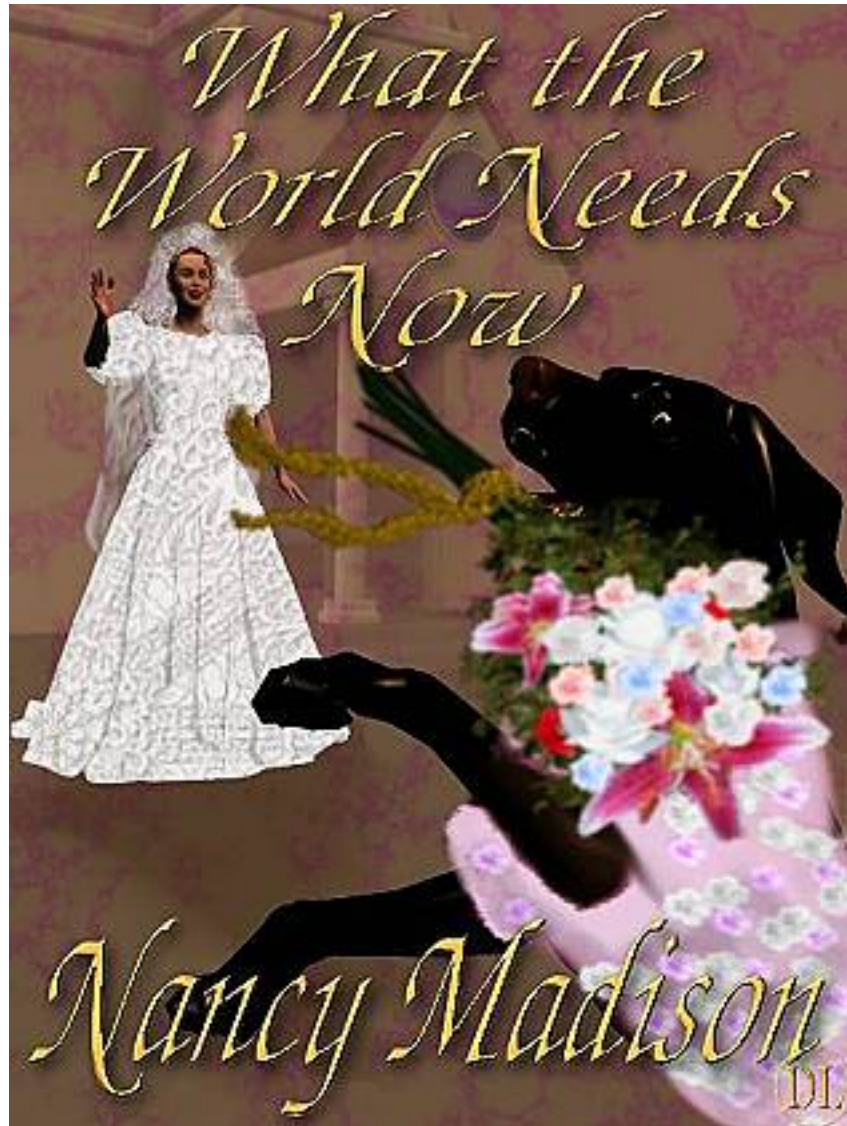


WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS NOW



Nancy Madison

*To my husband Walker,
still my knight in shining armor.*

CHAPTER ONE

"Damn it, woman. No self-respecting male pays for his ex-wife's honeymoon with another man." Jake Malone's temper soared, pushed to the limits of his endurance by Rhonda's call.

Glancing at the heaps of projects stacked around his office that June morning, a wave of resentment hit him. His ex-wife might have nothing better to do than talking on the phone but he did.

"You expect too much. Don't I already cover all of your expenses?" Without waiting for her answer, he continued. "I even pay for your sculptured fingernails."

Now Rhonda wanted Jake to subsidize her elopement with a man who'd picked her up at the grocery store. Freddy Benton wore tight designer jeans and was twenty-five years old, ten years younger than Rhonda. This Freddy also claimed to be a film producer. Some producer, with one lousy cat food commercial to his credit.

"If I'd known you'd be so hostile, I wouldn't have called you in the first place." Rhonda sniffed into the phone. "I should just hang up."

Didn't he wish. From his desk Jake picked up a picture of a little girl, their twelve-year-old daughter Deb. He took a deep breath. "It's too bad Freddy's short of funds. He shouldn't promise you a honeymoon in Spain if he can't afford the trip."

In a way it was partly his fault. If their marriage hadn't failed, Rhonda wouldn't be trying to find happiness with another man. With that in mind Jake softened his tone and offered a compromise. "There's one way I can help. If you haven't already made other arrangements for Deb, I'll keep her while you're in Spain."

No sooner did the words leave his lips than he had second thoughts. How could he keep their daughter? With two new client companies and two more pending, he was already working sixty to seventy hours a week. Maybe if he stopped taking time for meals and didn't sleep, he'd have enough time to do everything?

"If Freddy's income isn't enough to support you once you're married, you might be able to get a job with the school system." Rhonda hadn't worked since Deb was born. She had a college degree but

education was no good without motivation.

During their marriage if he even hinted that she might find another teaching position, Rhonda became ill and had to go to bed.

"I'm not like you, Jake," she said tersely. "Just because you're a work horse doesn't mean I have to be one."

All at once the light dimmed in his office, the piles of paper on his desk and credenza seemed to grow taller until they loomed around him. He felt hemmed in on all sides.

How he longed for the days before their marriage. At that moment Jake remembered the old wooden carousel horse Deb used to ride at the State Fair. A woebegone creature with chipped paint, it was doomed to repeat the same monotonous circle until beyond repair and junked.

"How about Napoleon? Can you keep him, too?" Rhonda referred to the family Pekinese.

"I suppose. Unless you want to drop him off at the kennel."

"Well, if you must know...they said not to bring him back."

"Why, for pete's sake?" Rhonda had a knack of creating a problem where none existed. And her problems soon became his since she always expected Jake to provide the perfect solution. What was it this time? Did she forget to pay the vet's bills?

"Napoleon's been acting so peculiar I took him to see a pet psychiatrist," she said.

"You're kidding." Some shrinks specialized in treating the neurotic pets of the rich. He had a good job but was far from being a millionaire.

"No, he's been quite nervous since you left." Though she didn't come right out and blame him, her tone implied the dog's condition was all Jake's fault. He had filed for divorce though it was by mutual agreement.

They'd married when Rhonda found she was expecting Deb, and they'd stayed together for twelve years because of Deb. They didn't love each other but both adored their child.

"Nervous? In what way?" Though he'd learned long ago that it was wiser to ignore her unspoken accusations, a sense of dread seeped into Jake's heart. What could a Pekinese do to warrant visits to a shrink?

"He's started biting everybody," Rhonda explained. Her voice broke and she sobbed into the phone. "Jake, Napoleon even bit my Freddy."

"Maybe he doesn't like Freddy's designer jeans." Jake chuckled as he imagined a pint-size dog biting the gaunt redhead.

"It isn't funny," she said. "Doctor Gandhi thinks the problem goes back to Napoleon's childhood, I mean puppyhood. I don't know about that, but the post office has stopped delivering mail to our house."

"Don't tell me, let me guess. Napoleon bit the mailman?"

"Just a nip."

"Okay." He sighed. "I'll stop by for Deb and Napoleon this Friday and keep them until you get back. How long will you be in Spain?"

"Oh, just two weeks." Now that he'd taken charge of her problems, Rhonda sounded almost carefree. "We're staying at a resort on the beach. And while we're there, Freddy plans to see a man about doing a film."

Following the call, Jake tried to concentrate on a tax problem troubling the owner of a chain of nursing homes. The conversation with Rhonda had broken his line of thought.

After several attempts to focus on his work, he eased back in his desk chair, rubbing his tired eyes. The corners of his mouth turned up in a grin at the image of Freddy being pursued by Napoleon, a five pound monster.

* * *

That week Friday rolled around sooner than Jake would've liked. Somebody ought to invent a week with more days.

Leaving work Friday evening he joined the commuter traffic headed west on I-30, exiting thirty minutes later onto an Arlington thoroughfare. A few blocks later he turned into an attractive neighborhood of older homes.

The family home he'd bought five years ago was now occupied by Rhonda, Deb and Napoleon, and sometimes if Jake's suspicions were correct, Freddy, though Rhonda would never admit it.

Parking his Volvo in the driveway, Jake crossed the well-manicured lawn then entered the two-story brick-and-frame Colonial.

Deb, their pigtailed, bespectacled daughter waited inside, suitcases stacked behind her in the hall.

"Hi hon." Eyeing the luggage, Jake gave her a quick hug. "Whoa. You're just staying at the condo for a couple of weeks. Don't tell me you need all of that stuff." At the sight of her trombone, Jake shuddered. Like her mother, Deb was tone deaf.

"Mom thinks I should practice every day." Deb's voice drooped. Bringing the musical instrument wasn't her idea.

"Tell you what," he whispered so Rhonda wouldn't hear from the next room, "why don't we just forget and leave it here?"

"That's fine with me, Dad." Her face brightening, Deb gave him a quick hug.

Rhonda walked into the room so Jake reassured her that Deb would be fine. "You know I wish you the best, Rhonda," he said. "You're sure about this guy?" He wasn't.

"I love him, Jake." She radiated happiness. "You'll like Freddy once you know him better."

He nodded, not wanting to cast a damper on her joy.

* * *

While Jake drove Deb and Napoleon to the condo, Napoleon perched on Jake's lap. The Pekinese remained quiet until other cars passed them, then he stood and barked.

Easing the little dog back onto his lap, Jake spoke to Deb. "What's this I hear about Napoleon? He's biting people?"

"Yeah. I think he misses you," his daughter said. She took Napoleon from her father, held him in her arms.

"I've missed you, Deb." Jake glanced over at his daughter. "Sorry we don't get to see each other much. With all of our group's new clients, I'm swamped."

"It's all right, Dad." She placed her hand over his for a moment before removing it to pat Napoleon.

What he told his daughter was no exaggeration. At the present all Jake did was work and he did his job so well, his boss, the Healthcare Tax Partner for the Dallas office, kept loading him down with new clients.

It'd been a long time since he'd taken Deb on a outing. Before his promotion, they used to go to a movie or roller- skating weekends.

"Now that school's out for the summer, I guess you and your mother are spending a lot of time together."

"When she's free. Mommy's clubs keep her busy." Deb frowned. "Do you know a good groomer we can call for Napoleon?"

"What happened to the one we've always used?"

"He nipped the lady's finger so we can't go back there."

"That doesn't sound like Napoleon." He didn't want their pet hurting anyone. And he sure didn't want to get sued. "Someone at my office was talking about a mobile service for pets the other day. They groom people's pets in their vans right in the customers' driveways. I'll call them and get Napoleon an appointment."

Jake reached over and ran his fingers through the Pekinese's shaggy fur. "We better do it soon while we can still find the dog. Right now Napoleon resembles a mound of fur that barks."

* * *

The next day, the condo telephone rang. Jake took one last gulp of coffee then grabbed the phone on the kitchen counter.

"I'm here to keep an appointment with Mr. Malone," a pleasant voice informed him.

Jake hit the buzzer allowing visitors to enter his security-minded community, then he walked down the hall to the front of the condo and opened the door. A neon blue van with the Happy Tails logo on its

sides passed through the open gates and parked in his driveway.

While scheduling an appointment with the grooming service, he'd tried to imagine the type of person the company would send, probably a mature adult, maybe a middle-aged woman working while her children attended school.

A teenager with a mane of dark hair, dressed in jeans, shirt and tired Reeboks, climbed from the van and marched up to his front doorstep. Jake's eyebrows rose.

If she noticed his surprise, the girl paid no attention. "A Jake Malone called our office about grooming his dog."

Her low tone was melodious and soothing. None of the females of his acquaintance soothed him when they spoke. Rhonda was the worst, her whine grated on his nerves like the twang of Country Western music.

"That's me. Do you help groom the dogs?"

"I'm the groomer." Her unpainted lips curved.

"Come on inside," He led her into his living room. "Where's your doggie?"

"Just a moment. I'll get him." Jake stepped into the next room and came back with the Pekinese in his arms. "There's one thing you need to know. Napoleon's been biting people, not the family, just everybody else." Jake waited, expecting the girl to approach their family pet with caution.

With no hesitation she smiled and reached for the Pekinese.

Napoleon let her hold him, even snuggled into her arms.

"We'll get along just fine, won't we?" She kissed the dog's fuzzy little head.

From her seat on the stairs, Deb asked, "Dad, can I go and watch?"

"I don't think that's a good idea--."

"Sure, come with us." The young woman cut him off. Like one unit, the girls and Napoleon moved toward the door.

"Wait," he called after them. "What's your name, Miss?"

"Carly Anderson, just call me Carly," she said. Her smile brought out a dimple in her cheek.

Braced for a scream or a bark, Jake stationed himself on his living room sofa, opened his briefcase, spreading papers he'd brought home on the coffee table. The quiet lulled him until he relaxed and was absorbed in his work when the door opened again.

Napoleon strutted through the doorway followed by the two girls. Jake couldn't get over the change in his pet. Well groomed, the little dog seemed calmer.

"I don't know what you did but he looks great. I hope he wasn't too much trouble." Now she'll complain Napoleon nipped her, probably charge me extra.

"Nope, he's a sweetheart." Carly called the Pekinese and he responded by bringing her his favorite chew toy, a large green rubber figure resembling a thin man.

Did dogs have fantasies? Maybe Napoleon pretended the toy was Freddy. "Thanks. We'll call you again," Jake said, paying the girl. Pleased she had been able to work with Napoleon, he even tried to give her a tip but she refused it.

The postman came into view, making his rounds. Seeing him stop next door, Jake held his breath. Would the dog lunge for the mail carrier's leg?

Napoleon's fur bristled and he growled until Carly knelt and spoke to him in a low voice.

Though Jake couldn't hear what she said to Napoleon, he could almost feel the canine's muscles relax. "I don't know what your magic is, but if we could bottle it, we'd make a fortune."

"No magic. I think he's been missing you. Do you see him often?" Carly gazed in Jake's direction.

Her bright brown eyes seemed to peer into his very soul. And her question could have referred to Deb, not the Pekinese.

"Sometimes," he said. She made him uneasy. "Well, I'm sure you have other appointments so we won't keep you. Thanks again." Jake stood in the open doorway, watching Carly drive away.

For some reason, she piqued his curiosity. It was a pity so many young women let themselves go. She'd never get a boyfriend looking like that.

CHAPTER TWO

Driving back to her office, Carly thought about Jake Malone. In her line of work, she met a lot of people and she could truthfully say she'd never met a man who seemed so alone.

Carly thanked her lucky stars for a life that brimmed over with activities. With her busy schedule, there was never time for loneliness.

She loved her mobile pet grooming business. In a way it was her child. Years ago, she'd come up with the idea of providing a service to pet owners who either didn't have the time to take their pets to a groomer, or who lacked transportation to get there.

Along the way, she'd taken the time to grow the business, bit by bit. Too many new small enterprises floundered because they tried to expand too fast. But her work wasn't her life.

With a large, loving family, of which she was the baby, plus a circle of friends, she was so busy she

had no time for loneliness. A week didn't pass that her brother or sisters didn't call her to babysit, or a friend would need a lift to work due to a broken car or help in preparing for a party.

Jake had brightened a bit while she was there, although from the lines in his handsome face and his weary manner he could've been carrying the world on his shoulders. Even on that beautiful Saturday afternoon, he'd buried himself in work. Was his job that all-important? How could it be with a sweet daughter like Deb? Napoleon was a love, too.

While Carly groomed Napoleon, Deb had confided that her parents were divorced and her mother was flying to Spain this weekend to get married again. The girl didn't sound enthusiastic about the guy named Freddy soon to be her new stepfather. To Carly's sympathetic ear it sounded like both Deb and Napoleon would like to see more of Jake than they did.

The moment she walked into her office, Jennifer, a large, tenderhearted woman who handled the grooming appointments, sighed with relief. A well-dressed younger woman Carly didn't recognize got to her feet.

"Thank goodness you're here. This is Paula Alford from the Arlington News," Jennifer said. "Today's the day you arranged for her to interview you for her paper."

"I'm so sorry." Carly shook the reporter's hand. "We've been flooded with requests for appointments. And with several employees home sick with the flu, I've been playing 'catch up.' I guess I've had too much on my mind because I totally forgot our appointment. I hope you're not offended."

"Goodness no. I just have a few questions. I'm interviewing several people for a series of articles on occupations that involve animals."

"I see."

Before they could walk away, Jennifer spoke to Carly. "Thank goodness you didn't catch the flu. The girls are dropping like flies." Jennifer paused to take a call then turned back to Carly. "I don't suppose you could take a few more appointments this afternoon? It'd be a big help."

"I can handle a couple, then I've got to run over to the school and see how they're doing."

While she readied a grooming van, Carly talked to the reporter who stood, notebook in hand.

"To start, tell me how you got into this business."

"Let's say I had an idea when I was a girl."

"I understand you have several related businesses?"

"Yes. We have a thriving pet grooming school plus the mobile grooming service consisting of six vans, almost always booked. I've also started dog obedience classes. And when I have the time, I write a monthly column in the Humane Society's newsletter."

"You're quite young. Did you start all this

"No, I never attended college, just took courses to learn grooming, and later a dog obedience course."

"I see." Paula paused to write something on her pad. "If I may ask, are your parents in this line of work?"

Carly smiled. "Well, no. My mother's a pediatrician and my father teaches European History at Texas Christian University."

"What did they think of your going into a business so different from their own professions?"

"At first they were surprised, then they supported me all the way. They've been wonderful."

"You come from a large family, I believe?"

"Yes, I have three older sisters and a brother." As always it pleased Carly to talk about her talented family. "One sister's a trial lawyer, one's a school teacher, and the third has her own dental practice. My brother George earned a MBA then got tired of corporate life and wanted to be his own boss."

"Studying the dry cleaning industry, he jumped at the chance to buy a dry cleaners business an elderly couple needed to sell. George has worked hard, building his clientele. Today he owns and operates a chain of dry cleaners." Carly was proud of her siblings, each successful in his or her own way.

"That's interesting, you're the only one of five siblings who didn't opt for a college education," Paula said. "If you don't mind my asking, how'd you manage that, coming from a family of professionals?"

Carly flushed. "Excuse me, but I feel I've earned the right to be considered a professional, too. Dogs are my profession. The past eight years, I've invested a lot of time and hard work in this field and it's paid off."

"Did your parents help you get started?"

"Yes, once I convinced them I knew what I wanted. Instead of forking out big bucks for college, I asked them to give me the chance to develop an idea. All I needed was one equipped pet grooming van and the necessary training."

"Talking to me, they realized I was determined so they did as I asked. Now they seem to be proud of me."

"From what I've seen, they have good reason to be," Paula concluded. "I recall reading about an honor you won last year. Would you tell me about it?"

"Yes. The local Chamber of Commerce gave me an award for being the city's Most Promising Young Entrepreneur."

"That's great, Carly." Paula closed her notebook then gazed her way, a twinkle in her eye. "I've asked lots of questions and you've been quite candid in your responses." She paused before adding, "if you don't mind, I'd like to ask one last question. This one's off the record."

Carly nodded. "All right. Go ahead." Now she'll ask how much money I earned last year.

"What about your personal life?" Paula seemed curious. "You're young, attractive, and it's clear you're a smart businesswoman. Just one thing's missing, no rings on your left hand. Is there a husband or boy friend in the background?"

"No, I just don't have the time."

The reporter left and Carly carried supplies to a van, preparing it for a grooming appointment.

Paula had asked if there was a man in her life. The truth was she'd never been in love. A busy schedule was her usual excuse for the lack of a serious involvement, but she knew better.

A romantic at heart, Carly had a dream. "Somewhere I believe there's a special man who'll need me as much as he loves me. And I'll know him right away because his touch will make me yearn." She blushed. She hadn't meant to speak out loud. Looking around, she was relieved to find no one there.

"Enough of that dreamy-eyed nonsense. Get moving."

She climbed in the driver's seat of the van and slammed the door. Driving across town, she talked to herself. "At least I have friends I've known since high school." Carly smiled and she added, "like Steve. He may be an oversized weight-lifter but I'm fond of him. Wish he'd stop pretending he's pining away from unrequited love. Everytime he teases me about getting that mythical engagement ring out of his safety deposit box and slipping it on my finger, I have to laugh. Oh, well. When you've known a guy as long as I've known Steve, I guess he's earned the right to tease me. One thing's sure. Everyone who knows Steve Burke knows he's a big kidder."

During the night Carly woke and wondered again about her dream. Was she fooling herself or was there really a man somewhere who needed her, a man who'd love her forever, a man whose life she'd fill?

* * *

Jake adjusted his schedule while Deb was staying with him. By leaving home an hour earlier and eating lunch at his desk, he managed to leave the office at a more reasonable hour. Some days he even got home in time to take Deb to the neighborhood pool for a swim before supper. Later, he'd work at his desk until late.

Deb tried her best to convince him she was almost a teenager and therefore mature enough to stay home alone all day while he was at work. Jake didn't agree. In a crisis, no matter how level-headed Deb was, to him she was still a little girl.

As if by magic, a co-worker solved his problem. Her mother, a Mrs. Crosby was at loose ends since she'd stopped working. She loved children, hers and everyone else's. Just retired from teaching elementary school, she wasn't ready for a rocking chair.

One visit with Mrs. Crosby convinced Jake she'd be a suitable companion for his child. The woman was a real jewel, a grandmother figure for Deb.

Jake's own mother, a woman who'd never quite recovered from her divorce when Jake was twelve, had no time or energy for her grandchild. And Deb's other grandmother was deceased, so his daughter was growing up without the tender loving care of a grandmother.

Mrs. Crosby soon treated Deb like one of her many well-loved grandchildren. The older lady came every day to keep Deb company while Jake was at work.

Not one to sit while there were chores, the older lady insisted on doing the laundry, grocery shopping and ironing Deb's dresses. Before she left, she even prepared their dinner.

Seated on the side of the pool with his feet in the water, Jake watched Deb playing with the other kids. He had to admit it was good to be away from work. Many nights he'd stayed at his desk until the night watchman made his rounds, once until dawn.

Jake glimpsed a neighbor's husband rushing into the pool grounds, apologizing for his tardiness. Hadn't he done that many times himself when he was married? No wonder Rhonda complained.

Deb waved and he waved back then watched her taking turns jumping off the diving board with the other kids. He enjoyed seeing a happy expression on his child's face. In the short time she'd been with him, Deb had made several friends.

"Dad? Daddy?" A soft voice broke into his reverie a few minutes later.

He turned his head. Deb stood before him, a petite tow-headed figure in a red tank suit, a pool of water forming at her feet.

"What? Oh, hello hon." He eyed his child, now tanned and smiling. What a comparison to the pale, unhappy girl he'd brought home with him a few days ago. This new Deb seemed to glow with good health and vitality.

Deb motioned to one of the children she'd been playing with in the pool. The chubby little brunette came and stood by Deb. "Dad, this is my friend Gloria."

"Hello Gloria, good to meet you."

"Mr. Malone, can Deb spend the night with me?"

"Ah, I don't know. Maybe I should meet your mother?" How would Rhonda have treated this situation? He knew the U.S. Tax Code and all of its ramifications, but topics like pajama parties were as alien to him as life on Mars.

"She's over there, the lady with the green polka dots."

Jake scanned the crowd of adults and children. He hadn't realized so many people lived in his gated condo community. Perhaps a neighbor brought guests.

At last he spotted a shapely blonde in a green two-piece bathing suit. With the children in tow, he walked in her direction.

She must have seen him walking toward her with the two girls in tow since she flashed a toothy smile. Jake was tempted to ask the name of her orthodontist. Deb's mother had informed him that their daughter's dentist recommended braces.

"Hello, I'm Jake Malone."

Chatting with Barbara Larson, Gloria's mother, he was relieved to learn that Barbara knew his ex-wife from a woman's club to which they both belonged. That was good news since he wasn't keen on Deb's spending the night with strangers.

Before he knew it, arrangements had been made for Deb to stay with the Larsons that night. Giving Barbara his home telephone number in case of emergency, he told Deb he'd pick her up next morning. She promised to be ready when he came for her.

The pool shut down and Jake's neighbors dispersed. An attractive young couple with a toddler hung back. What's wrong?

They both eyed him, smiled, he smiled back. The younger man hung back until his wife nudged him.

"Mister? We live over there." The guy who appeared in his early twenties pointed to a less prosperous neighborhood on the other side of the wall surrounding Jake's gated community.

"My wife and I hear people swimming and having fun over here every evening. It's hard for us since this's our first house and we can't afford a pool. Tonight we couldn't resist slipping over the wall," he said. His smile wavered.

Jake said, "It's okay. I won't turn you in." He'd been right. There were some nonresidents in the crowd of swimmers. He chatted with the young couple for a few minutes.

Taking charge of the situation as he was prone to do, he volunteered, "if you'd like to come and use the pool, you can use my membership number." He wrote it on a piece of paper and handed it to the younger man.

They exchanged names and the couple thanked him. The gratitude on their faces warmed him. A nice young family.

Once home, Jake switched on the lights. Napoleon jumped off the sofa and limped across the hardwood floor to greet him.

Kneeling, Jake examined the dog's paw but couldn't see anything wrong. When he released his pet, the dog limped away.

Better get someone to look at that paw. But who could he call? According to Deb, they were unwelcome at their vet's office since Napoleon developed the bad habit of biting people. Carly, the groomer came to mind. Napoleon had gotten along well with her.

Locating Happy Tails Grooming Service in the telephone directory, Jake called and left a message for them to contact him so he could set up an appointment.

Ten minutes later his phone rang. When the grooming service person asked his preference as to time, he explained he worked in Dallas during the week so it would have to be an early evening appointment or one on the weekend.

"We can work you in tomorrow. What about Saturday morning at 11 o'clock? Darlene is free then."

"Well, you see, it's like this," he said, feeling more than a little foolish. "I have a Pekinese who's not at ease with strangers and your Carly was so good with him last time, I'd sure like to have her come again."

There was a pause. "Hmmm . . . well, all right." The lady sounded surprised at his request. "I'll see if

she's available tomorrow."

Jake wondered how many hours Carly worked. "Is she a part-timer?" For some reason, he was curious about the girl.

"No, she's been full-time for years," the woman answered.

Did he imagine a smile in her voice? Jake hung up and returned to a tax shelters article that now seemed dull.

* * *

Saturday morning came and Jake walked over to the next block of condos to retrieve his daughter from her friend's home.

"Please come in." Greeting him at the door, Barbara smiled and led the way back to her kitchen. "I just made a fresh pot of coffee. You've got time for a cup, don't you?"

Coming inside, Jake had picked up the scent of fresh coffee brewing. There was also a plate of cookies on the counter. "Well, just for a few minutes. We've got a dog groomer coming and I don't want to miss her." He took his mug and followed Barbara to an attractive sunroom off the kitchen.

"I guess we're all new here since these condos were just constructed last year," he said, trying to make conversation. "Do you like living in your condo?"

"Well, it's an attractive neighborhood."

"Deb mentioned you're getting a divorce. I went that route last year so I can sympathize with what you're going through."

Barbara nodded. "I never thought it'd happen to us." She went on to say her husband, a commercial airline pilot, had taken early retirement to run his parents' ranch, then announced he no longer wanted to be married. Barbara was his second wife.

Jake nodded. What could he say? "I don't know if Deb mentioned why she's staying with me. Her mother's in Spain on her honeymoon with her new husband. They flew to Madrid and were married there."

"It's wonderful, your being willing to keep Deb while your ex-wife elopes with another man. There can't be many men who'd do what you're doing. It's admirable."

If she only knew how relieved he'd been to get out of that marriage. He'd filed for divorce but Rhonda and he parted by mutual consent, unlike Barbara and her husband.

Talking to Barbara, Jake surmised she was still reeling from her husband's unexpected wish to be single.

"With children, even if a marriage breaks up, both parents have a responsibility to be sure the kids don't suffer," he said.

"I wish all men had that attitude." Barbara sighed. "There must be a lot of wives going through

divorce who're having a hard time due to their husbands' misconduct and irresponsibility."

"I'm sure you're right," Jake replied. Reluctant to get into a lengthy discussion on divorce, he finished his coffee and set the mug on the table. Getting to his feet, he edged toward the door.

"Well, it was nice to meet you. Maybe your daughter can spend the night over at our place sometime."

Walking Deb home, Jake reminisced about the past. Deb's mother had become pregnant by accident. Not one to shirk responsibility, he'd married Rhonda.

Seven months later, he'd fallen in love with his tiny daughter the first time he held her. Both Jake and Rhonda had showered love on their child but there'd been no love between the two of them. They'd spent less and less time together until, after twelve years of marriage, they were more than ready to go their separate ways.

Though they were no longer married, he tried to maintain a friendly relationship with his ex-wife and to look out for her, steer her in the right direction. As a result, Rhonda still brought him her problems.

One meeting with Freddy had been enough to convince Jake the other man was a loser. The first chance he got, Jake warned Rhonda. Might as well have been talking to the wind. She'd made up her mind. And for once she wouldn't accept his advice.

She was hell bent on marrying Freddy in spite of knowing little about him.

A message from the grooming service waited on Jake's answering machine when he walked into the condo. Dialing the number, Jake soon connected with Carly.

"Hi there. You groomed our Pekinese the other day and I wondered if you'd take a look at one of his front paws? He's limping and won't let me near it."

"Sure." Carly answered in a lilting, slightly breathless voice. "How about two o'clock this afternoon?"

The hours flew by. Jake caught himself humming and stopped. Waiting for Carly, he shaved then rummaged through his closet for a fresh shirt. Finding a royal blue knit shirt he got for Father's Day last year, he slipped it on.

Jake examined his reflection in the bathroom mirror.

What was he thinking? It was just his dog's groomer. No big deal.

Men in their prime sometimes became foolish over younger women. What was the condition? Middle-age crazies, that's it. Ridiculous. Not at thirty-five. Jake shrugged.

There was that guy in Consulting Division last year. Low, Matt Low, wasn't it? Low went off the deep end over a Leggs saleswoman he met in a drug store. But he'd been in his mid-fifties and his wife's nickname was Broom Hilda.

He'd never become infatuated with this girl. Someone like Carly with her jeans and baggy shirts wouldn't appeal to him. Her main interests were probably dogs and dating pimply-faced boys who

worked in fast-food restaurants.

CHAPTER THREE

Carly found herself looking forward to her appointment with Napoleon. She parked the van at the gated community's entrance and dialed Jake's number, he answered and released the gate for her to enter.

Parking in his driveway, she scanned the nearby street and yards. No sign of Jake's daughter playing outside. Too bad. She'd taken a liking to Deb and had hoped she'd be there, too.

She rang the condo's doorbell and Jake opened the door.

Gazing at the tall blond, blue-eyed man dressed in a neat knit shirt and khakis, something fluttered deep inside Carly.

Too bad she hadn't taken time to fix her hair. It had a natural curl and was almost impossible to control. Still, she could've braided it instead of letting it cascade down her back. She glanced at her outfit, loose shirt and shabby jeans with a patch over one knee. She could've worn a neat pair of slacks and a top to work. Why didn't she?

Come on. There was no way to know she'd see Jake Malone today. Besides, it was Saturday. She was wearing what she always wore to work Saturdays. No reason to dress up for customers, including Jake Malone.

No telling when a dog would droll on her or worse. Why risk her good clothes while filling in for one of her groomers?

Napoleon limped into the room and barked excitedly as soon as he saw her. Before she could pick him up, Jake asked, "Do you mind if I come along and watch you work?"

At that point she almost panicked. Carly took a deep breath. "Of course not, if you aren't claustrophobic. There isn't much room in the van." Of course, he just wanted to see what she'd find wrong with his dog's paw. She walked ahead of him, climbed into her place of business.

"You're right," Jake remarked a few minutes later. He'd managed to tuck himself into a relatively small space. "This wouldn't appeal to people who can't stand close quarters."

Turning to give Napoleon her full attention, Carly couldn't help but be aware of Jake standing behind her. His aftershave cologne reminded her of his presence.

At one point she glanced over her shoulder. An unknown expression flickered cross his face then was gone.

"Look here," she said, holding Napoleon's paw.

Jake shifted his attention to the Pekinese, though from his expression, he didn't seem to notice

anything out of place.

"Hold on, fellow," she crooned to the little dog while wiping his paw with an antiseptic pad. Being as gentle as possible, Carly probed just beneath the surface of the skin with a tiny pair of tweezers. Napoleon whimpered once but offered no resistance.

A moment later she stood back, holding something on the palm of her outstretched hand. "That's what's been hurting him."

Jake stared at a small brown object. "What is it?"

"Dunno." She touched it with the tip of her finger. "It's prickly like a thorn, maybe it fell off a shrub. You wouldn't happen to have rose bushes in your yard, would you?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. The previous owners planted a few bushes before putting the condo up for sale when the husband's company transferred him to the West Coast. I haven't had time to do any gardening. To keep this from happening again, I'll get rid of them."

"Poor baby." Carly cuddled Napoleon to her chest. For one brief moment she wondered how it would feel to hold this attractive stranger in the same position. Her cheeks flushed and she hoped Jake hadn't noticed.

Out of the blue a disturbing thought occurred to her. Had he mistaken her for a younger girl? It wouldn't be the first time that'd happened. She'd been told more than once that she looked like a kid dressed casually and wearing no makeup .

Once Carly placed a bandage on the sore paw and let Napoleon out of the van the appointment was over, too soon for her liking.

Jake spoke up. "I don't suppose you have time to come in for a glass of iced tea or a soft drink?"

Tempted to accept his invitation, an unexpected shyness made her decline. "That's kind of you but I have to get back to work now. Maybe some other time?"

"Sure." Climbing from the van, Jake pulled out his wallet. "What do I owe you?"

"Nothing. It's payment enough to see that." She motioned to Napoleon running around the yard, barking at an unknowing squirrel who'd strayed into his private domain.

* * *

Before he knew it, Carly climbed into the driver's seat and slammed the door. The van disappeared down the street and Jake wondered why he'd invited the young woman into his home. He had to admit, for some reason she appealed to him. Was it because she was so natural compared to the women of his acquaintance?

To take his mind off Carly, he focused on Napoleon and his biting problem. What had caused a previously sweet-dispositioned Pekinese to start biting people?

Jake recalled seeing Napoleon station himself in the back yard where he'd stare through a hole in the

fence at the neighbor's female Pekinese. The other dog ignored him.

It might be a good idea to buy another dog to be a companion for Napoleon, though that could prove expensive, more dog food, trips to the vet, and maybe even more grooming bills. And more visits from Carly. Amazed at how his thoughts ran away with him, Jake shook his head.

Time he started dating again. Gloria's mother Barbara, the soon-to-be divorcee down the street, was one possibility. His instincts told him she might be willing to go out with him.

Jake had misgivings about that idea. It was possible his desire for a casual relationship might be misinterpreted and appear more serious to a woman in her thirties still recovering from her husband's rejection.

What the heck did he want, anyway? After one unhappy marriage he should've learned that inviting females into his life was asking for trouble.

Deb returned from playing at Gloria's and Jake told her that she'd missed Carly. The girl's shoulders drooped.

"You'll see her next time she comes." He tried to placate his unhappy daughter.

Deb pouted. "Dad, I wish you'd called me. You know how much I liked Carly the day she groomed Napoleon. Now it'll be weeks before she comes again." She paused and gazed at him, a hopeful expression slid across her youthful features. "Could we have her over for a cookout?"

"Well, I don't know about that." How did he get himself in these situations, anyway?

Deb stared at him, her heart in her eyes. "Please."

"If you really think she'd come, I suppose we could invite her over for supper sometime," he conceded, not mentioning a definite date. For some reason Jake found it a good idea and was glad Deb had mentioned it.

"Tomorrow night?" Her unhappy eyes begged him.

It appeared Deb was determined. Oh, well. Might as well call the groomer. Looking up the Happy Trails telephone number, Jake reminded himself that this must be a difficult time for his little girl with her mother on another continent, married to a jerk who'd be Deb's stepfather.

Though he was making this call for Deb, Jake's stomach knotted while he waited for the grooming service to answer. Would they give him Carly's home telephone?

The woman answering the phone at Happy Trails balked at giving out an employee's personal information. But she promised to pass Carly the message. It would be up to Carly whether or not she got in touch with him.

He waited by the phone, trying not to seem anxious.

Fifteen minutes later he'd begun thinking she wouldn't call. Deb's unhappy face mirrored his own inner disappointment.

Jake had turned to go into his study and work on a report he'd brought home from the office. The

phone rang.

"Hello. This's Carly." Her soft voice sounded worried. "Nothing's happened to Napoleon, has it?"

"No, he's fine. Deb was disappointed she didn't see you." Carly didn't reply right away so he hastened to explain the reason for his call. "As a matter of fact, I, I mean we wondered if you'd like to come and have a cookout with us tomorrow night?"

"Well, that's nice of you, but I don't know" Her voice trailed off.

"We'd really like for you to come," he persisted.

"I've always made it a rule not to socialize with my clients," she replied firmly. "If I do, the others would think it's all right--."

Jake interrupted her in mid-sentence. "I don't see how what you do away from your job would make a difference to your company." Her attitude puzzled him since she was one of the employees, not the owner of the company. Aware that Deb would be disappointed if Carly didn't come, Jake coaxed her. "Please come. We'd both like to have you share our cookout."

Well, . . . all right," she answered at last. "What can I bring to help you?"

Pleased that she hadn't turned him down, Jake reassured Carly the meal would be simple, just steaks and salad plus a dessert. There was no need for her to contribute anything. "Don't dress up, it'll just be three of us." He imagined she'd come in jeans and a shirt.

Mission accomplished, he hurried around, picking up, straightening his previously immaculate home. One twelve-year-old's games, books and clothes sure could mess up things fast. He got Deb to carry an armload of her stuff to her room.

At one point, Deb stopped and glanced at him.

"Good grief," she said, "Carly's just the person who grooms Napoleon. You're acting like you're getting ready for a date."

"I just want things to look nice. I know you liked Carly the day you met her," he said. Where was this going? He needed to stand back and gain some perspective.

Did he want to pursue Carly? Of course not. Still, he couldn't deny he looked forward to seeing her again.

Next afternoon he checked the marinating steaks then took a quick shower, found himself humming again.

The doorbell rang at seven and he raced Deb to the door. Flinging it open, his jaw dropped in astonishment.

An attractive young woman stood outside. His eyes took in the dark hair coiled on top of her head, big brown eyes and a full, sensuous mouth. Jake felt awed being close to so much beauty. Swallowing hard, he struggled to speak.

"Hello, can I help you, Miss?"

"Why so formal?" A familiar voice informed him he wasn't talking to a stranger. "It's just me, Carly."

He got the distinct impression she was pleased. Did she think he wouldn't know who she was?

"I must confess I didn't recognize you for a minute. You sure look nice." His glance sweeping her pink linen shirt and matching slacks, Jake was pleased to see her flush.

"Oh." She glanced at her outfit. "Guess I do look a little different. You don't mind, do you?" She smiled.

"Of course not. Come on in," he said, opening the door wider so she could step inside.

Carly walked into his living room. As she passed him, he caught a whiff of a flowery fragrance. Inhaling, he identified jasmine, maybe roses. The day she'd removed the thorn from Napoleon's paw, he'd picked up the homey scent of baby powder.

Deb ran downstairs and gave their guest a big hug. Carly didn't seem to mind. In fact, in a matter of minutes she'd put on an apron and started helping Jake and Deb get supper ready. Carly and Deb set the table and carried the steaks from the backyard grill to the dining room as soon as Jake cooked them.

Seated across the table from Carly, Jake admitted she looked great. He eased back in his chair, relaxed, and listened to Deb and Carly chattering like old school chums. A passerby might have mistaken the three of them for a family group.

Easy. He'd escaped a bad marriage last year and sure wasn't about to stumble into another relationship. The marriage to Rhonda had brought him Deb, the one good result of an unfortunate union, but that was all.

Besides, he did fine on his own, hadn't needed anyone for years, and wouldn't con himself into thinking he needed anyone.

Deb didn't help matters with her remark about Carly's age.

"Carly, my Dad thought you were a kid like me. But he knows better now." The girl chuckled.

Embarrassed, Jake glanced in Carly's direction and found her staring at him. Their gazes locked then both looked elsewhere.

Trying to appear unruffled, he answered his daughter. "Now, Deb. I never suggested Carly was your age. You're just twelve years old."

"How old did you think I was, Jake?" Carly leaned forward.

"I don't know. Tell me your age, if you don't mind."

"Of course I don't. I was twenty-six on my last birthday. How about you?"

He blinked hard. She looked so young. "I beat you by nine years. I'm thirty-five. That must seem ancient to you." He sat erect in his chair while waiting for Carly to insist he appeared no more than thirty.

"Not really. You're a well-preserved thirty-five." She grinned. "And the same age as my brother."

"Tell me about your family." Nothing wrong in learning a little more about their guest.

"Well, I have three older sisters and one brother. I'm the baby of the family."

Some baby. Carly was a very attractive woman.

"Okay. Now that we've got that straight, how about my fixing some hot fudge sundaes?"

"Not for me, thanks." Carly started to pick up some dishes and carry them to the kitchen.

"Don't bother with those," he said. "I'll stick them in the dishwasher later."

"I want a sundae, Dad." Deb assured him there was nothing wrong with her appetite.

* * *

An hour later Carly stood and thanked them both for inviting her.

"This's been a fun evening, but it's time I was going. I hope you'll call my company when Napoleon needs to be groomed again. We can use the business."

Jake escorted Carly to the front door. "I'll walk you out to your car," he said. The two of them stood in his front yard, the warm Texas wind ruffling Carly's dark hair.

"How long have you worked for your company?"

"It seems like forever," she replied. "I was there the day it started and I'm still there."

"It's obvious you love animals. Did you always want to be a dog groomer?"

Carly leaned forward, ready to confess she owned the company. "As a matter of fact--."

Deb and Napoleon interrupted them at that point. Excited, the Pekinese barked, chasing the girl around the yard.

"Easy," Jake cautioned his daughter. "It's getting too late for that commotion. We don't want the neighbors to complain." He turned back to Carly. "You were saying?"

Before Deb and Napoleon burst into their conversation, Carly had started to tell Jake the truth. She was the owner of the grooming business. The moment passed and she changed her mind. He'd made a mistake based on their first meeting and now perceived her as a groomer.

She'd wait and see what developed. The right sort of man would like her for herself.

"What? Oh, nothing. I have to go," she said. "Thanks again." Sliding into her dilapidated Volkswagen, Carly gunned the motor two or three times, waved and drove away.

All the way home, she fretted. Did it bother Jake, believing she was a dog groomer? So what? It didn't matter.

The fact that they'd had supper together didn't change things. He was still just a customer.

"It doesn't matter what he thinks." She caught herself saying the words aloud.

That night she lay awake in her narrow little bed, staring at the ceiling. With an aching heart, she admitted the truth. It mattered a lot what Jake thought.

CHAPTER FOUR

"We won't be late, hon," George called to Carly while hurrying his pregnant wife Faye to their pickup truck.

Resigned to an evening of baby-sitting her young relatives, Carly sighed and waved goodbye to the couple. As George backed his truck out of the driveway, George and Faye's happy, relieved faces revealed their utter delight at escaping their endearing, sticky-faced trio, if only for an evening.

Stepping inside the house, Carly prayed her nephews and niece would be good while she was in charge. Her day had been hectic, running from the grooming business to the school, then conducting a dog obedience class. Carly was weary.

Tonight she would've preferred to collapse in front of her television and watch a sitcom or two before retiring early.

