my address. I would love to keep in touch." He paused and set Melinda down. "Now that I've finally found you."

He reached inside his jacket and produced a pen and a business card.

He scribbled on the back of the card and handed it to Melinda, who pressed it to her heart.

"One for Mommy, too, in case I lose mine? And, Mommy, give him ours. Wait! I'll get some paper."

She dashed into the room and back again before Sarah could draw a breath. Was it wise to give her address to a man who was—essentially—a stranger to them? Was it any wiser that she seemed to have given him her heart? How could this have happened? *Oh, Joe, can you ever forgive me?* She gave her ring a twist before taking the pad of paper from Melinda. Sarah wrote down their address and phone number. Her fingers went numb from holding the pen so tightly. It suddenly felt like goodbye, and it was horrible.

Melinda took the information and drew a smiley face and her name below Sarah's writing before tearing it off and handing it to Duncan. He glanced at it and grinned, folding it and making a show of placing it carefully in his wallet. "I'll treasure it, my wee dearling, and write as soon as I'm home."

"Oh, Doctor Duncan, I'll miss you." Melinda stood in front of him, her face wet with tears, until she spun around and dashed into the room. The door slammed behind her. Her sobs increased in volume and could easily be heard in the corridor.

"What about you, Sarah? Will you be missing me then?" Duncan held out a hand to help Sarah to her feet.

"You know I will, but this is crazy. We'll be thousands of miles and an ocean apart."

He slid his hands up and down her arms before

embracing her. "You'll be right here, always." He pressed a kiss on the top of her head, on her cheeks, and finally on her lips where she tasted salt—whether from her tears or his, she didn't know. "I need to go now, or I'll not leave at all."

He let her go so suddenly that she swayed. He strode down the hallway to the exit and disappeared through the door.

She hadn't even said goodbye.

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"Help me put the angel on, Mommy." Melinda stretched as high as she could from the step stool but still couldn't reach the top of the spruce tree. Sarah gave her a boost, thinking that she wouldn't be able to lift her rapidly growing daughter much longer. She caught sight of the white circle on her ring finger, pale skin left behind when she'd removed her wedding ring the month before.

Melinda clapped her hands and clambered down off the stool. "The lights, Mommy! Turn them on!"

Christmas music played in the background as Sarah plugged in the lights to the tree. Nothing happened. She dropped her chin to her chest and wished for the umpteenth time that she wasn't alone anymore. It had always been Joe's job to take care of the Christmas lights.

Today was the day after Thanksgiving, and the official start of the holiday season. Tomorrow she'd put her Christmas cards in the mail and mark it off her to-do list. One less thing to think about, making room in her brain to think about Duncan even more.

As if she could forget him. As if he'd let her.

He called once a week, right at Melinda's bed time. Melinda talked to him for a few minutes before she crawled under the covers and listened to him read her a story, and then Sarah got him for the next hour. She could only imagine the size of his phone bill.

He would be calling tonight, and the thought made her pulse leap. Three months since they'd met, since they'd spent their meager hours together, and she missed

him more now than she had then.

When the phone rang right on time, Melinda ran to grab it first. "Duncan!" Her daughter didn't even check the caller ID, so certain was she that it would be him keeping his weekly promise to her. He'd never disappointed them, except in the beginning when he flew back to Scotland.

Sarah cursed the fates that introduced her to a man she could love—something she hadn't expected after Joe died—and then snatched him away. She didn't think she could stand it much longer. She either needed to break things off or move to Scotland and be with him.

Duncan said Scotland was a beautiful country, and Sarah had purchased books about it, had seen enough photos from Duncan to know it was true. She'd all but made up her mind to go and only waited for an invitation from Duncan and a sign that Joe was okay with her moving on without him.

The buzz of Melinda's voice in the background soothed her nerves, and she tried to keep herself calm even though she was dying to talk to him again. To touch him again. She missed touching him so much, missed the comfort in his embrace, and the heat. The phone calls couldn't compensate for the miles between them.

"Mommy," Melinda pushed the phone at her, making her jump. "Duncan needs to talk to you."

Surprised to get the phone so soon, she put the receiver to her ear and said, "Duncan? Is anything wrong? You didn't read your story to Melinda yet."

"Actually, something *is* wrong. Do you know how blasted hard it is to find a cab from Logan Airport on the busiest traveling day of the year?"

"What?" Her brain scrambled to process his words.

"Can you come pick me up?"

"What? When? You're here? For how long?"

"Come get me, darling. I'm here right now." Duncan's low laughter sent shivers up her spine. "And I'll stay as long as you want me."

"Want you?" She wanted him more than anything else, didn't he know that? Why couldn't she say the words?

"I've been offered a new job teaching at a college outside Boston. Do you think I should accept?"

"What?" Oh, God, why couldn't she talk?

"I'm here to stay, Sarah. Come get me if you want me. I'll be waiting near the baggage claim in Terminal C. If you're not here in a couple of hours, I'll know your decision." He hung up, leaving her speechless.

Here. Duncan was here.

He was home.

*Oh, Joe, what should I do?*

"Mommy." Melinda's voice was a sigh. "Look."

Sarah turned and stood, stunned. Hundreds of blinking white stars, previously without life, flashed on the Christmas tree. Sarah closed her eyes, relief and love flooding her system. *Thanks, Joe.*

She ran for her keys.