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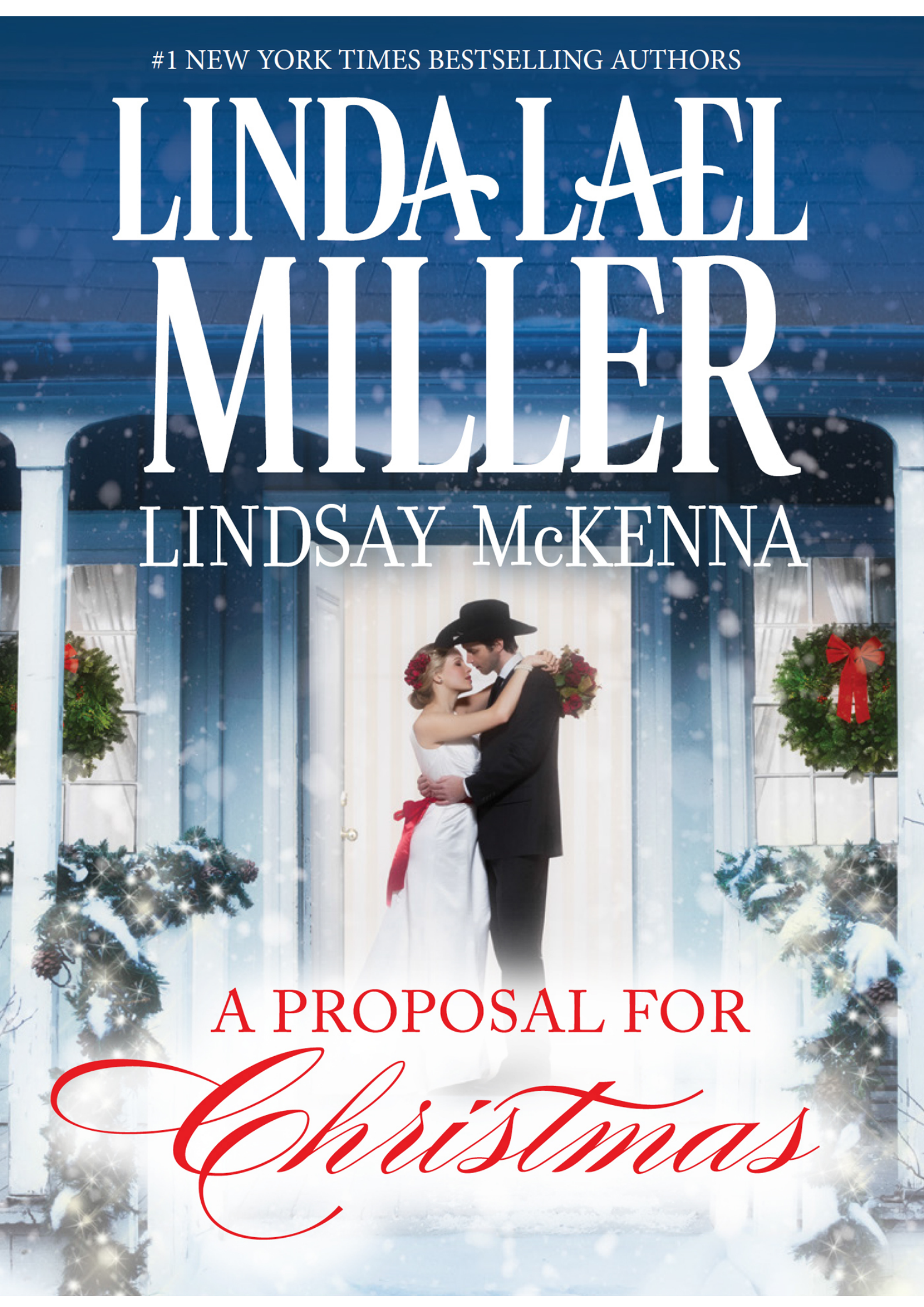

A PROPOSAL FOR *Christmas*

Lindsay McKenna

A Proposal for Christmas: State Secrets / The Five Days Of Christmas

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A Proposal for Christmas: State Secrets / The Five Days Of Christmas / L. McKenna — «HarperCollins»,

STATE SECRETSEven to Secret Service agent David Goddard, Holly Llewellyn's life remained a mystery. Tangled in the controversy swirling around them, David wondered, was it her secrets that fascinated him… or Holly herself?THE FIVE DAYS OF CHRISTMASMorgan Trayhern's toughest mercenary, Colt Hamlin, is looking to lie low this Christmas, but he may just have a change of heart when his matchmaking boss puts him in the path of Montana's prettiest widow.

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New York Times bestselling authors Linda Lael Miller and Lindsay McKenna present two enthralling stories about the redemptive power of the holiday season

STATE SECRETS

Linda Lael Miller

Secret Service agent David Goddard never expected to spend his Christmas surveilling the president's cousin. But after weeks of studying her, he finds that Holly Llewellyn's life continues to remain a mystery. Tangled in the controversy swirling around them, David wonders, is it her secrets that fascinate him…or Holly herself?

THE FIVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

Lindsay McKenna

Morgan Trayhern's toughest mercenary, Colt Hamlin, is looking to lie low this Christmas, but he may just have a change of heart when his matchmaking boss puts him in the path of Montana's prettiest widow.

A Proposal For Christmas

Linda Lael Miller, Lindsay McKenna

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State Secrets

Dear Reader,

The Christmas season is a beautiful time of year—full of family, joy and lots of presents! And as many of us can attest, it's also a time when truths are revealed and the gifts we receive are not always what we expected. Filled with mystery, secrets and the love that surrounds this time of year, I am delighted to bring back State Secrets.

Holly Llewellyn is a cookbook author and a distant relative of the president of the United States. As such, being something of an outspoken renegade, Holly represents a security risk. Secret Service agent David Goddard is dispatched to keep an eye on her and make sure she behaves herself.