Watching the evening news, Carly had just finished her three-course TV dinner when George called in a panic earlier. The teenaged sitter they'd lined up for tonight had cancelled at the last minute and this was no ordinary occasion. It was George and Faye's fifth wedding anniversary.

Talking to George, a little devil inside Carly's head urged her to revolt. Tell him no, just once. Of course she rejected the notion. How could she refuse the brother who'd taught her to roller skate and helped her through many other childhood problems? So what if she was exhausted? As long as there was a breath of life in her body, she'd come to George's rescue whenever he needed her.

The truck disappeared in the distance, Carly closed the front door. The children were hers for the evening.

From the next floor there was a boyish cry followed by a sharp bark. Taking the steep flight of stairs two at a time, Carly reached the second floor and gazed into the bathroom.

One of the identical three-year-old twins, Daryl, or was it Donald walked into the hall. Seeing his favorite auntie, he smiled like the angel he wasn't.

Anxious to discover what the twins had been up to, Carly stepped around her nephew into the bathroom. Her gaze fixed on a scene that made her lips twitch, though she refrained from laughing. She

didn't want to encourage the twins to do more mischief.

It appeared one or both of the boys had trapped Holly, the family's short-haired red Dachshund, and smeared the miserable canine with Vaseline then liberally sprinkled her with powder.

The other twin came into the bathroom, his chubby hands still clutching a container of baby powder, evidence of his participation in the fiendish scheme.

Smeared with petroleum jelly and doused with baby powder, the wretched Holly huddled behind the toilet. The bark Carly had heard downstairs had been Holly's desperate cry for help.

"Here, girl," Carly called the unhappy pet. The little dog wasted no time running to Carly's outstretched arms and safety.

"Okay, boys. It's time to give Holly a bath." Carly rolled up her shirt sleeves and turned on the water in the tub. A few minutes later the pet was restored to her usual Dachshund appearance. The bathroom now resembled a swamp.

One twin had found a plastic sandpail they used at bath time and poured water all over the floor while their aunt was preoccupied, bathing their pet. Wise to her nephews' ways, Carly let the water out of the tub.

A crash resounded downstairs and Carly moved fast. This time, precious two-year-old Angelica was the culprit. The chubby toddler stood in the middle of the kitchen.

Cereal box contents stuck to the kitchen floor, helped along by a pool of syrup from a now empty bottle of pancake syrup George's wife had left on the kitchen table.

Carly reminded herself the culprits were only children, blew her hair out of her eyes then picked up the little girl. Kissing her niece's syrupy-sweet cheek, she carried the child upstairs, her tennis shoes sticking to the floor with each step she took.

"Time to take a bath and go to bed," she said in a firm voice to the child in her arms and the toddler's big brothers who waited for their aunt at the top of the stairs.

An hour later, Carly had bathed all of the kids, read them Good Night Moon, their favorite story, three times and put them to bed. Then she filled several requests for glasses of water and trips to the bathroom. At last the children were asleep.

Rubbing her back, Carly eyed the kitchen floor. She'd better damp mop it before George and Faye got home. It was their anniversary, after all.

Getting out the mop, Carly cleaned up the mess then collapsed onto the living room sofa. The next thing she knew, George was leaning over her.

"Hi, Sis. Hope the kids weren't any trouble."

"Those angels?" Carly grinned, not having the heart to mention what the little monsters had done during their parents' absence. "Are you kidding?"

Faye looked relieved. "See, George," she addressed her husband. "Didn't I tell you? They're always good for your sister."

"Would you sit with them again sometime soon?"

George looked so anxious, how could she refuse? "Sure, let me know when you need me."

Driving home, Carly could have kicked herself. George's little monsters wore her out. Once a year would be too often to sit for them, and here she'd agreed to do it again soon.

Carly walked into her apartment, dropped her shoulder bag, kicked off her loafers, then wandered into the kitchen.

She deserved a medal for what she'd gone through the last few hours, but she'd settle for a big bowl of BlueBell Ice Cream, Texas's own ice cream, considered by many the best ice cream in the country.

She didn't know about that but it was good. Maybe she'd have a dish before taking a shower and going to bed.

The blinking light on her answering machine caught her attention.

"Honey? Carly? Are you there?" Steve's deep voice addressed her. She could almost feel his large, moose-like eyes sweeping every corner of her apartment, searching for her.

Thank goodness modern technology hadn't advanced to the point that some futurists once predicted. She'd hate callers, including Steve, to be able to see into her home.

"Carly?"

On the answering machine, Steve still called for her. For a moment, she wished he'd go away. Then loyalty and a pang of fondness hit her. In his own way, Steve needed her, too.

"Guess you're not there. Please call me when you get in. Don't forget." The message ended, none too soon.

Steve was a nice guy, though too immature to be a romantic interest. She laughed at his his monthly proposals of marriage but he never became discouraged, just asked her again the next month. The big kid. He ought to stick to gymnastics.

Carly fantasized marriage to Steve. His idea of a honeymoon would probably be time spent in his gym. Great! They could play Tarzan and Jane and swing back and forth on the rafters of the old skating rink he'd converted to a exercise facility.

Always willing and able to do what others wanted,, something in Carly rebelled. Feeling wicked, she erased Steve's message, then marched into the bathroom and turned on the hot water.

Four years ago she'd rented this apartment, a welcome change after years of living with her parents. Carly liked having her own place, even if she had neighbors right next door.

Two residents of the four-story brick mansion converted to apartments were senior citizens. That wasn't the case next door. A couple of newlyweds had moved in last month. She never saw one without the other, they worked together, and it appeared even took showers together, lots of showers.

Tonight she lucked out. The newlyweds hadn't used up all of the hot water for a change.

Stepping from the shower a few minutes later, Carly dried herself and slipped on a nightshirt. Someone had gifted her with the over-size cotton knit shirt that proclaimed 'Groomers Do It Better.' in hot pink letters. Looking at herself in the mirror, she sighed, turned off the bathroom light and went to bed.

Before she slept a male face flashed across her mind. This time the face was more handsome and more intelligent than Steve's. With his blue eyes and blond hair, Jake was Steve's opposite. Why couldn't someone like that fall for her?

Recalling the cookout at Jake's condo, Carly smiled. Jake had been embarrassed, forced to admit he'd mistaken her for a younger girl. But he'd recovered quickly and if she wasn't mistaken she'd noticed a gleam of admiration in his eyes.

She found him attractive. Too bad she'd teased him about his age. Nine years difference was no big deal. When she was eighty-one, he'd only be ninety. The thought of Jake and herself as senior citizens amused her. Yawning, Carly rolled over and fell asleep.

* * *

On the other side of the Metoplex, Samuel Smale paced his tiny but expensive townhouse near downtown Dallas, fuming at his failure to discredit his arch-rival.

The man was good, he admitted. No matter what he did, Jake always undercut him. If Sam suggested their healthcare team focus on a prospective client, he found Jake had already made the suggestion, even done research to see if the target company needed tax services their team could provide.

Everytime Jake got there first. As a result, he'd become the Healthcare Partner's fair-haired boy. He got the choice assignments while Sam got the left-overs.

"This has got to stop," Sam groaned. "There's got to be something I can do about Jake." Desperate to get rid of the man who he viewed as the major obstacle to his own advancement with the firm, Sam considered fantastic schemes to get rid of Jake. He could run Jake over with his delapidated pickup truck. Or push Jake down one of the elevator shafts in the high-rise building their firm occupied.

Sam shook his head. That would be too risky. With his luck, he'd probably get caught.

Maybe he wasn't approaching the problem from the right angle. Sam paced from one end of his home to the other. He might not be able to best Jake at work, but there must be some other way he could embarrass him. Mmmmm. Good old Jake's divorced. Wonder if he's dating?

An idea brought a grin to Sam's face. That's it. I'll ask him if he planned to attend the office party the next weekend and who he was bringing. Wouldn't it be great if their Healthcare Partner didn't approve of Jake's date? He smirked at the mental image of Jake discrediting himself by bringing a stripper or exotic dancer to the firm's stuffy office party.

Next morning in the office, Sam waited. His usual practice was to mutter something unpleasant when Jake passed him in the corridors, then run the other way. Today was different. Though it pained him, Sam went out of his way to be pleasant to Jake.

Striving for a conciliatory tone, he managed to muster a shy, friendly smile. He could've snarled at the guy who received the best assignments and, no doubt, the best raises. Jake raced ahead on the fast track while Sam lagged far behind.

The only trophy Sam had that Jake had never even come close to was his relationship with Alicia, their Tax Partner's attractive if bucktoothed niece.

The Partner's sister had married a Lord Something-or-other. Alicia was the result of that union, now dissolved.

If he were married to their Partner's niece, he'd have it made. Sam had once tried to persuade Alicia to marry him but her favorite pastime, working on her genealogy, absorbed most of her concentration.

He wondered if what he'd asked her had even registered. She was obsessed with tracing her family tree back to Charlemagne.

At least he was escorting her to the annual company party, a command performance for the professional staff if there ever was one. Unless you had a very good excuse, like being in the hospital with two broken arms and legs, you didn't dare to miss this party.

Gazing directly at Jake, Sam spoke in a clear, distinct voice for a change, wanting Jake to understand him. "I really liked what you said about tax shelters in the meeting last week,"

Clearly taken back by the fellow employee who usually sneered at him, Jake blinked then bowed his head slightly. "Thanks," he replied modestly. "It was only an idea."

"But so well put." Sam tried to look appreciative, as if he'd decided any idea of Jake's must be a good one. "By the way, who are you bringing to the party next Saturday?"

Jake looked surprised. "Next Saturday? Are you sure? I could've sworn it was next month."

"No, it's a week from Saturday. Better get yourself a date. I'm bringing our Healthcare Partner's niece, Fiona," he said.

"Thanks for telling me, Sam." Jake went down the hall shaking his head.

"Now," Sam almost wrung his hands in glee, "let's see what kind of date Jake can find to bring to the party."

* * *

Jake mulled over his problem during his drive home. As always, I-30, one of the two major east-west expressways connecting Dallas and Arlington-Fort Worth, was the commuter's nightmare, a crowd of cars, trucks, and vans, with each driver wanting to get to his destination faster than everyone else.

Today he recognized a group of motorists who traveled this route daily like he did. Most were careful drivers, though an occasional daredevil cut a swart through the evening traffic.

"Damn guy must have a death wish," Jake muttered when a driver in a Porsche cut ahead of him

again and again.

Reducing speed, Jake managed to stay well behind the reckless driver. A few miles later he laughed out loud, seeing the daredevil stopped by a motorcycle cop.

Back to his problem. Though it wasn't mandatory, Jake knew he should make an appearance at the company party if at all possible, though he didn't have a clue who to take. He hadn't dated since the divorce last winter.

That left him a limited selection to choose from. Let's see. Deb was too young and his elderly mother would never consider going. And Rhonda was in Spain on her honeymoon. Even if she were home, Jake doubted that Freddy Freeloader, his name for Rhonda's new husband, would approve of his bride's appearing at a company party with her ex-husband.

Wait a minute. How about the nice divorcee he'd met recently? What was her name? Barbara, Gloria's mother, the one with the green-and-white swimsuit. Maybe she'd go.

But did he want to take a woman he'd just met to a function like that? For all he knew, Barbara might get a life-or-death grip on the spiked punch bowl and end up dancing topless on the tables.

One other possibility entered his mind. Carly. But he hadn't talked to her since the night of the cookout. Jake wondered if she'd be interested in going?

CHAPTER FIVE

"Napoleon's done it again."

Hearing the quiver in Deb's voice, Jake's heart went out to her. "What happened?" His daughter's interrupting him in the middle of an important business call didn't bother Jake for some reason. Right then Deb needed him more than his client with a tax shelter question.

"Well, Mr. White, our postman came to the door to bring a package. Mrs.Crosby held the door open to sign for it. I guess she didn't realize Napoleon was right there beside her. Anyway, he slipped out and threw himself at the mailman.

"Poor Mr. White fell off the front steps with Napoleon attached to his pants leg. We managed to pull Napoleon loose but he'd already torn the postman's trousers."

The spectre of a large lawsuit gobbling up his savings tied Jake's stomach in knots. He swallowed hard. "Did our pooch bite the man's leg?"

"No,Dad, but Mr. White got real red in the face, said we'd better keep that damn mutt inside. He left, muttering about a big baseball bat he's going to bring with him next time he delivers our mail." She paused for a moment before asking, thoughtfully, "does Mr. White play baseball?"

"I don't know what's come over Napoleon but this can't go on." Jake realized sooner or later the dog would really hurt someone. "I hate to put a muzzle on Napoleon. Maybe we can enroll him in a dog obedience class. That might be the answer."

"Why don't you get in touch with Carly?" Deb's teary voice became hopeful. "I bet she'd know who we can call."

"Maybe I will." He hadn't seen or talked to Carly since the cookout. She'd left abruptly that night and he wondered later if he'd said something to offend her. No, it must have been his imagination. They were just standing in the front yard talking. He'd been asking her about her job when Deb and Napoleon interrupted them.

Needing to find a date for the company party, he'd asked Barbara and learned she'd be out of town. That left Carly.

Jake looked through his address book for Happy Tails Grooming Service then punched in the number and asked to speak to Carly.

The receptionist connected him with her right away. Funny how they could always locate Carly. Their office must be very well-organized.

* * *

"Help," a familiar deep voice cried the instant Carly picked up the phone on her desk.

"You can't be as desperate as you sound." How strange that he'd pick that moment to contact her. She'd just been thinking about Jake, wondering if he'd call. She'd tried to find a valid reason to get in touch with him and drawn a big fat zero. The last thing she wanted was for Jake to think she was chasing him. Suitors might not be breaking down her door but she wasn't desperate for male companionship yet. There was always Steve.

"You won't believe the ruckus one Pekinese can create. And all he did was attack one of our finest," Jake said, his voice a little shaky.

"He attacked a police officer?" Carly pictured Napoleon and Jake behind bars. The mental image of Napoleon in a tiny prison jumpsuit flashed across her mind. She grinned.

"Not a cop, a mail carrier."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Guess it's time I had another little chat with Napoleon. For some reason, I thought he understood it's not good etiquette to bite people." Was that the only reason Jake called? She hoped it wasn't.

"That's why I'm calling. Deb and I've discussed the possibility of Napoleon's having obedience training. Since you work for a grooming service, I wondered, could you recommend someone who trains

dogs with problems?"

"As a matter of fact, there's an excellent obedience school near my company's office," Carly said. Opening the venetian blinds she glanced at a sign on the front of the building across the street. Her sign.

"Great. I'm at work right now but I could call you later or come by your place this evening and get the information."

"Why don't you come over around seven?" His offering to come by her place was encouraging. Did Jake want to see her?

"Fine, see you then." He hung up, leaving her on the line.

"Whoops!" Carly frowned. How ridiculous. Hearing Jake's voice, she'd completely forgotten what she was doing that evening.

Her finger flipped her desk calendar to that day's date and a scrawled note "Steve- 7pm" Steve was taking her to the movies. "This should be interesting."

Pondering the best way to handle the situation if both men appeared at the same time, Carly concluded it was foolish to waste time fretting over something she couldn't control.

Besides, Steve was always late and Jake struck her as the efficient type who'd come early. And, if all he wanted was the information on an obedience training program, he'd be in and out of her apartment in a matter of minutes. Chances were good he'd be long gone before Steve appeared.

Seven o'clock loomed closer and closer. At six p.m. Carly arrived home, showered and slipped into the new denim dress and sandals bought on her lunch hour yesterday.

Thirty minutes later she microwaved and ate a random piece of pizza she'd found in the bottom of her freezer.

Six forty-five and no one arrived. Carly began to feel like a mouse in a trap, waiting for not one but two cats. She watched the street through her half-closed venetian blinds.

On the stroke of seven a familiar battered Jeep rattled to a halt in front of her building. As usual, Steve projected himself from the open vehicle without using the car door.

While he strolled toward her building, an emerald green Volvo turned the corner then crept down the street like its driver was checking street numbers. It parked behind the Jeep.

Jake climbed out of his car and approached the house, almost colliding with Steve who was about to enter the building.

The two men stared at each other.

Jake stepped around Steve. Entering the foyer, he pressed the button for Carly's apartment.

"I'll be right there," she answered and hurried downstairs.

On the first floor, she greeted both men. "Oh, hello." She tried to produce what she thought was a welcoming smile. Inside, her heart thumped as fast as a scared rabbit's.

"I don't guess you've met, have you?" She asked brightly, knowing full well they hadn't.

Steve glared at Jake. Through tight lips, he growled, "no, why don't you introduce us, Carly?"

She did, trying to get the message across to Jake that Steve was an old friend she'd known since kindergarten. She introduced Jake to Steve as one of her grooming customers.

"Good to meet you," Jake addressed Steve politely.

"Howya." Steve was barely civil. Checking his watch, he informed her, "Honey, we need to hurry if we're going to catch the early show." He gazed pointedly in Jake's direction.

Jake took the card containing the dog obedience information from her outstretched hand. "Hey, don't let me hold you up. I appreciate this, Carly." He put his hand out to shake Steve's.

Steve took Jake's hand in his own massive paw and squeezed it so hard Jake winched. His face turned red but he didn't make a sound.

"Good to meet you, Dad," Steve released Jake's hand then slapped him on the shoulder. "Always glad to meet Carly's customers' parents."

Jake smiled, his lips thin. Still silent, he walked to his car and drove away fast.

"Why do you always act like Tarzan whenever you find another man within ten feet of me? Jake's no threat to you," she snapped. "And don't call me honey. I know I hate that."

"Sorry. You ready?" Steve walked ahead of her to his car, jumping into the vehicle without opening his car door.

Carly climbed into the Jeep in a more traditional manner. As Steve drove them to the strip shopping center and the early show she wished for the first time she were with Jake.

Did Jake think Steve represented her choice in dates? Next time she saw Deb's father she'd make it crystal clear she preferred men who were more mature, more intelligent. If she wanted a gorilla she could always visit the Fort Worth Zoo.

The movie, Steve's choice, not hers, consisted of one car chase after another. Her ears were ringing by the time the noisy feature reached its smashing conclusion.

Strolling out of the theatre, Steve helped her into the car, something he never did, then slid onto the car seat beside her. He draped one massive arm around her.

"How about a little smooch, babe?" Steve puckered his lips.

Tonight he repulsed rather than amused her. Was he deliberately acting like a clumsy adolescent? "No thanks."

"Oh, you saving it for that old guy back at your house?"

"Old guy? I'll have you know that old guy's just thirty-five years old." Annoyed with Steve, she defended Jake.

"What's goin' on? You don't like that creep, do you?"

"Suppose I do?"

"But, Babe, I thought you and me had an understanding. You're my girl, ain't you?" He played with a lock of her hair.

"No, Steve," she said, removing his arm from her shoulder. "I'm not your girl, as I've told you since the first grade."

His face darkened with anger. "Okay, if that's the way you want it. Just don't come around crying you've changed your mind when you get tired of Gramps."

Steve put the car in gear and drove her home fast. He remained stone-faced in the driver's seat once they'd arrived, Carly opened the passenger door and got out.

"Goodbye, Steve," she said quietly then went into her building. By the time she'd climbed the stairs to her floor the sound of the Jeep's racing down the street had faded away.

It was too bad their relationship had to end like that. She'd never realized she meant so much to the big clown who sat by her all through school. Did Steve really love her or was she just a habit like a pair of comfortable slippers?

Now how did she get the message across to Jake that she preferred a man like him? She blinked in surprise, realizing she preferred him out of all the men she'd ever known.

A few minutes later her phone rang. Carly hesitated. Maybe Steve changed his mind.

Seeing Jake's name on the caller identification, she picked up the receiver.

"Carly? I hoped you'd be home now."

His voice filled her with all kinds of dreams, impossible dreams. "I just walked in the door."

"Hope I didn't cause any problems tonight. Your boy friend must work out with weights. He almost broke my hand."

"In the first place Steve's not my boy friend. In fact, after tonight I doubt I'll see him again."

"I'm sorry if I've caused trouble."

"Don't apologize. You didn't do a thing. And I'm sorry if Steve hurt your hand. He shouldn't try to intimidate people."

"Sweetie, I wasn't intimidated. I could've floored that clown, but I didn't want to hurt a friend of yours."

Knowing how strong Steve was, she had her doubts about that. Still, she was pleased Jake wasn't angry. "I'm glad to hear that." When he didn't reply, Carly asked, "Have you called the animal obedience school yet?"

"I've got an appointment with one of the instructors. I can't have a dog that bites everyone except family."

"And me, remember Napoleon likes me." Animals always did. They must sense she liked them, too.

"That's true." Jake paused then continued. "There was one other thing I wanted" His voice trailed off.

"Yes?" What would he ask her? Her pulse rate increased. Carly held her breath.

CHAPTER SIX

Jake didn't waste time telling Carly what he wanted. "Would you do me a big favor and sit with Deb this Saturday? I've got a date and Deb's regular sitter turned me down cold. She says Napoleon nipped her last time."

Carly's hopes for a closer relationship with Jake burst like balloons that fly too high and explode. On the verge of refusing, she changed her mind. At least she'd see him. "Ah . . . I guess so. What time would you like me to come?"

"How about seven o'clock?"

"I'll be there. Got to run now. Goodbye." Carly hung up fast before Jake could say anything else.

Alone at home she blinked back hot tears of disappointment. He wasn't interested in her after all. Maybe she should've told him the truth about her successful business, in fact, three businesses, if you counted the mobile grooming service, the grooming school, and the dog obedience classes.

A stubborn core inside Carly wouldn't let her reveal her true identity. She would have after the cookout if Deb and Napoleon hadn't interrupted. Then Jake seemed so curious about her grooming job that she got cold feet and changed her mind.

Let him continue to think she was a groomer. If he really liked her, it wouldn't make any difference what she did for a living.

Carly would've been fond of him regardless of his occupation. She snickered at the idea of Jake as a groomer. He'd probably try to get his co-workers to quit and go back to school for MBA's. To each, his own. Just because he was happy working in a highly structured work environment didn't mean everyone would be.

* * *

In her office next morning Carly remembered she'd promised to give Jake's daughter a tour of the grooming school. Dialing Jake's home number, she reached Deb.

"I'm so glad you called."

"Ah, I wondered if you'd still like to see where I work?"

"I sure would," Deb responded without hesitation.

Any illusion Carly might have had that Deb wouldn't want a tour was dispelled by the girl's eagerness.

"I thought you'd forgotten, Carly."

"Of course I didn't. How about this afternoon? I don't have to work so I could show you around the place. I thought we'd stop at my company's business office then visit the school where people train to be pet groomers."

"Cool." Jake's daughter sounded excited. "What time are you coming to get me?"

"Right now if you're not busy." Carly grinned at the girl's enthusiasm. If only Jake were as eager to see her.

Thirty minutes later Carly walked Deb around the mobile grooming operation. She'd cautioned her staff earlier not to refer to her as their boss while Deb was visiting. She hoped they didn't forget.

Deb asked a lot of questions, mainly about the kind of dogs the service handled. As they walked by Carly's closed office door, Jake's daughter asked, "Is that your boss's office?"

"Well, yes, but she's not here today. Probably goofing off, lying by her pool getting a tan." She couldn't praise herself. That would be too much.

One of the older groomers walked by. She must have heard Carly's remark since she laughed. "That'll be the day. We've got a boss who's always here at work. She's the best." Patting Carly on the arm, she continued walking down the hall.

Deb stared after the woman so Carly whispered to her. "You can't take anything that woman says seriously. Ever since she hurt her head in a car accident she says one thing yet means just the opposite. What she intended to say was our boss's never here and she's a terrible employer. Does that make sense to you?"

At this point, she'd prefer Jake didn't learn the truth, not until he decided she was all that mattered to him, no matter what she did to earn her living.

"Sure, I understand." The girl smiled as if pleased Carly talked to her like an adult, not a twelve-year-old with glasses and pigtails.

They strolled out of the grooming office. Crossing a side street, Carly led the way to a one-story frame building, previously a private home, now a school.

Deb looked into each classroom they passed. "If the kids in my class could see this, they'd all want to enroll in this school."

It did look like fun. In one classroom an instructor observed a student groomer. The student had finished bathing the dog she'd been assigned and was painting the dog's toe nails. The black Labrador lay

on a grooming table while in the background soft music played.

Again Carly explained. "That Lab's owner is an old lady who likes to enter Mimi in contests."

In truth, Carly's grandmother was the dog's owner but she wasn't about to tell Deb. "The owner of the school has an arrangement with Mimi's owner. She lends us the dog so the students can practice grooming techniques in exchange for free grooming appointments.

"Mimi's good-natured, never seems to mind the students' fussing over her. Her owner likes to sew costumes for Mimi. Last year she dressed her pet as a bridesmaid, with a bouquet on her collar. The contest judges gave Mimi a special award for "Tries Hardest," and her elderly owner went home satisfied."

The little girl sighed. "We sure can't enter Napoleon in any contests."

"Well no, not right now. Maybe when he stops biting people." Carly tried to encourage her young friend.

The student who'd been painting Mimi's toenails saw them and waved. "Hi Carly. Want a pedicure?"

"No thanks, but Deb might like to help you with Mimi. Want to give it a try, Deb?"

"Sure, if Mimi doesn't mind."

At the sound of her name, the Lab's ears flickered then she lay perfectly still while Deb applied polish to one toenail.

"Beautiful." Carly praised Deb's efforts.

Deb hugged her friend. "You're great. I wish Dad could be here with us. He works so much it's hard for him to relax and have fun.

"Barbara, my friend's mother invited Dad to have dinner with her this weekend. At first he turned her down. I told him Barbara's feelings would be hurt if he didn't go. He called her back and accepted her invitation."

Carly sighed, pleased to hear what had happened. It made her feel better that Jake was going on a date because Deb's friend's mother asked him. That was different. It was possible he wasn't even interested in the woman, was just trying to be nice. Something else came to mind to worry Carly. Jake might not be interested, but it sure sounded like this Barbara was attracted to Jake.

"Well, I guess I'd better take you home now, Deb." She'd enjoyed the girl's visit. Sometimes Carly yearned for a child of her own, but not while she was sitting brother George's kids.

Remembering her last experience with Angelica and the twins, Carly shuddered and hoped George didn't call her to sit again any time soon.

Carly drove her young friend home, parking the VW in front of Jake's condo. He opened his front door, stepped outside.

"Did you girls have a good time?" His glance flickered from Carly to Deb as they got out of Carly's

car. Jake reached down and playfully tugged one of Deb's pigtails.

"Great, Dad. Carly showed me everything. Guess what I saw at the grooming school?" Enjoying her father's attention, his daughter chattered away.

"I have no idea but I'm sure you'll tell me." Jake winked at Carly over Deb's head. "Why don't you go inside and get cleaned up? Mrs. Crosby wasn't feeling well so I told her to go home early. I've ordered a large pizza for supper and it should be here soon."

"Well, if you're about to eat, I'll be on my way." Carly opened her car door.

"Don't run off." Jake stepped toward her. Putting out his hand, he touched her on her arm. Her skin tingled from his touch, Carly started to cover his hand with hers but stopped herself in time. Instead, she smiled.

"Why don't you stay and share the pizza? There's plenty."

From his earnest expression she sensed he wanted her to stay. "Well, if you insist," she said. Not wanting to lose his touch, she stood still, holding her breath. Their gazes locked and something flickered in Jake's eyes. The spell was broken by a sharp, demanding bark at their feet.

Gazing downward, Carly spied Jake's dog. She knelt to address the little, yappy dog. "Napoleon, what's the matter? Do you feel like you're being ignored?"

Picking up the Pekinese, she gave him a hug. He responded by licking her ear to ear.

Jake shook his head. "How he can be so good with you yet so horrible with everyone else except his family, I'll never understand,"

"He'll stop biting people once he's had some obedience training," Carly reminded Jake. "When do the classes begin?" She knew already, having prepared the instructor for Napoleon.

"Next Monday. Luckily for us, our pooch likes Mrs. Crosby. She's volunteered to take him.

"This's no time for Napoleon to misbehave. Rhonda and Freddy return home this weekend." A muscle twitched in his jaw. "Deb tells me Napoleon's developed a strong dislike for Freddy."

"Judging by your expression, you don't appear to like Freddy either." Jake wasn't jealous of his ex-wife's new husband, was he? That didn't make sense unless he still harbored feelings for Rhonda himself.

If he did, where did that leave Carly? Walking away from the whole situation fast, that's where.

"There's no love lost between Freddy and me," Jake admitted, "but as long as the man's good to Rhonda and Deb I'll tolerate him. Maybe these obedience classes will help Napoleon get along with Freddy, too."

Soon Carly, Jake and Deb sat at the kitchen table, munching thin, crisp slices of mushroom pizza. Deb finished her supper and excused herself to go upstairs and read a new Larry Potter book her friend Gloria had lent her.

Helping Jake clean up the supper dishes, Carly sighed with contentment. From his relaxed manner,

he didn't mind her company either. Too bad he just thought of her as a groomer for his dog, a fill-in sitter for his daughter.

"Now that my chatterbox's out of the room, I'd like to thank you for entertaining her today."

"It was my pleasure. Deb's a good kid, bright, sweet, and fun." Carly said. Jake's daughter and she had bonded.

Out of the blue Jake issued an invitation. "I don't know if you'd be interested but my firm has its annual party soon and I'd like to take you."

"When is it?" Carly tried to act as if getting an invitation from a man like Jake was a daily occurrence. She hoped it wasn't a night George needed her to babysit his kids.

"A week from this Saturday." Jake paused. "I know that doesn't give you much notice but the date snuck up on me. I'd been thinking it was next month and just discovered it's a week from Saturday."

Carly exhaled. Thank goodness she didn't already have another commitment for that night. Trying to sound casual she responded. "Since I don't have plans that evening, I'll be pleased to go with you. Is it a formal affair?"

"No, just wear a nice dress. You'll be fine."

Unexpectedly, Carly yawned. She flushed. The last thing she wanted was for Jake to misunderstand and think she was bored. "Please excuse me. I had trouble sleeping last night and then we were terribly busy at work this morning."

"I imagine there's a real demand for experienced groomers," Jake said. "Have you considered working for a larger concern?"

"No, I'm happy right where I am."

"Good for you. There aren't many people who can say that."

Carly smiled. Were her instincts right about him?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Through his plane window Frederick Austin Benton, III watched the American Airlines 747 land on a runway at Dallas/Fort Worth Airport. The plane screeched to a rough stop on the tarmac and Freddy scowled. If he'd been the pilot he would've made a smoother landing.

Cramped by the minimal space allotted Economy Class passengers, he got to his feet and stretched

his long legs then cast a furtive glance at the woman sleeping in the next seat.

Rhonda had deep circles under her eyes. In the harsh morning light she appeared older than thirty-five. He shrugged. So what? Theirs wouldn't be a long-term marriage.

Honeying his words, he spoke to his new wife. "Wake up, Angel. We're home at last." Stupid broad. He'd really wanted to use the trip to Spain to promote a film he'd like to produce. But lovesick Rhonda had other ideas.

She sighed and opened her eyes, smiling when she focused on Freddy. "It'll be good to be home." Rhonda put her hand on his. "I'm sorry about last night. Your idea about investing some of my savings in your next project makes sense. Just let me run your plans by Jake. He's quite knowledgeable about investing and--"

"Jake, Jake, Jake, I'm sick of hearing that name." Freddy cut her off. "Who the hell are you married to, anyway? Jake or me?"

"Darling, I'm sorry." Taking his hand in hers, Rhonda kissed it. "You're my husband, not Jake. As I've told you, my marriage to him was a mistake from the beginning. You know I love you but I thought, since you want to form your own production company, Jake might be able to help."

"Forget it. I know what I'm doing," Freddy retorted. Damn right he did. Once he got this clinging vine to convert her savings account to a joint account he'd be home free.

Seeing the shimmer of tears in Rhonda's eyes, he pretended an affection he didn't feel, had never felt for anyone. Why should he? His mother had abandoned him in a laundromat. His foster parents didn't care either. He'd run away at age sixteen and was still running.

"Baby, don't cry. I can't stand to see you cry." Freddy leaned over and kissed Rhonda's cheek then shifted his attention to the sweet young flight attendant waiting to serve their breakfast, orange juice and cold croissants.

"Could we go by and get Deb and Napoleon on the way home?" Rhonda's tone was hesitant, like she didn't want to upset him. "It won't take but a few minutes."

That was all he needed, a smart kid underfoot who'd call her father the minute she found Freddy upsetting her mother. "Honey, not on our first morning home. I thought we'd go back to bed for a couple of hours. We didn't get much rest in Spain." He winked at Rhonda.

"Oh, Freddy." Rhonda blushed. "I do love you."

Great. Freddy sighed. Good thing he was a skilled dissembler since he'd have to play the adoring husband for a day or two more. Then he'd remind her both of their names should be on her bank accounts.

The next step would be to pretend to contact a nonexistent savings and loan in Maryland for his nonexistent funds. The S&L would be offering a great rate on certificates of deposit, so it'd be wiser to leave the money there. Freddy had no doubt he could persuade Rhonda it made sense. After that he'd drain her accounts and disappear.

Naive, gullible Rhonda would think something terrible had happened to her loving husband until

she checked her bank balance, then she'd go running to Jake and he'd call the police.

They'd never find him once he'd changed his appearance. New brown contact lenses lay hidden in the bottom of his suitcase. It'd be easy to buy some dark hair color. Different clothes and a dark mustache and he'd be a new man. Hawaii, here I come.

* * *

Jake caught Deb studying the calendar on the kitchen wall. "That's right, honey. Today's the day your mother comes home," he said. He missed Deb already, though she was still with him.

"And Freddy," she said. "Yuck."

"Now don't start off with a bad attitude about your new stepfather," Jake advised. "Things will--."

At that point Napoleon bounded into the room with his rubber man toy in his mouth. Picking up the Pekinese, Debby whispered "Freddy," a word Napoleon understood. The little dog growled.

"Dad, do you think you could keep Napoleon until he's finished the obedience training?"

"What? Oh, yeah. Maybe I should. We don't want this brute of a dog attacking your new stepfather." Jake grinned at his daughter. He didn't look forward to Rhonda and Freddy's return either.

Jake didn't know just what it was about Rhonda's new husband he disliked most. The scrawny redhead with his puny goatee, squinting eyes and whiny voice, had never done anything offensive in Jake's presence, yet just seeing him or hearing his pompous voice brought out the worse in Jake. Maybe if he didn't see the guy much he could refrain from punching Freddy in the mouth.

"It's ten-thirty," Deb complained. "Don't you think they're home by now?"

"Maybe the plane was late. Why don't you go over Gloria's to play. I'll call you the minute I hear from your mother." He wondered how Freddy would cope, having a stepdaughter under foot.

Hours later, there'd still been no word so Jake called Rhonda's number. The phone rang and rang. He was about to hang up when Rhonda answered. From her voice, Jake could tell something was wrong, seriously wrong.

"Want to tell me about it?" Poor Rhonda with her high hopes for this new marriage. She wasn't a bad sort, a tad self-indulgent and foolish, but at heart a good person and mother.

"Freddy and I had a terrible fight. He stamped out of here in a rage, and I don't know when he'll be back."

"What happened?" Well, it didn't take long for that marriage to fall apart. Though he sympathized with Rhonda, Jake felt somewhat relieved. All his instincts had warned him the guy was trouble. If the marriage was going to fail, it was better at the start before Rhonda got used to having Freddy in her life.

"Freddy wanted me to ask you to keep Deb a few more days. I told him I want her home with me." Rhonda sobbed as if her heart were breaking.

"The damn bastard. And I've been giving Deb a pep talk about getting along with her new

stepfather."

"Do you think you could keep her awhile, just until I convince Freddy that Deb won't get in his way?"

"I've already arranged a sitter to stay with her tonight. Let's play it by ear, Rhonda. Maybe it'd be better if Deb stayed over here for a few more days, anyway. I like having her here. It's almost like getting another chance to make up for all the times I missed being with her when she was younger."

"What about when you're at work?"

"I've lined up a neat older lady. Mrs. Cosby comes in weekdays, does light housework and keeps Deb company. Deb and I have been getting along fine."

Thinking of Freddy, Jake scowled. "I don't think much of your new husband's behavior. Are you sure you want to stay married to this guy?"

"Yes, of course. Just give me a few minutes to fix my makeup and I'll come over there. I want to see both of you. And Napoleon's another problem. Freddy's exact words were, 'send the mutt to the dog pound.'"

Jake's temper flared. "Over my dead body. Napoleon's part of the family. I know he's misbehaved recently but I've arranged for Mrs. Crosby to take him to obedience classes starting tomorrow. Let's see if that helps."

An hour later, Rhonda appeared at Jake's door with gifts for them from Spain.

"Mommy, I love the costume doll." Deb fingered the miniature senorita's bright dress and black lace shawl.

Jake eyed his gift. He didn't want to hurt her feelings.

"They're replicas of boots worn by matadors," Rhonda said.

"Really?" He tried them on and they fit. "Well, thanks for thinking of me. I'll be my office's first tax manager with matador boots. Who knows? Maybe I'll start a trend at work."

That was a laugh. In his ultraconservative work environment, he might even get a lower rating on his annual review if the wrong partner caught him wearing matador boots.

Rhonda hugged Deb, patted Jake on the shoulder and smiled. It was clear she was trying to play the part of a happy newlywed. Jake wasn't about to tell the little girl about Freddy's ultimatum to her mother. Maybe Freddy would reconsider and be there when Rhonda returned home.

Rhonda called Jake a few minutes later. Freddy had returned and all was well.

* * *

That evening Jake prepared for his dinner date with Gloria's mother. Carly was due to arrive in a few minutes and he found himself wanting to stay home, but he had always honored his commitments, and this was no exception. Anyway, it shouldn't be a late night. He'd have dinner, a few drinks and talk to

Barbara about their girls a bit, then come home. Maybe he'd be able to convince Carly to stay awhile.

Arriving on time, Carly seemed irritable for some reason and sent him on his way almost as soon as she walked into the condo.

Outside Barbara's house, Jake noticed the place was dark. Had she forgotten their date? In his present state of mind that wouldn't upset him. He'd accepted this invitation because he felt sorry for Barbara.

Well, he'd better ring the doorbell to make sure she wasn't there before returning home. The moment he rang the bell, Barbara answered the door.

Stepping into the foyer, Jake found the house dim and still. "Where's Gloria?"

"Oh, she's spending the night with a friend."

Jake couldn't help noticing Barbara's eyes. They looked unusually bright, almost feverish. Was she ill?

Leading him into the sunken living room, she slipped and would have fallen if he hadn't caught her arm.

"Whoops." She giggled.

Her behavior seemed out of character for the serious young woman he'd talked with several times. Had she been drinking? Jake said nothing, just smiled, willing to give Barbara the benefit of the doubt.

"Dinner will be ready soon," she informed him. "How about a drink while we wait?" She picked up her own half-filled glass and drained its contents.

"Sure. If you have beer?"

"There's not a beer in the place but we have lots of scotch, gin and vodka."

"Scotch neat, please."

By the time dinner was ready it was apparent his hostess was consuming too much alcohol. Taking charge of the situation, he carved the roast and carried the platter to the table then tossed and served the salad she'd left on the kitchen counter.

Why did Barbara start drinking? Was she nervous about having him for dinner? Or had she been an alcoholic all along and he hadn't noticed the warning signs?

They ate dinner quietly in the dining room.

"How is Gloria adjusting to her new home?"

"Fine, I guess," Barbara replied, listlessly.

"Our girls have become good friends, haven't they?"

She nodded.

Every topic he mentioned brought a limited response from his dinner companion. Jake began to feel he was doing a monologue but he forged on, mentioning the weather, his work, anything to keep at bay the deadly silence that crept into the room whenever he stopped speaking.

Barbara spoke seldom, just toyed with her food. He didn't suggest she replenish his drink for fear she'd have another herself. She did anyway.

"Have you made any plans for after your divorce?"

"No, I don't seem to be able to focus," she admitted dully.

"I'll tell you what helped me the most," he volunteered. "The best thing you can do is keep busy." He neglected telling her about his deep sense of relief, receiving the divorce decree.

"You're right, it's just that tonight is a very bad time. She blinked hard. "It's our wedding anniversary and I just didn't want to be alone."

Poor woman. No wonder she seemed so down. Rising, he walked around the table, leaned over and kissed Barbara's cheek. "You'll be all right. A lot of us have been where you are right now. You're not alone, believe me."

Before he could move away, Barbara responded by taking his face in her hands. She tried to kiss him on the mouth. Jake turned his head and the kiss landed on his cheek instead.

"I'm so sorry." Barbara looked distressed. "I don't know why I did that."

"It's all right." Patting her hand, Jake resumed his seat.

Once they'd finished eating, Barbara rose and stacked dishes with an unsteady hand, almost dropping a dinner plate.

"Why don't you go in the family room?" She requested. "I'll clear away these dishes then we'll have dessert."

"Here, let me do that." Jake took the delicate china plates from her. "You're tired, why don't you take it easy? Is that good-looking chocolate cake in the kitchen for us?"

She nodded and let him escort her to the family room where she sank onto the sofa.

"You rest and I'll slice us some cake. How about some coffee? How do you like yours?" He knew what Barbara needed, besides someone to keep her company. Lots of black coffee.

Returning to the family room with their dessert and coffee a few minutes later, he found her asleep on the sofa. In the dim light she seemed younger. Poor woman. Divorce was hard enough even when you wanted it. She hadn't.

Jake found an afghan comforter and covered her sleeping body then wrote a brief note, leaving it on the kitchen counter. It'd be less embarrassing for her if he weren't there when she woke.

Letting himself out the front door, Jake walked right into a hard fist that knocked him off the front stoop into the decorative Chinese Holly shrubbery.

"Damn!" He rubbed his jaw and glared up at the reason he was lying on his back amidst Barbara's shrubs. "What the hell was that for?"

Retrieving the bouquet of roses he'd dropped, the large man in a cowboy hat glared down at him. "I come home to apologize and try to make amends and what do I see? A guy sneaking out of my sweetie's place. Who the hell are you, boy? You trifling with my gal?"

"No." Jake drew a deep breath. "If you're Barbara's ex-husband, go right on in. Wake her up and she'll tell you the truth. I'm just a neighbor who had dinner with a lonely woman, the mother of my daughter's friend.

"Barbara got a little tipsy then passed out on the sofa. But I'm sure she'll be happy to see your face as soon as she's conscious.

"On second thought, I should ask why you're here. Have you come back to stay? If not, you better scram. That's a very special lady in there, and as her friend I won't stand for your hurting her anymore than you have already!"

Jake got up, brushed himself off. Hoping his words had penetrated the rancher's thick skull, he braced himself for another punch if the man didn't believe him.

"Sorry, old buddy." The man's tenseness vanished, leaving him looking uncertain. "Here, let me brush you off."

"No thanks. Go on in. I'm leaving right now. Remember what I said? Okay?"

Jake spoke to the air since the rancher had already tiptoed inside and closed the door. Feeling like Cupid, Jake walked home with a smile on his face.

Carly let him in, her frown indicated she wasn't too pleased to see him.

"It's not late, why don't you stay awhile?" For some reason he didn't want to be alone. "We can talk and if you're hungry I'll get us some of Deb's favorite, Rocky Road BlueBell ice cream."

"No thanks," Carly said, crossly.

"What the heck's wrong?"

"If you really want to know, take a look at yourself in the mirror," she said. "Good night." Grabbing her shoulder bag, Carly left the condo before he could tell her about his evening.

Jake shrugged. He'd never understand women. What did that remark mean, look in the mirror? He went into the guest bath, switched on the light and studied his reflection.

A smidge of lipstick on his face, ruffled hair, rumpled clothes. He guessed he didn't look like he'd just come from a quiet dinner with a friend. In fact, he'd have said he looked like he'd just had a hot date. Was that what Carly thought?

CHAPTER EIGHT

Monday evening at supper Freddy slammed his fist down on Rhonda's dining room table. A chicken leg slid from his plate and rolled onto the floor. He ignored the mess he'd caused. "Enough's enough," he sputtered. "If you say that name one more time, I'm leaving."

"Don't you think you're being a little unfair?" Rhonda responded. Jake never acted like this, not even in his worst moments. "I just think it wouldn't hurt to get some advice from someone who knows about things like business planning, and Jake's a tax expert--"

"I'm out of here," Freddy yelled, cutting her off in mid-sentence. "You've been talking to your ex behind my back, haven't you? I won't tolerate his meddling in my affairs. Do you understand?" He roared at his wife with such intensity, she flinched. Good. Maybe he'd gotten through to her at last.

After she'd agreed to help him, the irritating woman had changed her mind. She balked at giving Freddy her savings for his proposed film project. Rhonda told him it'd be better if he went ahead and financed the project with his own funds. If things went well, maybe she'd contribute later.

Of course, she had no way of knowing there was no film project, just a scam to get her money. What worried him most was the chance she'd discussed the whole business with Jake.

Good old trusting Rhonda would never believe her new husband would cheat her. Her ex-husband appeared much sharper. Freddy didn't like the hard look Jake sent him the day they met, like he saw right through him.

Freddy grabbed his jacket and headed for the door.

Rhonda trailed along behind him. "Where are you going?"

"To tell your ex-husband to keep his nose out of my business." He marched out of the house, slamming the door. A moment later, he returned. "Where's this Jake's office?"

"In downtown Dallas. If you insist on talking to Jake, please don't bother him at work. Wait until he gets home."

He scowled. "Are you going to give me his work address?"

She got her address book and looked up Jake's office. "All right, if you insist. It's on Main Street, you can't miss it. It's the tallest building downtown. Also, there's a red sculpture in front." Rhonda wrote down the address on a piece of paper. "Would you like me to call and find out if Jake's still at work? It's getting late in the day."

"Forget it. You've told me he works all the time. He'll be there." Freddy checked his reflection in the foyer mirror. He looked smart in the new Brooks Brothers navy blazer Rhonda had bought him. He combed his red hair, careful to cover his prematurely receding hairline. "See you later. Don't save any

supper for me. I'll grab a snack downtown." He closed the door before she could object.

On the drive into Dallas, the evening traffic all seemed to be headed in the other direction. Good, it wouldn't take too long to get downtown. He'd just tell Jake to mind his own business or he'd be sorry.

Once he'd parked in the high-rise garage adjacent to Jake's building, Freddy paced, waiting for the elevator. At last he was in Jake's building, then on the elevator, and at last he stepped onto the floor where Jake worked.

Freddy scowled. The place was deserted except for two cleaning ladies who strolled around, laughing and joking while they worked, emptying wastepaper baskets and running vacuum cleaners in the carpeted offices adjacent to the reception area. Otherwise, it appeared everyone had left for the day.

At first he wandered the halls, checking names on office doors. Why not leave a nasty note on Jake's desk? He spent a few minutes looking around the place, looking into different offices. A security guard approached and asked what he wanted.

Shaking his head, Freddy backed away. He left the firm's suite, took the elevator down stairs to the lower level.

All but two of the businesses were closed. A barber shop's bright lights indicated it was still open. He walked by the shop, glanced in the window.

An older man in business attire lounged in a barber's chair, chatting while the barber trimmed his sparse locks. Further down the corridor a garish sign flashed off and on outside a bar.

Why not? After all the stress Rhonda put him through he deserved a drink. His stomach growled. Too bad he'd told her not to save his supper. Maybe the bartender would fix him something to eat.

Strolling into the bar, he glanced at another man nursing his drink at the counter. Freddy took the next stool.

The other guy gazed his way then turned back to his drink.

The drink he ordered came. Fred took a big gulp. The beer hit his empty stomach and he wished he'd eaten more supper. He called to the bartender. "How about a snack?"

"Nuttin' left but chips. You should've come at lunchtime. I could've given you a nice steak sandwich." The weary bar attendant slid a bowl of potato chips down the bar to Freddy.

Munching the semi-stale chips, he began to feel a little better. He'd get something later at home. No sense in rushing back to the house. Maybe he should see this jerk Jake at home. The two words sounded so much alike, he grinned.

"Pass the chips, bub," the man on the next stool requested.

Freddy slid them to his right. Just to make conversation, he asked, "You work downtown?"

"Yeah, I'm a tax manager." The other man mentioned his company's name. Jake's firm.

"That's interesting. Don't suppose you know a man by the name of Jake Malone?"

The other man's eyes lit with interest. "You a relative of his?"

"No." Freddy shook his head. He was really no relation to Jake. What were they to each other? Jake was his wife's first husband. What did that make them, husbands-in-law?

"Friend?" The man persisted as if he was interested.

"Hell no."

"Put it there, friend." The man held out his hand. Freddy shook it. "So, we both know this weasel. Right?"

The other man nodded in agreement.

"And we both hate his guts?"

Another nod.

"I like you, fellow. Let me buy you another drink." Freddy felt as if he'd been given the keys to the city. He'd come to Dallas to tell Jake to stop meddling in his affairs. Too bad he'd missed Jake at the office, but opportunity was knocking here. He'd found an ally, someone else hated Jake.

Freddy glanced around the dirty bar, deserted except for the two of them and the bartender now washing dirty ashtrays.

The bar employee kept glancing at the wall clock. It was obvious the guy was counting the minutes until closing time. Still, there was time for him to talk to the guy beside him. The bartender couldn't make them leave until he shut the place down for the night.

"Let's sit over there." Freddy pointed to a booth in a dark corner across the room.

The other man seemed wary. "You're not" He dangled his wrist.

"Hell, no." Freddy shook his head hard. "I got me a new wife waiting at home. No, I'm just interested in hearing more about this Jake."

They sat in the booth facing each other. Freddy studied his companion. "Tell me, friend, just what has this creep done to you?"

Jake's co-worker thought a moment. "Nothin much except steal my promotions, take credit for my ideas, in general make my life miserable."

"I see. Well, I'll tell you two things. One, I don't know this Jake well. Two, I'm with you one hundred per cent. The guy's a troublemaker. Now, what do we do about it?"

"Don't think I haven't asked myself that question meeny, meeny times." The other man finished his drink, ordered another. "There's nothin I'd like better than to get even with Jake. The problem is I try, but he's too damn smart for his own good."

"If we put our heads together maybe we can think of something. Give me your home telephone number, not your name. We won't exchange names. I don't want to know you. And you sure as hell don't want to know me.

"Let's have a pact. If one of us comes up with a way to hurt this Jake, he calls the other.

"Working together, maybe we can fix him good." Freddy glanced at his wristwatch. It was getting late. "It's time I went home." He left a dollar for a tip, walked out of the bar.

Looking back through the bar's streaked glass windows, he could see the other man still sitting there, hunched over his drink. Maybe he had nothing better to do.

Freddy tiptoed into his new home thirty minutes later and was relieved to find Rhonda wasn't waiting for him. She must've gone to bed.

Digging through the refrigerator, he discovered she'd disobeyed his orders. A chicken sandwich wrapped in saran waited for him on one of the shelves.

He munched into the fresh bread and tender meat accompanied by lettuce and sliced tomatoes, reflecting on the past few hours. What an interesting evening.

If he learned Jake had convinced Rhonda to oppose Freddy's plans for her savings, he'd fix him good and proper. And even if Jake and Rhonda hadn't talked, Jake probably had it coming, anyway.

Creeping upstairs, Freddy undressed and crawled onto his side of Rhonda's fourposter bed. He lay beside his snoring wife, thinking of Hawaii and future opportunities. There'd be lots of naive women there to give him their hearts and savings.

CHAPTER NINE

Carly figured if she kept herself busy she wouldn't have time to think about Jake and his outrageous behavior the other evening.

"The nerve of the man. He ought to be ashamed of himself."

To fill her day she took two grooming appointments for assistants who were sick, then encouraged another groomer with a bad cold to take the day off, volunteering to take the woman's appointments. Still, no matter how busy she kept herself, Jake's face kept drifting across her mind.

Determined to remove him from her thoughts Carly looked around her for something else to do. She didn't have to wait long.

"Carly?" The woman who served as switchboard operator and set up the scheduling for the grooming side of the business as well as the obedience classes, stood in her office doorway.

"Yes? What's going on?"

"I'm going to have to cancel an obedience class. The instructor had a family emergency. She won't be in today. Just wanted to let you know before I started calling folks."

"I'll do it," she volunteered so fast the other woman grinned.

"You sure are a glutton for punishment today. Everytime I think we're shorthanded, you're there filling in. If I didn't know better I'd think you'd decided you can run this place single-handed."

"Of course I don't think I can do it all myself. I just like to keep busy."

"Okay, but remember you're not Superwoman. We've got a good team here. Every one has her own duties. Your job is to manage things, see that the operations run smoothly. Slow down, will you? You make me tired, just looking at you."

"Sorry." An hour later Carly taught the dog obedience class. Watching the owners working with their dogs, she still thought of Jake.

She replayed their last conversation again and again. As if it wasn't bad enough that he'd asked her to stay with Deb so he could have dinner with another woman, he'd made matters worse, coming home looking like an unmade bed. He hadn't gotten that rumpled appearance, bruised face, and lipstick-smeared shirt having a quiet dinner with Gloria's mother.

At last Carly admitted her pride was hurt. For some reason she'd hoped he'd return, bored and complaining he thought the evening would never end. To make matters worse he'd had the audacity to invite her to stay longer once he was home.

What did the man think he was? Maybe he suffered from the misconception that all women, Carly included, found him irresistible. Did he have illusions of starting his own harem? The more she thought about Jake, the angrier she grew.

Heat flushed her cheeks. She must not have hidden her feelings since she caught several students staring at her.

What was she going to do about Jake? There were several possibilities. Boiling him in oil was too humane. She discarded the simple solution of just not seeing him again. That was one thing she couldn't bring herself to do.

He needed to be taught a lesson, though she couldn't think how to do it. Besides, if he was the indifferent jerk he seemed, whatever she did wouldn't matter. He'd just laugh it off and move on to another woman.

The party was next weekend. Maybe she'd think of something between now and then. But no matter what she did, it mustn't be anything that would hurt Deb.

* * *

Jake eyed the telephone on his office desk. All day he'd caught his hand sliding to the receiver, almost as if it had a will of its own.

Carly couldn't have been more wrong about what happened at Barbara's home. She stalked out of

the condo the other night before he had a chance to explain. Puzzled, he wondered why such a trivial matter should upset him.

His thoughts rested on Barbara for a moment. Did she and her husband reconcile? Maybe the rancher concluded he needed Barbara in his life after all.

Jake paused and silently thanked God he was immune to feelings like that. Except for his daughter he'd have been better off, not marrying at all.

It seemed a lifetime ago that he'd first seen Rhonda. Meeting his ex-wife right after his twenty-second birthday, her helplessness had appealed to him. She'd needed someone to direct her, to tell her what to do, so he did. He also made the mistake of getting her pregnant.

Now there was Deb to consider. As her father he must be sure to provide the right kind of guidance for her. Deb mustn't make the mistake of ever feeling she needed anyone so much, her world would fall apart without him.

It was better, wiser to be self-sufficient. He was and his life was fine. Wasn't it?

Still, Carly was a nice little person and he hadn't meant to upset her. Maybe he'd call her, not to apologize, just to let her know what time he'd pick her up next Saturday evening.

Straightening his desk, Jake put away all of his confidential papers and reached for his jacket, preparing to go home. Deb would be waiting for him to take her to the neighborhood pool.

His desk phone rang. Ah, it must be Carly. It made sense that she'd call and apologize for overreacting the other night. He picked up the receiver, prepared to graciously accept her apology.

"Jake, I've got to see you right away," a familiar voice said. Rhonda's voice was tense, not an unusual condition for a woman who had difficulty coping with almost every problem she encountered.

What the hell was the matter now? Part of him resented being used as a marriage counselor. The other part readily accepted the fact his ex-wife still needed his guidance. He glanced at the clock on his office wall. "I was just leaving. Can this wait until tonight?"

"That depends on what time you'll be home. Do you plan on working late this evening?"

"No, I'm on my way right now. I'll call you as soon as I get there. All right?"

"It'll have to be. Will Deb be there?"

"I guess so. Let me look at my calendar to be sure." He glanced at the current date. "No, I seem to have forgotten but there's a notation on my desk calendar. Deb's going to a friend's birthday-slumber party tonight. In fact, she must be there already. Did you want to see her?"

"To tell the truth, I'm relieved she won't be home." Rhonda's voice trembled. "Please call me the minute you get home. I think it'd be better if I explain in person."

Jake worried about Rhonda all the way home. He imagined several possible scenarios. Maybe her doctor had diagnosed a rare, incurable disease. That wasn't likely since Rhonda was the picture of robust health.

Ah, maybe Rhonda and Freddy were expecting a baby? Maybe more than one. Jake shuddered, thinking of two or three miniature redheads, complete with goatees and squinty eyes, crawling around.

Forcing himself to concentrate on his driving, he was glad he had when the driver he'd nicknamed the "I-30 Kamakazi" roared by in a late model Jaguar. The more conservative drivers scurried to get out of harm's way.

Once home, Jake let Napoleon out then checked his mail. Concerned about Rhonda, he dialed her number.

"I'll be there in a few minutes," she informed him.

Five minutes later she appeared at his front door. Jake let her in, leading her into the living room.

"Make yourself comfortable, Rhonda." Pulling at his tie, he removed it and took a seat on a chair opposite the leather sofa where she sat.

"Oh, Jake, I know Freddy's got his faults but I never dreamed he'd be like this," she said.

"What's he done?" Her unhappiness alarmed Jake.

"It's not what he's done but what he threatens to do," she explained. She wiped her eyes. "I understand that being a stepparent can be tough, but I counted on Freddy's learning to love Deb in time.

Last night, he gave me an ultimatum. If I don't make other arrangements for Deb, he's leaving and I won't see him again."

"The louse. He knew you had a child when he married you. He's treating Deb like she's a stray you need to find a new home." Having already formed a healthy dislike for Rhonda's new husband, Jake loathed the man for the grief he'd caused Rhonda and for his indifference toward Jake's only daughter. "Do you want me to set him straight?"

"No," Rhonda cried, jumping to her feet. "Please stay away from him. All we need is for you to antagonize him. He hates you already, you know."

"Why? We've hardly spoken a dozen words to each other." Standing, Jake wrinkled his brow. Maybe Freddy had sensed his dislike. The man might not be as thick-skinned as he appeared. Jake studied his ex-wife. "Tell me what you want me to do, Rhonda. I still think he's a loser, but if you love him I'll help any way I can."

"Take Deb and Napoleon," she told him. "I don't know how long this will take. For now you've got sole responsibility for them."

"Whoa. I agreed to help out while you were on your honeymoon, but that was only for a couple of weeks." Jake was having a hard time convincing himself that he'd understood her. "Have a heart, Rhonda. I'm a man with a demanding career. How can I be a single parent?"

"I don't know, but as of this minute you are. I'll be in touch as much as possible. And when Freddy's away, I'll come over to see Deb." She patted his hand then picked up her handbag, preparing to leave.

At the door she turned. "Don't ask me to give him up, Jake. Freddy's my chance for a new life. Just because our marriage fell apart, you can't expect me to resign myself to being alone for the rest of my

life.

"You may not need anybody, but I'm not like you!" She walked out of his condo, closing the door behind her.

Jake remained in his chair, Rhonda's last words echoing in his head. He'd always prided himself on his self-sufficiency. At that moment it seemed the loneliest word he'd ever heard.

CHAPTER TEN

Jake awoke seconds before his alarm clock sounded. Hitting the off switch, he drew a deep breath. "Well, it's here, my first week as a single parent." He crawled out of bed and stretched. "Got to keep a positive attitude. This shouldn't be too bad. If I can keep a group of healthcare companies in line, this ought to be a piece of cake. What could go wrong?"

Breakfast passed calmly. Munching a bowl of Total cereal and sipping his coffee, Jake scanned the business section of the local paper.

Deb devoured a couple of toaster pop tarts and a glass of juice, Napoleon at her side begging for handouts. The little dog only ate his special diet dog food for canines with nervous stomachs when nothing else was available.

Before he knew it, Jake was up to his ears with work that morning. Again he congratulated himself on his success as a single parent. Life was only chaotic for people who lacked good organizational skills.

Later that morning, a single teary phone call blasted his smug attitude.

"Daddy? Please come home," Deb asked.

Jake heard male voices in the background. Did someone break into the condo?

"Hello? Hello?" His only answer was the sound of a door slamming on the other end of the line.

Imagining all sorts of horrible possibilities, he dumped his papers into his desk drawer, grabbed his coat and briefcase then headed for the elevator.

"Mr. Malone! Mr. Malone?" His secretary followed him.

"Sir? You've got a meeting in ten minutes with the Tax and Audit Healthcare partners. Will you be back in time?"

"Have you lost your mind?" Jake roared, jumping into a down elevator. Holding the door open with

his hand, he glared at the bewildered woman. "My kid's in trouble. She could've been kidnapped.

"You ask me if I'm going to be here for some stupid meeting?" He snorted. "If that damn meeting's so important, you go. I'll see you when I see you." He released the door and held his finger over the down button, causing the elevator car to race from the 53th floor to the basement level in one quick swoop.

Driving home, he told himself over and over, "Cool. Keep cool. Don't get excited." Though Jake knew it was futile to jump to conclusions, his heart raced as horrible pictures flashed before his frantic eyes.

At the condo, all was quiet. Jake thought the place deserted until toenails clicked on the Pergo flooring in the hall, then a trembling, whimpering Napoleon came into sight. Obviously happy to see Jake, the Pekinese barked and wagged his tail.

"Where're they gone, boy?" He looked around. As far as he could see everything was in order. His gaze fixed on a note on the dining room table.

Forcing himself to breath slowly, Jake approached the piece of paper. His hands trembled as he picked it up and read the scrawled message.

"Daddy:

By the time you read this, Mrs. Crosby and I'll be at the hospital.

She complained of a bad case of indigestion this morning. Before I knew what was happening, she fell on the floor. The ambulance men let me ride to the hospital with her.

Please come and get me.

Love, Deb"

Jake jumped back in his car and headed for the Suburban Hospital a couple of miles from his home. En route he worried about their elderly housekeeper and his daughter. Deb must have been frightened yet she'd kept her cool and called for help. At the hospital he asked for directions and was guided to the Emergency Room.

A nurse at the front desk found Mrs. Crosby's admittance papers then guided him to the waiting area. Jake found his daughter curled up in a chair.

Deb threw herself into his arms. Her tear-streaked face made it clear she still needed his support.

"It's okay now, hon. Daddy will take care of everything."

He kissed the top of Deb's head. "You hung up so fast, I imagined all sorts of horrible things." Relief surged through him and he held Deb close for a few moments.

"I'm all right." She squirmed in his embrace. "Daddy, you're squeezing me to death!"

Passersby smiled at the tall man hugging his daughter. Regaining his self-control, Jake released Deb. What the heck was the matter? It wasn't like him to become so emotional.

A kind-faced nurse asked if they were Mrs. Crosby's family.

"No, though we're very fond of her. She's our housekeeper," he said. "Her daughter works for my firm. I'll call her, let her know her mother's here."

The doctor appeared minutes later and told them Mrs. Crosby was resting comfortably. "Does she have a history of heart trouble?" He queried Jake.

Jake shook his head. "No, that's why it's such a shock."

Telling them it had been a minor heart attack, the doctor praised Deb. The ambulance crew's report mentioned she'd used CPR.

Jake's jaw dropped in surprise. He turned to his little girl. "How did you know about that?"

"I saw a neat program on television," Deb informed him.

His heart swelled with pride.

* * *

It was late afternoon before Jake and Deb were able to leave the hospital. His head ached and he felt a little queasy. "Why don't we go home? I'll make some sandwiches."

"Why don't we get a pizza?"

His daughter looked tired and hungry. It wouldn't hurt to pamper her a little after her bad experience.

One quick stop at a Pizza Hut and they were home in the condo a few minutes later.

Greeting them, Napoleon danced on his skinny little legs and licked his chops. Pizza was one of his favorite snacks.

While Deb munched on a large slice of pizza, Jake tried to get his thoughts organized. He'd have to take a few days family leave. Okay, no problem with that, except this week was, would have been an important one at work.

Healthcare partners and managers were converging on the Dallas office for an important seminar a foreign partner was conducting. Jake was responsible for introducing the speaker. Better inform his office. Someone else could handle his duties.

Mrs. Crosby's doctor had told him that she must rest and take her medicine. Whether she could return to his employ was uncertain at present. But what about Deb?

Take one problem at a time, fellow. Breathing deeply, he ate a piece of cold pizza. Minutes later he felt a case of indigestion coming on.

Deb murmured something about Carly.

"What, honey?"

"I said why don't you call Carly? Maybe she could stay with me until you find another

housekeeper."

"No." Though it wasn't his intention, the word came out short and brusque.

Glancing in her direction, he saw Deb's lower lip quiver. He softened his tone. "I mean, you and I will be fine. We don't need anybody, do we?" He winked at her.

"I guess not." Deb didn't sound sure.

"Right. Now what do we need to do first?" Jake walked around the first floor. In the laundry room, there were two large laundry baskets full of clothes, towels and bed linen.

"Mrs. Crosby always does the laundry in the mornings but she collapsed before she got started," Deb informed him.

"All right. We'll do the laundry." It'd been years since he'd done his own laundry. He recalled enough to separate it into stacks of darks, lights and towels then heap one load into the machine.

Not finding the dry detergent he'd used in the past, Jake picked up the bottle of liquid stuff Mrs. Crosby had left in the laundry room. Without measuring the liquid, he poured half the bottle into the washing machine.

"Okay. What does Mrs. Crosby do next?" He looked to his daughter for guidance.

"She sits down and watches game shows." Deb eyed her father skeptically. "You don't like game shows, do you, Dad?"

Jake shuddered. "No, but I sure could use a cup of coffee."

He'd wandered into the backyard, was playing fetch with Napoleon when he heard a gurgling.

"Oh great!" Jake hoped they weren't having plumbing problems. He dashed into the house to check on his wash.

Walking by the guest bathroom off the kitchen, he stopped cold. Bubbles were creeping under the door of the shower stall.

Concerned about his laundry, Jake continued down the hall. Outside the laundry room, his feet gave way and he sat down hard. "What the hell?"

Deb must have heard him since she came running. "Daddy? What's the" Plop, she slipped and fell on top of him. To make matters worse, Napoleon followed on Deb's heels, slipping and skidding into the two of them.

Obviously thinking this was a new game, the Pekinese stuck his nose into the bubbles then barked and began running up and down the hall, slipping and skidding in the foam until he landed flat on his tummy. Deb burst into laughter.

"Dad, how much liquid detergent did you use?"

Jake wasn't about to admit he hadn't read the directions. "A little too much, I guess, but I wanted everything to come out clean." He'd learned something from this experience. Always read the directions

when doing laundry.

Housework wasn't the child's play he'd imagined. Locating a mop in the kitchen closet, Jake wiped the floor.

"What's next?" Nothing could be as bad as this.

"Well, we go to the grocery store."

"All right." He wiped his hands.

"Aren't you going to make a list?" Deb cocked an eyebrow.

"Nah. We'll just get what we want."

Later he regretted his words. The last time he'd gone grocery shopping with Deb she was a toddler, easy to please.

The middle-aged checker cast a dubious eye at their overloaded cart. "You folks having a party?" The woman seemed curious.

"What? No, we just got what we wanted." Jake gave their order a closer look. Cookies, candy, cereals, frozen pizza and popcycles. He sent Deb back for milk and bread.

That night she woke up complaining of a stomach ache. Minutes later she threw up her supper.

"Sorry, Daddy."

"It's okay, sweetie. But next time I wouldn't mix Rocky Road ice cream with pizza and gummy bears." Another lesson learned. Children, even twelve-year-olds, don't always pick what's nutritious. In other words, you don't give kids free rein in the grocery store.

Next morning, he asked Deb what else Mrs. Crosby did.

"The ironing, Dad. There's not much, but I have a few dresses and things that need ironing. Especially my new outfit. I want to wear it to Sally's party."

"Piece of cake." He strode to the laundry room, set up the ironing board, turned on the iron. "Bring on that dress," he told his daughter.

"Here it is." An anxious expression crossed her face. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Of course. Do you think your father's stupid?" He couldn't remember the last time he'd used an iron.

"No but it's my new outfit."

Jake waved her out of the room. Mmmm . . . the dress was sure wrinkled. He adjusted the heat setting on the iron. Still wrinkly. Turning the iron to high, he worked on the dress. The phone rang.

"Dad, it's for you."

Distracted, Jake left the iron sitting on the fabric and went to answer the kitchen phone. It was his

secretary with questions only he could answer.

By the time he'd finished the call and hung up, five minutes had passed. Remembering the dress, he swore under his breath and dashed back to the laundry room.

A cloud of smoke was now rising from what had been a pristine white pique pinafore.

Picking up the culprit iron, Jake turned it off and examined the dress. A large black scorched area covered one side of the front of the garment.

Deb darted into the room. "You've ruined my new outfit. Dad, how could you?" Bursting into tears, she ran upstairs and slammed the door of her room.

Another lesson learned. Don't ever leave a heated iron on the garment you're pressing.

Feeling like a heel, Jake knocked on Deb's door, promised he'd buy her another dress.

By the time Deb went to bed that night, Jake was worn out, was about to retire himself.

Someone tapped on the front door.

Hoping it wasn't a pest selling encyclopedias house to house, he walked in that direction.

Jake opened the door. He did a double take. Carly stood outside.

"How're you doing?"

"Never better." He wasn't about to admit the last twenty-four hours had been a disaster.

"I heard about your housekeeper. Thought I'd come by and see if you needed some help."

"Why, no" His eyes met Carly's and that second it dawned on Jake why she was there. "Deb didn't just happen to call you, did she?"

"Why, no," Carly answered and walked inside.

* * *

Carly didn't like to lie, though sometimes it was necessary. Jake's daughter had called her in tears earlier. She was there on a fact-finding mission, gauge how bad things were and convince Jake to let her help.

It'd be difficult since he was hell-bent on doing it all on his own. But no one could do that, even self-sufficient types needed help sometimes.

Deb came downstairs, yawning. Seeing her friend, she brightened. "Hi Carly."

"Hi hon. I heard about Mrs. Crosby and thought I'd come by and see if you and your Dad needed help."

"Don't suppose you know anything about scorched fabrics." Jake chimed in at that moment.

"Well, that depends. Let me see the dr . . . garment that's scorched," Carly said.

Jake raised an eyebrow as if he were on to her. "It's in the laundry room. Right this way." He led her to the back of the condo. "Watch your step. The floor's still a little slippery."

Carly ran her shoe over the floor in the laundry room. "You're right about that. What happened?" She waited for him to tell her what she already knew.

"That's a long story. I won't bore you with the details." Jake picked up the scorched jumper from the ironing board. "I tried to press this darn thing but the iron scorched it. Trouble is Deb had her heart set on wearing it tomorrow. With that little flowery blouse. Guess it's hopeless."

Carly examined the scorched area. Frowning, she informed him, "the scorch is there to stay, I'm afraid. Looks like you almost burned a hole in the fabric, Jake."

His shoulders slumped. "Maybe I can find her another outfit like that," he said, his voice meek.

"Don't count on it, not if the party's tomorrow. Wait a minute. Where it's scorched is the perfect place for a false pocket." She examined the blouse that had come with the jumper. "And look, there's lots of extra material she doesn't need in the hem of the blouse. I've an idea. Get me some scissors, thread and needle."

An hour later the jumper sported two new pockets.

"Carly, you're wonderful!" Jake's daughter ran upstairs to try on her restored outfit.

"I sure thank you," Jake forced himself to mouth words of gratitude. He seemed reluctant to admit he'd needed help.

"Well, I need to go." She would have offered to stay and tidy up the place but it was late and from the annoyed pucker in Jake's forehead, she'd done enough for one day.

Carly wished he'd admit he sometimes needed help like everyone else. No one, including Jake, could always do everything on his own.

"I'll be by Saturday evening at seven o'clock to get you for the party," he reminded her.

"Great. See you then." Carly suppressed the urge to smooth his tousled hair. Wishing she could ease Jake's worries, she waved and drove home then spent the night dreaming about him and his darned self-sufficiency. Who was he kidding, anyway?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Arriving home from work the next day, Carly found a business card stuck under her apartment door. Did Jake come by? She picked it up. Oh, darn. It's from Steve. I wonder what he wanted?

Steve's Gym announced itself on the card followed by his logo, a tiny muscular man lifting weights with the slogan, "Be All You Want to Be" and the gym's address, phone number and hours. She flipped the card over and found her friend had left her a short message.

"Carly,

I tried to reach you at work but your phone's always busy. Please call me. We need to talk. Steve"

Great. As if she didn't have enough on her plate right now, it appeared Steve had decided to come back into her life. Carly started to crumple the note, toss it in file thirteen with the other trash, then something stopped her hand.

Poor Steve sounded lonely. Her heart went out to him in spite of the fact he'd never be more than a friend. He ought to realize that by now. She'd been discouraging his advances since Valentine's Day in First Grade.

Carly sat there for a moment, lost in memories. If she lived to be one hundred she'd never forget the Valentine's Day Steve tried to kiss her in the cloakroom and Miss Lacy caught them, sent them both to see Mr. Grimes.

Visitors to their elementary school almost always mistook their easygoing principal for the janitor. No wonder since middle-aged Mr. Grimes was an confirmed bachelor and didn't care how shabby his clothes became. Also, he loved to putter about his school. If something broke, he was first on the scene, making repairs.

Mr. Grimes patted them both on their heads, winked, and sent them back to class.

Wouldn't it be lovely if everyone in the world could find his one special person. For instance, she'd be more than happy if Jake With a sigh, Carly put that particular dream on hold. It might not be intended, yet she hadn't given up on Jake, not by a long shot.

The office party would be a chance for her to show him she belonged in his life. What did women wear to office functions in Dallas anyway?

Her company's parties were casual. Everyone, Carly included, came in jeans and shirts. Those who wanted to feel dressed up might add a little jewelry or sport new jeans or new boots.

Canvassing the stores in the mall, Carly selected a new ladies shop featuring conservative clothes in the front window. It wasn't a busy time of day and she lucked out. The manager was available to help her.

Explaining the kind of function she planned to attend, Carly let the older woman guide her. A few minutes later she left the store with a black silk dress, short sleeves, mid-calf length and collarless.

The garment was drab compared to the bright colors she usually wore but the manager assured her the dress would be appropriate for this occasion. She certainly didn't want to appear unsophisticated.

Smiling at Rhonda, Freddy gave his bride a quick peck on the cheek, pleased that she'd at long last succumbed to his request and signed signature cards, converting her savings and checking accounts to joint accounts in both of their names.

Since he'd complained of his need for immediate funds, she also wrote a check for the phony film project.

"There," she said, handing him the check, "I hope this will convince you how much I believe in you, Freddy."

"Oh, it does, dear," he replied. "You have no idea." With her check in his pocket, he could proceed with his plan.

He wondered if Rhonda had told Jake what she planned to do with her savings. It would be a whole lot better for Freddy if she hadn't.

Trying to be patient, he waited for her to mention Jake, as she usually did during their conversations. It would be only a matter of time.

"I'm so glad things are going better for us, sweetheart," she said, leaning over his chair and kissing him on the top of his head. "We're really fortunate finding each other. So many people are lonely. Look at poor Jake. I haven't seen him recently, but I just know he's lonely."

There. The stupid broad had said the magic word. Now maybe she'd divulge when she'd last seen her ex-husband, and if she'd mentioned her plans to help Freddy.

The day he disappeared, he wanted to make a clean getaway and not have the police on his trail right away, like a pack of anxious bloodhounds.

"Yeah, me too. It's sure better being married than single." He glanced up at his bride. "The guy must get lonely, staying home night after night. I bet he doesn't even date."

"Well I wouldn't say that." Rhonda smiled.

"What does that mean?" He hated it when women pretended to know something men didn't.

"Oh, not much . . . except the last time I talked to Deb, she told me her father had dinner a few nights ago with Deb's friend's mother. Also, this Saturday Jake's taking a friend of Deb's to his annual office party."

Freddy snorted. He'd been guilty of a lot of things, but he drew the line at messing with young girls. "Shame on him. He's a regular dirty old man, dating a twelve-year-old."

Rhonda threw her head back and roared. "You silly man." She hugged Freddy, she was always doing that. Personally, he hated being hugged, though he couldn't admit it to his bride.

"Jake's taking the young woman who grooms Napoleon to his office party. Deb told me this Carly, I think that's her name, is twenty-six years old."

"A dog groomer? That should go over big with the stuffed shirts at your ex's office. You can be sure good ol' Jake won't tell them what his date does for a living." A light bulb switched on inside Freddy's brain, and he remembered the pact he'd made.

Freddy found himself transported back to the dingy Dallas bar in the underground near Jake's office. What did he tell Jake's co-worker? Oh, yeah. If he recalled correctly, his exact words were, "if either of us comes up with a way to hurt this Jake, he informs the other. I promise you, we'll get him." Opportunity's knock brought a grin to Freddy's face. Beautiful.

With Rhonda out of the way taking a shower before she went to bed, he dug into his billfold. The first time he searched, he missed it. Next time he dug deeper and came up with a torn piece of paper napkin from the underground bar.

Spreading the paper, Freddy found the guy's number. Not wanting Rhonda to know what he was doing, he stood at the foot of the stairs, listening. She was singing off-key in the shower. If he knew Rhonda, she might be in there for an hour.

He picked up his cell phone and stepped outside on their redwood deck. Leaving the sliding glass doors to the kitchen open, so he could hear if she called him, he dialed the number. He recognized the raspy voice that answered.

"Hi pal, this is your friend from the bar the other night."

"Oh, hi." The other man's voice was wary.

"Sounds like you may not be alone, so I'll be brief. You remember our topic of conversation?"

"Sure thing."

"Our friend's taking a dame to your office shindig."

"So?"

"Here's the good part. I just found out she grooms dogs for a living."

"You're kidding." The other man's laugh was harsh.

"Nope. I know it's true. My source is close to him."

"Thanks, chum. I appreciate this. If I can do you one, I'll give you a call."

"Fine. See ya." Freddy pushed the end button, breaking the connection then humming a tuneless song he climbed the stairs to the second floor.

Feeling generous, he shed his clothes on the bathroom floor and stepped into the shower with his wife.

Surprised, she squealed when he got his hands around her plump, soapy body and kissed her. Rhonda didn't realize it, but it was his goodbye kiss. He'd be gone as soon as the banks opened tomorrow.

Uneasy when he didn't hear from her, Jake punched in Rhonda's number the next day. It wasn't like her not to keep in touch. He hoped by now things had settled down with her marriage, for Deb's sake as much as her mother's. But if this jerk Rhonda married didn't want Jake's kid around, Deb was better off living with her own father.

Rhonda's voice sounded husky, answering the phone, and Jake sensed things were still rocky. It was definitely not a good time to ask if she wanted Deb to come home. That was all right with him. Deb and he'd manage on their own for awhile longer.

"Hi. What's going on?" That might be the wrong question to ask Rhonda. Recently, crisis seemed to be her middle name.

"The bank called me today." She burst into tears.

"Hey. It can't be that bad. I want to cry sometimes when I get my monthly statment." He tried to kid Rhonda out of her upset state.

"This's not a laughing matter, Jake Malone." She scolded him. "Oh, hell. I'll have to tell you the whole story. Freddy convinced me to invest a large hunk of my savings in his new film project."

"Honey, I know he's your husband, but are you sure you want to do that? Why don't you tell him to use his own money and later on you'll lend him some funds. Better still, why doesn't he take out a loan?"

"Too late, it's too late," she moaned.

"You already did it?" Jake's anger rose. "Why didn't you talk to me about it first?"

"I knew you'd advise me not to use my savings, but I wanted to do whatever I could to improve things between Freddy and me."

"Wanted to?" He noticed her use of the past tense. Jake sighed, heavily, braced himself for what was coming. "Okay. Tell me the rest."

"I gave him a check for half the funds in my checking account. Also, I filled out signature cards, converting the two accounts to co-ownership."

"Of course." Having a hunch what had happened, Jake's jaw muscles tightened.

"Freddy left this morning to go to the bank and run some errands. He didn't get back by lunchtime so I thought he must've met an old friend someplace and stopped to chat. Freddy loves to talk to people."

"Yeah, I've noticed." Jake had also observed Freddy wouldn't look him straight in the eyes the day they met. He'd thought at the time there was something unsavory about Rhonda's new husband.

"Later, I received a peculiar telephone call from Mary Frances, you know my old sorority sister. She's now the assistant manager of our bank."

"Go on."

"She asked if I was dissatisfied with the bank's services. Of course, I'm not. They've always handled our accounts as they should." Rhonda's voice hardened. "Jake, there's no easy way to say this. Freddy not only cashed the check I gave him for his film project, he's withdrawn all of the funds in the savings and checking accounts and closed both accounts."

"The damn crook. I've had a bad feeling about him from the first. Where is the little weasel now?"

"Your guess's as good as mine," she answered. "After the bank called, I cried a lot, then I searched the entire house. His clothes aren't here, and neither is any of his other stuff. I did find a brochure in the back of his nightstand drawer."

"What was it?"

"Just a beautiful full-color brochure of Hawaii." Rhonda's voice crackled. "The bastard's gone to Hawaii with my money."

"Have you notified the police?"

"Not yet."

"I'll call them if you like."

"There's another way to handle this, Jake."

Her tone worried him. What was she thinking?

"I've always wanted to see Hawaii. I'm going on the morning plane. Maybe I can find him, get my money back before he spends it all."

"That's not a good idea." He wished he could take care of this mess for her, but he had Deb to consider and his job waited for him.

"Maybe not, but I'm not going alone."

"Did you ever tell him about your hobby?"

"No, but he's going to find out."

"Don't do anything you'll regret later."

"Of course, I won't. But I'm going to scare the hell out of the little weasel." Her laugh was bitter.

"Will you call me when you get there?"

"I'm going to teach Freddy a lesson. He'll think twice before he cheats any more helpless females."

Jake shook his head. Rhonda liked to play the delicate, Southern belle, but she could shoot the eye out of a snake at fifty paces. Too bad she couldn't do as well picking husbands. Good thing he'd never tried cheating her. As her now deceased father, the Colonel told him the day they got married, "Don't mess with my little girl, Son. When she gets riled up, you want to be on a fast horse, headed west."

CHAPTER TWELVE

"I understand your concerns about your daughter, Jake, but we need you here," his boss said. "Several companies you've brought us this year have called in the last couple of days, wanting to speak to you. And I don't need to remind you how demanding our clients can be. Once a company gets used to a certain manager, they want him whenever problems arise."

Jake's boss's tone was sympathetic to a point, but his message came across loud and clear. The executive's patience was wearing thin.

Jake swallowed hard. "I'm sorry, Howard. I was about to contact an agency for a temporary housekeeper when you called. It shouldn't be difficult to locate someone to fill in until Mrs. Crosby can come back to work. My only requirement is a kindhearted woman who likes children, preferably one who will sit evenings once in a while." Jake hung up the phone and grabbed the Yellow Pages. A half-hour later, he'd talked to two agencies. Each promised him quick results.

Deb walked into the kitchen. "What ya doing, Dad?"

"Trying to find someone to fill in for Mrs. Crosby, honey."

Deb's bottom lip trembled.

"Don't cry, hon." Jake held out his arms and she settled herself on his lap. "You know Dad has to work so he can pay the bills and take care of us." His child was intelligent and should realize he couldn't stay home with her forever.

"All right," she agreed. "But I'll miss you. Haven't we had fun?"

"You bet." And they had, if you overlooked the small problems, like the laundry, the scorched dress, and their shopping spree the other day.

His pantry was crammed full of boxes of cereal Deb would never eat, also cookies and snacks neither of them needed.

That afternoon he took a flurry of phone calls. Since he hadn't stipulated the need for English fluency as a requirement, he now suffered the consequences, receiving several calls from people who didn't have good command of the English language. Jake called the agencies and corrected his mistake.

Appointments were scheduled beginning the next day.

An hour before he expected the first applicant, his doorbell rang, then rang again as if the caller were in a hurry.

Opening the door, Jake found a tall, scrawny woman staring back at him. Everything about her was gray, her hair, her long, drab dress, even her eyes.

"You the guy who wants a housekeeper?"

"Yes, but--" Before he had time to ask if she could come back at her appointment time, she'd pushed past him and walked into his living room. What a rude person.

"Miss . . . ah, I didn't catch your name."

"Smith, Lollie Smith." She strode across the living room, walked into the kitchen. Everywhere she went, she opened doors, even snooped in closets, as if she had the right to do so.

"Well, since you're already here, why don't we sit down and I'll tell you the requirements for the position." Jake reminded himself that first impressions could be way off base, though her prying ways and shifty grey eyes didn't endear her to him.

Taking a seat, Lollie sent him a hard glance. "Where's the kid?"

"My daughter is upstairs reading," he replied, striving to be polite. "Now, about your duties, if I hire you--."

"You mean, if I decide I want to work for you, Bub." She interrupted him. "How old's the kid?"

"Twelve years old, and she'd be no trouble."

"Good. She can play outside except when the weather's bad," Lollie announced in a matter-of-fact tone.

"I'm sorry," Jake said, getting to his feet, "but this just isn't the position for you. I need someone to be a companion to my daughter, and it's obvious you'd be happier in a childless household." Taking the offensive woman by her bony arm, he tried to lead her to the door.

"Take your filthy paws off me." She slapped his hand away. "Some women may put up with hanky-panky, but not me." With no further comment, she stalked from the condo.

No car was in sight. Jake watched her walk away, relieved to be done with her.

The next lady arriving for an interview restored his faith in personnel agencies. A sweet little lady, Mrs. Dawson sat perched on his sofa, nodding her head. She seemed pleasant enough, even if she did smile at everything he told her.

"Well, you have excellent references, ma'am," he said once he'd looked over the letters of recommendation she'd brought with her. "Why don't we go upstairs? I'd like you to meet my Deb. You'll like her. She's a quiet, well mannered girl."

Leading the older lady upstairs, Jake congratulated himself on having found Mrs. Dawson. Now if she and his daughter just liked each other.

Deb opened her door and Mrs. Dawson and he entered the room. They chatted a few minutes and the old lady admired Deb's collection of dolls.

"I have a new pet, Daddy. Gloria gave it to me."

Jake drew a deep breath. Knowing Gloria had a cat, he hoped she hadn't convinced his Deb to take one of the new kittens. "What are you talking about?"

"You'll see. I was going to show it to you later. Wait a minute," she said.

Sitting on the side of Deb's bed, Mrs. Dawson leaned forward as if she were interested, too.

Deb knelt and slid a shoe box from under her bed then deposited the box in the old lady's lap, removing the lid.

Mrs. Dawson took one look at the contents, shrieked, and flung the shoebox onto the floor. She rushed downstairs.

Jake managed to catch up with the old lady before she left. "I'm so sorry. I had no idea."

"I'll put up with cats, even dogs if they behave themselves, but I can't stand rats." She shuddered with revulsion. "Find yourself someone else, someone who likes rodents."

Mrs. Dawson climbed in her old Lincoln and drove away without a backward glance.

Deb came into the room. "Sorry, Dad. I wanted to surprise you. Isn't she the cutest little white mouse you've ever seen? I'm going to call her Agnes."