As with any other assignment, David has a plan of action: he'll get to know Holly casually in order to satisfy the government's curiosity. It's strictly business. But when he unexpectedly finds himself taking personal interest, he's no longer sure he can stick to the rules.

Falling in love isn't one of Holly's goals, nor is it part of David's assignment. Still, love plays by its own rules, doesn't it?

Love,

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1

The tall man ran one hand through his dark hair and shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Despite the heavy woolen overcoat he wore, he was still cold. Swift indigo eyes scanned the first page of the dossier. “So what, Walt?” David Goddard bit out, frowning. “She’s the president-elect’s third cousin. Since when do third cousins qualify for Secret Service protection?”

Walt Zigman made a contemptuous, impatient sound. Apparently, this assignment wasn’t exactly dear to his crusty old heart. “It isn’t protection, Goddard,” he snarled. “Remember that. This is a surveillance project.”

David sat back in his chair, drawing his right ankle up to rest on his left knee. “Surveillance,” he muttered, suppressing an unprofessional urge to fling the file on Holly Llewellyn back into the mess that littered Walt’s desk. “That isn’t our—”

“I know, Goddard,” Walt interrupted, falling into his own chair and reaching into one ink-stained shirt pocket for a match to light the cigar stub that was always in his mouth. “I know. I tried to give this thing to the Bureau. I even tried the CIA. But they both threw it right back in my lap. Anything connected with the president or his family is our bailiwick—according to them.”

David breathed a swearword. He was tired and he could still feel the bite of the crisp November wind outside. He wanted to get out of Washington and have Thanksgiving dinner in Arlington with his sister, Chris, and her family. He wanted to spoil her kids and lounge in front of her fireplace. “Okay, Walt. So Ms. Llewellyn is our problem. Why am I the lucky one?”

Walt chortled. “Born under the right star, I guess. Come on, Goddard, how bad can it be? You spend a few weeks—maybe a few months—in Spokane. You get the lady to like you. And you make damned sure she’s really what she claims to be, and not a courier for that brother of hers.”

David had the beginnings of a headache. He opened the dossier again, skimming the rundown on Holly Llewellyn. Twenty-seven years old. Blond. Blue-eyed. Five feet, seven inches tall. A one hundred twenty-three pound pain. “What makes you think she’s running secrets? It says here she writes cookbooks.”

“Middle Eastern cookbooks,” David’s supervisor imparted with dramatic import.

David’s mouth twisted into a wry grin. “That alone should convict her,” he mocked.

“Dammit, Goddard, keep your sparkling wit to yourself. Can’t you see that we’ve got the makings of a scandal here that would make Watergate seem insignificant?”

“A scandal?”

“Yes! How would it look if the new president’s cousin turned out to be a traitor? Isn’t it bad enough that her brother sold out? She could be cut from the same cloth!”

David sighed. “That’s unlikely, Walt. It says here that she’s written a book about Scandinavian meatballs. Good God, maybe she’s spying for the Swedes!”

“Stow it.”

“Or the Danes. You’ve got to watch those Danes, crafty little devils, one and all.”

“Goddard!”

“She wrote Fun With Tacos, too, I see,” David pressed on dryly. “Do you think she’s working for the Mexicans? Holy guacamole, Batman—do you suppose they’re planning to rush up here and take back Texas?”

Walt was leaning into the desk, his meaty hands braced against the edge, his cigar stub bobbing up and down in outrage. “I’m glad you think this situation is funny, Goddard, but it just so happens that the next president of the United States doesn’t agree with you! This little lady happens to have a bona fide, card-carrying traitor for a brother!”

David flipped through the rest of the dossier, not so hastily this time. His headache was worse. “Craig Llewellyn,” he muttered.

“You remember him, don’t you, Goddard?” Walt gibed, going to stand at the barred window of his dingy little office.

Remember? David remembered, all right—how could he help it? Craig Llewellyn’s defection had never made the national news, by some miracle, but every federal agent in the country knew the sordid story. “Being Llewellyn’s sister doesn’t make the lady a security risk, Walt,” he pointed out quietly.

“Maybe not. If she wasn’t related to our next president, I wouldn’t be worried. If she hadn’t just spent two months in Iran, I wouldn’t be worried. As it is, I’m damned worried.”

“You’d think the opposition would have caught on to this before the election...” David speculated, thinking of the outgoing president and the no-holds-barred campaign he had conducted.

“They didn’t,” Walt broke in. “I’ll expect your first report early next week.”

“Right.” David stood up and stretched. Every muscle in his long frame ached with residual cold. “Is this operation covert, by the way, or do I just knock on Ms. Llewellyn’s door and flash my identification?”

Clearly, Walt Zigman had a headache, too. “That was a stupid question, Goddard. You’ve been on White House Detail too damned long. Spent too much time walking the first lady’s dog. Of course it’s covert!”

David shrugged, feeling weary. Maybe Walt was right; maybe he was getting soft. Instead of thinking about this case on every level, a part of him was anticipating a day at Chris’s place. The kids would be watching the Macy’s parade on TV. The smell of roasting turkey would be everywhere....

He reached for the dossier. “Can I take this?”

Walt waved impatiently. “Yeah, yeah, that’s your copy.”

David tucked the file under one arm. He supposed it was the forthcoming holiday that was distracting him, stirring up bittersweet memories and half-formed hopes, making him feel far older than his thirty-four years. He tried to imagine Marleen, his ex-wife, roasting turkey or settling a band of freckle-faced rug rats in front of the tube to watch a Thanksgiving parade and couldn’t. “You having dinner here, Walt?” he asked, his hand on the doorknob. “Tomorrow, I mean?”

Zigman grinned around his cigar stub. “Nope. Going to New York to see my daughter. Happy Thanksgiving, Goddard.”

David laughed, though he had a bereft feeling inside. He thought of Marleen studying chimpanzees in Borneo and wondered if she remembered that she’d once wanted to raise an entirely different kind of monkey. “I’ll call you on Monday.”