"Great. Now take Agnes right back where you got her."

"Two down and one to go," he muttered through clenched teeth. Today, good luck was evading him. Things had to improve.

The third and last interview of the day turned out the biggest surprise.

An attractive large-framed woman arrived right on time. As he led her into the living room, Jake was impressed by her height and the slight ripple of muscles showing in her arms.

While engaging the woman in conversation, Jake grew more and more apprehensive, though he couldn't say why. It wasn't anything she said or did. He just sensed there was something peculiar about this applicant.

He'd better tell her about Napoleon. "Do you like dogs?"

"Me? Love them. Do you have a dog?"

"Yes, a little Pekinese. Wait a minute and I'll get him."

Jake walked into the laundry room and released Napoleon from his cage, a safety precaution when there were strangers in the house. With their pet in his arms, he walked back into the living room.

Napoleon's behavior had improved with obedience classes. Earlier, he'd tried to bite everyone except his family, Deb's sitter and Carly. Now, he only attacked strange men.

Jake put Napoleon down on the living room carpet. Right away, the little dog reacted to the newcomer. First, his fur bristled. Next, a deep growl emitted from his throat. Finally, Napoleon flung himself on the lady Jake was interviewing.

"Get this beast off me," the woman roared in a deep voice. Napoleon hung on until he tore her skirt, revealing a large, hairy leg.

While the woman struggled to get away from the dog, her hair became disheveled. In fact, it shifted until it lay on her head, lopsided. A wig!

Jake nodded. He'd been right, thinking there was something odd about the woman. This was a man in disguise.

"Hold on. I'll get him off you," advised Jake, biting his lip to keep from laughing.

By the time he returned from putting Napoleon back in the laundry room, the man had smoothed his clothes and replaced his wig, regaining at least some of his composure.

"I'm sorry, but I advertised for a lady housekeeper."

"I know." The man moaned. Removing his wig, he kicked off the high heeled shoes and rubbed his cramped feet. "Mister, do you have any idea how hard it is to get a job nowadays?"

"I kept house for my invalid mother for years. Since her death, I've tried several agencies but nobody one wants a male housekeeper. I've decided my only recourse's to pretend to be a woman."

"I'm sorry, but you just won't do," Jake said, trying to keep a serious expression on his features. He didn't break down and laugh until the front door had closed behind the would-be housekeeper.

"Dad?" Deb came down the stairs. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing, hon," he replied, wiping his eyes. Considering his plight, Jake became somber once more. What the hell was he going to do?

As if on command, the phone rang again.

"If it's an agency, tell them no more interviews today," he directed his daughter.

Instead, she listened to the person on the line then handed Jake the phone.

"Yeah?" Listening to his caller, Jake straightened. "Yes sir, you're absolutely right. Well, we sure don't want to lose their business. Let me get back to you in a few minutes." He listened again. "No, but I'll do something." He hung up the phone.

Jake's mind raced, considering his options. Deb's mother was in Hawaii tracking her larcenous husband. His own mother with her numerous aches and pains, all of which grew worse every time he called, was in no condition to keep Deb.

Carly was his only hope. "I've got to go out-of-town tomorrow on business, Deb. Let's call Carly

and see if she's got a responsible, mature friend who can stay with you for a couple of days. If that doesn't work, I'll take you with me." He couldn't do that. Damn, but life could get complicated.

* * *

Carly noticed the change in Jake as soon as he spoke. His excessive self-assurance had been annoying at times. Still, she was shocked by this new downtrodden Jake. "What's the matter? Are you ill?"

"Not at all, it's just that I have to go out of town on business tomorrow--."

"And you need someone to stay with Deb?" She took the words right out of his mouth.

"Ah, you wouldn't have a girl friend you could recommend to stay with her?"

"There's one woman who'd take good care of your daughter. She'll play with Deb, make sure she doesn't fill up on junk food, and keep her company while you're gone." She might have added, and love her like a little sister, but she didn't.

"She sounds too good to be true. Would you mind giving me her name and telephone number?"

"Wake up, Jake. I was talking about myself."

"That's wonderful, but are you sure you can miss work?" Jake was relieved to have found someone to stay with Deb but could Carly afford to miss time from her own job?

"Sure. I've still got vacation time coming." Carly winked at her secretary. Grinning, the other woman handed her boss another letter to sign.

"I owe you one." He didn't sound too happy about that.

"Forget it. That's what friends are for." Carly managed to keep a casual tone in her voice.

If she had her way, before long she'd be much more than his friend. And with a man like Jake, it'd be better if he believed it had been his idea all along.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Shutting his bag, Jake kissed Deb goodbye. The taxicab pulled into the driveway while he was giving Carly last minute instructions.

"Here's the telephone number for my hotel in Chicago, and this's Deb's friend's mother's telephone number. If you get stuck about what to do, call Barbara Lawson. She's got a twelve-year-old daughter herself, will be glad to help you."

"Thanks, we'll manage." Though she didn't say anything, Carly resented Jake's assuming she couldn't handle any problems that arose. If she could manage the "Terrible Trio", her name for George's children, Deb would be easy. Besides, Deb and she were good friends now.

Jake waved as the cab drove away then Napoleon barked to be let out. Carly watched the little dog approach the fence. "What's so interesting out there?" She turned to Deb.

"Didn't I tell you?" Debbie grinned. "Napoleon's in love, or he thinks he is. The neighbors have a girl Pekinese and my pooch likes her."

"Do you plan to have puppies?"

"Not unless Napoleon and Penelope become better acquainted. Right now, she won't let him near her."

"That's too bad."

"I'd love another little Napoleon, but Daddy doesn't want any more dogs."

"Men, including fathers, have been known to change their minds," Carly reminded her young charge. Would Jake change his mind about her? Her own feelings were in a state of flux. Sometimes she wished they could spend more time together. Other times he infuriated her until she wished she'd never laid eyes on his handsome, stubborn face.

She confessed she'd become more than fond of him, even if he refused to admit he needed her or anyone else. Carly knew better and staying with Deb would be one way for her to show him how helpful she could be.

"Let's order a pizza then you can show me your Pokemon cards. All right?" Carly studied the little girl. Would she miss her father while he was gone? Deb had told her that Jake and she hadn't spent much time together since the divorce, until the last week or so. His taking time from work to stay with Deb had pleased the little girl more than Jake realized.

The evening passed with no excitement other than Napoleon going ballistic when a cricket wandered in from outside. Laughing at the dog, Carly rescued the unfortunate insect and deposited it in the front yard.

Deb yawned and Carly realized how weary she was herself. They'd better go to bed. Tomorrow she'd take Deb to the pool so she could play with her friends. Also they'd do a little shopping.

There was a new preteens shop in the mall. Carly had spied an adorable sundress in their store window the other day. If Deb liked it, she'd buy her one.

Once the little girl and Napoleon were in bed Carly took a shower then settled on top of the twin bed in the guest room with a book she'd wanted to read.

The telephone rang and she reached for it, hoping it hadn't awakened her charges. It was Jake.

"Everything all right on the home front?"

"Sure. Deb's sound asleep."

"Guess she misses her old Dad," he suggested.

"Actually, I don't think your name's been mentioned but once since you left."

"Oh?" His voice sagged.

"I'm sorry. Of course she misses you. What I should have said is we've been busy eating pizza, playing Pokemon and watching a video. Tomorrow, I'm sure she'll start wondering how much longer until you get home." Carly puzzled over the riddle that was Jake. It was all right for other people to need him, like Deb, her mother, Jake's mother, but he didn't think he needed anyone himself. He had a lot to learn.

"Yeah, well, tell Deb her Dad called and he'll call earlier tomorrow before she goes to bed." Jake paused. "How about you? I guess you're worn out, running around entertaining Deb."

"Actually, I am a little tired. When you called, I was in bed, reading a book."

"Oh, what's the title?" He seemed interested.

"Nothing academic. This's fun reading, a romance."

"Do women really read that stuff?" He laughed.

"Sure and lots of men, too," she said.

"I'll never understand why."

"It'd be hard to explain to someone like you. I bet you get your thrills from a good book on tax strategies for IPOs."

"What would you know about stuff like that?"

"Nothing."

"That could be because you have no need for knowledge on the subject right now, but I'm sure you could master that topic or any other if you wanted," he told her.

"Thanks."

He sighed. "Okay, talk to you tomorrow. You girls planning a big day?"

"Swimming in the morning, then lunch, and we might do a little shopping. We'll be home by supertime. Why don't you call then?"

"Good night."

Carly waited until he'd disconnected, then eased the receiver back in its holder. Finding the place she'd stopped reading, she was soon immersed in her tax strategies book.

Jake dreamed about Carly that night. In his dream he competed with other men for her attention. Every time he got her alone, one of her other suitors, all of whom resembled the muscle-bound Steve, would swoop down like Tarzan and carry her away in his arms.

He woke with a headache that lingered through his meetings with clients and their endless questions and needless worries. By late afternoon he was ready for a stiff drink, a hot shower, and an evening away from work.

Eager to call home, he placed an order with room service for dinner then slipped off his shoes and put his feet up.

Dialing his home number, he was prepared to hear a girlish voice on the other end.

"Yeah?" A deep voice rumbled into the phone.

Jake frowned. Had he called the wrong number? "Who's this?"

"Who ya want to speak to, wise guy?"

"This is Jake Malone. Who the hell are you?"

"Oh, you. Just a minute," the other man replied and clunked the phone down so hard Jake's ear hurt.

"Jake?" Carly's sweet voice came on the line.

"What's going on there? I call to speak to you and Deb and a gorilla answers the phone." He was annoyed. Was Carly entertaining friends?

"That's no gorilla." Carly snickered. "Steve came by, looking for me, and he answered the phone since I was cooking supper."

"I see. Well, put Deb on, please."

"Sorry, but she's taking a bath. Can we call you back?"

"No, just tell Deb I called and will be home tomorrow evening. I don't know how late my plane will be, so if you can plan on staying over tomorrow night, I'd appreciate it."

"No problem. Is everything all right?"

"Fine. Good night." He hung up and wished he were home. She'd lied to him about this Steve. It was obvious they were still seeing each other. So what? He didn't care who she saw. Carly had her own life.

That night Jake didn't dream. How could he since he didn't dare close his eyes all night. Everytime he did, he saw Carly with Steve, in Steve's arms.

* * *

"You better go, Steve." Carly stood, smoothed her dress then walked to the door.

"Baby, what's wrong with you? I show you how I feel and you give me the cold shoulder."

"How many times have I told you we're friends and that's all? By now you should have gotten the idea through that thick head of yours." She scowled at him.

"Okay, okay. We'll go back to how we used to be. I don't want to lose your friendship, Carly. But if you ever decide you want to be more than my friend, just say the word." He got to his feet.

At the door he turned and grinned at her. "You always were pretty when you got mad, even in the First Grade. Remember the jar of paste you threw at me?"

"Yes, and I remember we were both kept after school because the darn jar hit the assistant principal by mistake." They'd shared too many memories for her to stay mad at him.

Carly grinned and tapped Steve on his chest. "Go home, friend, I'll see you later."

After Steve left, Carly found his watch while straightening the living room. It must have fallen from his back pocket while they were sitting on the sofa.

"Now, you don't suppose Steve left that on purpose?" She spoke to an empty room since Deb had gone to bed hours ago. "No, he wouldn't pull a stunt like that." She shrugged and went upstairs to the guestroom.

While she undressed, Carly replayed Jake's call. He'd sounded peculiar, asking her about Steve. Could it be that Jake was just a little jealous of her old friend?

* * *

The next day glided by. As planned, Carly escorted Deb to the pool. Deb wasted no time finding two friends.

Soon the three girls competed to see who could swim the most laps. Where did they get all that energy? Was she ever that full of life?

Wondering if she could compete with the youngsters, Carly gave her one-piece suit a tug then jumped into the water.

Deb and her friends screamed with delight.

"Come on Carly! Race you," Deb called.

Carly completed three laps then she shook her head. "Enough. I'm not your age." She dragged her weary body out of the water and lay beside the pool on a beach towel, resting.

"I hope you won't be too tired to take me shopping." Frowning, Deb looked down at her.

"Of course not." Carly forced herself into an upright position.

Following lunch at a local burger joint Carly and Deb headed for the mall. The sundress was still in the front window and it looked great on Deb.

"This's my treat," Carly said. "Besides, it looks like it was made for you." It'd look better if they could do something about those pigtails.

She'd observed Deb's friends had shorter, more stylish cuts. She tugged on a lock of her own hair. She could use a trim, too.

Home again, Deb ran upstairs to try on her new dress. Carly had just slipped off her sandals and opened a can of soda when someone rang the doorbell.

Opening the door, she found a woman she'd never met. "Oh, hello, can I help you?"

"Yes," the stylish blonde answered. "I'm Gloria's mom, Barbara Lawson. Mind if I come in for a minute?"

"Please do." She opened the screen door, stood aside for the other woman to enter.

Standing in the foyer, Barbara said, "You must be Deb's little sitter."

Lawson? An alarm sounded in Carly's head. This was the woman who invited Jake to dinner. "Deb's upstairs. Did you want to see her?"

"No, I just baked cookies and thought I'd bring them by." She handed Carly a large, covered plate. "Is Jake coming home tonight?"

"Yes, but it'll be late. He asked me to plan on staying until tomorrow morning."

"I see. What do you think of him?"

"He's very nice, I suppose." She wasn't about to discuss Jake with this woman. Was Barbara after Jake?

Barbara's sculptured nails smoothed her hair. "Honey, that's a real man, let me tell you." She winked at Carly.

"Do you know Deb's Dad well?" I don't like this gal.

"We only had one date then my husband came back wanting to reconcile, but it's not what I want. Not when there're men like Jake running around loose."

"I see." At least she's honest. "Do you plan to date Jake again?"

"Sure. The sooner, the better. He's wonderful, if you know what I mean?" Barbara smiled.

"Speaking as his daughter's sitter, he's fine. Well, thanks for the cookies, ma'am. I'll tell Jake his old friend Barbara baked them," Carly replied, emphasizing the word old.

Carly led Barbara to the door then watched the other woman wiggle and sway down the block to her own condo. It was difficult but Carly resisted the temptation to toss the tin of cookies against the wall of

the living room.

Deb came downstairs, still wearing her new dress.

"Let me take your picture." Carly found her camera. With that done, she suggested, "now why don't you take it off before you get something on it." Stop that, you sound like her mother.

"Does your father like Gloria's mother?" Carly tried to sound casual. Was the blonde after Jake or was he pursuing her?

"Don't know." The little girl brought out her Pokemon game. "How about another game? You're getting better."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Late that night Jake slammed the door of the taxi then pulled out his door key. Entering the condo, he found no one downstairs, not even Napoleon. The dog's bed in the kitchen was empty.

"Just as well," he muttered. He didn't feel like talking. Depositing his suitcase by the stairs, Jake headed for the kitchen. The meal on the plane had been the usual meager, tasteless, rubbery chicken, a tired salad and a chocolate chip cookie. Jake made do with a Scotch.

Now he was hungry. Glad to be home, Jake stopped and sniffed the air. What was that delightful aroma? It smelled like freshly baked cookies. Did Carly bake cookies for him? His heart warmed toward Deb's sitter.

The next moment he reminded himself that Carly and he had nothing in common. He'd been married and had a twelve-year-old daughter. Carly was single. His clients were healthcare providers, hers were four-legged. He'd mentioned classical music once and she yawned. The list went on and on.

His nose led him to a covered plate on the table and a note.

"Daddy:

I wanted to wait up for you but Carly said we growing girls need our rest. We baked sugar kookies. Only burned a couple of batches. These were better. Napoleon liked them and you know how picky he is! Ha Ha.

See you in the morning.

Love from your dauter Deb."

Jake folded the note and stuck it in his pocket. He couldn't see Deb winning any spelling contests, but she was dear to his heart.

Also, to be fair, he had to admit Carly was great with his daughter. Of course, she was only twenty-six and Deb was twelve.

Knowing that Carly was with Deb had eased his mind so he could concentrate on his meetings, and he had, except for a few random moments. Strange but the times his attention strayed from the speaker he'd thought more often of Carly than his daughter.

Jake finished off two sugar cookies, which weren't half-bad if you didn't eat the edges. He slipped off his shoes and crept up the carpeted stairs.

All was dark except at the end of the hall where a dim light seeped under the guestroom door. He hesitated, not wanting to intrude on Carly's privacy then reconsidered. Maybe he should check on her. She could've been taken ill.

Easing his way down the hall, he approached the guest room and gave a light tap on the door. No response, he opened the door.

From the hall, he admired the view. If he'd been an artist, what a subject that'd be.

The soft light lingered on Carly's dark mass of hair, picking up touches of auburn in the strands. By comparison, her creamy nightgown seemed almost iridescent.

Mindless of her visitor, Carly lay fast asleep, a heavy book open on the bed beside her.

Drawn to her, Jake edged closer. With care, he lifted the oversized book. The title caused him to frown. Tax Planning for the Small Business Owner. Why in the world would she read something like that?

Marking her place with the bookmark that lay on top of the comforter, Jake paused. How would it appear if she woke and found him gazing down at her? Better get out of there fast.

Jake turned and stumbled over shoes she'd left beside the bed, almost falling. He glanced her way, afraid he'd disturbed her slumber.

Relieved when she didn't stir he was surprised to hear a low rumble escape the confines of the covers. A moment later a familiar little head appeared.

"Napoleon?" What was going on? Their pet never slept under covers. "It's all right, boy," he whispered. Patting his dog, Jake turned off the lamp on the nightstand then tiptoed out of the room, easing the door shut after him. Moments later he was in his own bedroom down the hall.

Lying under his covers, Jake felt confined so he climbed out of bed long enough to open the window. Outside was utter darkness except for one bright star in the west.

Jake stood staring into the abyss of night for a minute before returning to bed and a deep peaceful sleep like he hadn't experienced since he was a boy.

At first light Carly awoke. Birds twittered outside. She sat up in bed. Used to the quiet of her own place, she was amused to hear a sound coming from the other end of the hall. Jake was snoring.

Even that homey sound caused her pulse to speed up. The mere thought of being nearby while Jake slept sent a shiver racing down her spine.

Stop acting like a teen-ager. And don't count on anything as far as Jake's concerned. This isn't Steve with his declarations of puppy love.

This's a mature man, a darn attractive man who can have any woman he wants. Too bad he doesn't want you.

Why not tell him the truth? He's tried to motivate you. He must think your only goal in life is to give other people's dogs haircuts. How did you get yourself in a fix like this?

Getting out of bed, Carly started to march down the hall to Jake's room, set him straight. She stopped. That was the last thing she should do. One look at her in her nightgown, and he'd misunderstand again.

The mere thought of climbing into Jake's bed and kissing his cheek until he woke made the heat rise in her face. She'd been with men, well, a man, and she knew what lovemaking entailed. But somehow she knew that Jake wouldn't make love like that guy she dated in high school.

Looking back, Carly found it hard to believe she'd found seventeen-year-old Dan Spicer attractive. Sure, he had a thatch of black hair and deep brown eyes, but he also had the scars of acne and bad breath. The night she'd agreed to go "all the way" with him, he'd jumped on her like a dog on a bone.

There was no tenderness, no sweet nothings whispered in her ear, no subtle caresses, just wham bam, thank you, ma'am. It was over so fast, it was hard to believe she'd lost her virginity. She wouldn't dignify that hasty coupling by calling it lovemaking.

While she mused over her lost innocence, Jake coughed. Carly slipped on her robe and hurried downstairs to start the coffee maker. At least, she could cook breakfast before leaving.

Busy in the kitchen, she still heard the shower running. A few minutes later Jake appeared in the kitchen doorway, a bemused expression on his features.

"Hey. You don't have to fix breakfast, Carly."

The way he said her name entranced her. "No trouble," she said, trying not to look at him. If she did he'd be sure to notice the longing in her eyes.

"This's very good of you," he commented. Jake eased into a kitchen chair and helped himself to several pancakes. Taking a mouthful, he chewed, swallowed then sighed. "Wonderful."

From his grateful expression, she concluded his ex-wife hadn't been much of a cook. Carly filed that information away as possible future ammunition.

"How was the trip?" She wished she had the nerve to ask if he'd missed her.

"No problems. Did Deb behave for you?"

"You kidding? She's my best buddy."

"How about Napoleon?"

"He's fine." In a flash, she realized Jake knew the little dog had slept in her bed the previous night, but how could he unless

Although tempted to ask, she didn't dare. She'd fallen asleep, waiting for the sound of his key in the lock, but in spite of not being awake when he returned she had a vague recollection.

Her book had been closed and on the bottom of the bed this morning, though she had no memory of shutting it. And there was something else. Was it a dream or did a hand reach out and touch her cheek while she slept? Too bad Napoleon couldn't tell her.

Thinking of her previous night's sleeping partner, she turned as toenails clicked on the hardwood floor. Napoleon came prancing into the room.

Jake grinned. "It's about time you got up, boy. Where'd you get to last night, anyway? I looked and you weren't in your bed by the back door."

"He was keeping me company while I read a book after Deb went to sleep," Carly confessed, wondering if Jake knew all of this already.

"Oh, really?" He flashed her a smile then poured himself another cup of coffee.

A sobering thought must have come to mind since a more serious expression appeared on his features. "You've been great, helping me like this. Still I feel bad about your using your vacation time. Let me recompensate you."

The mere suggestion he'd pay her for the last two days hurt Carly. "You'll do no such thing," she said. "Being here with Deb and Napoleon has been a real treat."

"Well, okay." He sipped his coffee then picked up the cordless phone beside his plate. "You didn't take any messages from an agency while I was out-of-town, did you?"

"No, they didn't call."

"I need to see if they've found anyone yet." He contacted both agencies but neither had any more leads for him. Turning off the cordless phone, Jake sighed heavily. "This is getting to be a real problem. I've got to go to work, and I sure can't take Deb with me."

"I know an older lady who might be willing to come for a few days," Carly volunteered. She didn't explain she was referring to her own grandmother, the one who lent Mimi the Lab to the dog grooming school on occasion.

Jake's frown vanished and hope appeared. "No kidding? Do you think she'd come tomorrow?" His tone was cautious, as if he were afraid to become too optimistic.

"She won't be home now but I can leave a message." Carly hoped her grandmother wouldn't be too busy. Gran Alice was involved in so many activities. "I'll let you know as soon as I get in touch with

her."

"Wonderful." Jake beamed and patted her hand. "You may have saved my life again. Thanks."

On her drive home, Carly thought about what was fast becoming her favorite subject. She intended to become so indispensable to Jake, he'd admit he needed her, permanently, in his life. And needing could lead to loving, couldn't it?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Gran Alice was sympathetic and available for a few days. The only catch was her monthly seance meeting day after tomorrow. She couldn't cancel since she was hostess.

Ready to promise anything to help Jake, Carly tried to reassure Gran.

"No problem. You can have your meeting at Jake's condo. He has a large kitchen table you can use. Besides, Jake will be at work."

"What about Deb?"

"She'll think it's a neat experience, Gran."

"All right, if you're sure he won't mind, dear." Gran smoothed Carly's hair. "Tell your Jake that I'll be there first thing tomorrow morning. Is seven o'clock early enough?"

Carly kissed her grandmother's wrinkled old cheek. Hugging the gaunt old lady, she inhaled Gran Alice's perfume.

"If you don't mind, could you use a little less Jungle Taboo cologne? Jake's what you'd describe as conservative. I don't think your fragrance would be compatible with his image of grandmothers."

"Sure. And while we're at it, should I get that antique lace shawl of Mother's out of the cedar chest?" Gran Alice's smile was wicked.

"No, don't go overboard." Leaving her grandmother busy with the details of this month's seance, Carly drove home.

Jake was ecstatic to hear he could go back to work the following day with the knowledge he'd left Deb in good hands.

* * *

The next morning Jake navigated I-30, relieved to be headed back to his job. With reluctance he admitted all of his recent good luck appeared to be due to Carly.

First, she'd solved the problem of Napoleon's grooming, then she'd guided Jake to a dog obedience school. Their pet was better-tempered already. Now the little dog just became alarmed at the sight of strange men. In time, maybe Napoleon wouldn't want to bite anyone.

Jake wondered how Rhonda was doing in Hawaii. From the brief comments on her postcards it didn't appear his ex-wife had any leads to Freddy's whereabouts.

He knew Deb missed her mother, though she mentioned Rhonda less and less. The girl had bonded with Carly who seemed quite fond of Deb.

His thoughts trailed back to Carly. She'd filled in when he had to go out-of-town on business. If that wasn't enough, she'd found him an older lady who seemed a charmer.

Deb had taken to her new sitter right away. Of course, Gran Alice's violet hair had come as a shock, but he knew older ladies who had their hair dyed silver-blue. A person's hair color wasn't important.

What mattered was Gran Alice, a generous, affectionate woman who loved children and dogs. Mimi, her mild-mannered Lab, had come along with her, the old lady and her dog were inseparable.

Everytime he needed something, Carly seemed to be there. As much as he hated to admit it, she was becoming part of his life. Of course he wouldn't say he depended on her, but it sure was convenient, having her around, like a helpful younger sister.

Jake snorted. Bub, you're a liar and you know it. Your thoughts were far from brotherly last night when you found Carly asleep in bed.

* * *

Carly checked on her Gran that afternoon.

"He's a doll, Carly." Her grandmother chuckled. "If I were ten years younger, I'd make a play for him myself."

"Hush, Gran, he's not mine." Not yet anyway. "Just don't tell him or Deb that you and I are related."

"All right, though that young lady's pretty sharp. Deb asked how long I've known you, and I had to admit since you were born."

"Just don't say any more. Got to get back to work. I'm glad everything's working out."

Her next call was to her mother. The pediatrician had left Carly a message to call her. Had she been talking to Gran Alice?

Carly contacted her mother. Her parent mentioned in an offhand manner that George and his family were coming for dinner. If Carly wanted to bring Jake and Deb, three more wouldn't matter. Carly

imagined her mother was curious about Jake.

Invited, Jake surprised Carly, and probably himself, by accepting. Maybe he was curious about her family or maybe, just maybe, he wanted to see more of her.

* * *

That evening Jake came home an hour early, showered and changed into khakis and a sports shirt since Carly had indicated it'd be a casual affair. While he dressed, he thought of Deb. If Carly's relatives were half as nice as Carly, they'd be delightful people. Not having an extended family of her own, with aunts, uncles, cousins she could visit, this should be a pleasant experience for the little girl.

They arrived at Carly's parents' home and Jake did a double take. He'd imagined a large, comfortable, untidy home with dogs everywhere.

Instead he found an impressive mansion with a well-manicured lawn. Hmmmm. She'd been vague when he asked about her family, and Jake hadn't pressed the topic.

His next shock came when Carly's mother greeted them at the door and invited them in. A tall, attractive woman with hair as dark as Carly's, but better groomed, Patricia led them into a sunken living room.

Before he knew it, Jake felt right at home, charmed by the woman's warmth and sense of humor. He could see Carly inherited much from her mother.

"I guess a house this size must keep you busy?" That was his way of inquiring if Patricia worked outside her home.

"Heavens no, but my housekeeper says she could do with one or two rooms less. Of course we have a cleaning service regularly so she doesn't do any heavy work."

"I see. But the lawn and your beautiful garden . . . I guess that takes a lot of time."

"I wish I had time to play in the garden, but with my schedule, we're lucky to have an excellent gardener who takes care of everything."

Having learned nothing except his hostess was skillful at evading questions, Jake glanced in Carly's direction for assistance.

"Mom's a pediatrician with her own practice," Carly said.

"I see. Please forgive me." He had been too nosy. "I didn't mean to pry."

"No problem, Jake." Patricia turned to Carly. "Your father will be late. His class's having a test this afternoon so he said to go ahead without him."

"Your father's a teacher?"

"Professor," Carly corrected Jake. "He teaches European History at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth."

Jake was pleased, hearing Carly's parents were both professionals. But he would've liked Patricia and surely her husband, no matter what their occupations.

Did Carly go to college? Her parents were both professionals. It followed they'd want their children to continue their educations after high school.

Carly was bright, very bright, yet she'd indicated she was content with her present position. Something just didn't fit.

"Carly tells me she's your youngest. Will your other children be here tonight?"

"I'm afraid not. George was planning to come then he had an emergency at work today. Since leaving a career in engineering, he's built his own little empire of dry cleaning shops. How many does he have now?" Patricia looked to her daughter for help.

"Gee, Mom, I don't know." Carly shook her head. "Ten or eleven?"

In comparison, Carly's dog-grooming position bothered Jake.

As if she'd read his mind, Carly's mother spoke up. "And of all of our children, Carly has done the best. We're quite proud of her accomplishments." Patricia patted Carly on the arm.

"Hmmm . . . I see." But he didn't, though there was nothing wrong with being a groomer, lots of people held such positions. Also, who was he to question a medical doctor. Still, something didn't make sense.

Carly's father, Lewis came in while they were dining. A heavy-set man in a rumpled seersucker suit and a graying crewcut, Lewis slid with unexpected grace into the remaining chair. He started eating as soon as his wife introduced Jake and Deb.

"How's my girl?" He smiled across the table at Carly.

"Fine, Dad."

"And how's that business of yours?"

"Now, dear, you shouldn't refer to the mobile grooming service as Carly's." Patricia wasted no time correcting her husband.

"Why not?" He wiped his mouth on his damask napkin.

"Well, I suppose you could say her business. It's where she works as a groomer," his wife said.

"What?" Lewis wrinkled his brow. "Yes, of course." He smiled blandly at Jake. "She's our youngest, you know, so anything she does is fine with us. Right, Mother?"

"Yes indeed." Patricia motioned to the maid who removed their dinner plates and brought them slices of lemon chess pie.

Something wasn't quite right. He just couldn't put his finger on it.

With a shrug, Jake relaxed and enjoyed the evening. Carly's parents loved to travel and had visited many interesting places. They entertained him with tales of pony-treking across the Yorkshire moors.

If he wasn't mistaken, Carly had been a little nervous when he met her parents. He didn't know just what he'd expected yet he was glad he'd accepted the invitation. Her parents were warm, caring people who he liked right away.

There was more to this young woman than he'd realized and Jake found himself wanting to get to know her better. Still, he must be careful. He didn't want Carly to think he was interested in her other than as a friend.

A young woman might conclude a man was romantically interested in her with little or no reason. He wouldn't want to raise Carly's hopes. He had no intention of letting their friendly relationship develop into something more serious. They didn't have anything in common.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Rhonda stretched her stiff muscles. The narrow bed she'd slept on the last few nights was ruining her back, but this was the cheapest room in the luxury hotel.

With the tourist season in full swing she'd been lucky to find a place to stay in Honolulu. Jake had wired her funds, otherwise she'd have been home by now.

Being robbed by a man she'd loved had humiliated her then her shame changed to anger, stiffening her resolve to see Freddy punished.

If not for Deb waiting back in Texas and her dwindling funds, she wouldn't have stopped until she found the louse and retrieved what he'd stolen, or at least what he hadn't squandered.

Slipping into her Hawaiian print and sandals, Rhonda checked her shoulder bag. Its contents included a wallet which was getting thinner each day as her wad of cash diminished, makeup, a petite pair of binoculars and the return plane ticket.

Locking her room door, she again marveled at the exorbitant rates the hotels on the Islands charged. For what she paid, she should have a view better than an exterior wall.

Rhonda's elevator descended to the first floor where she took advantage of the complimentary coffee and croissants in the lobby. When the concierge wasn't looking she managed to wrap an extra croissant in a paper napkin and slide it into her ample Coach bag for lunch.

The stakeout hadn't paid off yet. One more day then she'd mark Freddy off as a terrible mistake, go home to her child, and try to pick up the shreds of her life.

He'd hit her at just the right psychological moment. Lonely since the divorce, she'd been fair game

for the slick-talking, worldly producer.

Before she knew what was happening, he was rushing her with dinner invitations, flowers and compliments. Freddy reeled her in like a fisherman snagging a hungry bass.

Her jaw tightened. If she'd learned anything from this whole damn experience, it was not to trust strangers.

In the lobby, she stationed herself behind a column surrounded by gigantic ferns. Rhonda sipped her coffee and watched people coming and going at the front desk.

She'd spent hours doing this at all of the better hotels, the type of location to which Freddy would most likely gravitate, where the pickings were good. All he needed was another lonely woman to replenish the bankroll he'd stolen from Rhonda.

Nobody resembling Freddy appeared so she began her trek through the neighboring hotels, striking out again and again as the day progressed. Trying to economize, she walked as much as possible between hotels.

Rhonda placed a call to Jake to let him know she'd be coming home in the next day or so. The call went through and in a matter of seconds she heard his voice on the line.

"You sure you're all right?"

His caring tone warmed her heart. While they were married his overly protective nature and need to direct had irritated her. Now she appreciated his concern. How many ex-husbands would be as caring as Jake?

"I'm okay. Just wanted to let you know I'm calling it quits if he doesn't show up today."

"That makes sense. Those islands must have a lot of places a rat can hide."

"You're right." While she talked to Jake, Rhonda scanned the people strolling by her phone booth, the usual tourists, old and young. One lean, dapper middle-aged man walked by. Though his dark hair had a silver streak and he wore glasses, there was something familiar about the way he moved.

"Whoa, got to go, Jake. I may have found him."

She hung up fast, pushing the door open and stepping out in time to see the man, well dressed in an expensive linen suit, greeting an older woman.

Rhonda lurked behind a tourist who'd picked that time and place to stop and consult her map, oblivious to other hotel guests who had to walk around her. Rhonda strained her ears to hear the couple's conversation.

"My dear, you are exquisite in that dress. Here, this will be the finishing touch." He pulled the carnation from his lapel and inserted it in the woman's gray hair.

"Why, thank you." The woman, older than her escort, blushed like a young girl.

Viewing the man in profile, Rhonda's stomach lurched. Freddy. Her fists clenched and her first inclination was to rush over and slap the little weasel.

Her better judgment won. She'd follow the couple and strike as soon as Freddy was alone.

Rhonda wished she could get the woman by herself and show her the Wanted poster with Freddy's picture on it. Her friend Ada, the assistant manager of the post office sub-station near Rhonda's home, had copied it for her.

But Rhonda realized that, as the old adage goes, "Love is blind." The older lady would never in a million years recognize her handsome escort as the man in the poster.

He'd made a drastic change in his appearance yet anyone who knew Freddy would recognize him. That included his wife or wives.

Rhonda had learned the little worm had several wives across the USA. He was wanted in Texas and two or three other Southern states for bigamy and larceny.

Her chance came when Freddy and the woman parted. Perhaps he wanted to freshen up before they met for dinner. Rhonda could have used a shower and fresh clothes herself, but this was no time to worry about trivial matters.

Following Freddy, Rhonda managed to squeeze into the glass-sided elevator before it ascended.

He paid her no mind. That wasn't surprising since all he'd see if he happened to glance her way was a woman with her hair covered by a drab scarf, dark glasses and the cheap Hawaiian print dress she'd bought in a gift shop at the airport.

One by one the other passengers got off on their respective floors. The elevator continued its ascent.

The elevator stopped on the top floor, the penthouse level. Her lip curled with contempt. Leave it to Freddy to have the best, most expensive accommodations. Rhonda followed Freddy off the elevator.

He strode down the corridor and Rhonda followed at a slower pace, her head down, like she was searching for her roomkey in her shoulder bag. But she looked up in time to observe which suite he entered.

Giving him a few minutes, she removed the small pistol from her shoulder bag. The gun was registered so it'd been no problem to declare it at the airport in Dallas and claim it again on landing in Hawaii.

Holding the pistol by her side, in case a hotel employee chanced to walk by, she approached his room.

A soft knock on the door brought an immediate response. "Yes?" He looked curious then afraid when she pointed the gun at him, forcing him back into the room. She followed.

Removing her dark glasses and scarf, Rhonda smiled at the man who'd broken her heart and raided her bank accounts.

"Hello Freddy. It's payback time." She pointed the gun and pulled back the trigger.

The little coward, accustomed to preying on the weaker, had no stomach for violence. He keeled over in a dead faint.

Rhonda smiled and put the empty gun back in her bag. Opening her shoulder bag, she hog-tied Freddy with rope she'd bought at a store near her hotel then phoned the local police.

"If you'd like to pick up a man who's been preying on helpless women, stealing their funds, come to the Maui Hotel, top floor, room 1000. His name is Freddy Benton, though that's probably an alias."

"My name? Rhonda Benton, though I probably should say Rhonda Malone since I've learned he's married several women."

Taking the Wanted poster from her shoulder bag, Rhonda draped it across Freddy's unconscious body, found a comfortable chair and waited.

Later at police headquarters, she filed charges against the man from whom she'd learned trusting strangers was stupid.

As it turned out just two other women had taken the trouble to file charges against Freddy. Since they were Texas residents like Rhonda, Freddy would be brought back to Texas to stand trial. And because he'd crossed state lines, the FBI became involved.

* * *

The agent assigned to the case was about ten years older than Rhonda. A fortyish bachelor with sharp blue eyes that didn't seem to miss anything, Mark described himself as a man no woman in her right mind would want.

Before she left the Islands, he asked her if he could write.

"Oh, so you can keep up-to-date on the state's case against Freddy?" Her heart fluttered under his intense gaze, but Rhonda had learned a lesson. Next time, she'd be more careful.

"That too." When he smiled, he appeared years younger. "As a matter of fact, I'd like to see you again, Rhonda. If you don't mind?"

* * *

The next day, Rhonda viewed the Islands through her plane window, smiling.

"You look like you're glad to be leaving," the handsome gray-haired man in the next seat commented. "Didn't you enjoy your stay?"

"Oh, yes. But I've accomplished what I went for, so it's time to go home."

* * *

Carly answered the call that had been transferred to her office. It was Steve again. He'd dropped his watch the other night at Jake's while she was staying with Deb. Weary of his continued insistence he was the man for her, Carly had kicked him out of the condo after he made an unwelcome pass. Since then,

she'd left him a message concerning the watch. He hadn't responded so she figured he was pouting.

"I've got your watch if you want to come by for it. I can leave it with the receptionist at the front desk."

"That's fine. I appreciate your calling me, especially after I acted like a jerk."

"It's all right." Relieved that Steve had at last seen the light, Carly assured him he was forgiven. They arranged for him to come by and get his watch. As soon as he hung up, she realized she'd left the watch at Jake's. Calling Steve back, she asked him to meet her at Jake's condo.

Late leaving work, Carly hurried to Jake's.

She darted up the walk, prepared to greet Gran. The door opened just as Carly's hand reached to ring the doorbell.

Barbara opened the door and stepped outside.

Carly wondered what the heck was going on. Still, she tried to be cordial to the woman who'd made it clear she wanted Jake.

At that moment, Steve drove up. Carly smiled fondly, seeing her muscular friend launch his body out of the Jeep without opening the car door.

A couple of years ago one of his employees had made the mistake of telling Steve he looked like Sty Stallone. That must have delighted Steve since right away he bought all of the old Stallone videos he could find. Carly watched him lumber up the walk.

Standing beside Barbara, Carly heard the other woman let out a soft gasp and immediately stand taller, her hand smoothing her hair.

Steve approached them. Carly had always thought he resembled a friendly gorilla. Now she saw another side to Steve. Flashing a toothy smile, he bore a marked resemblance to a wolf. His efforts to impress were clearly meant for Barbara since his gaze fixated on her.

Carly introduced them. From the smouldering glance Barbara sent Steve, Carly half-expected her old friend to growl and carry Barbara off to his cave.

"Good to meet ya, Barbara," Steve rumbled. Before Carly could say another word, he'd launched into a minute biography of his life then mentioned his fantastic business. In conclusion, Steve offered Barbara a personal tour anytime.

"In fact, gimme your telephone number, and I'll call you. Our new rates go into effect soon if you're interested in body-building?" He eyed Barbara. "Not that ya need to improve." He leered, playfully.

Barbara almost drooled. "Thanks . . ., your body's great. I guess you work out a lot?"

Carly was starting to get a little queasy. Why not give this mutual case of "instant lust" a jump start. "Hey, Steve, I bet if you say please, Barb might be willing to tour your facilities right now."

"Pleazeeee." Steve puckered his thick yet sensuous lips.

Barbara blushed. "Well. . . all right." She replied. "If you have the time."

Before Carly could count to ten they'd driven away in Steve's Jeep. Her last glimpse of Barbara's face revealed an expression not unlike that of a big game hunter returning home with his trophy tiger.

Gran Alice came to the door.

"Was Barbara visiting you?" Carly was still a little shaken by what had happened.

"Yes, dear. She brought us some home-baked cookies. Barbara's a lovely person, but lonely, you know." Gran Alice paused. "So many people your age are lonely. Everybody needs someone to love, even you. And this Jake, he's the neediest fellow I've ever seen."

"You better not tell him that, Gran. I'll see you later." Carly drove home, deep in thought.

The day she met Jake, he'd struck her as handsome and lonely though if anyone had told her he'd be the one for her, she'd have scoffed at the notion. But he was. Now all she had to do was convince him. Or rather, he had to realize it himself.

Carly pulled her new dress from the closet, held it up to her. Day after tomorrow was coming fast. She could hardly wait.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Jake sat in one of the company boardrooms trying to concentrate on the senior Healthcare partner's speech. Today he was finding it very difficult to focus.

The speaker paused and asked, "How about giving us your take on this, Malone?"

Jake jolted to attention, almost spilling his water glass on the heavy mahogany conference table. With all of the people in the room staring at him, he tried to remember the partner's last words but drew a complete blank. He realized he'd been thinking about Carly again.

"I agree with everything you've told us," he said.

The partner nodded. "Thanks. Then you won't mind taking charge of this new group of companies when we get their work?"

New group of companies? What had he gotten himself into? "Ah . . . no. I think I can handle them."

"This might be a good group project, with you in charge."

He'd never admit to needing help. Still his boss talked about his forming a group, so he must realize Jake was overloaded. In private, he was relieved.

His situation had changed since he became a single parent. Of course that could change overnight but there was no telling how long it'd be before Rhonda felt able to take over full-time care of their daughter.

Even if she came home today as she'd promised, Jake believed his ex-wife would be depressed, maybe more indecisive than usual. He doubted she'd tracked Freddy down, much less done anything about it.

His inattention having caused him to take on more work, Jake focused on the speaker for the duration of the meeting. Just once his glance strayed across the large, oblong conference table and caught a smirk on Sam Smale's face.

An idea formed in Jake's brain and he acted on it. "Sir?" Jake raised his hand.

"Yes, Jake? Are you reconsidering?" His partner smiled. "Maybe this's too much responsibility for you?"

"I could handle it. There's no question of that. It's just that my daughter's living with me now, so I'll take you up on your offer and form a group, starting with Sam Smale. I have no doubt I can find work for one of his abilities." He sent Sam a pleasant smile across the conference table.

"Of course. I'm sure Sam will be glad to lend you a hand. Won't you, Sam?"

"Anything that'll help our practice, sir." Glaring at Jake, Sam had to agree. When a partner spoke he expected obedience.

Jake laughed inside. He'd find something appropriate for the man who'd always gone out of his way to belittle Jake's efforts, to embarrass him in front of their superiors.

Sitting at his desk later, Jake leaned back in his chair and let his mind wander, a luxury he almost never indulged in at work.

A glance at his desk calendar reminded him tomorrow evening was the office party. How times changed. Last year he'd taken Rhonda. What a boring evening. They'd left early, though Rhonda would've stayed until the bitter end if she'd had her way. She'd spent most of the evening flirting with the young staff.

When Jake reminded her most of staffers were just a year out of college she'd changed tactics and danced with Sam who seemed to relish Jake's disgust at his wife's tactics.

Plump, foolish Rhonda liked to flirt and Sam encouraged her. Sam's date had gone home earlier, complaining of a sick headache.