“Right.”

David stepped out into the wide, familiar hallway, with its lighted paintings and expensively shabby carpeting. In front of the Oval Office, two agents guarded the heavy double doors. He nodded and they nodded back, their faces solemn.

Downstairs, David left the White House by a side door, then strode through the snow-dusted parking lot to his car. At one of the high wrought-iron gates, he showed his ID, even though he was going out, not in, even though he knew the young Marines on duty, knew their wives and their kids and their collar sizes.

Again he felt lonely. Even quietly desperate. As the White House gate clanked shut behind him, he turned up the car radio in a belated effort to cover the sound.

* * *

Holly Llewellyn placed the elegantly scripted invitation in the center of the kitchen mantelpiece. Hands tucked into the pockets of her cozy blue jogging jacket, she stood back to admire it.

"Imagine," said her friend and secretary, Elaine Bateman, from her chair at the cluttered trestle table. "Being invited to the White House! An Inaugural Ball! Good heavens, Holly, what are you going to wear?"

Holly's bright, aquamarine eyes danced with mischief and she withdrew her hands from her pockets to push her chin-length blond hair atop her head. "Nothing," she crooned, striking a cheesecake pose.

"That ought to cause a sensation!"

Holly made a face and went back to the printer set up on the end of the trestle table. She began printing out the pages of "Ka-bobs for a Crowd," the initial chapter of her new book. "I meant that I'm not going," she pointed out. "After all, Toby is in school and I've got my classes to teach and this book to finish. These recipes all have to be tested and retested, you know. And there's my newspaper column—"

"Excuses!" Elaine cried, ignoring the finished manuscript, Soups are Super, that she was supposed to be indexing. "Good Lord, Holly, how many times does a person's cousin get elected president? I can't believe you'd miss a chance like this! Besides, you've got until January."

The rhythmic whining of the printer was giving Holly a headache; she closed her eyes and ran her hands down the sides of her trim-fitting jeans. "I'm not going," she repeated sharply.

Elaine sighed in a way that made Holly regret her tone of voice. "Okay, Holl. No problem. Listen, tomorrow's Thanksgiving—do you mind if I take this home and work on it there? I've got a turkey to stuff and ceramic pilgrims to set out in strategic places."

Holly laughed, able to look at her friend now. "Go," she said. "And leave the manuscript here. It will keep until Monday."

Elaine beamed triumphantly, gathering the stack of blue-penciled pages into a neat pile. "You were always a soft touch for ceramic pilgrims," she grinned. "Are you sure you don't want me to work Friday?"

"Positive."

Elaine looked worried now, her wide green eyes watchful. "You and Toby have somewhere to go for Thanksgiving, don't you? I mean, you're not going to sit here and brood or anything, are you?"

Holly felt a tender sort of exasperation. "We're spending the day with Skyler's parents, worrywart. Hie thyself home, before that husband of yours tries to stuff the gobbler on his own. Remember last year? He cut himself on the giblets."

Elaine laughed. "Roy means well," she said, taking her coat from the antique wall rack beside the back door. Shrugging into it, she tossed her glossy brown hair back over her shoulders. "How was he to know that a partially frozen turkey neck can be lethal?"

"How indeed?" Holly chuckled, wondering why she felt so sad. Skyler's parents were nice people; she and Toby would both have a good time at their house.

"Happy, happy," Elaine sang, opening the door to leave and letting in a rush of frigid November air. "See you Monday."

"Monday," Holly confirmed, smiling hard. But when her friend was gone, she sat down on the long bench beside the trestle table and sighed.

Just then Toby scrambled in from the other direction, still wearing his jacket, earmuffs and mittens. His "Moon Boots" made puddles on the redbrick floor, and he was waving a multi-colored construction-paper turkey in one hand. "Look what we made, Mom! Look what we made!"

From somewhere in the depths of her, Holly summoned up another smile. "Wow!" she crowed. She didn't bother to correct the little boy, to remind him that she was his aunt and not his mother. She never did that anymore.

The seven-year-old was trying to peel off his winter garb without crumpling his purple, green, pink and black turkey. The cold glowed in his plump cheeks and his china-blue eyes sparkled.

After ruffling his irresistible corn-silk hair with one hand, Holly aided him by taking the bedraggled, paste-crusted turkey while he wrestled out of his jacket.

"I've never seen a turkey quite like this," she remarked.

Toby laughed and Holly felt a pang at the sound; he was so like her brother, Craig. Poor, hunted Craig. "I wanted him to be different, Mom!" For a moment, the child looked sheepish. "Besides, all the brown and gold and orange paper was gone."

Holly walked to the huge side-by-side refrigerator and attached the turkey to its surface with magnets. To make room, she had to take down the previous month's construction-paper pumpkin. "No matter," she said. "I like this bird. He has character. Are you hungry?"

"Starved," the little boy exclaimed, and there was a scuffling sound as he made a place for himself at the paper-and-book-littered table.

Holly plundered the refrigerator for lunch meat, sliced cheese, lettuce and mustard. She thought ruefully that another trip to the supermarket was in order.

Carrying the armload of sandwich supplies over to the counter, Holly set everything down to open the old-fashioned wooden bread box.

"We're still going to Skyler's place tomorrow, right?" Toby asked without looking at her.

Holly was closing the bread sack, tucking it back into its nook. She sighed. "Not exactly. We're going to his parents' house, remember? They live in the country."

"Oh."

"You don't like Skyler very much, do you, Toby?" she ventured, buttering a slice of bread, adding cheese and lunch meat and a lettuce leaf.

"Are you going to marry him?" the child countered, watching Holly with pensive eyes.

It was a fair question, but since Holly didn't know the answer herself, she could hardly offer one to Toby. "I don't know. I like Skyler."

"A lot?"

Holly thought. "Yeah. I like him a lot."

"Do you love him?"