Carly Just whispering her name pleased Jake. What was it about that young woman? She was pretty, but many women he'd known were just as attractive. Funny, but when she was in the room Jake thought she was beautiful.

He forced himself to count her imperfections. Her luxurious hair was always a mess. But it was a

rich dark brown with auburn highlights. She was too thin. Still he imagined she'd feel just right in his arms.

Jake knew what he needed. A real woman.

Deb's friend's mother Barbara was interested in him, if he wasn't mistaken and she was his own age.

Carly insisted she was twenty-six, yet in her usual uniform, shirts and jeans, she looked younger.

Was it a good idea to bring her to the office party? He supposed he could tell people that Carly was the daughter of an old friend he owed a favor, so he'd invited the girl who was recovering from a broken engagement. Jake shelved that idea.

They'd come to the party, dance a little, have a couple of drinks then leave. With any luck he'd have her home by nine-thirty.

Tomorrow he'd call Barbara for a date, making it clear he needed a friend. Barbara should understand. After all, she was just getting her divorce, so she might want time out before getting serious about another man.

He straightened in his chair. What about flowers? Jake called his secretary.

"Mary, would you order a corsage for my date for the office party?" He listened to the young woman then replied. "I don't know. Get white, that goes with everything, maybe a miniature orchid, I don't know. Whatever young women like."

He listened again then laughed. "Not that young, Mary. She's not a teenager, for Pete's sake."

That accomplished, Jake went back to work, burying himself in details of a new client's problems. The next time he looked up people were filing by his office, going home for the evening.

Locking away his papers, he slipped on his jacket, turned off the banker's lamp on the desk, and walked out of his office, joining the throng already gathered at the elevators.

As the elevator descended to the underground, he tried to imagine what Carly would wear to the party. It would most likely be some short piece of fluff. He hoped she'd wear her hair up like she had the night of the cookout. That hairstyle was most becoming.

He drew a deep breath, anticipating, and at the same time dreading tomorrow evening. He'd get through it, then he wouldn't make the mistake of asking Carly out again.

Let her date someone like that Steve, her childhood friend. Carly and he lived in different worlds. As much as he liked her as a friend, they didn't have much in common.

One day he'd become a partner. A girl like Carly wouldn't be happy as a corporate wife. She'd find it stifling. The company social functions bored him but they were necessary.

Slow down. You don't want to think about marriage, at least not yet. He nodded, admitting he'd need a wife to progress with the firm, someone his own age, someone polished and poised, someone who was also ambitious.

Sam let himself into his home near downtown Dallas. It was just before twilight and he admired the lighted skyline of the city, including the building where he worked. Taller than the other buildings downtown, it stood out against the sky, outlined in green lights. Impressive was the word that came to mind and so was his walled community of townhouses, more than he could afford, but prestigious.

Alicia seemed to find his townhouse attractive the first time he brought her there. Since she was the daughter of British nobility, Sam strived to impress her in every way possible.

He rubbed his hands together in glee. Tomorrow night, he'd have good fun at Jake's expense and it'd be so easy.

It must have been fate, his meeting the stranger that night. He'd been depressed, daily watching Jake advance, each day leaving him further behind.

The guy, whose name he didn't know, had no desire to know, and he'd made a pact, hurt Jake Malone any way possible. Sam figured that Jake must've done something terrible for the man to hate Jake so much.

The kicker came when the stranger called him the other night with just a sliver of information, but one that Sam could use to ridicule Jake. As stuffy as the partners were, Sam's announcement about Jake's date wouldn't make Jake look good in his partner's eyes. On the contrary, he'd look ridiculous.

Sam grinned. Just one more day. What he knew wouldn't damage Jake irreparably, but it could well raise questions in their own partner's mind about Jake's good sense and taste. And he'd make a point of apologizing to Jake later, as if he hadn't meant any harm.

Escorting Lady Alicia to the party would make Sam appear successful. She was his senior partner's niece, a plus as well.

A twinge of shame stabbed Sam. The young woman seemed to like him. So what? He wasn't about to let emotion rule his life. His goal was to succeed with the firm any way he could. And ruining Jake or at least pulling him off his pedestal, wouldn't hurt.

Sam opened a beer and sat down on the stiff Ethan Allen upholstered sofa the decorator had insisted he buy to go along with the other furniture he couldn't afford.

Image was so important. It was so important to impress the people who mattered, his bosses, his girl friend with her fancy British title, everyone that mattered.

He viewed the expense involved as an investment which'd pay off in the long run. Along the way, he'd discredit Jake.

He'd win, one way or other. Then he'd have the prestige, the importance he craved. Once he achieved his goal, he'd be happy. That was what life was all about. Success and happiness came in the same package.

It was wise to just think in terms of his own advancement. He used people and they used him. It was a dog eat dog world. And he'd be the last person to want it any different.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Carly studied her reflection in the mirror. Shouldn't have let that store manager talk her into buying this dress. But the woman seemed so knowing, so sure it was just the right thing to wear to an office party in Dallas.

It was her own dumb fault. She should've followed her own instincts. When she wore a dress, she preferred bright colors.

If there was time, she'd drive over to the mall and to exchange the dress for something else. A hurried glance at the clock on her dresser. Nope, Jake was due in a few minutes.

She tugged at the high neckline. A nun would be comfortable in this outfit.

The telephone rang. Her parents' names showed on the answering machine so she took the call.

"Hi Mom. No, that's all right. I'm just waiting for Jake." She listened for a minute. "What am I wearing? Oh, a neat little black dress, very chic. I found it at that new dress shop near Foleys." She listened again.

"You're kidding. Where did you hear that?" She talked to her mother for a couple more minutes before hanging up.

Her mother had visited the mall that day and noticed the new dress shop had a "Closed" sign in its front window. Not that Carly wanted to buy anything else from them, anyway.

Oh, well. Maybe the dress would start a new trend in evening wear. Her lips curved into a half-smile. If she were a fashion designer, she'd name the dress Minimal. It was that for sure, minimal in appeal.

She imagined a long line of women entering the hotel ballroom, all wearing a copy of her dress. Carly shuddered. There weren't that many copies of the dress in the Metroplex, were there?

Still, in her present state of mind she wouldn't be upset to see two or three. They could form an ugly dress club and sit together, like crows on a fence.

Trying to look on the brighter side, she considered the remote possibility her dress would be a big hit. And Jake would gaze at her with new interest. Good luck on that.

The best way to discover what he thought of her outfit would be to watch his expression when he came to get her. That'd tell her what he thought. That was what mattered most to her tonight, Jake's

opinion.

A car stopped outside and her stomach knotted. She'd never thought she'd dread seeing him. If only he wasn't disappointed.

Her doorbell rang and she took time for one last glance in the mirror. Did the dress make her look older? She made a face at her reflection then flipped off the light switch and ran to answer the door.

* * *

Jake waited outside Carly's apartment door, holding the orchid corsage in its white box. He held his breath, hoping, no praying her dress wouldn't make her look too young. If she did, no one at the party would be impolite but there'd be a lot of snickering behind their backs, when people thought Carly and he couldn't hear.

The door opened and Jake's jaw dropped. One thing was sure, Carly didn't look like "Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm."

"Why don't you come in for a minute?" She held the door open so he could enter.

"I forgot to ask your dress color so to be on the safe side, I brought you a white corsage." Jake handed the box to her, afraid to look at the hideous dress or gaze in Carly's eyes.

His first reaction had been shock then he had a horrible urge to laugh. He bit his lip. Don't hurt her feelings.

"Thank you, Jake." She slid the ribbon off the box, opened it and removed a gigantic white orchid.

Carly seemed at a loss for words. At last she remarked, "ah, . . . that's the largest orchid I've ever seen."

"It's a little oversized," he admitted. "Let me pin it on you." Taking the florist pin, he tried to attach the monster flower to the front of Carly's black dress.

"Ouch. You stuck me." She backed away.

"Sorry. I'll try again, if you'll hold still." He approached her.

She extended her hand, palm up. "Jake, please. Let me do it." She took the pin and attached the corsage to the bodice of her dress.

"That's better," he said. At least the giant orchid hid part of her dress.

What a horrible way to start their date. He hoped this wasn't an omen of what the rest of the evening would be like. Jake escorted Carly to his car.

During the drive into Dallas, they didn't talk much. Jake turned on the radio but found nothing but the news. "Do you want to listen to that?"

Shaking her head, she turned off the radio.

Jake asked, "do you like to dance?"

"Not really." She frowned. "I don't believe I've danced since high school. Do you?"

"Sometimes." In college he and a friend had won first prize in a tango contest. His trophy was buried in one of his closets. Rhonda and he'd enjoyed dancing, one of the few things they did well together. "It's all right. There'll be other things to do at the party."

At the handsome old hotel near downtown Jake handed the parking attendant his car keys, then he escorted Carly to the ballroom the firm had rented for the evening. In the corridor they passed several younger men in the Healthcare practice. They smiled at Jake as he and Carly approached.

Taking a firm grip on her arm, Jake's nodded to the younger men but didn't stop to introduce his date.

The other women attending the party fluttered and chatted, cool and summerlike in their brightly colored dresses, some short, some long. Adjacent to Carly they resembled butterflies flying around a moth.

Poor Carly. By now she must realize how inappropriate her dress was.

Where in the world did she find that ugly black dress? It resembled a garment an older woman might wear to a funeral. He'd met Carly's stylish mother and was certain she didn't own such a dress.

He must do his best to see the poor girl had a good time. Jake glanced her way, he perceived a strained smile on her face.

Jake led Carly into the ballroom, stopping near a group of older men in dark business suits. Standing next to the company executives her somber outfit didn't look so bad.

The group shifted and his senior partner called to him from its midst. "Jake, aren't you going to introduce your charming date?"

"Yes sir, I'd like you to meet her." Jake's spirits lifted and he introduced Carly to the executive.

After a few minutes of pleasantries, the older man dismissed them. "Now you young people run along and have fun. Jake, I'm sure you've noticed the orchestra's warming up. And if my memory serves me well, you love to dance."

Carly stared at Jake. With a shrug, he leaned over, whispered in her ear. "He's got me confused with someone else."

"I wish you'd told me this was a dance," Carly said. Her forehead puckered in a frown.

They stood on the sidelines, watching more and more couples start dancing. His feet itched to dance.

The band started playing a tango and one couple danced so well together, the others stopped to watch.

"Jake? Jake?" A nasal voice broke through the music.

A short, olive-skinned man in a tuxedo pushed his way through the crowd, tugging a tall woman in his wake.

He grabbed Jake's hand and shook it. "Good to see you."

"Hello Sam." What the devil! Sam Smale had asked him who he was bringing to the party. What would he think of Carly?

"Aren't you going to introduce me to your date?" Sam edged closer like he wanted to inspect the woman Jake had brought.

"Of course." Jake introduced them, then he had Sam introduce his girl friend Alicia.

Smiling at Carly, she made a suggestion. "Let's go and powder our noses. These two workaholics can talk shop, or whatever it is men discuss when their women are out of hearing range. All right?" She steered Carly toward the corridor outside the ballroom.

* * *

Carly and Alicia entered the powder room and found a young woman in a flowered sundress with tiny straps combing her long, blonde hair before an ornate antique mirror.

Another girl in a pink dress dabbed perfume on her wrists. Their chatter stopped dead, seeing Carly.

They're staring at me.

Alicia and she freshened up then turned to leave the powder room. Before the door had swung shut behind them the girl wearing the flowered dress snickered. And her companion whispered loudly, "Did you see that? I wouldn't be caught wearing that dress at my own funeral."

Carly winced. How cruel. And they didn't even know her.

Alicia had heard, also. "Don't pay them any attention. Some people lack good manners. And others just don't care who they hurt. Your dress's ... interesting." She patted Carly on the shoulder.

"Thanks. You're a darn good liar. A saleswoman talked me into buying it. I've never attended a party like this and I had no idea what to wear."

* * *

"Where did you get her?" Sam said as soon as the two women left the ballroom.

Jake opened his mouth and closed it. At last he said, "you wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me." Sam folded his arms, waiting for an explanation.

Jake found himself reluctant to tell Sam. It wasn't that he was ashamed of her occupation. Someone had to groom other people's dogs. He just didn't see her in the role.

The more he saw of Carly, the more confused he became. But he knew one thing for certain.

Snobbish Sam with his British Lady Alicia for a girl friend would find Carly's occupation ridiculous.

Jake didn't want to lie so there wasn't anything he could do but tell Sam the truth and hope his subordinate would understand.

"If you must know, I met her a few weeks ago under the most unusual circumstances." That's it, he'd make their meeting into an amusing story. Maybe Sam would see the humor.

"I know all about it so why don't you just come right out and say she's a--"

Before Sam could say dog groomer, the Managing Partner for the office strolled by and stopped to speak to them. "Have your dates abandoned you already?" He teased them both. "It's a good thing you boys are better with our clients. Otherwise, the firm'd go broke." The executive laughed and Sam joined in. Jake simmered.

How did Sam find out about Carly? Jake hadn't talked to anyone in the office about her. He searched for an explanation for Sam's remark. Who told him?

The office executive was about to walk away, Carly and Alicia chose that moment to reappear.

Clearing his throat, Sam spoke up. "Sir, you haven't met Jake's date, have you?"

Jake introduced Carly to his superior.

"What do you think this young lady does for a living?" Sam smiled as if he were amused.

The office executive shook his head. "I have no idea, but I'm sure, whatever it is, she does it well." He turned to go.

"She's a dog groomer," Sam proclaimed in a loud voice just as the music stopped.

Heads turned and a nervous titter swept the room. Jake felt eyes, dozens of curious eyes fixed on Carly.

His own partner's gracious wife saved the day by gliding up to Carly and taking her hand.

"What fun. I've always wanted to learn how to groom dogs. You must be wonderful with animals. Let's go and get some punch and you can tell me all about it." She flashed a smile at Jake, a frown at Sam.

Seeing a senior partner's wife with Carly, the crowd lost interest. The music resumed and the party continued.

Jake could've kissed the woman. Instead, he followed her and Carly. A moment later, Sam's date joined them, leaving Sam standing alone in the middle of the ballroom.

* * *

Carly's cheeks flamed. How cruel. First those catty females in the restroom. Now this man who worked for Jake.

For a moment she was tempted to tell the crowd the truth, she was the owner of a dog grooming business. In fact she owned three related businesses. And the Chamber of Commerce of Arlington had named her "Most Promising Young Entrepreneur."

Biting her tongue, she'd refrained from responding to Sam's remark then a gracious woman rescued her, led her across the ballroom to the punch bowl.

At least she'd taken the other attendees' minds off business for a few minutes. Judging by the disinterested expressions on many faces, not many people were enjoying themselves. Even the band members looked bored.

They didn't stay long after that. Jake started checking his watch, a sure sign he wanted to leave.

"Guess we should go," he suggested and she agreed. What was the matter with him? Was her outfit that terrible?

Sam downed his drink and announced in a loud voice, "You can't go until Carly dances with me."

Though she had no desire to dance with the man who'd embarrassed her, she agreed, afraid Sam would make a scene otherwise.

The band began playing a waltz. Thank goodness. Even she knew how to waltz.

While on the dance floor, she took advantage of having Sam alone. "I'd be interested in the source for the remark you made about me earlier." She stared at Sam.

At first, he continued to manuever her around the crowded dance floor, ignoring her request. She stopped dead in her tracks.

"All right," he said. "I met a man in a bar and he told me. It's true, isn't it?"

"In part. Does it bother you? The way I was raised, the important thing's to do honest work, no matter what it is." Her gaze raked his face. "I've never had trouble facing myself in the mirror. What about you?"

He flinched as if she'd hit a sore spot. "I don't have any idea where this conversation's heading."

"The heck you don't. But in case I didn't get through to you, let me spell it out. How can you live with yourself? Do you get your kicks from hurting others? I hope not since that's one symptom of a sick, sad mind."

"I wouldn't know about things like that, though as long as we're handing out free advice, let me give you a tip about your friend Jake. Don't count on him. As long as he has himself, he doesn't need anyone else."

"Maybe and maybe not. Sooner or later we all need somebody. It's the human condition."

The music ended. Stiff-backed, Carly walked ahead of Sam to their table.

"Can we go now?" Carly asked. Jake stood and led her from the room.

"Is this Sam a friend of yours?" She had her doubts.

"No, just someone who's in my group."

"I'd watch him if I were you, Jake. He'd like to hurt you."

Jake helped Carly into his vehicle and soon the Volvo was navigating I-30, headed west.

Carly sat in silence, staring out her car window.

Uncertain what to say, Jake murmured, "I'm sorry the party wasn't more fun."

"Do you have any idea how Sam found out about me?"

"No idea." Jake frowned. "I sure didn't tell him."

"I guess not. Does what I do for a living bother you?"

"No, I just think you're limiting yourself." He drove without speaking for a mile or two. "Sam's a terrible snob, in case you haven't noticed."

"Jake, if you like a person, it shouldn't matter."

"I agree."

Nothing more was said until they were parked at the curb in front of her building.

"You don't have to walk me to my door." Carly unfastened her seat belt, preparing to get out of the car.

"Wait a minute." Jake reached over, touched her on her shoulder.

The light from the street lamps revealed tears on her cheeks, Jake was moved. It hadn't been his intention to upset Carly. He wanted to make amends.

Tilting her face to his, he leaned down to kiss her cheek. She turned her head and his lips made contact with hers.

They kissed and there was a roaring sensation in his ears. Her kiss stirred him, shook him to his core. Jake held on to her for dear life.

The kiss ended. Carly moved away and Jake thought he heard her sigh.

"I'll walk you to your door." His voice sounded shaken to his own ears. Did the kiss disturb her?

Carly appeared serene now, even had a slight smile on her face. Her lips parted and she whispered something. He wouldn't have heard if he hadn't been so close. Unless he was mistaken, it sounded like "I was right."

"Excuse me? What did you say?" She mystified him.

"What? Oh, nothing. She shook his hand at the door. "Good night Jake."

Before he could say a word, she was gone. As if spellbound, he stood outside her closed door, the memory of their kiss still fresh on his lips.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

At daybreak things looked different. His imagination must have been playing tricks on him. There wasn't a woman on earth whose kiss could cause Niagra Falls to roar in his ears. It must have been the strain of attending the party with Carly in that ugly dress and being embarrassed by Sam.

He'd see to Sam Smale. Why not assign him to their most troublesome client? Mr. Smale would sing a different tune once he'd spent a few weeks serving as nursemaid for a client who demanded service seven days a week.

He'd come crawling to Jake, pleading for mercy. Jake's lip curved at the picture of Sam on his belly. Good, that was the proper position for a worm.

One thing he must do was stay away from Carly. There was something about their budding relationship that scared the hell out of him.

For a fleeting second last night he'd even imagined he needed her. That was sheer lunacy since he didn't need anyone. People needed, leaned on him, not the other way around. His elderly mother, Deb, Rhonda, and his subordinates at work came to him with their problems and he did his best to help.

Because of him his mother lived in a first-rate senior assisted-living facility, Deb attended an excellent private school, Rhonda didn't have to work, even had funds for non-essentials like sculptured nails and massages. He also counseled the young men in his group with work-related problems.

In private Jake admitted what he'd never tell another living being. In his weakened emotional state last night he couldn't have refused Carly anything. If she'd asked him for the moon and the stars, he would've done his damnest to get them for her.

Those thoughts he buried deep in the darkened recesses of his mind. If he ignored them in time they'd fade to nothing. Yeah, it'd definitely be a good idea to avoid Carly.

Having made a decision on Carly, he moved on. He'd heard that Barbara's husband was gone again so their attempted reconciliation must have failed. That left Barbara a free agent, the same as he, so there was no reason not to ask her for a date. Chances were good she'd accept his invitation. She'd made it clear she liked him the night he had dinner at her house.

Feeling better now that he had a plan, Jake whistled while putting on his robe and slippers and going downstairs to fix Sunday waffles for Deb and himself.

Once the waffles were ready he called to Deb from the foot of the stairs. No response. Thinking she'd be down in a few minutes, he reentered the kitchen. As he deposited the maple syrup on the table

his gaze landed on a note stuck on the refrigerator door.

"Dad, don't forget I'm at Laurie Ann's slumber party until Sunday afternoon. xxxooo Deb"

Great. He'd made all those waffles for nothing. Annoyed with himself and feeling a tad lonely, Jake stepped to the back door. "Napoleon," he called. Where was that pooch?

The Pekinese pranced into the kitchen and gulped down the waffle Jake put in his dish while Jake stood at the window, punching in a number on his phone.

"Barbara?" He'd waited to call, reasoning that she probably slept late.

"Yes? Who's this?" She yawned into the phone.

"It's Jake, Jake Malone, you know, Deb's father."

"Oh, hello. How are you?"

She didn't sound overjoyed to hear from him. "Fine, I hope I didn't wake you."

"Well, we were kind of late getting to bed." She giggled.

"Ah, would you rather I called you some other time?"

"That'd be nice. Bye."

She hung up fast before he could ask what would be a good time for a return call. "Boy, that lady sure did a turnaround." Was his imagination working overtime or did he hear a low whisper in the background while Barbara was talking to him?

Upstairs again, Jake dressed while watching television in his bedroom. A news flash broke into the regular program.

"As of ten o'clock this morning, a convict who escaped from the Tarrant County Prison during the night hasn't been apprehended. Residents in north Arlington are cautioned to be on the alert."

North Arlington? That was his section of town. Remembering that whisper he'd heard while talking to Barbara, Jake's nerves went on alert.

You don't suppose? He slipped on a pair of jeans, stuck his feet in his loafers, and pulled on a tee shirt.

Better walk over to Barbara's and see if she was okay. While he was there, he'd mention going to the theatre.

Outside Barbara's condo, Jake hesitated. Her home had the same floor plan as his and Jake now observed that Barbara's bedroom curtains were closed.

Looking through the open shutters in her dining room, he could see a light in the kitchen at the back of the house. He'd just check on her, put his mind at ease.

The first time he rang the doorbell there was no response. Waiting a minute, he tried again, wanting to see if she was all right.

Barbara came to the door, clutching a flimsy robe to her body. "Yes?" She seemed surprised to see him.

"Are you all right? I could've sworn I heard someone whispering in the background while we were on the phone. And there was a news flash on television, warning residents about an escaped convict. I thought I'd better check on you."

He gazed at Barbara. With her tousled hair and puffy lips, she looked like she hadn't had a good night's rest.

"I'm fine, Jake. Really fine." She didn't invite him in.

"While I'm here, would you like to have dinner and go to the theatre next weekend?"

"If you'd asked me a week ago I would've accepted, but things are different now." She sent a radiant smile his way.

"I see. Well, if you change your mind give me a call." Jake turned to leave. What was going on? If he didn't know better he'd swear this Barbara wasn't the sad-faced woman he'd met not long ago at the pool.

About to close the door she paused long enough to call after him. "Thanks for thinking of me."

"What? Oh, sure, anytime." He'd started to walk away when a deep voice rumbled from inside the condo.

"Barb, who is it, hon?" Curious, Jake turned around. Through the half-open door, he couldn't see anyone.

Barbara had the good grace to flush. "Just a neighbor," she informed the man inside. Turning back to Jake, she said, "you see how it is. Goodbye." She closed the door.

Walking away, Jake observed for the first time a Jeep parked at the curb between Barbara's condo and her next-door neighbor, a Jeep like the one Carly's friend Steve drove.

Approaching the vehicle, Jake noted a Steve's Gym sticker on a side window.

He shook his head. You just never knew about women's taste in men. He wouldn't have thought Barbara would find a guy like muscle-bound Steve attractive.

So Barbara found herself a younger male companion, so what? She wasn't the only fish in the sea. Jake considered locating his little black book, but it was ancient.

There must be someone he could date besides Carly. How about the women in his office? That new accountant with the great legs and red hair was a possibility. What was her name? Never mind, he'd find out tomorrow at work.

* * *

Folding the black dress, Carly stuffed it in a bag of clothing she'd give the next charity asking for donations. A few minutes later she drifted to sleep with the feel of Jake's kiss still on her lips.

Morning came and she sat on the side of her bed, thinking about Jake. She wouldn't hear from him today, maybe not tomorrow either.

In fact, it might be awhile before he returned. Even so, she was certain their kiss had shaken him, too. The difference was she'd expected it to move her so she was better prepared.

Poor Jake. There'd been a confused expression on his face following their kiss and fear in his eyes.

She wouldn't be surprised if he tried to convince himself he'd imagined the whole thing. And even if he admitted the kiss knocked him for a loop, he'd find some logical explanation to dismiss it.

A romantic to her core, Carly knew something that Jake had yet to learn. They were meant to be together, so it was just a matter of time. She'd try to be patient though she hoped he didn't take too long.

In the meanwhile she'd keep in touch with Deb who she hoped would be her ally in this whole business. Better wait and call Jake's daughter after he left for work tomorrow. That way they could have a good chat undisturbed.

* * *

Jake wasted no time once he got to his office. As soon as he was seated at his desk he turned on the computer and looked up the new woman in the online departmental directory.

What would be the best strategy? Out of the singles field since marrying Rhonda, he felt at a disadvantage, competing with younger men who probably had lines that proved irresistible.

He'd better keep his approach simple. Maybe he could just happen to run into the new accountant in the corridor? Most of the accountants went out to lunch. He'd noticed Marie brought her lunch like he did since Deb came to stay.

Jake waited until most of the managers' offices were empty, their occupants gone to lunch.

Observing one else around, he strolled by Marie's office and found her at her desk. She was so absorbed in her reading, she didn't look up though he coughed twice.

The next time, he stopped in her doorway. "That must be a good book."

She looked up, removed her glasses. "Yes, it is. Tax Shelters for IPO's. Have you read it?"

Until recently, Jake would've been delighted to find a woman keen on the accounting profession. Why did this topic seem so dull to him today?

Pretending an enthusiasm he didn't feel, he replied, "No, but I intend to soon." He searched his memory for another new business title they might discuss.

Their conversation ended and Jake strolled back to his own office. Before he left Marie, she'd invited him to a lecture one of her old accounting professors was presenting the following night. Jake accepted, offering dinner after the lecture.

* * *

The next night Jake sat beside Marie in a crowded auditorium at Texas Christian University. Scanning the audience, he surmised there were two distinct groups present, professors and students with a sprinkling of the business community represented. He forced himself to laugh at the professor's stale jokes, chatted with the woman beside him.

Although he tried to concentrate on Marie, he couldn't stop thinking of Carly. What was she doing tonight? Was she seeing another guy? At least, he didn't have to worry about Steve. Barbara had seen to that.

Jake escorted Marie to an intimate French restaurant not far from the college campus for a late supper. He found they both loved continental cuisine.

Tasting the delicate sauce accompanying one dish, Jake yearned for the simple food of the cookout.

While he drove Marie home, he turned on the classical channel. As it turned out, Marie also liked classical music.

At her door he declined an invitation to go in for a drink then drove home. Paying the sitter, he slumped on the living room sofa as soon as she left.

"Dad?" Deb came downstairs, Napoleon at her heels. "What's the matter?"

"Not a thing, honey," he said, forcing a smile. "It's late. You ought to be asleep."

"I was but the light woke me."

"Light doesn't make noise, funny bunny." That was his name for her when she was a little girl.

"Okay." She seemed to consider what he said then spoke to him again. "You were thinking so hard, it woke me up." Deb grinned. "Deep thoughts, Dad?"

"Not really. Nothing for you to worry about." He gave Deb a hug, glad she was there with him. "Now, off to bed with you, young lady. I don't want to catch you yawning tomorrow because you didn't get enough sleep."

Forcing himself to go to bed, he lay in the darkened room. Marie and he shared a keen interest in their profession, also music, art, and European recipes. One day he should consider marrying again. The right kind of wife would benefit his career. Marie was attractive, educated, ambitious, and his own age. What more could a man like him want?

* * *

"Hold on, Deb. Just a moment." Not wanting any interruptions while she was talking to Jake's daughter, Carly gestured to her secretary. The woman left the office, closing the door behind her.

"What's going on?"

"Not much. Dad's not doing too good."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. Is he sick?"

"No, but he stays up late every night, and if I ask him a question, half the time he doesn't hear me."

"Maybe he has something on his mind."

"I wish you could come over here."

"I don't think that's a good idea right now. After all, your Dad hasn't called me since his company party."

"I miss you, Carly."

"I miss you too." There was no doubt in her mind about that. She'd become quite fond of Jake's daughter. "Let's wait awhile. Maybe we can see each other soon."

"Dad had a date last night. Are you dating, Carly?"

"I have a couple of friends I see sometimes, if that's what you mean."

"But you don't like them the way you like Dad. Do you?"

Clever girl. "No," she said. "But don't tell your Dad I said that. Okay?"

"I won't."

* * *

That evening Carly slipped into an old school chum's car.

"This's great, Carly." Allen seemed pleased she'd agreed to go out with him. "I was really surprised to hear from you. For some reason, I thought you and Steve were engaged."

"Steve may have wanted people to think that but it's not true," she explained. Allen had taught her how to hold a baseball bat in the third grade. "Isn't it time for the movie?" Allen bought their tickets then escorted her into the already darkened theatre,

"There're two seats over there," she suggested.

They excused themselves, stepping over a couple seated on the end of the row.

Carly settled into her seat and tried to focus on the screen. It wasn't a very good film. Before long

her attention wandered, her gaze flickered over people sitting near them.

One handsome, masculine face drew her. The man on the end of their row bore a striking resemblance to . . . Jake.

Carly caught her breath. Jake had his arm draped over the back of his companion's seat.

She managed to look away before she drew his attention but every so often her eyes would stray to his face. Of course he was bound to notice her attention sooner or later. Their gazes locked then he nodded his head in her direction. At that moment his date must have whispered something since he leaned his head closer to hers.

Carly felt a burst of envy. It wasn't fair that he'd be there with an attractive woman. Her escort was her old freckle-faced baseball buddy from third grade.

Unexpected tears threatened to spill. She had to get out of there right away.

"Allen, I'm sorry but my head's splitting. Would you mind taking me home?"

"Of course not, let's go." He led her pass the others seated on their row then out of the darkened auditorium.

* * *

Seeing Carly and her date slip away in the middle of the movie, Jake felt a twinge of envy. Maybe the couple had something more interesting to do. He wished he were the one taking Carly home.

Jake imagined Carly and her date entering her apartment. She'd lock the door, dim the lights. He'd take off his jacket, loosen his tie then sit on the sofa, waiting for her. She'd slip into his arms, their lips would touch and

"No," Jake yelled. The other moviegoers turned and glared at him. Even in the dark, he sensed their annoyance.

"Pipe down back there," one man a few rows away ordered.

"What's the matter?" Marie seemed concerned.

"Nothing, I'm sorry." How could he explain he'd come to his senses and realized he was with the wrong woman?

CHAPTER TWENTY

Next day Carly sat at her desk, frowning. Unshaken in her belief that Jake was the man of her dreams, she'd been certain he'd soon realize he cared for her and return.

Impatience tugged at her until she sighed. Things were moving more slowly than she would've liked but what could she do? He had to make up his own mind.

Meanwhile Jake darted from one woman to another like a bee buzzing from flower to flower while she waited.

The phone rang and her throat tightened. Jake? She grabbed for the receiver.

"Carly? Howareya?" A man's voice, but not Jake's.

Steve's deep rumble disappointed her. "What's going on?"

"Nothing much. Weren't you at the movies last night?"

Of all the luck. He'd been in the audience, must have seen her with their old classmate. Carly braced herself for some teasing. "Did you like the show?"

"You and Skeeter were sitting a couple of rows in front of us, but Barbara and I noticed you leaving. I didn't know that you and Skeeter were an item." Steve kidded her.

"We're not, you idiot. I just needed a ... why don't you mind your own business anyway?"

"Sorry. You don't have to be so touchy. I thought you had your sights on that Jake fellow. Didn't it work out?"

"We've only had one date so far," she admitted.

"Sorry, Carly. Me and my big mouth." Steve paused. "That dumb jerk doesn't know what he's missing. Want me to work him over, toots?" His tone seemed sincere, though his attempt at imitating Stallone annoyed her.

"You lay a hand on Jake and I'm calling the police. Now leave me alone." She glared at the telephone.

"Sorry. Would you like me to find you a man? We could double-date."

"I'm not that desperate, but thanks. See you." She hung up fast before he could come forth with any more suggestions.

Her secretary came in carrying a large vase of flowers. "These came for you." From the smile on her face, she was glad her boss had a boy friend at last.

"Oh? Put them somewhere." Carly kept her eyes riveted to a article she was writing for a local

animal society until the woman left then she scooped up the card attached to the vase and opened it. Reading the message, her shoulders drooped.

"Hope you're feeling better. How about dinner tonight?

We can talk about old times.

Love, Skeeter"

Boy, oh, boy. She needed an extra man hovering around her like a hole in the head. All she needed was Jake.

To take her mind off him she grabbed her shoulder bag. "I'm going to check on the obedience classes," she called to her secretary who was now filing.

At the school Carly spoke to a veteran teacher then to a younger woman with a question. As she turned to go back to her office a handsome man approached her.

For a moment Carly had no idea who he was, then it dawned on her that he must be the new trainer. She'd corresponded with Eric and spoken to him over the phone but they'd not met in person. Alice, her assistant at the school, had greeted him the other day when he started work.

They discussed his pupils. Eric had one particular dog that was proving to be a problem.

Carly had an inkling who that might be. "You wouldn't be talking about Napoleon, would you?"

"Ah, . . . yes. But how did you know?" He creased his brow, dazzled her with blue eyes too vivid to be natural.

"Let's say I know his past history." Carly grimaced. "His owner can be troublesome, too. The only advice I can give you is to be kind but firm. Napoleon will be all right. He's just going through a difficult time right now." She was speaking the truth though it applied to Jake as well.

"Perhaps we could discuss this further," Eric said.

The guy fancied himself a real lady-killer. Too bad since his charms were wasted on her. About to turn him down she had second thoughts. If Jake saw her around town with this handsome fellow he might notice.

Pasting a bright smile on her face, she flirted a little. "Why not?" She waited for him to make his next move.

"How about dinner tonight?" Again that blue flash.

"Sorry but I've got plans for this evening." She did have important matters to take care of, like cleaning the refrigerator and washing her hair.

"Tomorrow?"

"Why not?" Jake wasn't the only one who could play the field. She could play the game, too, though her heart wouldn't be in it.

That evening she had another call from Deb.

"I'm worried about my Dad."

Carly felt a tug of pity. "What now?"

"Daddy's going to bring a lady named Marie home for dinner so she can meet me. What do I do now? What if she likes me?" From her husky tone, Deb was about to cry.

"Sweetie, all you have to do is make sure she doesn't."

"How?"

"Listen and I'll tell you." Carly gave Deb some tips on how to be an obnoxious brat. She supposed she should feel guilty and her conscience did twinge a bit but her future and Jake's were at stake.

* * *

That evening Jake led Marie into the living room, invited her to make herself at home then went upstairs in search of Deb.

"Honey, Marie's here and eager to meet you," he said, leaning in the doorway of Deb's room. Getting a glimpse of his daughter's face, he reared back. "What happened to you?"

"Hi Dad. Gloria lent me some of her makeup."

"Terrific." He didn't want to hurt her feelings but Deb resembled a pint-sized showgirl who'd applied her cosmetics with an unsteady hand.

If Marie hadn't been waiting, he'd have ordered his young daughter to scrub her face. There wasn't time.

Introducing Deb to Marie, Jake couldn't have been more embarrassed. He'd described his daughter as a sweet child who'd just stopped playing with dolls.

Marie greeted Jake's daughter, her lips twitched like she wanted to laugh but was too polite to do so.

Dinner went well if you liked monologues. While he turned himself inside out, telling funny stories, talking about things that might interest twelve-year-olds, Deb just sat in her chair with that grotesque mask of makeup covering her features. Every question he asked, she answered with "No" or "Yes."

Marie was no help. Everytime he asked her a question, she got a funny look on her face, like she was trying hard to keep from laughing. Or she'd comment on work and Deb would yawn.

Before she went to bed Deb's disposition improved. With a sweet smile she invited Marie upstairs to see her room.

Ah, Jake thought, his daughter liked Marie after all.

Two minutes later he heard a shriek then Marie came back downstairs fast, picked up her handbag and headed for the door.

"What the heck? Marie? Wait, I'll take you home."

"Don't bother. I'll call a cab on my cell phone."

He closed the front door then took the stairs two at a time. "All right," he called outside his daughter's door, "tell me what you did to upset her."

"Dad?" Deb opened the door. Her expression was wide-eyed innocence. "I didn't do anything."

"Tell me what happened."

"Well, she was nosing around in my room, and I couldn't help it, Dad." Deb burst into peals of laughter.

"I'm waiting." He folded his arms, tried to look stern. At heart he wasn't really angry. He might have liked Marie the day they met but compared to Carly she'd turned out a real bore, always wanting to talk about tax matters.

"I didn't get a chance to tell you earlier. Gloria's friend Jeffrey lent me one of his pets, just for the weekend. Your lady friend was walking around my room. How was I to know she'd pick up one of my shoes?"

"What was inside?"

"Just the sweetest little snake. It's Jeffrey's favorite. I told Marie his name's Martin and he likes to swim in the bath tub. She didn't give me a chance to explain that Martin's just visiting. She must not like pets."

"Not that kind of pet." Jake sighed. If Deb weren't so young he'd think she planned this to get rid of Marie.

* * *

On Monday morning Jake eyed the abject figure seated on the other side of his desk. Sam had just apologized for his tactless remark at the office party.

"Let me get this straight. You heard about my date from a stranger in the bar downstairs?"

"Yes. . . I don't have any idea who he was."

"Describe him to me."

Sam shrugged. "Tall, thin, I dunno. Wait, he kept looking at his reflection in the mirror behind the bar."

"Redhead, a little prissy?"

"You got it."

"I know who he was." It must have been Freddy, He was glad his ex-wife was rid of him, even if it meant losing her savings to convince Rhonda her husband was no good.

"Whoever he was, the guy hated your guts," Sam explained, adding, "like I did. But you've been kind to me in spite of my embarrassing you and your friend last weekend."

Taking out his handkerchief Sam wiped his face

Jake noticed tears in his eyes. "What I don't understand is why you'd want to hurt me." That was what troubled him the most. "What did I ever do to you, Sam?"

"Nothing except you're always the best, first to find new clients for our practice, first with ideas our partner likes. It's impossible to compete with you. You're so strong, so self-sufficient.

"Hell, you don't need anybody. I've tried my damnest to be like you but I'm not good enough." Sam lowered his head, his shoulders shook.

The other man's admiration unnerved him. Finding it difficult to believe he was anyone's ideal, Jake was still flattered. The next moment, he felt like a phony. If Sam had the foggiest notion how uncertain he felt at times, how lonely. "The man you admire so much doesn't exist, except in your mind. I'm not like that. Can you keep a secret?"

"Ah, I . . . guess so."

"I get scared myself. I don't know what's wrong with me recently but I've been feeling kind of lost. I've even thought it'd be nice to have someone of my own. Are you serious about the woman you brought to the office party?"

"Well, yeah, in a way. I sure could do worse than her for a wife. She'd be quite a catch too. Just think, she's our boss's niece and has a British title."

"That's not a good reason to marry someone. You need to feel something for her right here." Jake placed his hand over his heart. "She should be special to you, more than any other woman you know." Now he sounded like Ann Landers or her twin sister, what's her name. Where did that bit of advice come from? Maybe he should consult a psychologist.

"Let's make a deal. I'll give you work-related tips and when there's time we can talk about things, like girl friends. We might even advise each other about how to make the right decisions in our personal lives.

"The last few days I've caught myself wondering what the hell I'm doing. This would have to be confidential of course."

"It's a deal. Gee, Jake, you're much more approachable than I ever dreamed." A relieved expression covered Sam's face. "By the way, you called me in here to talk about my work?"

At that moment, Jake had a change of heart. He'd planned to move his troublesome subordinate to a demanding client company in the far suburbs. Now that notion faded away.

"Well, yes. I've decided to become your mentor. That way we can work closely together and I'll give you tips on how to improve in your work."

"Great. Well, I know how busy you are so I'd better go. Anything I can do to help, you just ask."

"Thanks." Jake smiled in appreciation at Sam. Full of good will toward his former adversary, Jake

hadn't lost his memory or his mind. Without his subordinate's noticing, Jake would still keep an eye on the guy who'd tried to cause him trouble.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Carly dropped by Jake's condo to visit Deb and her grandmother, parking down the street on the off chance Jake might come home without warning.

Her grandmother met Carly at the door. "See my new wheels?"

"There's a red Harley outside. Yours?" Carly grinned. Of her whole family Gran and she were the only free spirits. That included her mother who tended to be conservative, her vehicle a sedate Cadillac. Her father always drove Buicks.

"Like it?" The old lady's dark eyes twinkled. "Let's get my keys and I'll take you for a spin around the block." A kid at heart, seventy-eight-year-old Gran lived every day to the hilt.

"Thanks, maybe another time. I can't stay, just stopped by to see Deb and you for a few minutes."

Deb jumped up as Carly walked into the room. "You didn't tell me you were coming." She gave Carly a big hug.

"Can't stay long. How's your Dad?"

"All right. That lady friend of his left early the other night." The little girl sounded pleased.

"Was your Dad angry?"

"Nah, he pretended to be, but I don't think so."

"That's a good sign. I guess."

"Dear, what are you girls up to now?" Granny chuckled.

Carly wrinkled her brow. "You might say I'm trying to help things along, Gran." She didn't add she was growing impatient.

"Why don't you let nature take its course?"

"That might take forever. You know how slow men are when confronted with new ideas."

A key rattled in the lock. Carly looked around. "Where can I hide, Gran?" She wouldn't have come if she hadn't believed Jake was still at work.

"Get in the closet, dear." Gran opened a door.

Moments after Carly wedged herself between winter coats and Deb's ten-speed bike, Jake opened the front door and stepped inside.

"Everything all right?" He glanced in Gran's direction.

"All's quiet on the western front," the old lady said.

In the closet, Carly wondered how long Jake would stand there chatting.

"What's going on, Deb?"

"Nothing, Dad."

Through the cracked closet door, Carly saw Jake nod then turn away, heading upstairs. She waited to give him time to enter his bedroom then crept from the closet, motioning to her amused grandmother and apprehensive friend to ignore her.

Carly had made it as far as the foyer when Jake called Deb from upstairs. Jumping back into the front closet, Carly was filled with an insane urge to giggle. If she weren't so scared Jake would find her, this'd be hilarious.

Deb went upstairs then Carly's grandmother gave her the all clear sign. This time she made it to the front door. Leaving the condo, she hurried down the block to her car.

"That was too close for comfort," Carly muttered from the safety of her VW. Next time she'd make sure Jake was still at work before visiting his home. Better use a pay phone since he might have caller id at work. It wouldn't do for him to think she was so anxious she was calling him but not leaving a message.

What would he have thought if he'd found her hiding in his coat closet? Carly grinned. You had to look at things with a sense of humor.

Two messages waited for her at work, neither from the right man. Allen wanted her to call him and so did Eric the Handsome. That was her private nickname for the almost too good looking trainer who'd graced her with his attention.

Carly's lip curled. Eric probably had the world's shortest attention span, and a waiting list of women panting for a date with him. If she didn't need an escort Jake would notice, she'd ignore Eric. Men who were too good looking tended to be a pain.

But she didn't want to hurt Allen's feelings. He was a good friend, and some day another woman would find his Howdy Doody freckles and cowlick appealing.

Carly decided the best thing to do would be to call and thank him for the flowers then decline more dates. It'd be cruel to lead him on, delude him into thinking she was interested.

Having reached a decision on Allen, she decided playing a little hard to get might be the best approach with Eric. If he wanted a date, let him pursue her.

He did call and the next evening took her to a fashionable Greek restaurant not far from TCU. While

they waited for their table, Jake and a tall redhead walked in. Carly caught her breath.

Unsmiling, Jake nodded in her direction then steered his date to the bar.

Eric proved more observant than she'd figured. He caught Jake's brief salutation and must have sensed she was upset.

"You know that guy?" He seemed curious.

"Ah, . . . not really. Just someone I've met once or twice." She'd have to be certifiably insane to tell Eric the man in question owned Napoleon, Eric's most troublesome pupil.

He'd be at the bar talking to Jake in a flash, introducing himself as Napoleon's new trainer. Then Jake would learn the truth. He still believed she was a groomer and she hadn't corrected him. It was important that he like her for herself.

Jake and his date still waited at the bar while the maitre d' seated Carly and Eric in the adjoining dining room.

This restaurant had earned a five star rating but Carly was too busy watching for Jake and his redhead to pay attention.

"No wonder you're so thin," Eric said.

Carly looked up. "Excuse me?"

"Look at your plate. Tell me what you see."

Carly had to laugh. She'd rearranged her dinner on the plate, but hadn't touched a morsel. "I'm a slow eater."

"Or you have something on your mind."

"Not at all. Watch this." She sampled the entree then the vegetables. Surprised, she glanced at her dinner partner. "It's good, isn't it?"

It had been a long time since lunch so once she started, Carly didn't take long to finish her dinner.

"Dessert?"

"No, I couldn't."

"It's just as well. They have a dessert cart here."

"Excuse me?"

"Hate to see what you'd do to it. Once that appetite of yours clicks in, you're ferocious. You might even eat the cart," he quipped, teasing her.

What a nice man. Although she wasn't interested in him, he was more pleasant than she'd imagined.

On the way home, she debated whether she should invite him to come in for coffee. Her instincts told her that wasn't a good idea. After all, she didn't know a thing about Eric except he loved dogs and

worked for her.

Also, there was something unnerving about him. Once or twice, she'd caught him watching her, a peculiar expression on his face. For some reason, she'd felt chilled.

Though she told him it wasn't necessary, Eric insisted on escorting her all the way to the fourth floor. At her door she smiled and stuck out her hand. "Thanks for a very nice evening."

"You can do better than that," he replied and pulled her into his arms.

Carly closed her eyes. Eric's kiss was pleasant but it didn't cause bells to ring nor was there a Niagra-like roaring in her ears. She wasn't surprised.

"I have an idea you and I are going to be--".

Before he could finish, Carly finished his sentence. "Friends, we'll be friends, Eric. Good night." She stepped inside and closed the door.

* * *

All was quiet in his car during the drive to Marie's. Jake couldn't forget how Carly looked, how her date kept his arm around the back of her chair. The guy was so good looking, he could've been a model from Esquire magazine. He was the second man Jake had seen her with in the last few days. Carly must have an active social life.

Marie stirred and Jake noticed he'd already parked the car in front of her house.

"Want to come in for a nightcap?" She asked.

"Well, sure, if it's not too late." He glanced at his wrist watch. Nine o'clock. Where was Carly right now? It pained him to think of her in another man's arms, but she was a free agent the same as he. All they'd shared was one kiss, a kiss that seemed almost a figment of his imagination now.

Storing away his memories, Jake followed Marie into her front yard. As they approached the large, older home, he admired neat, orderly rows of flowers by the white picket fence. Orderly and regimented, just like Marie. Life with her would bring no surprises, and, he suspected, not much joy either.

They sat on the sofa she'd reupholstered after taking a class last year. The fabric was attractive, like its owner.

Marie sat close to him, seemed to watch him studying her home. "What do you think?"

"It's very neat and trim like you."

She smiled. "You've been off in a world of your own tonight, Jake. Where do you go when that distant look appears on your face?"

"Nonsense. I'm right here with you. In fact, I was thinking of you right then and wondering if I should do something."

"Like what?" Again she seemed to watch him.

"This." He leaned over and kissed her on her mouth. No roaring in his ears, so he tried again. It was hopeless. Only Carly's kiss caused that Niagara-like effect, shook him to his core, made him cling to her for dear life.

Marie sighed. "That must be quite a lady."

"Huh?"

"You're in love, aren't you?"

"Of course not."

"Well, I won't pretend it doesn't matter because I like you, Jake. But I think we're both looking for something and it's not each other."

"Thanks for being so reasonable, Marie."

She laughed. "That's my problem. I'm too reasonable for my own good. I won't fight her for you. It'd be a waste of time."

"Maybe I'm fooling myself about her. She's not the kind of woman I've ever found appealing. You are, but I can't help my feelings. God knows I've tried."

"Was it that attractive brunette in the restaurant?"

And he thought he'd been so cool. "Yeah, and now she may be involved with another man. I could've missed my chance."

"Go home, Jake. I don't feel like playing Dear Abby to the lovelorn tonight." Her voice was kind, if slightly irritated.

"If you don't mind, I think I will. See you around, Marie."

"See you, Jake." She walked him to the door. "Take a word of advice, Jake?"

"What?"

"Don't wait too long."

He drove home, or meant to drive home. As if by magic, his car ended up parked in the shadows in front of the old red brick apartment building where Carly lived.

Jake longed to see her but what could he say? "I have this thing about you, yet I know we don't have a thing in common." Nope. He'd just sit there and look at her windows for awhile then go home.

A car drove up, parked, then a couple walked by. Under the porch light Jake recognized Carly and the guy she'd been with at the restaurant.

Watching Carly's date enter the building with her was torture but Jake managed to sit in his car instead of following them.

Less than five minutes later, he was relieved to see the guy exit the apartment building. Climbing in his car, he drove away.

Well, at least her date didn't stay long. With a heavy heart Jake drove home. What should he do? The answer came back loud and clear. Unless you're ready to make a commitment, there's not a damn thing you can do.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

On his way to work Jake lectured himself. "You've just got to stop thinking about Carly," he said, knowing the other motorists on I-30 couldn't hear. Even if they did, they wouldn't pay any attention. But resolving to stop thinking about Carly and doing it were two different matters. She now drifted into his mind at will.

Maybe if Marie and he'd been compatible he could escape this fascination with a woman with whom he had nothing in common. Unfortunately, Marie left him cold. Too bad since she shared his ambitions and interests and would've been the perfect wife for a man with his foot planted on the corporate ladder.

Jake decided to give up on the dating scene for awhile. He'd give his job his full, undivided attention. With the additional companies to supervise he had much to do.

Walking into his office Jake found several messages from clients and a few minutes later he was absorbed in his work.

That afternoon Sam walked into Jake's office while he was eating lunch at his desk. Noticing his subordinate's frown, Jake determined to find out what troubled him.

"What's the matter?" Sam must have hit a snag with one of their growing group of clients.

"This isn't business, but I wonder if I could bend your ear for a few minutes?"

"All right," Jake responded, wondering what was going on.

"Did I tell you I've asked Alicia to marry me?"

"No, you didn't. From your long face she must've refused."

Sam shook his head. "Alicia indicated she'd like to accept. But she insisted on telling me what she'd discovered in the last few days since it might make me want to withdraw my offer."

Jake's subordinate wandered around the room, absentmindedly picking up one object then another.

"A most upsetting document turned up the other day while she was examining papers in her deceased mother's safe deposit box."

"I see," replied Jake. Remembering his own remark about exchanging confidences with Sam, helping each other with their personal problems, he felt uncomfortable. Subordinates' work-related problems he could handle. But he was struggling to solve his own problems. How could he help Sam with his?

Sam's unhappy gaze pleaded for help while Jake hesitated. Praying for the wisdom for the right words Jake vowed silently to do his best to help. "Want to tell me about it?"

"That whole business about her title is a lie. She isn't really Lady Alicia. It turns out her father neglected to get a divorce from his first wife before he married my girl's mother so Alicia's illegitimate.

"She told me she loves me and wants to marry me. But her conscience demands she be honest, reasoning I might feel differently once I learned she doesn't have a title.

"Also, there's the matter of her inheritance and family estates in England. According to Alicia, she won't inherit from her father since, on his death, his first wife and legitimate children get it all."

"That's rough. I'm sorry. I know the idea of having a wife with a title and fortune was attractive to you. But there's something more important than titles and estates involved here."

"What are you getting at?"

Speaking from his heart, Jake explained. "Do you love her, love her so much you'd want her, whether she had a title or a penny to her name?"

"That's what I have to decide." Sam chewed on his lip.

"Ask yourself how you'd feel if you let her go. Would you be able to find someone else, make a new life for yourself, forget Alicia. Or would you regret losing her every day for the rest of your life?"

Hearing his own words, Jake felt uneasy. In spite of his better judgment, he missed Carly. How would he answer that question if someone asked him?

"You have no idea how much you've helped me," Sam said. A smile replaced his worry and confusion. "I have to make a call."

At that moment, Jake had an unexplicable urge to get away from work. "Use my desk phone. I'm going home early for a change." He tapped Sam on the shoulder. "Good luck."

"What?" Sam seemed confused then he nodded. "If she'll still have me. Thanks."

As he drove into his compound, Jake noticed two or three strange cars parked near his home. His next door neighbor must be entertaining her bridge group. Unlocking his own door, he stepped inside.

Darkness, utter darkness met him. From the kitchen at the back of the condo he heard a moaning sound.

Remembering Mrs. Crosby's heart attack, Jake was afraid something had happened to Gran Alice. He turned on the lights in the hall on his way to the kitchen.

Easing the door open, Jake stopped, surprised by the sight before him. From the meager light shed by a few candles, he observed four older women with eyes closed and hands joined, sitting around his

circular kitchen table.

He recognized none of the ladies except Gran Alice who sat, eyes closed, head tilted back. She murmured then spoke in a deep rumbling voice.

"Milly? Mildred? It's Clarence. I'm sorry, dear. I never loved that other woman. I love you."

One of the old ladies moaned and burst into tears. "I'd recognize that voice anywhere. The old rascal never could resist a pretty face or plump bosom. He had a heart attack and died in another woman's bed thirty years ago. Tell him I forgive him."

Gran Alice relayed the old lady's message then her head slumped on her chest for a few moments before she straightened, opening her eyes.

"Well, that's all we have time for today, ladies," she said. Her voice was tired. "Your medium needs to rest now." Getting to her feet, she blew out the candles and opened the kitchen drapes.

Before Granny or her guests could see him, Jake closed the kitchen door then tiptoed back down the hall and went upstairs.

Deb was lying on her bed reading. She looked up as he passed her room.

"Dad? What ya doing home so early?"

"Do you know what's going on in the kitchen?"

"Sure. Gran invited me to watch but I had a book to read. I listened outside the kitchen door for a few minutes. If that's a seance, it's a bore."

Once the last guest left Jake returned to the first floor. Gran Alice was tidying up the kitchen.

"And how was the seance?"

She whirled around. "What?" Gran looked puzzled. "Oh, I see. You must have come in while I was in a trance. You're early today."

"This pretending to contact dead relatives for your friends is ridiculous." Since meeting Gran Alice, he'd perceived Carly's older friend as mature and level-headed.

Now Jake reminded himself she'd bought a motorcycle in the last few days and the purple hair she sported wasn't a natural shade. Maybe he'd misjudged the woman.

"See here young man, I do reach the other side, well, most of the time, and even if I don't, if it eases my friends' minds, what's the harm?"

"It's just a shock to see a respectable woman who I thought had good sense behaving like an old fool."

"Watch your mouth." Granny bristled with indignation. "If my granddaughter were here she'd pin your ears back."

"Oh, is she into seances, too?" Disgusted, Jake wished he'd stayed at work. Many times in his life others had disappointed him, and this was one of those times.

"No, she isn't. She's a lovely, dear girl, bright and talented, and my favorite grandchild."

"Well, excuse me." He tried not to sound too sarcastic. "Maybe you'll introduce me to this paragon sometime."

"Why should I? You already know her. It's Carly."

His mouth dropped open. "Carly? The Carly who grooms our dog?"

"None other and I'm proud of her."

Deb walked into the kitchen. "Dad? What happened? I can hear you upstairs."

"Did you know Carly's Gran Alice's granddaughter?"

The guilty expression on Deb's face told him she did.

Jake slapped his forehead. "Why doesn't anyone ever tell me anything?"

"Dad, you don't see Carly anymore, never even ask about her. I thought you'd forgotten her." Deb's tone was odd, almost accusing.

"That doesn't mean anything. It's just that . . . well, we're different kinds of people. She has her own life just like I have mine. That doesn't mean I don't wish her well."

How did he ever get into this discussion? If this was what happened when he came home early, he'd better go back to his old routine, go to work early and leave late.

* * *

That night Deb slumped in her chair at dinner.

"What's the matter? Are you sick?" She'd hadn't touched her meal, even the apple dumplings she loved.

"No, I'm just not hungry. Do you mind if I go and read in my room, Dad?"

"Fine, go ahead."

Alone in the living room Jake tried reading a book that Marie had recommended. It was impossible. He saw Carly's face on every page.

Deb had told him he never saw Carly, didn't ask about her. The little girl thought he'd forgotten Carly. If his daughter only knew how often Carly drifted into his thoughts.

Unable to concentrate he closed the book and tossed it on the table by the sofa.

Turning on the television, Jake soon realized why he didn't watch more often. It was the doldrums of summer and the channels were full of reruns and old movies. He clicked on the Discovery Channel and watched a program about spiders. Once that ended he tuned in to the evening news on CNN.

Was the house always so quiet evenings? Even the sound of the refrigerator running was a welcome

relief from the dense quiet surrounding him like a silent fog. Jake shivered. He could've been the last person alive on earth.

Napoleon clicked into the room. It must be his imagination but the family pooch also seemed lonely, if a Pekinese could feel that way.

Jake wondered what Napoleon was thinking. He'd seen the little dog sitting by the fence, gazing next door. "What's the matter, Napoleon? Do you yearn for that pretty little Pekinese next door?"

What a strange afternoon it had been, to come home and find a seance being conducted in his kitchen by a woman he'd believed in full possession of her mental facilities. And if that wasn't enough, he'd also discovered the sitter was Carly's grandmother. The old lady spoke of her granddaughter in glowing terms, even said she was proud of Carly. But you expected that from grandmothers.

A weird feeling came over Jake, like he'd walked into a theatre in the middle of a movie. Liking to feel in control, right then he didn't have a clue what he was doing or what was happening. Jake made up his mind to question Gran Alice about Carly the first chance he had.

* * *

He found Sam waiting for him in his office. Before Jake could say a word, Sam gave him a warm handshake.

"You may not know it, but you saved my life yesterday. I called Alicia, told her I wanted to see her last night. As soon as we were together, I asked her to marry me again. She broke down and cried then I did, too. If I can ever do anything for you, just ask." Happiness radiated from Sam.

"As a matter of fact, I wouldn't mind talking to you about something," Jake said. Striding to his office door, he looked outside then closed it. His image would be ruined if people in the office heard he'd asked for personal advice. People came to him for help not the other way around. "You won't repeat anything I tell you?"

"You have my word," his subordinate assured him.

"There's this young woman," Jake began.

Sam nodded. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but aren't you talking about Carly, your date for the office party?"

"How the heck did you know that?"

"I couldn't help noticing how you looked at her."

"Okay, it's Carly. Since the office party she's always on my mind. I can't say why since it's obvious we don't have a thing in common."

"Like what?" Sam gave him his full attention.

"Well, I'm in the financial field and she works with dogs. A large, corporate office is my turf while she prefers to stay with a small suburban company comprised of people she's probably known since high

school." He paused, looked over at Sam.

Sam smiled as if he sympathized with Jake, nodded for him to continue.

"Also, I like classical music and she likes popular, she reads romances and I stick to non-fiction, especially tax-related."

"She seemed to be a very nice person the night of the party." Sam chuckled. "And she sure set me straight, told me a few things about myself that I didn't like. I realized later they were true.

"In a way she made me take a good look at myself. Carly caused me to think about the kind of person I'd like to be."

"She's smart, I don't deny that," Jake said. "That's what's so mind-boggling. I just can't understand why she's so determined to stay right where she is in life."

"Maybe she's content with the way things are."

"Maybe. She sure looked like she was enjoying herself the night I saw her and her date at a restaurant."

"How did that make you feel?"

"Go ahead. There's no one here but you and me."

Jake hesitated.

"What was your gut feeling?" Sam leaned forward, his gaze never leaving Jake's face.

"It was peculiar. For a moment I felt jealous of her date." Jake ran his fingers through his hair. "If I tell you something weird, will you promise not to laugh?"

Sam held up his hand, so solemn-faced he could've been about to take an oath. "I promise."

"I took my date home, intending to go back to the condo," Jake said. "I must've been thinking too hard and not paying attention. The strangest thing happened. I found myself sitting in my parked car outside Carly's place, was there when her date brought her home. I watched them go inside. Now what does that make me? Am I turning into a fruitcake?"

"No, not at all," Sam replied. "Would you answer one question for me?"

"Okay." Jake waited.

"When you saw Carly's date enter her building with her, what did you want to do?"

"Nothing much, maybe punch him in the mouth." Jake flexed his knuckles.

"I have an idea what's wrong with you," Sam said. "I could be wrong but from what you've told me you've displaying all the symptoms of a man in love." With that, he sat back in his chair, folded his arms and grinned.

"Me? You're nuts!" Jake opened the office door. "Enough of this nonsense, Smale. We've got a business to run."

"Aye, aye, sir." Still grinning Sam saluted and marched out the door, stopping in the hall. "It happens to the best of us," he added, ducking to avoid the book Jake tossed at him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Parking the VW in front of her building the next night, Carly found herself out-of-sorts. What was wrong with her? She didn't brood about things as a rule.

She'd stayed away from Jake, dated other men, and done her best not to think of him. By now he should have seen the light and be on his way back to her.

She glanced down the street. If Jake was there he must be invisible. The only people in sight were two girls on bikes.

Seeing the kids ride by reminded Carly she hadn't checked in with Deb for a day or so.

Jake's daughter answered the phone on the first ring. Today she seemed excited.

"What's the matter?"

"Carly, now that my mom's feeling better she wants me to move back home. The day she returned from Hawaii Mom was worn out, so Dad suggested I stay here for a few more days."

"That makes sense. But she's all right now?" Carly sympathized with Deb's mother. What a horrible experience, to marry a man who was already married, a man who didn't want you, just your savings.

"Your mother's been through a rough time, Deb. Try to be patient with her, understand if she has bad days, is irritable."

"I will. We girls have to stick together."

What a sad mess. Twelve years old and already Deb had learned there were ruthless people in the world who preyed on others. "Just because Freddy exists you mustn't think most men are like him. Take my word for it, they aren't," Carly said. "There're lots of good guys."

"Like my Dad."

"Right." Carly had to agree, Jake was decent and kind but also too stubborn and independent for his own good. If only he'd admit he needed people like they needed him. If only he'd admit he needed her.

She vowed to not give up on Jake until she was sure he didn't care for her. That day all of her hopes and dreams for the future turned to ashes.

"How's he doing?" She longed to see him, hear his voice. It'd just been a week but seemed an eternity.

"All right, I guess, except he's working more than he did when I came to stay over here."

"Is he dating?"

"Not any more. The last few days he's been beat when he gets home. Some evenings he even goes to sleep downstairs.

"The other night the television woke me up so I went downstairs and found Dad asleep on the sofa."

Carly wondered how long this would go on. An idea came to her. "I'd like to meet your mother. Ask her to call me?"

"Sure."

One hour later Rhonda phoned Carly. "Deb has told me so much about you," she began in a high-pitched voice.

"We've become good friends. I don't need to tell you that your daughter's special."

"Yes, she is. And I hated to go off and leave her but that trip to Hawaii was something I had to do."

"Was it a successful trip?" Carly only knew Rhonda had found her husband, not the outcome.

"You might say so." Rhonda laughed. "If nothing else, I sure scared the gee whiz out of the little worm."

"Well good, I guess." What did you say in response to a remark like that? "I'd like to take you and Deb to lunch tomorrow if you have time."

"Time? Dear," Rhonda sighed and for a moment sounded down, "time's one commodity I have in abundance. Why don't you come over around eleven-thirty? We can decide where we want to go once you're here."

* * *

Rhonda was waiting when Carly drove up. Stopping at the condo to get Deb, they were soon all in Carly's old VW, driving to a new lunch spot she'd heard about.

"You're quite pretty." Rhonda complimented Carly.

"Why, thank you. Coming from you, I consider that a real compliment." Carly warmed to Jake's slender red-haired ex-wife. She was sure the woman had faults but everybody did. Did Rhonda regret losing Jake? Carly hoped she didn't want him back.

Over lunch Rhonda told Carly about her trip, downplaying what must have been a heartbreaking experience.

While Deb visited the restroom, Carly talked to Rhonda. "I don't mean to intrude but what will you

do now? Would you consider taking Freddy back once he's released from prison?"

"Not in a million years. He's already started writing mushy letters from prison. They're a waste of time since my feelings for him died the day he cleared out my bank accounts and ran off to Honolulu." Her voice rose, discussing Freddy. "The nerve of that guy. Do you have any idea what he did with my funds?"

"No but I can imagine." Carly said.

"He'd been wining and dining other lonely women. I'm sure he thought he'd find another fool he could marry, rob and dump."

"You were just in the wrong place at the wrong time, Rhonda." Carly patted the other woman's hand. "But life goes on. Now you're wiser than you were when you met the guy. You're so attractive. Don't sell yourself short."

"I won't. In fact, there's a certain FBI agent I met in Hawaii where Freddy was apprehended but that's another story. Now, dear. Shall we talk about Jake?"

"Jake?" Carly blushed in spite of herself. "If you want to." She tried to sound nonchalant.

"Don't play coy. From what you've said and what Deb's told me, you love Jake. The question is does he love you?"

"I think so. Jake's problem is Jake. He doesn't think he needs anyone but I disagree. I think he needs me."

"This problem will require some thought, though I'm sure if we put our heads together we can find a solution."

"No trickery. He has to realize he needs me on his own."

"Of course we won't trick the man. But we can help him come to his senses. Agreed?" Rhonda held out her hand.

Carly shook Rhonda's hand. "Agreed." She smiled.

* * *

Jake cornered Gran Alice in the kitchen. "I don't think we finished our conversation about your granddaughter. As I recall, you were telling me you're very proud of her. Would you mind explaining just why you feel that way?"

"Ah, . . . well, she's pretty and bright," the old lady began, at a loss for words which was unusual coming from a woman who always had an opinion, no matter what the topic.

"Go on," Jake said. He leaned against the kitchen counter, prepared to wait as long as it took to get some answers.

Deb ran into the room. She'd come back to the condo to search for a few items she'd left behind. "Dad, I can't find that Pokemon book Gloria lent me. Will you help me look for it?"

"Right this minute?" He'd wanted to talk to Gran Alice. She was holding back something about Carly and he was determined to find out what it was.

"Please? I have to take it back to Gloria tonight."

"Okay. Let's look in the living room. Have you checked under the sofa cushions?" Turning to leave the room, Jake heard the old lady let out a deep breath.

The first time he'd met Carly he'd been curious about her. There was something about the young woman He hurried to catch up with his daughter who called to him from the front of the house. "Dad? Are you coming?"

* * *

"Hi Gorgeous. Thought you'd never call me." Eric seemed pleased to hear from her.

"I came by the Obedience classes but I must've missed you." Carly had told Eric they could be friends but she wasn't interested in anything more.

Today she wanted to ask him a favor. Rhonda had convinced her it was a good idea. At that moment Carly was having second thoughts.

"I had to leave a little early to go to the dentist," Eric told her. "By the time I was finished it was too late to return to work."

"Eric, would you do me a favor? Before you answer let me say it's quite important to me, but I'll understand if you don't feel right about doing it."

"Geez, what do you want me to do, help you rob a bank?" He laughed nervously.

"No, nothing like that. Let me tell you what I've planned." She filled him in on the scenario Rhonda and she'd devised.

"This is important to you?"

"Well, yes." Very important in fact.

"Okay, count me in. When are we doing this? And where?"

"This weekend is his ex-wife's birthday, so it has to be this Saturday. Her birthday's Sunday."

"Now I am confused. You aren't trying to get this guy and his ex-wife back together, are you?"

Heaven forbid. Carly shuddered at the thought. "No, that's not what I had in mind at all."

Eric agreed to come by her place Saturday morning. From there they'd drive to The Parks shopping mall, the largest, newest shopping center in Arlington.

"Remember, we're just going inside the jewelry store for a few minutes. You need to look happy when we come out of the store. You might have your arm around me," she said.

"Gotya. I'll turn on the old charm."

"Thanks, Eric. If I can ever do anything for you"

"That's okay, Babe. Anything for a friend."

Carly remained seated, deep in thought for a few moments. Maybe this plan would work. Rhonda and she'd considered several scenarios. The others they'd reviewed then discarded.

This one seemed to have the most potential for success. What she liked about it was she wouldn't have to lie to Jake. He'd misunderstood her when they first met. Maybe he'd misunderstand the scenario that was going to unfold before his unsuspecting eyes at the Mall.

It wouldn't be all lies. It was founded in the truth. Sunday was Rhonda's birthday so Deb had a legitimate excuse to take her Dad shopping for a present on Saturday.

The rest would be mirage but Jake wouldn't know it. Carly didn't like deception but this was for a good cause.

* * *

Deb led her father from one store to another at the Mall. All the while she watched the time closely.

"I don't see what was wrong with that turquoise nightgown back at Dillards," Jake complained. "Where shall we look next?"

"How about Victoria's Secret? Mommy mentioned they're having a sale on short gowns." Deb steered her father up and down the Mall, busy today with weekend shoppers.

"My feet are getting tired, Deb. Let's just get your Mom something and go home. If she doesn't like her gift, she can return it next week."

"All right, Daddy." She guided Jake to a convenient bench, right outside one of the Mall's better jewelry stores. "If you're tired why don't you sit down here for a few minutes. I'll get us each a soft drink."

"Stay there. I'll be right back," Deb said and went in search of soft drinks.

"Hurry back before your old man gets too comfortable," he called after her then leaned back against the bench. Minutes passed and he watched shoppers strolling by, including lots of young couples with young children in strollers.

Several people passed him, going in and out of the nearby stores, a children's clothing store, a bookstore, and a jewelry store.

Jake yawned, viewing the crowds. Across the way a handsome young man and a pretty young woman came out of the jewelry store. From where he sat Jake couldn't miss their happy expressions. The man had his arm around the shoulders of a young woman sporting a radiant smile.

"Just got engaged," Jake muttered to himself then he took a closer look, recognizing the man as the one he'd seen with Carly in the restaurant.

Boy, he's some fast worker. Just the other night he was with Carly. Carly! It was Carly wearing a

new hairdo and a short denim dress. What was she doing in a jewelry store with that guy? Jake stared, horrified as the guy kissed her cheek and whispered in her ear then they walked away, holding hands. Jake sat on his bench reeling.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"Dad? Sorry I took so long." Deb walked up to Jake's bench, handing him a soft drink in a tall paper cup. "That fast-food place's crowded, and they took forever."

His lack of response seemed to disturb her since she stopped short and asked, "Daddy? Are you all right?"

"Me?" Jake wiped his clammy hands on his jeans. Not wanting to worry his daughter he managed a weak smile. "I'm just a little tired. Let's go back and get that turquoise gown for your mother. I'm sure she'll like it."

Deb didn't argue this time. "Yes, Dad," she replied docilely, following him while he wove his way through the crowd back to Dillards.

Inside Jake was shaken. Occupied with trying to decide what to do about Carly he hadn't considered the possibility she might find someone else. Did Eric propose to Carly? And more importantly, did she accept? Deep inside Jake realized if he lost her he'd regret it the rest of his life.

Maybe there was some other explanation. He clung to that thought like a toddler clutching his favorite security blanket. At least it allowed him to retain a shred of hope.

Night came and he wandered around the condo, too disturbed to rest. Napoleon trailed along behind until his master picked up the little dog, walked across the hall and deposited him on the foot of Deb's bed. Before Jake left the room Napoleon had crawled up the bed, snuggling next to Deb who'd come to stay overnight.

"Dad?" A sleepy voice stopped him in his tracks before he could tiptoe from the room.

"Go back to sleep, hon. Sorry I woke you."

"Daddy, it'll be all right." She lay her head back on the pillow, closed her eyes.

Jake's heart filled with love and gratitude for Deb. The sweet child had sensed his distress though she had no way of knowing what upset him. What would he ever do without her?

Back in his room he undressed and crawled into bed. Better get some rest. Morning would come

soon enough. Sleep eluded him for hours while he twisted and turned, trying to get comfortable. At last he stopped trying to sleep and lay on his back, staring at the ceiling.

His mind raced, thinking of Carly and what he'd find out the next day. The last thing he remembered was the hall clock striking two o'clock. He woke to sunshine streaming through the bedroom window. Today he'd see Carly.

There were two distinct possibilities, either Carly was engaged or she wasn't. That was the first thing he must determine. If she was, there wasn't anything he could say but "Good luck. I hope you'll be happy."

If she was still unattached, he'd ask her for dates until he discovered the reason he found her so appealing.

Seeing Deb's anxious expression at breakfast, he tried to reassure her. "I'm fine, don't look so worried."

Deb and he were taking Rhonda out to brunch for her birthday at eleven o'clock but he was free until then. Part of him suggested he forget Carly, he didn't need her. Hadn't he gotten along fine for thirty-five years without her?

His heart countered, telling him he was a damn fool if he didn't at least find out if she was engaged. If not, he'd see her, explore his feelings.

"I'm going out for a few minutes, Deb." Grabbing his car keys, he left the condo before she could ask where he was going.

A short drive later Jake parked in front of Carly's apartment building. Suddenly he was amazed by his own behavior. What ever possessed him to come there in the first place? His hand reached to turn on the ignition and return home, his eyes strayed to her building.

Just then Carly walked by and entered her building. One glimpse of her was all it took to change his mind. Jake climbed out of his vehicle and followed her.

Ascending to the fourth floor, he caught his breath then rang the bell. What in the world would he say to her?

The door opened and she looked out. A smile crossed her face, seeing him. "Oh, hello."

"I was in the neighborhood and thought I'd stop by. Haven't seen you for awhile other than that night in the restaurant. You were with a friend, I believe."

"Friend? Oh, you mean Eric."

"Were you at the Mall yesterday?"

She smiled but didn't answer his question.

"Can I come in or is this a bad time?"

"Well, I just got home and I'm expecting someone any minute. It was nice for you to stop by, though."

"Sure, well, it was good to see you." He'd come to find out if she was engaged to another man and still didn't know. "Can I call you sometime?"

"I guess." She looked at her wristwatch. "Hate to rush but I've got a million things to do. Goodbye." She closed the door.

Jake stood in the corridor, feeling foolish and rejected. That had been a dumb idea. Stomping back to his car, he drove home. As he walked into the foyer Deb hung up the phone.

"Talking to Gloria?"

"Don't be sad about my not being here, Dad. Mom needs me with her right now but I'll come and visit you often." She gave him a peck on the cheek.

Jake and Deb arrived in plenty of time at her mother's house. Rhonda was never ready on time.

Today she appeared thinner and quite attractive in a short blue linen dress. Jake couldn't help comparing this svelte Rhonda to the young woman he'd married. Two months pregnant the day they'd wed, she'd gained a lot of weight carrying his child then hadn't lost it once Deb was born.

At the busy restaurant reknown for its homemade sticky buns and mimosas, a mixture of orange juice and champagne, Jake steered Deb and Rhonda to a table. He didn't envy the line of people waiting for their places. He'd made a reservation days in advance.

One waiting couple caught Jake's attention as he followed the maitre d' escorting Rhonda and Deb to their table. The man seemed familiar though the woman was a complete stranger.

A second glance and Jake placed the guy. Carly's Eric stood talking to a tall, bosomy blonde. Passing by, Jake heard her giggling over something Eric said.

He'd presumed Carly was in a fluster getting ready for a visit from Eric yet here he was with another woman. Jake felt a little better. Maybe he'd misunderstood.

*** * ***

Carly yearned to pull Jake inside and wrap her arms around him when he appeared at her door that morning. She'd dreamed of that wonderful kiss they'd shared but she managed to keep a cool but polite facade while he was there.

Rhonda had advised her she shouldn't appear too available. Men, including Jake, found the out of reach more alluring.

Whenever they spoke on the phone Carly's mother coaxed her to come to dinner again and to bring her new friend. It was obvious her parents had been favorably impressed with Jake.

Of course her entire family wanted Carly to get married. Her mother had told her on more than one occasion that they were giving her one more year then they'd pick someone for her. She was kidding, wasn't she?

Carly's phone rang that afternoon. Usually she wasted no time answering her calls but Rhonda had

taught her well. This afternoon Carly stood by the telephone and let the answering machine pick up the call. Thanks to Caller ID she knew at a glance who'd dialed her number.

Hearing Jake's voice, she picked up the receiver.

"Is this a bad time?" Jake sounded a little hesitant, a change from the self-assured, take-charge man she knew. His deep voice still sent a ripple of awareness through her.

"Ah, . . . actually, I was just leaving." She paused. "But I've got a minute or two."

"I wonder if you'd have dinner with me tomorrow night?"

"I've already promised to have dinner with my family," she said, adding almost as an afterthought, "but you could join us."

"Thanks for the invitation. Seven o'clock like last time?"

"That'll be fine. I'll see you then." Ending the call, Carly hoped she hadn't sounded too cool. The last thing she wanted was for Jake to lose heart and go away.

* * *

The next evening Jake got to meet George, Carly's brother, his pregnant wife Faye and their three children. As soon as Jake took a seat at the dinner table one twin hopped onto his lap.

The toddler took a fountain pen from Jake's pocket and proceeded to doodle on Jake's shirt sleeve. His twin knocked over Jake's water glass.

"Boys, behave yourselves," their father ordered.

"I'm so sorry." Their embarrassed mother wiped the wet cloth with her table napkin then dabbed at Jake's shirt.

"It's quite all right," Jake said, trying to keep a pleasant expression on his features. Little monsters. He hoped Carly's other siblings didn't have brats for children.

Carly smiled like she was enjoying the show.

"Why don't you ask your Auntie to play with you," Jake suggested. When one twin balked, Jake whispered in his ear.

The boy's face brightened and he made a beeline for Carly, flinging himself on her lap with such force she almost fell off her chair.

The dinner conversation seemed stilted to Jake. If he didn't know better he'd have sworn each of Carly's relatives was screening what he or she said in Jake's presence.

Anxious for the ordeal to end he was relieved when the twins went ballistic after dinner. George apologized and took his rowdy little brood home. Jake wondered if the three-year-olds always misbehaved.

The evening with Carly's family ended soon thereafter. Though Carly's parents said it'd been good to see Jake again they neglected to invite him back.

At Carly's door he was tempted to grab her and kiss her, then manoeuvre her inside where they could continue in more privacy. With effort Jake managed to restrain himself, afraid she'd reject his advances if he came on too strong.

As if she'd read his mind Carly eluded his touch, gave him a quick kiss on the cheek then stepped inside before he knew what was happening.

Funny, but the more she evaded him the more he wanted her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

"Hi Gran. Sorry you couldn't join us at Mother and Dad's last night." Now that Jake knew Gran and she were related, there wasn't any reason Gran couldn't have had dinner with them.

Carly wondered why her grandmother wanted her to call asap. But knowing Gran Alice well, she assumed it was some trifle.

She considered other times when Gran had been upset, like the time Mimi balked at being dressed as a pumpkin for a dog show last Halloween.

"What's going on?" Carly asked when Gran answered. "Is Mimi all right?"

"She's fine, thank goodness. And if she outlives me I've put a clause in my will leaving her to you."

"May you live forever, Gran," replied Carly, her usual response when her grandmother talked about dying. "All right, you've aroused my curiosity. Why did you call?"

"To tell you what I heard at Jake's house the other day, dear. I've been debating whether I should tell you."

"Oh?" What did you hear?"

"Jake told Deb that he wished you well but he and you are two very different kinds of people. The way he said it, I got the impression he wasn't paying you any compliments."

"We are different, Gran. There's nothing wrong with that. I'm sure he didn't mean his remark to sound insulting." Carly defended Jake though her grandmother's report hurt her.

"Wait, there's more. When he discovered you're my granddaughter he was surprised, and even more

surprised by my praising you. It was all I could do not to set the guy straight about your accomplishments."

"It's all right. Jake talks a lot but it's just talk." Inside Carly anger bubbled. So they weren't exactly alike, so what? What a dull world it would be if everybody was just alike.

She decided to use what she'd just heard. She'd be cool to Jake and if he asked what was wrong she'd admit, with reluctance of course, that she wondered if they weren't too different.

If he cared for her he'd be put on the defensive. That might make him realize that they did have things in common. Carly made a mental list. They both loved children, well-behaved children at least, and they were both animal lovers.

Most importantly, they both needed someone to share their lives.

Carly reminded herself that physical attraction was only one factor in a relationship. Still, she couldn't help remembering that magical kiss and how it affected them both. She hadn't been the only one moved. Even after Jake's lips left hers, they'd clung to each other for a few moments.

Everytime he came close to her she yearned for his touch. There was no way she'd ever believe he didn't care. Why wouldn't he admit he needed her as much as she needed him?

* * *

Jake would have cringed with embarrassment if he'd heard Carly and Gran Alice's conversation. At present he remained in a quandry about Carly, but at least now he was doing something about it. Seeing her on a regular basis should squelch this senseless fascination she held for him.

The condo seemed empty and still that morning while he ate breakfast and prepared to leave for work. He'd become accustomed to having Deb around. Now that his daughter was back at home, he prepared to terminate Gran's services.

The old lady smiled when he thanked her for her help. "I hope you find what you're looking for, Jake."

"Excuse me?" Remembering her seance, Jake studied Gran Alice. She didn't really have psychic powers did she? He'd hate to think she could read his mind.

"You know what I mean." With those obscure words she walked out of the condo.

Standing in the doorway, Jake waved while the old woman revved the Harley and made a noisy departure. He chuckled in spite of himself at the idea of a motorcycle granny. What was the world coming to, anyway?

Jake grinned and locked the front door. Navigating I-30, now busy with commuter traffic, he headed east to downtown Dallas.

Once at his desk, he buried himself in work for his clients, one of whom always needed something. He'd become so engrossed in his work, he jerked when someone called his name.

"Want to go out to lunch?" Sam grinned as Jake blinked, forcing himself to resurface from a project and focus on his subordinate's invitation.

"Well, all right. I hadn't thought about lunch," he said. "Come to think of it, it's a good idea since Gran's no longer fixing me a bag lunch every day."

Jake slipped on his jacket, turned off the banker's lamp on his desk, following Sam down the corridor to the elevator bay. "I'm glad you came by." Why not ask Sam what he thought he should do about Carly. "I need another man's opinion."

"What's going on?" Sam seemed interested.

"Not here." Jake noticed a couple of company secretaries in the back of the elevator. "Let's go to the bar in the underground. If my memory hasn't failed, they used to serve good steak sandwiches."

Sam hesitated then agreed.

"This place's become popular since the last time I was here." Jake scanned the bar serving lunch fare during the middle of the day. "There's a booth over there." He headed across the large room, filled by people on their lunch hours.

Sam followed him to the booth. Soon a waitress sauntered up to them. Taking their orders, she said, "it'll be a few minutes," then wiped the table top with a damp bar cloth. "We're shorthanded today."

"No rush." That didn't sound like something he'd say. In the past he would've been in a big hurry to get back to work. Today Jake was content to take this opportunity to talk to Sam. "I want to ask your advice."

"Shoot, you've got my attention." His subordinate sipped his glass of water, all the while gazing at Jake.

"This young lady--," he began.

"There you go again," Sam interrupted. "Why don't you say Carly? We both know who you're talking about."

"All right. Carly has been giving me the cold shoulder the last few days. You don't know about this but I saw her with another man last weekend at the mall.

"They were just stepping out of a jewelry store, hand in hand. Judging by the blissful expressions on their faces, I assumed he'd bought her an engagement ring."

"That's too bad," Sam said. "You must feel lousy."

"Can't say I do since I saw the same guy with another woman later at brunch. He sure didn't act like he was engaged to Carly. And last night, during dinner at her parents' home, her family acted kind of peculiar. I don't know what's going on but I've got a date to take her out to dinner tomorrow night."

"So what's the big deal? Just ask her if she's engaged," Sam replied.

Jake shook his head. "Nope. I'd have to admit to seeing her leaving the jewelry store with the guy. She's apt to tell me it's none of my business."

"Isn't it?" Sam looked confused now.

"No, not really. Other than a couple of dates I've never shown any real interest in Carly. Besides, I need to get my head straight. All my better instincts tell me getting involved with someone like her would be an error in judgment."

"So how can I help you?" Sam fidgeted in his seat.

"I don't think anyone can. I'll just have to work it out for myself," Jake muttered, glancing at his watch. "Better get back to work." He slid out of the booth.

"But we haven't had lunch," Sam complained.

"You wait. I seem to have lost my appetite." Jake left money for his lunch on the table then exited the bar.

Ascending to his floor in the elevator, he sighed. He must make up his mind about Carly. At present he wavered between wanting to be with her and worrying if it'd be a big mistake. It was making it difficult to focus on his work.

Jake groaned with indecision. He could cancel his date with her the next evening. A small voice inside warned him that would be a big mistake.

* * *

That morning Carly's secretary stepped into her office. "There's a lady here to see you."

"Did you get her name?"

"Rhonda something."

"Ask her to come in." The only Rhonda Carly knew was her friend Rhonda, Jake's ex-wife who'd been helping Carly in her pursuit of Jake. Of course, he must never know they'd been conspiring. As far as Jake was concerned, he'd pursue Carly until she landed him.

The tall redhead strolled in with an extra bloom in her cheeks, a bounce in her steps.

"You look great!" Carly pushed away from her desk, circled Rhonda. "If I didn't know better, I'd think the love bug has bitten you too."

"I wouldn't call it love, though I must admit I'm happier than I've been in years. I've been corresponding with that FBI agent I told you about since Freddy's arrest in Honolulu.

"Mark kept writing he was coming to the DFW area on business and would call me. Of course I didn't believe him."

"I take it he did call you?"

Rhonda nodded. "After Freddy I thought I'd had my fill of men but Mark's changed my mind. Just like he promised, he got in touch with me today. He's here for a meeting, called as soon as he had a free moment."

"I take it you're going to see him while he's here?"

"You bet! Tonight's the night." Rhonda grinned.

"So is that why you're here? Not that I don't always like to see you."

"Ah, . . . well, actually, I know it's short notice but would you mind staying with Deb tonight? I'd ask Jake but you know how he is."

"Yeah. He'd go ballistic if he heard there's already a new man in your life." Carly's conscience twinged. Jake had a point.

"You can't blame Jake. It hasn't been that long since Freddy" Carly stopped, not wanting to mention what Rhonda had confided.

Freddy had romanced and married Rhonda when he was already wed to at least three other women. He then proceeded to steal her savings and flee to Hawaii, using her funds to wine and dine his next prospective victim.

"Don't remind me," Rhonda said. "That's why I'm taking it slow with Mark. I'll spend the evening with him then send him back to his hotel room."

"What time do you want me?"

"Six-thirty. Now, I need to get my hair done before I pick up Deb at a friend's in North Dallas. We'll bring some supper home for Deb and you."

"Don't bother," Carly said. "I'll order us a pizza."

* * *

Later that day Rhonda blew a lock of hair off her face.

"Gee, Mom, I told you taking that shortcut wasn't a good idea." Deb gazed at the line of cars ahead of them, none moving.