Holly's knife clattered in the mustard jar. "Well—"

"You're supposed to love somebody if you're going to marry them. The way Elaine loves Roy. She's always kissing him and when he says something, she looks at him like every word is real important."

Holly paused, feeling oddly shaken, and gave her nephew a lopsided grin. "You've been watching Dr. Phil again," she teased.

Toby looked puzzled. "Huh?"

"Never mind. How was school today?"

The little boy sighed. "I didn't get any orange paper."

"I remember," Holly replied, putting the finished sandwich on a plate and carrying it to the table. "How come that happened, anyway? Were you late for art class or something?"

Toby was gathering up the sandwich in eager hands. "I had to talk to the principal."

"Toby Llewellyn! Did you get into trouble?"

"No," Toby said through a mouthful. "He wanted me to talk about the new president next week at assembly."

A jolt of mingled alarm and fury raced through Holly; she had to take a deep breath before she could speak calmly. "What? How did he know—"

Toby shrugged. "Maybe there was something in the paper. Mr. Richardson was pretty disappointed when I told him I didn't know the president."

Holly was pacing the floor, her hands tucked into the hip pockets of her jeans. The celebrity of being a cookbook author was one thing—only a select group of people cared one way or the other, of course—but this shirttail relationship to the future president could get to be a real problem. Suppose reporters started taking an interest? Suppose what Craig had done got talked about? Toby could be hurt or even put in real danger!

"Did you see any newspaper people, Toby? Did anybody ask you questions?"

Toby shook his head. "Can I watch TV?"

Holly nodded somewhat impatiently. "You'll tell me if anyone you don't know tries to talk to you, won't you, Toby?"

"Sure. Is there any lemonade?"

Agitated, Holly forced herself to stop pacing. There was no reason to panic, no reason. After all, she and Craig were only distantly related to the new president.

"Mom?"

"Cocoa. I'll make you a cup of cocoa. It's too cold for lemonade."

"Okay," Toby agreed amiably, on his way out of the kitchen. A moment later, as she searched the cupboard for a saucepan in which to prepare the cocoa, Holly heard the television set in the next room blaring. Her hands trembled as she collected the milk, salt, sugar and chocolate.

Oh, my God, she thought. Craig, what have you done to us? What have you done to all of us?

She reflected on her brother's problems as she made the cocoa and carried it into the family room to Toby. The telephone shrilled and Holly jumped, startled out of her skin. She raced back into the kitchen and grabbed up the receiver. "H-hello?"

"Hello, kitten," said the familiar masculine voice on the other end.

Holly sank into the chair at her small desk, her knees wobbly. Skyler. It was only Skyler. She was so glad that she didn't even ask him not to call her by that silly, condescending nickname. "Hi," she said.

Skyler cleared his throat. Skyler always cleared his throat when he was about to suggest something he expected Holly to oppose. "Listen, Holl, I was wondering—why don't you and I and the kid just drive up to my folks' place tonight, instead of waiting until tomorrow? I could close the shop early."

Holly bit her lower lip, considering. She hated the way Skyler always referred to Toby as "the kid," as though he didn't have a name. But confronting him about it had about as much effect as asking him not to call her "kitten." Which was none at all.

"Holly?" Skyler prompted when the silence grew too long. "Are you still there?"

"I was just—I was just thinking."

"Is it that hard to decide?" he snapped, impatient now.

Holly drew a deep breath and let it out slowly before answering. "No, Skyler, of course not. But, well—"

Skyler made an exasperated sound. "I suppose you're afraid I'll want you to sleep with me. In my parents' house, Holly? Give me some credit, will you?"

He was being unusually defensive, Holly thought, but then sex was an issue between them. While Holly was certainly no innocent, she wasn't ready for that kind of intimacy, not with Skyler Hollis at any rate. "Sky."

"Well? That is what you were thinking, isn't it?"

Holly sighed as she rubbed her aching temples with a thumb and forefinger. "Yes. And I refuse to discuss it over the telephone."

Skyler's struggle for equanimity was almost audible. "Right," he said presently. "Do I pick you up tonight or not, Holly?"

"What time would we leave?"

"I can be ready in about an hour and a half. We could eat dinner on the way if you'd like."

Holly found herself smiling in spite of the odd tension Skyler always managed to inspire in her. "That sounds like a good idea. I really don't feel like cooking."

Skyler chuckled. "Little wonder."

"On the other hand, I've got a freezer full of experimental ka-bobs. Test run from yesterday."

"I'm in no mood to be a guinea pig," Skyler retorted quickly, and there was a disturbing note of conviction in his voice. "I'll see you at—" he paused and Holly could imagine him looking at his thin gold watch "—six-thirty."

"Six-thirty," Holly confirmed, and after a few perfunctory words of parting, they both hung up.

Somebody should have said, "I love you," Holly thought as she left the kitchen.

* * *

Skyler stood before the mantelpiece, frowning at the invitation to the Inaugural Ball. He was a tall man with sleek, fair hair, an altar-boy face and elegant, long-fingered hands. The owner of a very successful stereo-and-television dealership, Skyler was prosperous, and his tailored gray slacks and tasteful cashmere sweater were meant to convey that to even the most casual onlooker.

Holly stood watching him, waiting, her hands in the pockets of her black corduroy skirt. With it she wore high leather boots, a burgundy blouse and her black velvet blazer. Her hair, cut in a layered, easy-care style, glistened, and her makeup was perfect.

"You didn't tell me you knew—" Skyler began, pensively, turning to frown at her.

"I know lots of famous people, Skyler."

"Yes," Skyler mused, one perfect golden eyebrow arched in speculation, "but shaking somebody's hand on The Today Show and getting invited to an Inaugural Ball are two different things."

Holly folded her arms and allowed herself a wry smile, though inside she felt shaky. She always did with Skyler; his very presence seemed to evaporate her self-confidence. "Howard is a distant cousin, Skyler. I didn't mention it because I didn't think it mattered."

"Howard! You call the next president of the United States 'Howard'?"