"How could I know there'd be a major accident on Northwest Highway?" Rhonda glanced at her wristwatch. "If Mark and Carly get there before we do they can keep each other company. We'll get home as soon as possible."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Carly strolled out of her apartment, climbed into the old VW and turned on the ignition. She started to drive away. The car lurched.

Oh, no. She had a flat. She jumped out to examine the car. The two new tires she'd bought for the right side of the vehicle were gone. Nothing was left but the hubcaps.

Damn. And this was supposed to be a safe neighborhood. She should report the theft to the police but didn't have time.

Picking up her cell phone, she dialed the local taxi company. The dispatcher warned her they were behind schedule, would be there as soon as possible.

Carly struck out, trying to contact Rhonda at home. Either Rhonda wasn't home from Dallas yet or she didn't hear the telephone. Oh, well, she'd get there as soon as possible.

* * *

On his way home from the office Jake decided to swing by his ex-wife's home and see Deb and Rhonda.

The clock on the dashboard showed six o'clock. Dinner time. Maybe they'd invite him to join them. With no lunch his appetite was growing by leaps and bounds. Rhonda might not be much of a cook, but even her cooking was better than fast food.

Jake parked at the curb behind a late model rental car. Its sole occupant stared at him. He stared back until the other man looked away.

The stranger got out of the car, walked up to Rhonda's front door, rang the bell. There was no response.

While Jake watched the stranger strolled around the house to the back yard.

Having bought the residence, part of Jake still thought of it as his. What was the stranger doing back there? There'd been a rash of burglaries in this neighborhood in the last few months so Jake felt he had reason to be concerned.

Getting out of his car, he took pains not to slam his car door and tip off the man he was under observation. In silence Jake approached Rhonda's backyard. From behind a spruce tree he'd planted after Christmas one year, he maintained his surveillance.

The stranger tried the doors and ground floor windows. His nonchalant attitude infuriated Jake. This must be either the world's dumbest burglar or the boldest. It was hours before night fell.

While Jake waited, the stranger approached then passed him. Climbing the steps to the redwood deck Jake had built years earlier, he tried to pry open the sliding glass doors.

Jake had seen enough. He crept up the redwood stairs. The stranger turned around.

"What the" Jake's body slammed into him and the man staggered back. Fast to recover, he rammed Jake and tried to throw him off the deck.

Every muscle in Jake's body protested yet he managed to keep a death grip on the stranger. When Jake fell from the deck the other man fell along with him.

They landed on ground baked hard by the summer sun then rolled around, arms fraying. Jake surmised they were an even match. Neither could do much damage to the other.

At last his hand brushed against an empty pottery vase he'd bought Rhonda one time in Mexico. Seizing it, he tried to smash it over the stranger's head the next time he was on top.

At the last moment the other man rolled away and the clay vessel shattered, hitting his shoulder, not his head.

Roaring with pain, the stranger got a head lock on Jake, then he sat on Jake's chest and managed to catch his breath. "Okay, fellow. Fun's over. F.B.I," he announced. Breathing hard, he stuck an official-looking badge under Jake's nose.

"But what" Jake was so winded, he couldn't say any more. The agent cuffed him.

"What the hell were you doing, hanging around here?"

"I could ask you the same question," Jake retorted. "I saw you hanging around and thought you were casing the joint."

"A likely story. Here, show me your identification."

Jake held out his cuffed hands. "My wallet's in my back pocket. If you'll help me up, you can get it."

The agent pulled Jake to his feet and extracted the wallet. He wiped at the sweat running down his dirty face then flipped through the wallet to Jake's driver's license.

"Says right here you're Jake Malone," the stranger read aloud. He flinched. "Not Rhonda's ex?"

"You're damn right." Jake gestured to the F.B.I badge the other man had flashed. "Now that we've established I'm not a crook, is that the real McCoy?" Bruised, battered and cuffed like a criminal Jake fumed, getting madder by the minute.

Unlocking the cuffs, The F.B. I. man brushed off Jake's clothes, giving him back his wallet.

"Ah, I don't know if you'll believe this but I was in Hawaii when Freddy was arrested." Red faced, he added, "That's where Rhonda and I met. We've been corresponding. I have a date with her tonight."

"Damn." Jake grinned. "I feel like a complete fool."

"That makes two of us." The agent held out his hand, introducing himself, "Special Agent Mark Tate."

"Jake Malone. I'm a tax accountant with a firm in Dallas."

"Accountant?" Mark felt his jaw. "You pack a hell of a punch for an accountant."

"You're not bad yourself," Jake admitted. Every bone in his body ached. "Let's go inside and have a beer, Mark. Under the circumstances I don't think Rhonda will mind." Retrieving his ex-wife's key from its customary hiding place under a potted geranium on the front porch, Jake led the agent to the kitchen.

Jake and Mark were sitting in the kitchen, feet propped up, drinking their beer when a key rattled in the lock of the front door. A moment later Rhonda burst into the room.

She beamed, seeing the agent. "Hello Mark. Looks like you found my hidden house key, I forgot to tell you where it was. I'm sorry to keep you waiting but traffic was backed up for miles on Northwest Highway." Her eyes slid to Jake. "What're you doing here?"

"Visiting with your new friend."

Her gaze scanned Jake then traveled back to Mark. Jake shifted the makeshift bag of ice from his cut lip to his eye.

"Are you all right?" She'd been so excited when she first arrived, she mustn't have noticed their appearance. Now she did. "Were you in an accident? You both look like candidates for the Emergency Room."

Mark rubbed his jaw then put a finger inside his mouth like he was checking for damage. "With any kind of luck, I won't lose any teeth. It's not as bad as it looks, Rhonda. Give me a chance to wash up and we'll go out to dinner."

"Like that? Your slacks are dirty and grass-stained, and you've got blood on your shirt collar." Rhonda shook her head. "Why don't you take a shower? We can have omelets and a salad."

Turning to Jake, she extended an invitation to him as well. "You're welcome to stay."

"Thanks but I just stopped by to see how Deb's doing."

"As soon as I parked in the driveway, our daughter jumped out of the car and ran over to a friend's to see her latest Harry Potter book. I'll call and let Deb know you're here."

The doorbell rang and Jake got to his feet. "I'll get it." He was striding down the hall to the foyer and opening the door before the others could move.

"What are you doing here?" Carly raised both eyebrows.

"I could ask you the same question," he said.

"Well, Rhonda asked me to stay with Deb tonight while she goes out with a friend."

"I know. I've met her friend."

"Now that you mention it, I was about to ask if you got the license number of the truck that hit you."

"Very funny." Jake managed a weak smile. All he wanted was to go home and clean up. Two aspirins and a scotch might help followed by a very hot shower.

"Sorry, Jake. It's just that you're always well groomed. What happened?"

"That's a long story, a very long story. I'll tell you all about it tomorrow night." He paused. "What time should I pick you up?"

"Seven would be good."

"Great." Stepping into the kitchen, he shook hands with the agent again. "Good to meet you, Mark."

"Same here, Jake. Just don't mistake me for a burglar next time. Okay?"

"You got a deal. Good night, Rhonda." Jake leaned over and pecked his ex-wife on the cheek.

Mark sent Jake a hard look.

Interesting. Did it bother him to see Rhonda's ex-husband kiss her? Jake filed away that information.

On his drive home, Jake considered what'd happened. What a mess. But the agent had acted in a suspicious manner. How the heck was he to know the man was there to date Rhonda, not to steal the family silver?

* * *

Carly snickered, remembering how sheepish Jake appeared on finding her at the door. What he must have thought, finding her at his ex-wife's home.

Did the fact that Rhonda and she were acquainted bother him? He didn't have a clue how well they'd come to know each other. Thank goodness. As smart as Jake was it wouldn't take much for him to suspect the scenario at The Parks Mall was staged for his benefit.

Thinking of Rhonda, Carly smiled. Even with his cuts and bruises, Mark Tate seemed a very nice man. They'd offered to take her home but she called a cab once they'd decided to have supper at Rhonda's.

Good thing they did. The better restaurants wouldn't hesitate to refuse service to a man who appeared at their doors in Mark's condition.

* * *

The next evening Carly left work early. Arriving home, she stripped off her workday uniform, jeans and a shirt. Walking around her home in her underwear, she remembered the party she'd attended with Jake.

What a disaster. That miserable ugly dress coupled with the oversized orchid had lowered her spirits and embarrassed Jake.

Sam Smale had humiliated both of them. But Jake appeared more upset.

She'd given Jake's co-worker a few choice words. She doubted they'd soaked through his tough, indifferent skin.

Tonight would be different.

Jake was on time picking her up. Tonight Carly sensed a different current in the air though he didn't say anything out of the ordinary, just chatted about the place he was taking her for dinner.

Maybe it was the way he looked at her, almost like he was seeing her for the first time.

She felt breathless just watching him when he was unaware. Once he caught her staring and smiled. She looked away.

Jake drove them to a new restaurant located in a mansion at one time owned by one of Fort Worth's wealthiest residents. Opening the menu, she was horrified.

"What's the matter? Can't you find anything you like?"

"It all looks great, but the prices" She wasn't about to admit she couldn't read the menu.

"Don't fret, Carly. Just get whatever you want."

The menu was all in French. For the first time Carly wished she hadn't avoided foreign languages in high school. She had no idea what the selections were.

"Why don't you order for both of us?"

"All right."

The waiter returned and Jake ordered their dinner in French without the slightest hesitation. She was impressed.

Following the meal Jake checked his watch. "It's early yet. Would you like to go somewhere else, maybe hear some jazz, have a few drinks?"

"Why don't you come home with me?"

"I guess we could do that." His tone turned wary.

"For dessert," she added.

"What did you have in mind?"

"Oh, ice cream, cheesecake, anything you want."

"Great. Let's go." Paying the bill, he wasted no time escorting her to his car.

Twenty minutes later her fingers fumbled with her key, opening the apartment door. Carly preceded Jake into her apartment and turned on lights in the living room.

It was time to either move their relationship forward to a more intimate level or stop seeing each other. Which would he choose?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Jake followed Carly upstairs to her apartment on the fourth floor. He was there to learn more about her. What better place to start than her own home?

Her living room was a pleasant surprise. He'd expected odds and ends of furniture stuck in a room in a haphazard fashion. Instead he found a large room decorated with good taste.

An old piano had been placed in one corner. A conversation area consisting of a navy leather sofa and two matching arm chairs in front of a fireplace was surrounded by shelves filled with books, both hardback and paper, covered one wall.

Carly left the room and he scanned the titles. The collection of romances came as no surprise. He was pleased to see the assortment of nonfiction, books on business planning, philosophy, sociology, psychology and history.

He also found a large assortment of books on dogs from a tattered copy of History of Dogs to several books on dog grooming.

All in all it was an interesting collection. Jake admitted, that he might've misjudged Carly's taste in literature. If her library was any indication, she was well-read.

While Carly busied herself, preparing their desserts in the kitchen Jake took advantage of her absence to walk across the room and study the groupings of framed pictures.

Pictures of her family abounded on one wall, interspersed with her high school diploma and a framed Girl Scout certificate, even the program from her first piano recital.

Jake's eye registered a gap. One picture was missing. Maybe it was one of an old boy friend. Not about to be caught giving the place the once over, he settled on the sofa and waited for Carly.

Seconds later she returned, carrying a tray of selections, any of which he'd have enjoyed on another occasion. Tonight his appetite didn't tend toward coconut cream pie or cookies.

He must have frowned without realizing.

Carly asked, "are you allergic to coconut?"

"No, not at all. And that looks delicious." Jake forced himself to lift his fork, stab the slice of pie she'd given him. He took a bite and tasted it. "This's wonderful."

The absurdity of the situation struck him. Placing his fork on his plate, he advanced on Carly.

She looked at him standing in front of her then leaned back in her armchair.

"What's the matter?" Her eyebrows raised when he leaned over her. "Jake?"

He pulled her to her feet then took her face between his hands. "Either I've lost my mind or something strange happened the night we kissed. There was the most peculiar roaring sensation in my ears. If you'll bear with me a minute, I'd like to see if it happens again."

She didn't have time to say a word before his mouth descended on hers. Carly didn't resist his advances. In fact, she put her arms around his neck and kissed him back.

It was there! He hadn't been imagining things. Like a miniature Niagara, the same roaring resounded in his ears. He clung to Carly.

"Oh." She raised her head.

Jake perceived a shimmer of tears in her eyes. "You felt it too, didn't you?" He heard his own voice as from afar.

She whispered one word he couldn't quite hear. He leaned closer. "Sorry. What did you say?"

"Again," she demanded and he complied with pleasure.

Kissing, caressing, removing the troublesome garments that kept them from each other, they hurried down the hall to her bedroom.

The bed was already turned down, a scented candle flickered on the chest across the room, providing a dim light.

The room looked like it had been prepared for a guest.

"Did you know we'd be here tonight?"

"No, but I hoped," she said and pulled him into her arms.

Touching, kissing, caressing, and learning all of Carly's many charms, Jake lost himself in her. She responded with warmth and tenderness. At that moment she became all he'd ever dreamed of in a woman.

Slipping into her, Jake felt he'd come home at last. What an idiot he'd been to waste so much precious time. She'd been right under his nose and he hadn't recognized her.

Riding the wave of passion they climaxed at the same time. Exhausted, he lay on his side, drew her against him.

Jake kissed her damp forehead, he lay his weary head on a scented goosedown pillow and dozed.

Carly stirred later in her sleep and Jake woke long enough to cover her with the bedsheet. He patted her soft cheek before falling into a deep, contented sleep.

Waking the next morning, Jake reached for Carly but found himself alone in the bed. The scented candle that had welcomed them the previous night was now burned out.

Had it all been a dream? He felt the bedcovers beside him and found them still warm. She had been there until a few minutes ago.

Even after he heard a small sweet voice singing in the kitchen the dream-like atmosphere persisted. The previous night still held a magical quality.

Raised up on one elbow, Jake searched the room for his clothes before remembering their frantic race to the bedroom. He'd retrace his steps, retrieve his garments.

True enough, he found his underwear draped on the bedroom doorknob then his shirt and slacks on the floor in the hall.

He slipped into his underwear and slacks, put on his shirt. Stepping into the sunny kitchen, he stopped to admire the picture before him.

Not knowing he was there Carly stood at the counter, singing a soft tune he'd never heard before while she squeezed oranges. The sunlight coming through the window over the sink sparkled and danced on her dark hair.

He wrapped his arms around her and she sighed, leaning back against him. If this wasn't Paradise it was close enough.

Turning her around, Jake kissed her lightly, then more deeply. He could feel her racing heart next to his.

"Hello. Did you sleep well?" She smoothed his hair.

"Like I was drugged. Did you put something in that Coconut Pie?" He couldn't take his eyes off her.

"I dreamed of you." She snuggled in his arms.

"Keep giving me those come-hither looks, lady, and I'll cart you right back to bed," he warned, only half-jesting.

"Sorry," she said, not looking the least bit apologetic. "Why don't you sit at the dining room table while I fix us some breakfast?"

Jake sat down, turning so he could see her in the kitchen. "Anything I can do?"

"Why don't you get us some placemats? They're in the buffet behind you." She returned to what she'd been doing.

"All right. This drawer?" She hadn't said which. He pulled open one drawer and found nothing but silverware that they didn't need. She'd already stacked the knives and forks on the plates they'd use for breakfast.

The second drawer held no table linens, just knickknacks. He almost closed it then pulled it open again, his curiosity aroused by a framed picture taking up most of the space.

Bringing it out of the drawer, Jake laid it on the table. Wasn't that Carly in the photograph? Yes, though he didn't recognize her hair style or outfit.

She was standing between two middle-aged men in business suits. What was that she held? A plaque of some sort?

Jake scanned the caption under the picture then went back and read it again.

"Local Businesswoman Named Most Promising Young Entrepreneur of the Year."

While his new-found dream world burned about him, Jake's old cynicism reared its ugly head, croaking a reminder. Watch out for things that seem too good to be true. They're not.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Carrying the frame into the kitchen, Jake slammed it down on the counter where Carly was preparing their breakfast.

"Look what I found tucked away in a buffet drawer." He scowled at her. "Here I've been concerned about your getting stuck in a job with a company with little or no room for advancement. Have you enjoyed making a fool out of me?"

She turned pale, deathly pale. "Jake, it was never my intention to lie to you," she answered.

"No? How the heck do you explain this?" Jake's finger jabbed the framed newspaper article.

"Enough." She slammed the breakfast tray on the counter with such force the orange juice slushed out of the glasses. Tears of rage sprung to her eyes. "You jumped to conclusions the day we met, believing I was a dog groomer when I was just filling in for one of my employees. You're an intelligent person so you should realize first impressions aren't always accurate.

"Whether you believe it or not, I tried to tell you the truth but you wouldn't listen, just babbled on about employment opportunities elsewhere."

"Lady, you may not be a groomer but you sure as hell are a colossal liar," he roared. Jake couldn't have been more disillusioned if he'd discovered Carly had two heads and worked part-time in a carnival freak show.

"Guess you won't be staying for breakfast," she replied, her voice dripping with sarcasm. Dumping

the tray of food into a plastic trash container, she burst into tears and ran to her room, slamming the door behind her.

Jake wasted no time gathering his belongings and stalking out of Carly's apartment. A Japanese gardener at work on the flower beds in front of the building smiled when he hurried from the building. "Good morning."

"Hell it is!" Jumping in his car, Jake turned on the ignition, stomped on the gas pedal and roared away

He chastised himself for being lulled by Carly's facade. She might be a few years younger but she was a more skillful liar as anyone he'd ever met. He'd advised her as to her career while all along she was a businesswoman, a capable businesswoman. His instincts had been right on target. He'd always found it difficult to accept the fact she was content in her present employment.

Getting to know Carly, he'd found her a bright, capable woman. But why lie about her achievements?

She'd been right about one thing. Maybe he did put too much value on first impressions but that was no excuse for her lies.

Jake showered, dressed and drove to work, though it was the weekend. Chances were good no one else would be there this morning so he wouldn't have to make conversation, could bury himself in work.

What a mess he made of his life each time he got involved with a woman. The solution to that was to just stop dating, apply all of his time and energy to his job.

Jake sighed, regretting what he'd lost. For a few hours he'd had someone of his own, someone who needed him. And for a short while he'd almost felt he needed her.

He shook his head. People might need him but he didn't need anyone, never had. And most of all, he didn't need the deceitful little brunette who'd tried to trick him.

* * *

Jake had been everything she'd dreamed of, tender, loving, passionate. Last night he'd made love to her. This morning he'd stormed out of her apartment.

Though he believed she'd deceived him on purpose, she hadn't. But it wasn't all Jake's fault. The day they met he mistook her for a groomer, she should've made him listen, told him the truth before he found out by accident.

Now he considered her a liar and would never respect her, no matter what her achievements.

What was he thinking right now and did she have a prayer he'd come back? God only knew. She sure didn't.

After an hour of soul-searching and tears, Carly dried her eyes, dressed and went to visit her solace in every storm, her grandmother.

Gran Alice came to her front door. From the piece of light blue organdy she was clutching, it appeared that Carly had interrupted her in the middle of another sewing project.

The old lady wasn't surprised to hear about Jake. "You know I was afraid this might happen. Your parents didn't raise you to evade the truth," she scolded Carly. "You were taught to be honest."

"I know but--"

Granny held up her hand. "Let me finish, please." Her stern expression changed to one of loving concern. "You're the most dear of all of my grandchildren, the best and the brightest. I've taken pride in your achievements, maybe even more than your parents. Carly, I'm an old woman and have seen many things, done more, so I knew your life lacked the one special ingredient it needed, the love of the right man.

"When Jake came into your life I had a hunch he might be that man."

"And he is, Gran," Carly whispered, her voice hoarse from crying. "But now he's left, and I'll never see him again."

"Wrong, you're wrong. He'll be back. But until he admits he needs you as much as you need him, there's no chance of your having a life together."

"Do you know that for sure? You always laugh when people suggest you can predict the future, but I've wondered"

"I don't have a special gift, just wisdom acquired during a long life, child. You should've told Jake the truth at first."

Carly nodded in agreement. "Tell me what I can do."

"Nothing, do nothing. My advice is to just Let him simmer awhile. If he loves you he'll come around, realize you tried to tell him the truth, but he didn't give you the chance. If he doesn't, well, you wouldn't want him if he's that kind of man."

Picking up her shoulder bag, Carly stood and gave her grandmother a peck on the cheek. A deep sigh escaped her lips. "Thanks, Gran. I'd better go home. Jake might be trying to get in touch with me." Realizing what she'd just said, she burst into tears. He wouldn't be calling. He was gone.

* * *

Jake worked until he was exhausted. Pausing for a soft drink he wondered where Carly was at that moment. Don't even think about her. The realization that she'd deliberately lied hurt his pride.

Disappointed in Carly, he found himself out of sorts. Nothing and no one pleased him. He found himself irritable with all who he came in contact with that day. Even Sam soon learned to stay out of his way.

At home that night Jake called Rhonda to let her know what had happened. Instead of consoling him she suggested there were always two sides to any argument then hung up.

Of course he couldn't discuss the matter with his mother who had enjoyed poor health for years and only wanted to talk about herself, pity herself for being alone and unloved.

Lonely himself, Jake tried visiting her. Right away she began complaining of his infrequent visits. Her whining and self-pity drove him away.

He'd become closer to Deb since she stayed with him. Too bad he was over-loaded with work, otherwise he'd have taken her to the movies or skating. Maybe some other time.

Jake began to isolate himself without even trying and the more he burrowed into his work, the lonelier he became. Good thing he didn't need others. He was well on his way to being all alone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

"Jake, when you have a minute there's something I'd like to discuss with you."

Seeing his boss's solemn expression, his stomach tensed. What had happened? He ran through a mental checklist of his clients. They'd all seemed content with the services his group provided when last contacted. Something must have gone wrong since then.

Bracing himself for bad news, Jake entered the partner's office.

"Have a seat." The executive's tone was serious.

"What is it, Howard?"

"I never thought I've have to say this to you"

"Please tell me what's wrong and I'll do my best to fix it," Jake wasted no time trying to reassure his boss.

The older man's features broke into a grin. "Sorry, I didn't mean to alarm you. Nothing's wrong, Jake. In fact you've done a beautiful job with the clients I've given you to supervise. Too beautiful a job."

"Now you're confusing me," he said.

"Maybe I shouldn't have bragged about you at our international partners meeting, but I'm quite proud of you."

"Well, thanks but I still don't see--."

"Okay. Here's the deal. The senior Tax partner of the Honolulu office wants to develop their

Healthcare practice. I told him about the great job you've done building our base of clients here.

"He was impressed, so impressed he's asked me to find out if you'd consider transferring to Honolulu to head their project. There'd be a raise in it for you. And if you did a good job you'd be promoted to a junior partner in one year."

Jake's mind reeled. "That's quite an offer, sir. I'm flattered that they'd want me. And I appreciate your support."

"If I seem down in the dumps it's because I hate to think of losing my best manager. This would be a major move for you. What do you say? Maybe you'd like some time to think it over?"

"Well, yes. How soon do I need to decide?"

"The Honolulu office's no different from the rest of our firm. ASAP is what the managing partner said, however I realize this shouldn't be an instant decision. Why don't you give me your answer in a week?"

"In a way I'd hate to leave Dallas." Jake spoke to his boss but he was also thinking aloud. "It's my home and the little family I have is here."

He thought of Carly but that relationship was dead. The only other people this move would affect would be Deb, Rhonda and his mother. How would they respond to his news?

Back in his own office Jake picked up the phone. Better let Rhonda know right away. He hoped she wouldn't panic, hearing he might move thousands of miles away.

She answered the phone on its first ring.

Jake told her what had happened then waited, almost certain she'd beg him to reconsider.

"That's great," she said with no hesitation. "You must be pleased to be offered this opportunity."

Her response surprised him. He'd expected a cry of dismay, maybe even tears. Jake waited for her to reconsider and tell him he couldn't move so far away. She didn't. In fact, she seemed genuinely pleased.

"I realize this must come as a shock, but--."

"Maybe it would've in the past." She interrupted him before he could finish. "But since my own trip to Hawaii, I realize I'm a grown woman and shouldn't depend on you to take care of my problems, whatever they are." Rhonda chuckled. "I'm proud of the way I located Freddy. He's in prison today because I tracked him down."

Dumbfounded, Jake swallowed then managed to reply. "You sure did. I'm proud of you, too."

"Thanks for saying that. Anyway, the old Rhonda's gone at last. No one will ever victimize me again. Don't worry about me and Deb, we'll be fine. Just tell your boss you'll accept the offer."

"Thanks." The next call was the one he dreaded most. His mother was sure to throw a fit and he was certain she wouldn't want to move to Hawaii, if he offered to take her with him. She wouldn't even go to Neiman-Marcus for their year-end sales unless he drove her.

"Mom, how are you feeling today?" Easing back in his desk chair, he prepared for a ten minute monologue on her condition.

"Fine," she said. "It's a good thing you called when you did, I was just about to leave."

"Oh? Do you have a doctor's appointment?" She never went anywhere else.

"No. A group of us are going shopping and to lunch at Wonderful World of Cooking. Was there something special you needed, Son?"

He stared at the phone. Did he dial the wrong number? It sure sounded like his mother.

What was going on today? First Rhonda practically offered to drive him to the airport and now this. "Ah, . . . no. I just called to let you know the firm's made me a great offer but I'd have to move to Honolulu." There. If that didn't throw her, nothing would.

"How wonderful. I'm so proud of you!" Her voice was filled with excitement and praise.

"You're not upset?"

"Of course not, silly. I've always wanted to visit the Hawaiian Islands. Maybe after you're settled I can come for a short visit?"

"Ah, sure. That'd be nice. Well I'd better let you go. Hope I didn't hold you up too much."

"Of course not. Anytime you need to talk, I'm here."

"The world has gone mad," he muttered to his empty office. No one needed him anymore. Jake straightened in his chair. Deb! His little Deb would be crushed, would beg him not to go. Or to take her with him.

He worked at his desk then went out to lunch with Sam. Remembering he'd snapped at his subordinate earlier, Jake managed an apology. "By the way, I've had a lot on my mind recently. So if I barked at you, I apologize. It's nothing you've done, believe me."

"It's okay. Don't think any more about it." Sam didn't seem upset.

"I won't be seeing Carly anymore," he said.

"Who? Oh, well, that's too bad." Sam seemed ready to dismiss that topic, asked his opinion about a healthcare matter.

"You don't seem surprised."

"No, I'm not. To tell the truth, I've always thought she was too young for you. How old is she, twenty-two?"

"She's twenty-six, and there's not but nine years difference in our ages." Jake found himself on the defensive.

"Great. Did I tell you Alicia and I've set the date?"

"You're sure you know what you're doing?"

"I owe you a debt of appreciation. If you hadn't talked to me like you did I mightn't have asked her again to marry me."

"Huh? Oh, right. Anytime." Jake was at the same time glad for Sam and envious. "How about our grabbing some steak sandwiches and a couple of beers after work tomorrow night?" All at once he yearned for company, though he didn't need a close relationship like Sam did.

"Tomorrow?" Sam frowned. "I'm sorry but Alicia and I've an appointment with a real estate saleswoman to look at houses. My apartment's fine for a bachelor but much too crowded for two people."

"Day after tomorrow?" Admitting he needed some one to talk to, Jake persisted.

"That's the night she's having a shower and I'm invited."

"Fine, it was just a thought."

"You okay? You don't seem like yourself."

"Fine, I'm fine." Jake ended the conversation by motioning to the waiter. Examining the bill, he pulled out his wallet and peeled off some bills, placing his share on the table. "Got to go back to work. See you." He left before Sam could ask him to wait until he finished his own sandwich.

If he stuck around his employee would probably give him a full rundown on the wedding plans. Maybe some people found wedded bliss but once around the track was enough for him. Jake admitted he found himself liking Rhonda more now than when they were married.

At four o'clock he called Rhonda's number, getting his daughter.

"Deb? Did your mother tell you I might have to move to Honolulu to get a promotion?"

"What? No, she didn't. When are you going, Dad?" She seemed to think he'd already made up his mind.

"Well, I haven't decided if I am going. What do you think?"

"Sure, you should go. But Dad, would you do one thing for me once you're moved there?"

"If I can." Ah. Now she'd cry and ask him to help convince her mother to let her come live with him."

"I want a grass skirt," Deb replied. "In seventh grade, we study different countries. It's neat. You're supposed to wear an outfit from the country you're studying. I could do Hawaii."

"Hawaii's one of our fifty states," he reminded her.

"Phooey. I forgot." Her voice drooped then she rallied. "Okay, I'll do Tahiti."

"That'll work," Jake said. "So you think I should take this offer and move to Hawaii?"

"Sure, and we'll come to visit. Got to run, Dad. We're having softball practice in ten minutes. Tim said he'd help me improve my pitching if I came a little early. Bye."

Tim? His little girl was playing softball with a boy? Jake felt abandoned. His daughter was growing

up before his eyes. And she didn't need him anymore, either.

On his way home from work Jake reflected on the day's events. He admitted he'd liked having Rhonda, his mother, and Deb come to him with their problems. In fact, he liked their needing him.

Then there was Carly. For a short time she'd seemed everything he wanted. That was before he discovered she was a consummate liar. Face it, Jake. You didn't know her at all so you won't miss her. You can't miss a stranger.

If that was true why was there a dull ache near his heart since they'd parted yesterday morning?

Maybe this job in Hawaii would help. He'd be with a whole new group of people in a new environment. And he'd be busy setting up a new practice.

There was no reason not to move, no one here who needed him, even wanted him to stay.

He drove home, disgruntled, irritated, and alone.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Jake's boss droned on about the new assignment in Hawaii.

"We'll have to find someone to replace you here. Is there anyone on your team you'd like to recommend?" Howard asked.

"I haven't said I was going yet." Irritated, Jake felt as if he were being pushed out the door.

"Sorry, Jake. Knowing you, I just assumed you'd want to go. It's not like you to turn down such an opportunity," the executive said then changed the subject. Minutes later they were deep in a discussion of healthcare matters.

Driving west on I-30 that evening, Jake muttered to the empty passenger seat beside him, "I might as well go." His boss was right. It was a golden opportunity. So why couldn't he work up any enthusiasm about the project? Jake forced himself to admit it just didn't mean much without someone to share it. Carly. Somehow, his reluctance to go involved her.

With care he examined his feelings for her and was surprised to find his conscience twinging over the abrupt way they'd parted.

In his mind's eye, he saw her again, standing in the sunlit kitchen, singing softly while she fixed their breakfast.

Moments later he'd attacked and her contented expression changed to one of pain and denial.

Jake admitted what he'd been trying to avoid the last few days. He still wanted her.

Moving on he also admitted he might have overreacted. Maybe he should give her the benefit of the doubt. If she claimed she'd tried to tell the truth he ought to believe her.

Finally he decided to give their relationship another chance. Having reached that decision he considered the job offer one last time and rejected it. "I won't take it. Nothing's forcing me to go."

* * *

While Jake mulled the job offer, Carly waited, trying to be patient. She contacted Rhonda, her friend and confidant.

As soon as Rhonda heard her voice she told Carly the news. "Jake's been asked to head a new healthcare team in his firm's Honolulu office."

"You don't think he'll take it, do you?" They hadn't been in touch since the day he stormed out of her apartment. She wouldn't figure in Jake's decision since they were no longer seeing each other.

"I've encouraged him to go to Honolulu but I don't believe he'll go without you."

"How do you feel about this move, Rhonda? Does it bother you to think of Jake thousands of miles away?"

"There was a time when I spent hours on the phone, asking Jake for advice, then that ugly business with Freddy forced me to grow up," Jake's ex-wife confided. "People need a certain amount of independence. I've even started giving Deb more say in matters that affect her. Jake may think of her as his baby but she's almost thirteen."

"How about his mother? Was she upset?" Carly remembered Jake commenting on how much his mother depended on him.

"Mrs. Malone took the news better than we expected," Rhonda said. "She may be bored with playing the hypochondriac. I wouldn't be surprised if she'd like to be more independent too. "Times change and so do people. We may all have leaned on Jake in the past but his mother, Deb and I need him less now. Of course that doesn't mean we don't love him."

Rhonda told Carly that Jake seemed disappointed she hadn't objected to his going. And Deb's casual acceptance of his news seemed to shock him almost as much as her playing softball with boys in the neighborhood.

Ending her call with Rhonda, Carly sighed. Jake seemed to like people needing him but he should face up to the facts, he needed people too. And he needed her. She hoped she lived to hear him say the words, "I love you. And I need you."

* * *

Jake sat in his condo staring at a program on TV that didn't interest him, eating a TV dinner that could've been made of cardboard since he didn't taste it. He felt on the verge of something.

Having made the decision to see Carly again, he was now experiencing second thoughts and cold feet. He didn't want to rush into anything he'd regret.

Jake picked up his cell phone, his fingers punching in a number he'd never forget.

His party answered. Talk fast. She may hang up.

"Can I come over? I'd like to see you, talk to you." He listened then responded.

"When? I can come right now if you're free." He smiled. "I'm on my way."

* * *

She drew a deep breath before she opened her door. Asking him to sit down, she took a seat across the room.

"Will you forgive me?" he asked.

"That depends," she answered.

"It was all my fault. The day we met I paid too much attention to the baggy shirt and jeans you were wearing and too little to the woman wearing them.

"The first time we had a real conversation, I realized you were capable and intelligent. It puzzled me that you'd insist on remaining where you are, not try to advance yourself."

"That should teach you not to judge a book by its cover." Carly responded in a stern voice. She paused, and when she spoke again, her tone was kinder. "It's my fault too. I let you assume I was what I appeared. I should've set you straight right away."

"Now that I know the truth, I'm quite impressed. How many businesses do you own, anyway?"

"Just three, the mobile grooming service, the obedience school and the school for groomers." she answered, not bothering to mention that the column she wrote on pets had grown into a book an agent hoped to sell to a New York publisher.

"Can we start over?"

"I don't know, Jake. I like you but we're so different." This time she wouldn't be easy.

"Maybe in some ways. On the other hand, we get along and enjoy each other's company."

"True."

"Also, I may not work with dogs but you know how fond I am of them, especially Napoleon."

Jake paused. "Your kisses, there's something about them. When we kiss, I hear a roaring in my ears."

He cut to the chase. "Damn it, Carly, I want you more than I've ever wanted a woman."

She wanted him with every ounce of her being. But to her wanting was just a part of loving.

Having tried to please others all her life, she now realized she deserved more, had needs like everyone else.

"That's it?" She'd hoped he'd confess he needed her, loved her.

Jake frowned but said no more.

"I'm sorry but it's not enough. Unless you can think of a more compelling reason we should be together, you'd better go." It hurt so much she bit her bottom lip, concentrated on containing the tears that threatened to fall.

"I see." Jake looked disappointed. "I'm not giving up. You should know that."

"All right."

"I have this feeling we could be very important to each other if we let it happen."

Her lips curved.

Seeing her smile, he seemed encouraged. "What do you say? Can we start over?"

Though she could see his heart in his eyes she held fast. He'd have to realize just what she meant to him. Unless he admitted he loved her, needed her in his life, it was hopeless. "I'm sorry but those just aren't the right reasons. You'd better go now, it's late." She walked him to the door.

Jake stepped outside. Carly closed the door before she could change her mind.

The evening hadn't ended the way she'd hoped. By now they should be together in her cosy bed, surrounded by the sweet fragrance of vanilla.

She managed to hold back the tears until Jake's car roared down the street, then, sinking to the floor she cried until she had no tears left.

Exhausted, she went to her room, lay on the bed, all the while wishing she hadn't sent him away. Her resolve weakening, she asked herself wasn't a flawed relationship with Jake better than no Jake at all?

It was a struggle to convince herself she'd made the right decision. She deserved more than he'd offered. But would he ever come back?

During the long, quiet night, Carly locked her dreams away, concluding life wasn't full of rainbows and happy endings. And finding the one special person you'd waited for, that just happened in romance novels. She'd not fool herself again.

Rhonda called Carly the next day. "Jake says he's decided not to move to Hawaii, but won't give a reason. He didn't say but I figured you two must be together again".

"No, we aren't. If he's turned down that job offer, it has nothing to do with me." Or did it? He'd told her he wasn't giving up before he left her apartment. That was too bad unless he changed.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

All it took was a chance remark made to her secretary, who Carly had never considered a busybody. The news that she'd broken up with someone who'd mattered spread through her company like wild fire through dry brush.

"Are you all right? You seem a little under the weather." Her secretary must've seen the dark circles under Carly's eyes, circles Carly had tried covering with makeup. "You're not coming down with the flu, I hope."

"No, just allergies. I sneezed all weekend. That's why my eyes are so red. I'll be better in a day or so." Wishing the woman would just go away, Carly pretended to study the monthly bank statement on her desk. One kind word and she'd start bawling again.

"Oh well, at least allergies aren't contagious," the secretary said, sympathetically. "I was going to ask if your boyfriend had the flu. It's so contagious, you have to be careful even in the summer."

"No, he's got other problems but not the flu." A trace of irony slipped into her words.

The woman left the room, closing the door behind her. Carly heard her a few minutes later, whispering into her telephone. What was she saying that she didn't want anyone to hear?

Creeping to her door, Carly eased it open in time to hear her secretary's parting words before she finished her call.

" . . . must have upset her terribly. She's like another person--."

Stepping from her office, Carly stationed herself in front of the woman's desk so she couldn't miss seeing her.

Her secretary looked up, paled. "Got to go. Bye." Then she managed to look her employer in the eye, asking, "did you need something?"

"No, I was just going out, thought I'd ask you the same thing. Do you need anything from the drugstore?"

"Ah . . . no, thanks." She seemed to be in a quandry. "Did you"

"Yes I heard, and I must say I'm disappointed. I never thought you gossiped. If you want to know what happened, I broke up with my boyfriend. Before you ask, let me say no, we won't get back together. Yes, I'm upset, and no, I don't need a shoulder to cry on. I'll be fine. Now why don't you get back to work? Okay?" She walked away, wishing people would just leave her alone.

Later, in an attempt to escape from her secretary's apologetic cocker spaniel expression, Carly strolled across the street to the dog obedience classes.

She walked in on Eric teaching a group of beginners. Carly noticed some of the dogs behaved better than their owners.

Once the class ended she'd planned to slip away unobserved but Eric must have noticed her since he called out while she was walking across the exercise field.

"Hey! Wait up!" With his long stride he quickly overtook her, walked beside her to the street.

Today his blond boyish looks seemed even more handsome but compared to Jake's rugged, masculine features Eric came in a poor second. Was Eric vain? She couldn't tell though it must be difficult, being so attractive, so flawless.

"Is it true?" His gaze fixed on her face.

"That depends on what you're talking about."

"The rumor that you're a free woman again."

"That depends on your source, I guess."

"Why don't you just tell me?" He persisted.

"You won't run all over, blabbing to everyone you meet?"

"Scout's honor," he replied, holding up one group of fingers after another.

In spite of her pain, she came close to smiling at his foolishness. "I take it you weren't a Boy Scout."

"No, my mommy was afraid I'd be eaten by a bear if I went to camp," he replied with a straight face, adding, "but I helped the neighbors' daughters sell Girl Scout cookies door-to-door."

"You must have been a handsome little boy."

"I guess." He shrugged. "Carly, what's happened shouldn't ruin your life."

"It hasn't," she said a little too quickly. "What ever give you that impression?"

"You never smile. I half-expect to see a little gray rain cloud floating over your head. Come out with me tonight. I'll have you laughing before you know it." His blue eyes sparkled.

"Thanks, but I'm not in the mood," she replied and walked away, wanting to be left alone.

The next day she did smile, entering her office. A bunch of wildflowers stuck in a vase with a miniature bear tied to the stem of the vase sat on her desk. Remembering Eric's remark about Boy Scouts and bears, she opened the attached card. "This little bear hopes you feel better soon!" No signature, though she knew who'd sent them.

Carly placed the flowers on the top of a filing cabinet out of the way and got to work. She wasn't attracted to handsome Eric and wouldn't encourage him to think she was.

The next few days, every time she left her office, Eric just happened to be passing. Once or twice he stopped and drew her into a brief conversation. Sometimes all she got was a smile and a wave when he passed her.

She'd begun to think Eric just felt sorry for her when he surprised her, asking for another date. It'd been awhile since they'd gone out to dinner. He hadn't called her since she'd suggested they could be friends.

According to Eric, he'd acquired two tickets to the community theatre and she could come if she wanted. If not, no big deal. She declined and stayed home, feeling sorry for herself, wishing Jake would call, a dull ache inside telling her that he wouldn't.

Eric asked her twice more before she agreed to go out with him. That day they stood chatting outside the obedience school building. Carly sensed someone watching them.

Turning around, she found Phyllis, a new trainer. Her pretty face was marred by a scowl.

Carly spoke to the girl but she turned away without responding. Had Phyllis been dating Eric? Carly shook her head in dismay.

As handsome as Eric was, he must leave broken hearts everywhere he went. Foolish girls probably threw themselves at his feet. Thank goodness she was immune. Eric was fun but she was still in love with a man who made the Erics of the world look like silly adolescents.

That night Eric and she went to a new movie. During the main feature Carly caught herself scanning the audience, searching for Jake. Every man with light hair attracted her attention. Not one was Jake.

In a restaurant following the theatre Carly sat in a booth while Eric paid for their desserts at the counter. He returned to the booth, carrying two ridiculously large sundaes.

"I'll never eat all of this," she complained.

"You better," he laughed, adding, "if you don't want to walk home."

She found herself laughing along with him then stopped, feeling somehow disloyal to Jake.

"Let yourself enjoy life, Carly. You don't think Jake is sitting home alone, do you?"

"I don't know what you mean," she replied, digging into the mountain of ice cream to avoid further conversation.

The restaurant door opened and a tall man walked in with a redhead. Carly stared at the couple.

From where she was sitting, it looked just like Jake laughing with a woman she didn't know.

Carly turned her head so he wouldn't see her face when he and his date walked by, taking a booth in a corner.

She couldn't stand seeing Jake with another woman. "Eric, would you take me home? I've got a rotten headache."

"No, I won't." He kept eating his ice cream.

"Please?" Tears blurred her vision. She didn't want Eric to see her crying.

"All right." He got to his feet, waited for her to slide out of the booth seat. "Come along," he ordered, taking her arm, leading her across the room.

Eric steered her toward Jake's booth. "The door's the other way," she muttered through clenched teeth.

Eric kept his grip on her arm. Short of screaming and dragging her feet, she had no choice. They approached the booth she'd wanted to avoid.

The man broke off his conversation with his date long enough to look over and ask, "yes, can I help you?"

Carly wanted to laugh out loud. It wasn't Jake. Seen up close, this sandy-haired man was older and had a double chin. Relief filled her.

"Sorry, we thought you were someone else," she managed to say before Eric turned her around and headed for the door.

"That was cruel. Suppose it'd been Jake."

"Then you would've said 'hello, how are you' and we would've kept walking." Eric smiled. "He's gone, Carly, but I'm here and I'm just what you need right now."

She wondered about his odd remark while Eric opened her car door. Sliding into the driver's seat and turning on the ignition, he drove out of the parking lot.

"This's not the way to my house."

"No, it's too early to take you home so I thought we'd go to my place for awhile."

"Oh." Limp with shock over what had happened in the restaurant, she sank back into her seat. Before she knew it Eric parked his car in the driveway of a lakefront mansion.

"You live here?"

"Why not?" Eric led her up the walk, unlocked the door and stood back so she could enter. From the quiet that met them no one was home.

"My parents are in Europe so we have the place to ourselves. Want to play some pool?"

"I've never played. Why not?"

Rumors circulated at work about the dashing Eric and his love-them-and-leave-them treatment of her younger employees. Carly felt uneasy, being alone with him.