Holly shrugged. "It's his name, Skyler."

"Still—"

Suddenly Holly was impatient. "I'm not going to the ball anyway," she said, reaching for her purse, which sat on the corner of her desk. "Shall we go? The traffic will be horrendous and it's still snowing."

Skyler nodded distractedly, but even as they left the kitchen, he kept casting his eyes back to the invitation. "Right," he said.

Once Toby and his suitcase, which also contained Holly's things, had been tucked into the tiny back seat of Skyler's sleek, sporty car, and the boy had been carefully buckled in by a seat belt, Holly glanced quickly at her old-fashioned brick house and felt a sweeping, dismal sort of loneliness.

Mentally, she shook herself. Good heavens, she was acting as though she would never see her cozy home again.

The traffic, as Holly had predicted, was terrible. The number of cars leaving the city was equaled only by the number of cars coming in, and the snow swirled and spiraled in front of the windshield, making it almost impossible to see.

"We're in hyperspace!" Toby cried in delight. Out of the corner of her eye, Holly saw Skyler grimace and tighten his grasp on the steering wheel.

She let her head rest against the back of the seat and closed her eyes. Skyler Hollis was what her mother might have called a "catch," with his good looks and his flourishing business, but his antipathy toward Toby, carefully hidden though it was, disturbed Holly. She wondered if he felt that way about all children or just her nephew in particular.

An hour and a half later, when they had eaten at a roadside restaurant and were again on their way, Toby asleep in the back seat, she broached the subject. "Do you want children, Skyler?"

He glanced at her and then turned his attention back to the hazardous road. "Of my own? Most men do, Holly."

Holly sat up a little straighter. "Of my own," he'd said. "In other words, you wouldn't accept Toby?"

Skyler's clean-shaven jaw worked for a moment, and his narrow shoulders grew tense. "Your brother will probably come back for him one day, Holly. You told me that yourself."

Holly sighed and looked out the window at the fierce flurries of snow. She had told Skyler that, it was true. But now she had grave doubts that her brother would ever actually reclaim his son or be in a position to take care of him. After all, Toby's mother was dead, and though few people knew it, Craig was a wanted man, suspected of espionage. It was possible, in fact, that he wasn't even in the country.

"Craig won't come back," she said quietly, after a long silence.

"How could he not come back?" Skyler demanded angrily. "You've got his kid!"

His kid. When Skyler said that, used those simple, everyday words, it always sounded inhumane. "And I want to keep him, Skyler. Craig is in no position to be a real father and besides, I love Toby. I love him very, very much."

There seemed to be nothing to say after that. Skyler shoved a classical CD into the slot on the dashboard and the car was filled with thunderous Beethoven.

* * *

Chris's kitchen was a bright, warm, cluttered place. The walls were graced with shining copper utensils and a fire crackled in the huge wood-burning stove in one corner of the room. Two long shelves held the largest collection of cookbooks David had ever seen.

Frowning, he took down a copy of Fun With Tacos and studied the colored photograph of the author on the back cover. Tousled, honey-colored hair, enormous blue-green eyes. Holly Llewellyn.

"Taking up the culinary arts?" Chris asked mischievously, standing beside him.

Startled, David thrust the thin volume back into its place on the shelf and shook his head.

Chris, a lovely woman with dark hair and eyes, laughed warmly and hugged her brother. "We live in a new age, you know. Men are actually cooking, among other things."

A new age. David's mind caught on those words—he was uneasy, even jumpy. He had the strangest feeling that he was on the edge of something momentous, something that would change his life forever. He took Holly Llewellyn's cookbook down from the shelf again, turned it over and studied the captivating face on the back.

Llewellyn, he thought, if you turn out to be a fink, I'm not going to be able to take it.

2

Holly looked with a jaundiced eye at the mechanical department-store Santa Claus nodding beside the escalator. Thanksgiving is over, she thought ruefully, so bring on Christmas.

In the toy section to her left, a horde of shoppers were engaged in a good-natured battle of some sort.

Reaching the next floor and the cookware section of the large store, Holly found Elaine already there, her hair pinned to the top of her head, a clipboard in hand.

"What's going on downstairs?" Holly asked irritably. The weekend with Skyler and his parents had been a disaster.

Elaine chuckled but did not look up from the list she was going over. "They got in a shipment of Webkinz."

Shrugging out of her winter coat, Holly assessed the room. The store had done a good job of setting up; there were tables, aprons and even chefs' hats for all the students. In the cooking area, where Holly would demonstrate the fine art of baking fruitcake, an assortment of copper utensils had been set out on the counter.

She peered at Elaine's clipboard. Normally, twelve students were accepted for her popular cooking classes, but this time the list showed thirteen names. "David Goddard? Who the devil is that?"

Elaine gave her friend and employer an understanding, patient look. "There's always room for one more, right?" She grinned. "The guy was so eager...."

Holly was annoyed and tired. All she wanted to do was spend the night at home, in front of the TV or better yet, in a hot bath with a book. Anywhere but in this posh downtown department store, teaching thirteen people how to bake fruitcake. "Elaine," she began stiffly, "this is a popular class. There is a waiting list several months long, in case you've forgotten. So where do you get off letting some bozo walk in and sign up just because he's eager?"

Elaine colored prettily. "Actually, he's better than eager. He's a hunk."

"Great! You let him in because he was good-looking!"

Elaine shrugged. "What can I tell you? I looked up into those navy blue eyes and I could not deny the man ten lessons and a chef's hat."

Holly muttered an expletive and flung down her purse and coat. "I'll be glad to deny him for you," she snapped, washing her hands at the gleaming steel sink that was part of the store's fully equipped kitchen. "Where is he?"

"Downstairs, I think, in the toy department," Elaine replied, unruffled, as she checked the supplies of flour, sugar and assorted other ingredients against another list on her clipboard. "He said something about buying a couple Webkinz for his nieces."

Holly found an apron and put it on over her jeans and cotton shirt. Despite repeated pleas from the store's publicity director, she refused to wear a chef's hat. "I don't know why I agree to do these cooking classes, anyway," she muttered.

"You have a contract with the store," came the blithe reply from her secretary. "And they pay you big bucks."

"Thanks for reminding me."

Elaine looked up from her clipboard and made a face. "Anytime, boss."

Holly couldn't help it; she had to grin. "I don't know how you put up with me. I've been a grouch all day and I'm sorry."

Elaine sighed. "A weekend with Skyler Hollis would do that to anybody. Everything checks out, Holly. Could I go now? Roy and I are going to have dinner out and then do some early shopping."

"Go. Leave me here to tell the hunk that he can't learn to bake fruitcake." Holly paused and assumed a pose of mock despondency. "The help you get these days."

Elaine laughed. "When you see him, you'll let him stay. Believe me, God was in a good mood the day He threw this dude together. Everything is definitely in the right place."

"Elaine Bateman, you are a happily married woman!"

The pretty brunette was pulling on her coat. "Yeah. But I'm not blind," she twinkled, before taking up her purse and starting off toward the escalators.

Holly was alone for about five minutes, and then a heavy, earnest-looking man arrived. She asked his name—it was Alvin Parkins—and checked it off on Elaine's list. One by one, the other students came, some of them bringing copies of Holly's books to be autographed.

And then he showed up. Number Thirteen. The intruder. At the very first sight of him, Holly's stomach did a nervous flip.

He was tall and his hair was very dark, neatly cut, and his eyes were a piercing navy blue, just as Elaine had said. He wore blue jeans, a soft white sweater and a brown leather jacket and under each of his powerful arms, he carried a plush toy.

Holly lifted her chin, squared her shoulders and approached him. "Mr. Goddard?"

He tilted his head slightly, in acknowledgment or greeting or both. His cologne was musky and Holly found herself trying to identify it by name.

Holly glanced at the toys, trying to delay the moment when she must tell this man that there simply wasn't room for him in the fruitcake class. "Mr. Goddard—I—" Holly cleared her throat. "The fact is, Mr. Goddard, that there just isn't...there just isn't room in this class for another person. I'm sorry."

He set the toys down on one of the tables and calmly removed his jacket. He didn't look as though he planned to go anywhere. "I'm sorry, too. That it's a problem, I mean. But your secretary took my money and told me I had a place in good old Fruitcake 101 and I'm staying."

Holly felt the color rising in her face. "You're going to be difficult, aren't you?"

David Goddard smiled and folded his arms, stirring that appealing musky scent and touching something deep inside Holly. "If necessary," came the simple reply.

To hide her annoyance, Holly looked down at her watch. It was time to start the class and all the other students were there, ready to begin. It wouldn't do to make a scene in front of them and besides, Elaine had told the man he could participate. "All right, then," she muttered, "you can stay."

"Thank you," he replied, and the deep warmth in his voice soothed Holly somehow, taking away the anger that had arisen at his stubbornness.

David Goddard proved to be an attentive student, listening closely to every word Holly said, watching every move she made. She could almost feel the steel-trap agility of his mind.

When the class was over and Holly was cleaning up, he stayed behind to help. Without a word he rolled up his sleeves and began running hot water into the sink.

Holly gathered mixing bowls and spatulas and bread pans and brought them to the counter. It was odd, the feeling she had—as though they were old friends instead of strangers, washing dishes together in a homey kitchen instead of a busy department store.

"This is quite a setup," he remarked, up to his elbows in hot, soapy water.

Holly found herself smiling. "I know. I was impressed the first time I saw it, too." And the first time I saw you, Number Thirteen.

"Did they put all this in just for you?"

She shook her head and took a dish towel from a top drawer. "I think it was a demonstration kitchen at first—you know, so people could see how the appliances would look in a home setting. When I started to become well-known, Cookware and Books put their heads together and came up with the idea that I should teach classes here."

David smiled. He had a nice smile, she noted, a smile touched with humor. Full of straight white teeth. But what was that sad detachment in the depths of his ink-blue eyes?

"Doesn't that take up a lot of your time? Teaching, I mean?" he asked.

Holly dried a lacquered copper mixing bowl to a red-gold shine. She liked the way it looked, so bright and cheery. "I guess it does. I travel a little, write my books. And I keep up a weekly newspaper column, too." She paused, then shrugged. "I like teaching, though. I get to meet new people that way."

"You don't meet people when you travel?"

She smiled again, wearily. “Not really. I take classes in other countries, and sometimes I’m the only student. It’s precise, exhausting work and I usually don’t even get to see the sights, let alone strike up lasting friendships. What do you do for a living, Mr. Goddard?”

“Call me David or I’ll never tell,” he retorted, and even though his glance was pleasant, Holly had a feeling that he was stalling, for some reason.

“All right. What do you do for a living, David?” she insisted, watching him.

The navy blue eyes were suddenly averted; he was concentrating on scrubbing a baking pan. “I’m in law school at Gonzaga,” he finally answered.

The answer seemed incomplete somehow. David Goddard was in his mid-thirties, unless Holly missed her guess. Surely old enough to be through with college, even law school. On the other hand, lots of people changed careers these days. “What kind of lawyer are you planning to be? Corporate? Criminal?”

He took up another baking pan. “Actually, I’m taking review courses. I graduated several years ago, but I haven’t been practising. I thought I’d better brush up a little before I tackled the Bar Exam again.”

“The Bar Exam? I thought you only had to take that once.”

“It varies from state to state. I didn’t study in Washington.”

He was hedging; Holly was sure of it. But why? “Where did you study?”

David still would not look at her. “Virginia. Do they pay you extra for washing dishes?”

The sudden shift in the conversation unsettled Holly, as did something she sensed in this man. In a flash it occurred to her that he might be a very clever reporter looking for a story. Her cooking career usually didn’t generate a lot of interest, but being third cousin to the next president of the United States just might. And what if he knew about Craig?