On guard, she kept waiting for him to make a pass. He didn't, in fact he didn't seem very interested in her now.

She told herself that was fine since she wasn't interested in him, then she began to wonder why he didn't find her attractive.

What was wrong with her? Her emotions were muddled, grief caused by Jake's not caring enough mingled with a lack of self-confidence.

Before they left Eric's house, Carly learned the basics of pool. She wondered if he'd try to kiss her when he took her back to her apartment and if she should let him.

Driving her home, he shook her hand at her door and drove away. Carly was annoyed.

She dated him twice more. By this time she was becoming curious. How would it feel now, kissing Eric? Jake's kiss had stirred her, made her yearn for more.

At last Eric kissed her good night. It was a pleasant kiss but nothing more, and there were no bells, no roaring sensation in her ears.

She was relieved to discover Eric's touch still didn't move her. Jake was the only one who had that effect on her. If he'd just admit he loved her and needed her in his life.

The next time Eric asked her out, she turned him down.

"What's wrong?" He scowled like he was unaccustomed to being rejected by any woman.

"Nothing, except I'm in love with another man. You're a nice guy but you're wasting your time with me."

"You'll change your mind," Eric replied, smugly.

"Hasn't anyone ever said no to you?"

Her rejection finally registered and his handsome features became distorted, ugly. "You'll be sorry," he muttered and stalked away.

At first, Carly wasn't concerned. Eric was behaving like a peevish child, but he'd soon find someone else and forget all about her.

* * *

A couple of days later one of the groomers approached Carly at work. She realized she might have misjudged Eric.

"Carly, can I see you a minute?" A groomer asked.

"Sure, come on in my office." She led the way.

The groomer followed her, closing the office door.

That was odd in itself since her office door was almost always kept open. "What's wrong? Did someone die?" The girl's grim expression disturbed her.

"I've just heard an ugly story and came right to you."

"Go on," Carly prompted her employee while easing into her desk chair.

"I had three grooming appointments scheduled this morning," the girl began.

Carly nodded.

"On my second appointment the lady met me at the door. At first she just cancelled today's appointment. When I reached into my pocket, offered to re-schedule, she muttered she didn't care to use our service anymore. This was a customer we've had for three years so I was taken back."

"Did she give a reason?" A ripple of uneasiness began to spread through Carly.

"She didn't want to say. I persisted until she told me there's a ugly rumor circulating at her beauty salon that one of our people mistreated a dog she was grooming. My customer told me she didn't think it was me, but she couldn't take a chance with their family pet, would find another company."

"I've never heard such a thing." Carly was shocked. "Give me your customer's name and phone number." The groomer wrote the information on a piece of paper.

Eric's angry face came to mind. The day she refused him more dates he'd warned her that she'd be sorry. She'd thought he was just being a sore loser. Surely he wouldn't try to hurt her business just because she wouldn't go out with him. Or would he?

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Dialing the telephone number the groomer gave her, Carly connected with a disgruntled customer. After a little gentle prodding, the lady told Carly she'd heard the ugly rumor at her beauty salon. It'd been a younger woman who the customer had never seen before.

Why would anyone want to hurt her business? Carly's first reaction was to confront Eric but without proof he was responsible she'd be treading on dangerous ground. Better to ignore the story, hope it didn't happen again.

That week three other regular customers dropped the grooming service. That included the business's

first customer. Carly really hated to lose her.

No one had a clue who was spreading the rumor. In an attempt to do some damage control, she gathered her groomers together for a meeting.

"I think you'll all agree, it sounds like one person's doing this," she told the group composed mainly of young women, though there were two senior citizens who worked as groomers. "Otherwise the stories wouldn't be so similar.

"Keep your eyes and ears open, and if another customer repeats this rumor tell her we're going to track down the person who's responsible.

I intend to see that person prosecuted for malicious slander." Carly dismissed the meeting.

This couldn't go on. They had a fairly large base of regulars, but in the last two days four more people had dropped their grooming service.

Each customer told her the same thing. She'd heard the rumor at the beauty salon.

The phone on her desk rang and Carly braced herself for more bad news. She relaxed, hearing Rhonda's voice.

"What's going on? Have you heard from Jake?"

"I've got enough problems right now without worrying about him."

"That doesn't sound good. Tell me about it?"

She told her friend what'd been happening.

Rhonda agreed Carly must find the source of the rumors so she could stop them. "I won't keep you. Please call me as soon as you find out anything."

The customers who'd dropped her service all had one thing in common. They were all clients of the same beauty salon.

Carly made an appointment with a hairdresser at the salon. She was long overdue for a trim. Maybe she'd get a shorter style for a change.

Seated in the hairdresser's chair she chatted with the lady, determined to discover the identity of the person slandering her company.

Looking for clues, Carly studied the other customers getting their hair done. "Guess you have a lot of regulars?"

"Yes. One lady's been coming here for twenty-seven years."

"Wow, that's a year longer than I've been living," she exclaimed. An idea occurred and she grabbed it. "Are most of your customers older women?"

"They're all ages though we do have more mature ladies. That's why I asked if you were sure you wanted a haircut. Most women your age keep it long."

"Do you have many clients with long hair?" With a sigh Carly watched another lock of her hair falling on the floor.

"Not as regulars though a younger woman with waist length hair came in the other day. I have a horrible time, remembering people's names. Hers was easy to remember since it's the same as my older sister's."

"Oh, what's her name?"

"Phyllis. It's a pretty name but not popular right now," the pleasant middle-aged woman commented.

"You're right. I only know one woman with that name and that's Phyllis Duncan, a trainer at my business."

"Why, that's the woman." The hairdresser nodded. "The world seems to be getting smaller by the minute. About half of the people I meet turn out to be friends of friends, or they're related to someone I know."

All of a sudden Carly had a hunch about Phyllis Duncan. The last time she'd seen the girl was the day she chatted with Eric following his obedience training class. She still remembered seeing a scowl on Phyllis's face.

Shorn of her mane of hair, Carly blinked into the hairdresser's mirror. "It sure is short."

"This style works well for you," commented the hairdresser. "Just wait until I use the curling iron on it. You'll look like a different person." Realizing what she'd just said, the lady tried backtracking. "I don't mean you weren't attractive before, but this's more fashionable. And it shows your pretty ears."

Carly stared in the mirror. It'd been years since she paid attention to her ears other than washing behind them at bathtime.

"If I were you, I'd get my ears pierced then buy a pair of gold loop earrings."

"One thing at a time." Carly laughed, studying her head from various angles in the hairdresser's mirror. "My neck feels cold. Is there a draft?"

"No, just the air conditioning. You'll get used to it."

Carly gave the woman a generous tip, not just for the stylish haircut, but also for the tidbit of information that might prove useful.

With care she made her plans. First she'd talk to Phyllis. Perhaps it'd help if she told the girl she didn't want Eric.

* * *

Jake struggled to adjust to life without Carly. He still thought of her often and had no desire to be with other women.

Recovering from the initial shock, his boss made no bones about being pleased Jake wasn't leaving.

The executive walked around the office with a large smile on his face. To show his gratitude he bestowed even more clients on his favorite manager.

Jake didn't complain since work kept his mind occupied, his days busy from start to finish. But during the nights he'd awake and remember a certain cozy room, soft bed linen and the fragrance of vanilla. And Carly. Would he ever forget her?

He was about to retire for the evening when the phone rang. Probably another sales call. Did those people ever sleep?

Jake let the answering machine pick up the call.

He was on his way upstairs when Rhonda's voice surprised him. He dashed for the phone, glad to hear a friendly voice.

"Yeah? Is Deb all right?" He'd talked to his daughter the other day but lately Deb had been too busy to come for a visit.

"Our pride and joy's fine," Rhonda said. "I'm deeply concerned about Carly."

"Hold on, Rhonda. I'm not sure this's a good idea, your discussing Carly's problems with me. She's made it clear she doesn't want to see me." There must be something he could do to change her mind.

"She's got trouble, big trouble," Rhonda informed him, "and I thought you might have some ideas how we can help."

"Tell me about it." Jake sat on the step, listening while his ex-wife explained what had happened.

"These nasty rumors just started out of the blue?" he asked as soon as Rhonda finished.

"I guess. This's the first I've heard of it."

"Has she been seeing anyone?"

"Well, yeah, Eric, a guy who works for her. She described him as drop-dead gorgeous."

"Eric? I may have seen him with Carly once." Jake remembered seeing Carly walk out of a mall jewelry store with a good looking man the day Jake took Deb shopping for Rhonda's birthday. He'd never learned why Carly was there that day.

Not wanting to appear jealous, he didn't mention the incident to Rhonda, but he hadn't liked Eric's looks. There was something smug about the man. And it'd rankled him, seeing Eric's arm around Carly.

"I suppose she's still dating this Eric?"

"No, she's not. Carly told me she'd stopped seeing him. You don't suppose he's involved?"

"Probably not but do me a favor. Get his last name and home address if you can."

"I'll try. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. Just call me as soon as you have the information."

* * *

The following morning Rhonda called back while he was dressing for work. "I found out his name's Eric Masters."

"Good girl. Do I dare ask how--"

"Reading all of those detective novels finally paid off," Rhonda responded, with a trace of a smile in her voice. "All I had to do was call the obedience school office, pretending to be a local bookstore."

"As soon as I mentioned the name Eric, the nice lady on the switchboard knew who I wanted."

"The woman volunteered his name, Eric Masters. Since that was his place of business I asked her to give me his home address so I could send him a letter about some books he'd asked us to locate." Rhonda sounded quite pleased with herself.

"Where does he live?"

She read off the address.

"Good girl. Forget this conversation. I'll take it from here," Jake requested. Disconnecting, he dialed another number.

"Arlington Police Department," a crisp voice announced.

"Put me through to Detective Sweeney, please." Seconds later Jake was explaining the problem to his old fraternity chum, Wally Sweeney. The detective took down Eric's name and address, promising to check on the man.

Jake yawned. Time to go to bed. Maybe tomorrow Sweeney would find something on Eric. If he was the reason for Carly's grief, he'd live to regret it.

* * *

Next day Jake came back from a meeting to find a message in his voice mail. His friend Sweeney at Arlington Police Department requested him to call APD right away. Ah. Maybe his instincts had been right.

"I ran a check on this Eric and he's got a record," Sweeney told him. "He's served time for aggravated assault and passing bad checks. Also, a woman in Arkansas took him to court, claiming he'd been stalking her."

"That charge was dismissed after the woman moved to another state and couldn't be contacted. Just goes to prove looks can be deceiving. Eric's not the All American boy he appears in his mug shots."

"Thanks, Sweeney. I had a hunch he was a bad one." Jake hung up the phone. Better warn Carly. Based on the man's criminal record, it was possible Eric was behind the malicious rumors. And if she'd stopped seeing him, this might be his way of getting even.

She didn't answer when he called so Jake left a message that he needed to talk to her about her

company's problems.

Two hours later she returned his call. "You found out something?"

It was difficult, discussing her company's troubles when he really wanted to say how much he'd missed her.

"If Eric's behind this he must have an accomplice," Carly said. "All of the customers who've dropped our services mentioned hearing the rumor at the same beauty salon."

"That might make it easier for us to track down the trouble makers." This wasn't something for her to handle alone.

"Make it easier for us?" She sounded incredulous. "You mean you're willing to help me?"

"If you'll let me," he replied. He'd do anything for her, didn't she know that by now?

"Thanks, I appreciate it. If you're going to get involved, I should tell you I've an idea who the woman is."

"Great. What's her name?"

Carly told him. "I'm going to see her tomorrow."

"Do you want me to be there when you do?"

"Thanks, but that's not necessary."

Jake told her about his conversation with his friend, the police detective. "This Eric sounds like a tough character, Carly. Please don't confront him alone."

"I'll remember what you've told me about him," she replied.

Her words bothered Jake but he couldn't tell her what to do. "Promise me one thing."

"If I can."

"Be careful. You don't know what he is."

Not making any promises, Carly thanked him and disconnected leaving him with a tight knot in his stomach. If anything happened to her Jake drew a deep breath.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Carly happened to look up the exact moment Phyllis walked by her office door at closing time next evening. Dropping a report she'd been reviewing and grabbing her shoulder bag, she followed her employee, approaching Phyllis as she unlocked her car in the parking lot.

"Do you have a minute?"

At the sound of her voice Phyllis jumped, dropping her car keys on the pavement. She knelt to retrieve them. Getting to her feet, she replied. "Ah, . . . not really."

"I just wanted you to know that as far as I'm concerned, the field's all yours regarding Eric." That should clear the air. The girl probably thought her boss was crazy about Eric.

"In fact, I have no intention of dating him again."

Phyllis smirked. "I can't imagine why you're telling me this."

"You know why I'm telling you. It's obvious you care for Eric. That's your business, not mine. You see, I'm in love with another man, so I have no interest in Eric."

Phyllis hung her head, her shoulders slumped then she straightened, meeting Carly's gaze. "The way Eric tells it, you're the best. At least he felt like that when the two of you were dating. Now all he talks about is your dumping him."

"You may not know this but Eric's not always charming. He can have a nasty temper. I've never seen anyone get so angry."

"Angry enough to try and cause trouble for me?"

"I don't understand." Phyllis looked away.

"Sure you do." It was difficult but Carly managed to produce an understanding smile. She felt anything but understanding towards the girl.

"Don't let him suck you into his schemes, Phyllis. You're a pretty, intelligent girl. You don't need a man like Eric."

"Schemes?" Phyllis raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"I know he told you to spread rumors about my company, malicious rumors. If you don't stop I'll take legal action." Carly pulled her own car keys out of her shoulder bag. "If you don't want to be charged along with Eric, stop what you're doing before it's too late."

Staring at her employer, Phyllis hesitated as if she were trying to make up her mind about something. "I'm not admitting anything but if I were guilty I'd say thanks for the advice." She sent Carly a wobbly smile.

"Good. Don't let him drag you down with him. Eric already has a criminal record, but you don't." Carly turned on her heel and walked away. Maybe what she'd told Phyllis would persuade the girl to stay clear of Eric.

That night Carly had trouble sleeping. Not one to enjoy conflict, the confrontation with Phyllis must have upset her more than she'd realized.

She was dozing when a neighbor's dog's shrill, incessant bark jolted her awake after midnight. A short time later an outside door opened in a neighboring house and an irritated masculine voice yelled at the canine. The door slammed and silence returned so the dog must have been taken inside.

The dog's barking had masked another sound. A tapping sound came to her ears.

Carly knew better than to let her imagination run away with her. Maybe she shouldn't have started that suspense novel before going to sleep.

By the dim glow of the night light on the wall, she could see her nightstand and cell phone. Grabbing the phone, she stuck it under her pillow. Somehow that made her feel safer.

What she really needed was Jake. He'd cradled her in his arms the night he shared her bed. Even asleep, his presence made her feel secure. Well, he wasn't there so she'd better stop wishing he was.

By now she was wide awake. And the tapping persisted. Had she left the window open over the kitchen sink?

Hating to leave the relative security of her bed, she threw back the covers, put on her robe and slippers and eased open the door to the hall.

Carly paused, trying to find a logical explanation for the sound. Midnight, a neighbor's large black cat, prowled at night. If her apartment weren't on the fourth floor, she'd suspect the cat. One of her neighbors on the first floor had caught the feline peeping through his window.

Bracing herself, she flipped the switch in the hall. Nothing happened. "Oh, great. All I need is a burned out light bulb. The janitor will have to bring his ladder and replace it."

In the kitchen she found the source of the noise. As she'd suspected, she'd left the window half-open over the sink and a night breeze was stirring the venetian blind, causing the blind cord to tap against the window frame. Carly promptly closed and locked the window.

While she was up she'd have a cup of warm milk. She took the milk carton from the refrigerator and poured milk into a small pan.

The chocolate chip cookies she'd baked yesterday appeared most appealing in a glass jar on the counter. Selecting one, she nibbled on it while the milk heated, then poured the milk into a Happy Face mug from the cupboard.

Sipping the milk, she almost burned her tongue. Too hot. She set the mug on the counter to let the milk cool while she finished the cookie.

The next instant her flesh prickled. Carly's senses vibrated a warning. Trying to act like nothing was wrong, she picked up the mug of hot milk then slowly turned around.

Eric stepped from behind the open pantry door. Since she'd last seen him he'd undergone a

metamorphosis.

Tonight all traces of his pleasant, handsome persona were missing. The man standing before her in the kitchen could have been a different person.

A pale figure dressed all in black, he leered at her.

Acting on instinct, Carly threw the hot milk in Eric's face. While he yelped with pain and wiped at his eyes, she ran for her life. The hot milk slowed him down a few precious seconds, time enough for her to gain the safety of her bedroom, slam the door and lock it.

For once she was glad to be the resident of an older building. Her apartment still retained the mansion's original heavy doors.

Not far behind her Eric yelled and pounded on the door.

Carly dove across her bed, reached under her pillow for the cell phone and hit 911.

"Sorry," the maddeningly calm recording announced. "All lines are busy right now. Please call again in a few minutes."

Great, now what was she supposed to do? Wait until the lunatic pounding on her door got into the room and killed her?

The next party she called answered on the first ring. "Jake? It's me. I need you. Hurry!"

"What? . . . Carly?" His words were slurred, heavy with sleep. But the urgency in her tone must have shocked him awake. His voice became alert. "Hold on. I'm on my way."

Eric threw himself against the door again and again, each time the heavy wood creaked and groaned in protest. To her immense relief, the door held.

Without warning the noise stopped. Carly hoped he'd given up and left.

Moments later a screeching noise in the hall informed her Eric was still there. What was he up to? It sounded like he was moving furniture.

This was no time to be rearranging her furniture. If she hadn't feared for her life, she would've laughed out loud. Don't get hysterical. Keep calm.

A heavy object shook her bedroom door. Good Lord! He was using one of her armchairs as a battering ram.

Her heart pounding, Carly searched for a weapon she could use to defend herself. She'd never felt the need for a gun but now she wished she had one.

Scanning the room, she found nothing more deadly than a framed picture of her parents and a candle-holder. Well, if she didn't have a weapon her only other option was to get out of there before Eric gained access to the room.

In her search for possible escape routes, she studied the bedroom windows. There was a solitary high, hexagonal stained-glass window that didn't open on one wall of the bedroom. She'd always admired

the window. It was most decorative and totally useless.

A pair of larger windows were behind her bed, hidden by drapes. Though it was too dark to see, Carly envisioned the view by daylight, the brick courtyard three stories below.

Eric's rage increased. Just inches away, he howled like a wild beast and scratched on the bedroom door with his fingernails.

Trembling, Carly had a pretty good idea what he'd do if he got into the room.

She pushed and shoved, moving her antique brass bed away from the windows a few inches, providing her enough space to squeeze between the headboard and wall.

Opening the drapes, she tugged on each window with all her strength. Neither one would open, thanks to a long ago tenant who'd painted over them to block the view of the courtyard.

Carly struggled to keep calm. If she lost her composure she was finished. Crawling from behind the bed, she hurried to her desk and dug through the drawers until she located a screwdriver she'd borrowed from her parents' home then forgotten to return. With the screwdriver she scraped at layers of paint coated around one window's lock.

Eric called to her through the door. "Carly? Carly? Come out and we'll play, Carly."

His voice was a high-pitched whine, like a little boy wanting his own way. "You better play with me or I'll tell my Mommy you're a bad girl," he ordered, kicking the door.

The door groaned as he began ramming it again.

Moments before the door finally gave way the window Carly was working on creaked then slid up a few inches. Slipping through the opening, she stood on the narrow ledge outside and clutched the window sill.

Eric stumbled into the room. He didn't notice the windows behind her bed right away. She'd closed the drapes.

She could hear him muttering, knocking things over in his rage to find her. Then seconds of quiet.

All of a sudden the drapes were yanked back and Eric's face appeared at the window, his features were twisted and ugly.

A scream died in Carly's throat. She drew back, almost losing her footing.

"What you doing, Carly? Don't want to play? Bad girl, bad girl." The oddly childish voice combined with his angry expression made his words all the more hideous. He cursed, aloud, struggling to raise the window higher.

Below them a car stopped at the curb. Praying it was Jake, Carly called out a warning. "Up here. It's Eric, be careful." She waited, holding onto the ledge, afraid to move her feet for fear she'd fall.

Jake took the stairs to her floor two at a time. Her apartment door was locked but he threw himself against it, the second time the door opened.

Seeing the armchair in the hall, he approached her bedroom. and her battered, broken door.

"Carly?" Dear God! Let her be all right. He ran into the room. She was nowhere in sight. A large figure in black stood behind her bed.

Eric leaned out the window, grabbing for her, a distorted grin pasted on his face.

Jake lunged at Eric. "You bastard, I'll kill you if you've hurt her." Grabbing Eric, Jake wrestled with him, trying to get him under control.

A police siren sounded down the street, then two patrol cars parked at the curb in front of the building.

"Up here," she called. "Fourth floor."

One policeman pointed his patrol car's light on her. "Hold on, Miss. We'll be there in a minute."

Both officers disappeared inside her building.

Jake wrestled with Carly's assailant, his fist slammed against the other man's jaw and he crumbled to the floor.

Putting all of his might against the window frame, Jake pushed it higher.

Uttering a sound between a sob and a laugh, Carly gratefully seized Jake's hand, letting him help her into the room. As soon as she was inside again she broke down, clinging to Jake.

The policemen burst into the room, guns drawn. Seeing Carly in Jake's arms, the officers roused Eric who lay unconscious on the floor, cuffed him and led him away.

Before leaving, one officer addressed Jake. "You'll both need to come downtown for a few minutes."

Jake nodded.

"Thank God you got here. He would've killed me."

"I'm glad you called me."

"Jake, you saved my life." She clung to him.

"I wouldn't have much of a life without you." He kissed her tear-drenched face. "It's all right now. And things will look a heck of a lot better in the morning."

At police headquarters they both gave statements and Carly pressed charges against Eric, then Jake took her home.

He moved the damaged chair Eric had used to break into the bedroom and picked up some of the debris.

"That's enough for now. We'll finish cleaning up in the morning. It's time you got some rest."

"Stay with me." She held on to him.

"I promise I won't leave. Now, let's get you to bed." Jake helped Carly undress and into a nightshirt, pulling back the bed covers and tucking her in bed.

Removing his shoes, he lay down on the bed, his arms around Carly. A little while later, fatigue took its toll and her eyes closed, her breath came slower and more regular.

Jake had no intention of sleeping, not that night, after her close call with death. On guard, he stayed awake until dawn, watching over her.

Whenever Carly stirred Jake murmured words of comfort until she dozed again. And while she slept he murmured a silent prayer of gratitude he'd arrived in time.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Jake awoke to find himself lying on Carly's twin bed, a light blanket tucked around him. Rolling over, he reached for her but was disappointed to find himself alone.

The fragrance of perking coffee wafting into the room gave him a clue where she was. Stretching, he sat on the side of the bed, running his fingers through his tousled hair.

With a heightened sense of relief he reviewed the events of the previous night. Carly had woke him from a deep slumber, the urgency in her voice jolting him awake in an instant, then he'd driven to her place at high speed.

If it'd been daylight, chances were good an Arlington patrol car would have stopped him for speeding. At that hour of the night, he passed few cars.

At least she didn't have to worry about Eric anymore. His past criminal record coupled with the attempt on her life ought to keep him incarcerated for years.

Entering Carly's bathroom, Jake helped himself to some of her mint-flavored toothpaste and rinsed his mouth, combed his hair. He gazed into the mirror, rubbing the stubble on his face. He craved a shower and shave. That could wait until he got home.

Having done all he could to make himself more presentable, he walked down the hall.

He found her on the sofa, tears running down her face.

"Hey. Hey, what's the matter?"

Carly glanced in his direction then cried harder.

"Okay, I know I look like the devil, but give me a chance, lady. I'm more presentable, cleaned up." He kidded her, trying to cheer her out of her doldrums.

"Jake, it just hit me how close I came to dying last night."

He'd half-expected this, probably a delayed reaction to that horrible experience the previous night.

Sitting beside Carly, he slid a protective arm around her shoulders. "That's over, baby, you're safe now. And old Eric is in jail, will be for a long time."

"I know, I know." She sniffed then extracted a handkerchief from her robe pocket, dabbing at her eyes. "I was okay until I started remembering last night. Eric was so angry, if he'd had a weapon he would've killed us both."

"Fortunately, he didn't. And now he's in jail where he belongs and we're here together." While reassuring Carly, Jake couldn't help but wonder what she wanted. Would she prefer he went home right now?

"Thank God." Without warning, she pulled his head down to hers and kissed him hard on the mouth.

Automatically, his heart beat faster, his arms tightened around her. "Be careful. My nerves are on edge right now so don't send out false signals," he warned. "I might misunderstand, get the impression you want to make love while you're just giving me a hug for old times sake."

"Men can be so damn thick-headed," she muttered. Temper flashed in her eyes. "All right, I'll spell it out. I'm going back to bed and if you want you can join me, unless you'd rather go home." Rising from the sofa, Carly walked away.

"Well, if you put it that way." Jake swooped her off her feet in one easy motion and carried her down the hall. He could've cheered. She wanted him back in her life.

Pushing her broken, battered bedroom door aside, Jake carried Carly into her bedroom and playfully dumped her on the bed. "I'll take the \$2.50 Trail Hands' Special, ma'am," he drawled.

Carly blinked but didn't miss a beat. With a happy grin, she replied, "Cowboy, this one's on me." Pulling him down beside her, she removed his undershirt then started working on his belt buckle.

"Whoa. Hold on, little lady. Us Texas trail hands take off our own britches." He looked down at her flushed face and her now laughing eyes. Gentling his voice, he asked, "Are you sure, Carly?"

"I love you, Jake Malone." Her scrapped knuckles caressed his hair, she purred in contentment when he kissed her.

"And I love you, Carly." That was the first time he'd said the words, though he'd loved her for awhile. Before that morning something deep inside held him back.

This time he went slower, watching her face while they caressed each other. Carly was like no other woman in the world, and she'd just admitted she loved him.

The telephone rang. "Damn." Annoyed at this intrusion he glanced around, couldn't find the lousy phone.

"I know where it is," she said, laughing. Carly slipped out of his arms and disappeared from sight.

Jake heard her talking to someone but where the heck did she go? Following the sound of her voice, he climbed out of bed, he knelt and raised her bed's dust ruffle. "Room for one more?" Lying down, he rolled under the bed.

"You're insane," she giggled, hugging him. "What? Oh, not you, Rhonda. I was talking to Jake." She stopped to kiss him. "What, Rhonda? No, we're both fine."

He started kissing her, first on her mouth, then slowly worked his way down her body. By the time he reached her breasts, Carly clung to him.

With a gasp she spoke into the phone. "Rhonda, I'll call you later."

Jake took the phone. "Much later," he added and turned off the phone. He sneezed. "There's too much dust down here, come back to bed." He crawled out followed by Carly.

Back in bed, he asked, "Where were we?"

"Does it matter?" She pulled the covers over them both and snuggled close to him.

"Hell, no. As long as we're together."

They made love leisurely, taking breaks for a little food, coffee and calls of nature.

The phone rang again while they were in the shower. "This time we let it ring," he said, not about to be interrupted again.

"Fine with me." She continued what she was doing until he groaned.

Kicking the shower door open, Jake scooped her up, carried her to the bed. Again they made love, mindless of anything but each other.

Later they dressed and drove to his place so he could shave and get some fresh clothes.

"Wouldn't you like to move in with me?" He asked, casually, but his heart was in his eyes when she turned to gaze at him.

"No, but thanks," she replied, thoughtfully, and gently touched his face.

"I just thought" What had he thought, anyway? He wanted her with him all the time. Why shouldn't they live together if she felt the same way.

"I guess I ought to go home," she announced, an hour later while she sat on his sofa, his head in her lap.

"All right." His mind made up at last, Jake stood and pulled her to her feet. "This condo's nice but

we could get a bigger place if you like."

"What are you saying, Jake?"

"Well, I thought you might like to get married," he offered and enjoyed seeing a radiant smile spread over her face.

* * *

A few days later Carly hummed under her breath while writing thank you notes. The wedding gifts just kept coming. She'd taken time off from work to finish the last minute preparations for the ceremony. With two days to go, she believed everything was under control.

Having a little time alone, she enjoyed the sensation of being engaged. Her more traditional mother was still recovering from the shock they'd marry so soon.

Obviously pleased by their announcement, Gran had taken her aside to ask if Carly had resolved all of her problems with Jake. Carly didn't answer, just smiled and hugged her.

Without warning a cloud of foreboding appeared, spoiling her previously blissful state of mind. This must be the pre-marital jitters she'd read about.

Why should she feel anxious? Carly reviewed the wedding preparations once more. She could relax. Everything was in order.

Her mother had arranged for them to use the chapel at their family's church when another wedding was cancelled. Also their own pastor was available, the e-mail wedding invitations had been sent. They worked as well as fancy engraved ones which took weeks to get. And, last but not least, she'd borrowed her grandmother's own wedding gown.

With Granny's blessing Carly had opened the box sealed for decades, then held her breath, trying on the lovely, old-fashioned gown of lace and satin.

She'd burst out laughing, delighted to find the dress a perfect fit. It had been dry-cleaned and now hung on her closet door, waiting.

No, it was more than pre-wedding jitters. She'd tucked away her old dream. Now it reappeared to haunt her.

Jake had told her he loved her, yet he'd never admitted to needing her. In her heart she believed he did. Why wouldn't he admit it?

It wasn't too late to call things off, but was that what she wanted? Wasn't Jake the man for her?

All her life she'd tried to be what others wanted. Carly admitted she liked having people need her. Had she been selling herself short by doing that? How about her own feelings, her own needs?

The phone rang. George's wife was in tears again.

"Carly? I don't know what to do. The twins are driving me crazy. Do you think you could come over and let me escape for a couple of hours? I know you're off today so you probably have time." She waited

expectantly.

In the past Carly would've jumped to help her brother's wife who kept having children, more than she could manage. The woman would've been better off with one or two children, yet she'd recently had her fourth baby.

Drawing a deep breath, Carly did the unthinkable and refused. "Any other time I'd have been glad to help, but I can't right now. You may recall I'm getting married in two days. Why don't you wait until George comes home and get him to spell you with the kids?"

"Well if that's the way you feel I'm sorry to have bothered you." Her sister-in-law hung up.

Carly felt a little ashamed but more proud of herself for standing up to George's wife who'd presumed too much, taken her for granted for years.

Jake, the bridegroom, arrived an hour later. He was off until after their brief honeymoon, just a weekend. According to Jake, his group at work was too busy for him to miss time now.

"Dinner ready?" He whiffed the air then walked through to her kitchen.

She heard him checking the ovens, raising pan lids. Was he looking for his dinner?

He reappeared. "There's nothing to eat here."

"I thought we'd go out," she answered.

He gazed at her from the doorway. "Why don't you fix something? You've been off all day. I thought you'd have supper waiting." His lips set in a firm line, a clear sign he was displeased.

"You may've forgotten, but I'm getting married in a couple of days and there were some things I needed to do."

"Fine. I'll help you." He walked over to her, bent to kiss her cheek. His arms tightened around her, she sat stiff in her chair, not responding.

"What's the matter? Have I said something to upset you?"

"It's not what you've said, Jake. It's what you haven't said. I've been thinking and there's something I need to know before the wedding."

"What is it?" He wrinkled his brow.

"You love me, don't you?"

"You know I do."

"But do you need me, Jake?"

"Now what's this all about, anyway? What do you want?"

"For years, I've dreamed of a man who'd love me and need me to fill his life," Carly explained. "You say you love me, but you won't admit you need me. To my mind needing is another way of saying 'I love you.'"

"Carly, isn't it enough that I love you? This needing stuff, I don't know." Jake frowned. "I've always been able to take care of myself. People need me, not the other way around."

She slipped off her engagement ring, put it in his hand. "I'm sorry to do this so close to the wedding, but I deserve more. It's important that the man I marry needs me. After all, we intend to spend the rest of our life together."

"You can't be serious. We're so good together." Jake seemed to be making an effort to stay calm. "Carly, look in my eyes and tell me you don't want me." He grabbed her, kissed her.

It took all of her resolve but she didn't give in, though she was sorely tempted to return his kiss, to mark up her worries to nerves.

Removing his hands from her shoulders, she sighed deeply. "I'll want you every day of my life but the man I marry must need me as much as I need him." She turned away and wiped her eyes, now filling with tears.

"You're just nervous about the wedding. I admit we're doing this in a hurry." Jake's words were soothing yet there was an edge to his tone, as if he were making a real effort to keep his composure. "If you need more time to get ready, we could postpone the--."

"No," she interrupted him. "I'm cancelling everything, Jake. Now please get out of here." She opened the door.

"Okay. If that's the way you want it." Clearly puzzled and hurt by this sudden change in the woman he'd intended to marry, Jake marched through the open doorway. In the corridor, he turned, sending her a last hard look. "Lady, you sure know how to cut to the quick."

Once he'd gone, Carly sat on the sofa, a shimmer of tears blurring her vision. She took a deep, shaky breath. If she'd done the right thing, why did it hurt so damn much?

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Jake almost hit a silver Jaguar pulling through the open gates to his neighborhood.

The Jag's driver hit his horn and glared.

"Sorry," Jake muttered and let the other car pass before he drove into the gated community.

In front of his condo he caught a glimpse of a neighbor waving from her yard. Ignoring her, he parked his car and marched into his home.

He thought he'd found happiness with Carly then she dumped him at the last moment. What was this hangup she had with "needing" anyway? He loved her enough to marry her. That ought to be enough for any woman.

They would've been married in two days. It hurt, thinking of Carly busily shutting down their wedding preparations, cancelling the pastor, enlisting her mother's help to notify relatives and friends.

Better call the South Padre Island resort and cancel their reservation for the bridal suite he'd reserved just for the weekend. His healthcare clients needed him too much for him to take vacation time right now. Somehow he couldn't bring himself to make the call. Later, he'd do it later.

He wished he'd wake up and find this a horrible nightmare. It was no nightmare. He was wide awake and the woman he loved had dumped him right before the wedding.

What just happened was beyond his comprehension. Jake shook his head. The guy who wrote that book about men and women being from different planets wasn't far wrong. Personally, he'd never understand women.

Maybe a woman's point-of-view could help him figure what was wrong with Carly. Right away he thought of Rhonda. Carly and his ex-wife might've become good friends, but he and Rhonda went back a long way.

They'd shared a lot of things besides an unhappy marriage. Deb for one. Yeah, he'd speak to Rhonda. She'd help him.

Jake dialed Rhonda's number. The first time he called he got a busy signal. Ah, she's on the line with her FBI boyfriend. Maybe it's a waste of time, expecting Rhonda to be interested in her ex-husband and his problems.

Jake almost didn't call back. Then his need for a sympathetic ear overcame his self-pity and he punched in Rhonda's number again.

"You must live on the phone," he complained, hearing his ex-wife answer. "I've been trying to get you."

"Oh, Jake," Rhonda responded cheerfully. "How's the wedding plans coming? Are you ready for the big day?"

"You haven't heard? I expected half the city would've gotten the word by now. Carly's cancelled."

"Cancelled? That's not something you should kid about, Jake." She scolded him like he'd made a tasteless joke.

"I've never been more serious in my life. Carly cancelled our wedding today. It seems she's been having second thoughts. From what she told me she doesn't believe I'm not the man for her after all."

"I see. And how does that make you feel, Jake?"

"Lousy," he said. "I thought she wanted to be my wife. But she doesn't."

"Did she say that?"

"No, she admitted she loves me, then she babbled something about wanting a man who loves and needs her."

"Oh, so that's what this's all about." A note of irritation crept into Rhonda's voice. "Well, you do need her. That's as obvious as the nose on your face."

"Hold on. I do love her, but this needing stuff, I don't know about that. I'd never lie to Carly, so I couldn't truthfully say I need her. You know me, Old Self-Reliant. People come to me with their problems. They need me, not the reverse."

"Oh, really? Like who?" Rhonda interrogated him. A voice murmured in the background and Rhonda said, "Hold on."

She laid down the phone and Jake heard her talking to someone then she returned.

"All right. Where were we?"

"What's going on?"

"Nothing except Deb's getting ready to attend a friend's party with a neighbor's son and she wanted my advice on what she should wear," Rhonda informed him as if this were a daily occurrence.

"Dating?" Jake swallowed hard. "But she's only a baby," he insisted. Had Rhonda lost her mind?

"No, she's not. Deb will be thirteen soon, the same as her friends. There's no harm in boys and girls of that age getting together at one of their homes for games and dancing," she said, a smile in her voice. "They'll be well chaperoned, Jake, don't worry."

"I guess." Dismayed, he shook his head. His Deb needed him and her mother when she was an infant and small child. It came as a jolt that she was growing up, though even thirteen-year-olds required some help from their parents.

"Times change, Jake, and people change." Rhonda seemed to hesitate. "We all need others at different times in our lives. As children we need our parents. Later as adults most of us fall in love and marry. But if you love someone, don't you also need that person?"

"I guess." His head hurt. "Well, I just wanted to let you know, Rhonda. Would you tell Deb the wedding's been cancelled? She'll be disappointed, I'm sure, since she thinks a lot of Carly." He started to hang up.

"Wait a moment. Would you do something for me?"

"Sure. Got a problem?" Even after their divorce Rhonda had brought her problems to him and he'd done his best to help her. At least she'd asked for his advice until recently. Since her trip to Hawaii, his ex-wife had become more independent, or maybe her FBI boyfriend had taken his place as her adviser.

"No, just call your mother. With all of the wedding plans I bet you've been too busy to go by and visit her, haven't you?"

"Yeah, I should see check in and see how Mom's doing. Don't know if I told you but the last time I got in touch, she was whizzing out the door with some friends, hardly had time to chat."

That bewildered him since his mother had always seemed to delight in his phone calls, always had time for him.

Dialing his mother's assisted living apartment, Jake was pleased to find her at home. "Mom, will you be there awhile?"

"It's about time for lunch. Why don't you join me?"

"Thanks. I need to talk to you about something."

Half an hour later he sat across from his mother in the attractive dining room at her apartment complex.

Jake glanced around, admiring the large airy room and the soft piano music provided by an elderly gentleman in shirt sleeves. The luncheon platter was tasty though he had little appetite that day.

"You say Carly's called off the wedding?" His mother wasn't as upset as he'd imagined she'd be.

"Yeah, and I don't know what to do." For a moment he felt like a child again. His parents had divorced when Jake was a youngster and his mother had gone to work. It was just since she'd grown older that she clung to him.

"I never thought I'd live to hear you say that." She smiled kindly.

"I know. I must be a big disappointment to you. You took care of me when I was a child. I've tried to do the same for you now that you're older."

"And I appreciate everything you've done, Jake. But I've been thinking recently that I've leaned on you too much.

"From now on, I'll do all I can for myself, while I'm able. The day may come when you have to do more, but right now I want to be self-sufficient."

"Good, as long as you remember I'm here if you need me."

"And I'm here for you, Jake. I'll be the first to admit I need you, but I know you need me, too. That's what love is all about, isn't it?"

Where had he heard that line of thought before? People needing people. He'd always perceived himself as strong, not needing anyone else. Had he been wrong?

"While I was growing up," he recalled, "you were my hero, so strong, so independent. You didn't need anyone."

"I told you that, did I?" A sad expression flickered across her wrinkled but still attractive face.

"Yes, many times."

"Those were the words of an embittered, lonely woman, Son. Because I was so independent, never admitted I needed anyone, even your father, I drove him away."

"But I remember your saying many times it was important that I be strong, be able to take care of myself."

"Yes, and it's probably my fault you turned out the way you are today. Put yourself in my place, Jake.

"I was a young working woman with a child. I had to teach you to be self-reliant since I couldn't run home whenever you had a problem. But you carried your independence too far when you believed you didn't need anyone ever."

She drew a deep sigh then reached across the table and patted his arm. "It's too late for me to find someone else to love, but you still have time. If you love Carly, you need her."

All at once he understood. "I didn't think I did."

"I know." For a few moments his mother's brow puckered as if she were deep in thought, then she smiled. "Maybe this will help. If you'll bear with me, I'm going to ask you a few questions and you tell me the absolute truth. Okay?"

"All right." Jake kept his eyes on his mother's face. What would she ask him?

"If you don't see Carly again, will you forget her?"

"No," he whispered. "Not as long as I live."

"Will you be able to find happiness with someone else?"

He paused, considering the question, then shook his head. "She's the only one for me."

"Then you do need her, don't you?"

"With my whole heart." His vision blurred by unshed tears, he said, "but it's too late."

"Not yet. Go to her and tell her you need her. Tell her what you've told me. Promise?"

"Do you mind if I--"

"Don't drive too fast." She kissed his cheek.

Jake was on his way the next instant.

All the way to Carly's he alternated between hope and despair. What kind of reception awaited him?

Nearing her building, he had a brief flurry of panic. Suppose she wasn't there. Suppose she wouldn't take him back.

Resolve took him up the stairs to the fourth floor and her apartment. His knock brought no response so he opened the unlocked door and heard a soft sound, like someone weeping.

"Carly?" Jake raced down the hall to her bedroom.

Red-eyed but smiling, she met him at the door.

He swooped her into his arms. "Carly, please marry me. I do need you. Without you my life would be an empty shell."

"What took you so long?" She kissed him, clung to him like she'd never let him go.

He hoped she never did.

EPILOGUE

Jake stood beside Carly's family's pastor, watching the members of the bridal party march down the aisle. The chapel was decorated with arrangements of wildflowers.

Instead of organ music, Carly's cousin from Abilene played softly on her harp. He had to admit the music sounded lovely.

One by one Carly's older sisters marched down the aisle, each beaming at him as she reached the front of the church.

Right before the bride and her father were due there was a brief flurry in the back of the church then an irritated bark. Gran Alice came into sight, resplendent in powder blue organza. Carly had asked her grandmother to be an attendant. The old lady convinced her that Mimi would be a perfect addition to the bridal party. After all, she was a member of the family and she even had a bridesmaid dress Gran had made last Fall.

With pride Mimi pranced down the aisle, a most unusual flower girl in shell pink organza with a pink ribbon collar. Her costume and demeanor brought a light ripple of laughter from the wedding guests.

In her mouth the Lab gently carried a white wicker basket of rose petals that Gran now and then plundered, sprinkling a handful here and there.

Mimi was the star of the show, at least until the harpist struck a chord and started the old familiar Wedding March, bringing everyone to their feet.

Carly came into view, a vision in Gran Alice's satin and lace dress, carrying a bouquet of wildflowers. Flowers in her hair, stars in her eyes, she walked down the aisle toward him.

Jake's heart swelled with pride and love. If anyone had informed him a few short weeks ago that he'd be getting married today to an enchanting starry-eyed woman, with a Labrador flower girl led by an old woman with lavender hair, he'd have laughed.

But here he was and here he'd stay with the woman he loved and needed filling his heart and life.

At the reception he shook the hands of the people who'd become friends, Sam, once an adversary,

now his friend and confidant, Rhonda, once his unhappy ex-wife, now also a friend standing tall, slender and proud with her FBI lover who'd soon make her his wife. And Steve with Barbara, also his friends.

Who said it was better to be alone? At that instant, Jake felt surrounded by love and was thankful to be a part of it.

Before Carly and Jake left on the honeymoon that he'd extended to two weeks with his boss's blessing, Carly turned to toss the bride's bouquet.

Gran stationed herself in the front row, holding Mimi's basket now that it was empty.

Nodding to her grandmother, Carly took careful aim and tossed the bouquet.

With a soft bark Mimi lunged and caught it with all of the grace a Labrador in a flower girl's dress can muster. The crowd cheered.

THE END

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