Holly paled and withdrew a little. “I can finish this myself,” she said stiffly. “Why don’t you go?”

Now the inky gaze was fixed on her, impaling her, touching that hidden something that did not want to be touched. “Is there a sudden chill in here or am I imagining it?” he countered.

Holly kept her distance. Gone was the feeling of companionship she had enjoyed earlier. There was danger in this man; there was watchfulness. Why hadn’t she noticed that before? She fielded his question with one of her own. “Why would a lawyer want to learn to bake fruitcake?” she asked.

David went right on washing, his hands swift and strong at the task. “For the same reasons the other people in this class do, Holly. There was a bookkeeper, if I remember correctly, and a construction worker—”

“Maybe a journalist or two,” she put in sharply, glaring at him now.

“A journalist?” He looked honestly puzzled for a moment, and then a light dawned in the blue depths of his eyes. “You think I’m a reporter,” he said.

“Are you?”

“No,” came the firm and immediate reply. And Holly believed David Goddard, though she couldn’t have explained why.

“You really want to bake fruitcake?” Did she sound eager? Lord, she hoped not.

David laughed and touched the tip of her nose with a sudsy index finger. “I really want to bake fruitcake.”

They finished cleaning up and David lingered while Holly put on her coat and reached for her purse.

“Was there something else?” she asked, trying to keep her voice level. For some reason Number Thirteen had a strange effect on her.

“Yes,” he answered. “I plan to walk you to your car. It’s late and I don’t want you to get mugged.”

Holly felt warm. Protected. Though she cherished her independence, it was nice to have someone looking out for her that way. “Thank you,” she said.

Her car was in a parking tower in the next block, isolated and in shadow. It probably wasn't safe, walking there alone, but she hadn't thought of that in her hurry to get to the store and conduct her class. She was glad David was with her.

He waited beside her sporty blue Toyota until she had found her keys, unlocked the door and slid behind the wheel. Toby's model airplane, a miniature Cessna flown by remote control, was on the seat, and she moved it in order to set down her purse and the small notebook she always carried.

"Is that yours?" David asked with interest, his eyes on the expensive toy.

"Actually—" Holly grinned "—it belongs to my nephew, though I do admit to flying it now and then up at Manito Park."

Again there was an unsettling alertness in David, as though he was cataloging the information for future reference. But why would he do such a thing?

"I have a plane like that," he said, and Holly ascribed her instant impression that he was lying to weariness and an overactive imagination.

David Goddard was a kind, attractive man, not a reporter or an FBI agent. She was going to have to stop letting her fancy take over at every turn or she would become paranoid. She said goodbye, started the car and backed out of her parking space.

There was a light snow falling and Holly drove up the steep South Hill at a cautious pace, her mind staying behind with David Goddard.

He could be a reporter, she thought distractedly as she navigated the slick, slushy streets. He could even be an FBI agent hoping to find Craig.

Holly laughed at herself and shook her head. "You'd better take up writing fiction, Llewellyn," she said aloud. "You've got the imagination for it."

But even as she pulled the car to a stop in her own driveway, even as she turned off the engine and gathered up her purse, her notebook and Toby's airplane from the seat, she couldn't shake the conviction that David Goddard was something more than a second-time law student who liked to cook.

Inside the house, Holly found her housekeeper and favorite babysitter working happily in front of the living room fireplace. Madge Elkins was a middle-aged woman, still trim and attractive, and her consuming passion was entering contests.

Now, she was busily writing her name and address on one plain white 3-by-5-inch piece of paper after another.

"What are you going to win this time, Madge?" Holly asked pleasantly, putting down the things she carried and getting out of her snow-dampened coat.

"A computer system," Madge replied, tucking a paper into an envelope and sealing it with a flourish. "Printer, software, monitor, the whole shebang."

Another person might have laughed, but Holly had known Madge for several years and in that time had seen her win more than one impressive prize in contests. A car, for instance, and a mink coat. "Is Toby sleeping?"

"Like the proverbial log," Madge answered, gathering a stack of envelopes, all addressed and stamped, into a stack. "You had a couple of phone calls—one from Skyler and one from a man who wouldn't leave his name."

Again Holly felt uneasy. "What did he say? The man who wouldn't give you his name, I mean?"

Madge shrugged, fussing with her contest paraphernalia. "Just that he'd call back. Skyler wants you to call him."

Holly was suddenly testy. If Skyler wanted to talk to her, he could darned well call back. She saw Madge to the door and then headed off toward the kitchen, planning to take one of her experiments out of the freezer and zap it in the microwave. She'd been running late before cooking class and hadn't had a chance to eat dinner.

Just as the bell on the microwave chimed, so did the telephone. Muttering, Holly dived for the receiver, afraid that the ringing of the upstairs extension would awaken Toby.

"Hello?" she demanded impatiently.

The voice on the other end of the line was haunted, shaky. "Sis?"

Holly's knees gave out and she sank into the chair at the desk. "Craig! Where are you? What—"

Her brother laughed nervously and the sound was broken and humorless, painful to hear. "Never mind where I am. You know I can't tell you that. Your phone might be bugged or something."

"Craig, don't be paranoid. Where are you?"

"Let's just say that this call isn't long-distance from Kabul. How's Toby?"

Holly deliberately calmed herself, measuring her tones. She was desperate not to panic Craig and cause him to hang up. "Toby is fine, Craig. How about you?"

"I'm all right. A little tired. More than a little broke."

Holly closed her eyes. So that was the reason for his call. Money. Why was she always surprised by that? "And you need a few bucks."

"You can spare it, can't you?" Craig sounded petulant, far younger than his thirty-six years. "You're a rich lady, sis. Didn't I see you on Ellen a few months ago?"

"Craig, come home. Please?"

He made a bitter, contemptuous sound. "And do what? Turn myself in, Holly? Give me a break —I'll be in prison for the rest of my life!"

"Maybe not. Craig, you're not well. You need help. And I promise that I'll stand by you."

"If you want to stand by me, little sister, just send a cashier's check to the usual place. And do it tomorrow if you don't want me to lose weight."

"Craig, listen to me—"

"Just send the money," he barked, and then the line went dead. Holly sat for five minutes, letting her ka-bob get cold in the microwave, holding the telephone receiver in her hand and just staring into space.

Finally she hung up, forced herself out of the chair, and took the ka-bob from the microwave. Although she ate, she tasted nothing at all. The ka-bobs she had taken such pride in making might as well have been filled with sawdust.

* * *

David Goddard locked the two Webkinz into the trunk of his rented car, shaking his head as he remembered the way he'd had to scramble for them. He sighed, then grinned. The kids would like them, so it had been worth a few scars.

On his way back to the parking garage's lonely elevator, he passed the place where Holly's Toyota had been. Instantly, his mind and all his senses brimmed with the scent and image of her.

He reached the elevator and punched the button with an annoyed motion of his right hand. Walt Zigman was full of sheep-dip if he thought that woman was capable of espionage. Holly Llewellyn was harried and she was haunted, but she was nobody's flunky.

The elevator ground to a stop; the doors swished open. David stepped inside and punched another button. He smiled to himself, thinking of the first fruitcake he'd ever put together in his life. It was a good thing no one had bothered to taste it; his cover would have been blown then and there. He'd been too lost in Holly Llewellyn's aquamarine eyes to concentrate on baking.

Baking. He rolled his eyes. For this I went to law school, he thought. For this I walked the first lady's dog.

He reached the first floor of the parking garage, where there was a wine shop and an old-fashioned ice-cream parlor. Ice cream, in this weather? David shivered and lifted his collar before stepping back outside, onto the street.

At the corner, he paused. Gung ho Christmas shoppers surged past him when the light changed, carrying him along. He went back into the department store where Holly had taught her class and

again braved the toy department. This time he bought an airplane, a model that would fly by means of a small hand-control unit. Manito Park, she'd said.

Half an hour later David entered his apartment, acquired only two days before, with mingled relief and reluctance. It was a small place, furnished in tacky plaids. The carpet was thin and the last tenant had owned a dog, judging by the oval stains by the door and in front of the fold-out sofa bed. At least he had a telephone. David went to it and, with perverse pleasure, punched out Walt Zigman's home number.

It was after one in the morning on the East Coast and Walt's voice was a groggy rumble. "Who the—"

"Goddard," David said crisply, grinning. "I said I'd report Monday. This is my report."

Zigman swore fiercely. "Goddard, did anybody ever tell you that you're a son of a—"

"I met her."

"Holly Llewellyn?" Walt's interest was immediate. Clearly, he was now wide-awake. "How did you manage that so fast?"

"Simple. I bought yesterday's paper and read the food section. There was a write-up about her new class."

"Her new class in what?"

David closed his eyes. There was no way out of this one. "Fruitcake," he answered reluctantly.

Zigman laughed. "Fitting," came his rapid-fire reply, just as David had expected.

"You're getting corny in your old age, Walt."

"Did you find out anything?"

David unzipped his jacket and flung it down on the couch. It covered the toys and the model airplane in its colorful box—he'd be up half the night assembling that sucker. "Sure," he snapped. "She fed me grapes and poured out the whole sordid story of her life in the underworld."

"Don't be a smart—"

"I met her. That's all. But I can tell you this much, Walt—she's no traitor. I'm wasting my time here."

"You're getting paid for it. Keep your eye on the ball, Goddard. When it's time for you to come back to D.C. and follow the new first lady around, I'll let you know."

This time it was David who swore. "Tell me, Walt," he began dryly, "does she have a dog?"

"Three of them," said Walt with obnoxious satisfaction. "By the time the new first family takes up residence, you'll be back on good old Pennsylvania Avenue, passing out poochie treats."

"You're funny as hell, you know that? In fact, why don't you take your goddamned job and—"

"Goddard, Goddard," Walt reprimanded in his favorite fatherly tone. "Calm down, I was just kidding you, that's all. You're a damned good agent."

Agent. If he hadn't felt like screaming swearwords, David would have laughed. "I didn't work my way through law school so that I could walk dogs, Walt."

"You really are unhappy, aren't you?"

"In a word, yes."

"We've been through this before."

"Yeah. Good night, Walt."

"Goddard!"

David hung up.

After a few minutes he hoisted himself up off the foldout couch, dug the stuffed animals out from under his coat and set them on the scarred counter that separated his living room–bedroom from the cubicle the landlady called a kitchen.

Thinking of his nieces and how they were going to enjoy the Webkinz, he began to feel better.

Presently, David took a TV dinner out of the tiny freezer above his refrigerator and shoved it into the doll-sized oven. While it was cooking, he stripped off his clothes, went into the bathroom and

wedged himself into a shower designed for a midget. After drying off with one of the three scratchy towels the landlady had seen fit to lend him, he went back to the living room and dug his robe out of a suitcase. Someday, he promised himself, he was going to write a book about the glamorous life of a Secret Service agent.

After consuming the TV dinner, he set about putting the model airplane together. It was after midnight when he finally gave up, washed the glue from his fingers, folded out the sofa bed and collapsed, falling into an instant sleep.

3

It was very bad luck that, after a quick visit to her bank that bleak Tuesday morning, Holly encountered David in the neighborhood branch of the post office. Or was it luck?

Holly looked at the carefully wrapped parcel in his arms and decided he was only mailing the Webkinz he'd bought the night before to his nieces. No doubt he lived nearby and it made sense that he would be here.

"Don't you have classes today?" she asked as they waited in line, stiff pleasantries already exchanged.

David smiled wanly. "One o'clock," he answered. He hadn't looked at the address on the envelope Holly carried, as far as she could tell, but she held it against her coat all the same.

Soon enough, it was Holly's turn at the window; she laid the envelope addressed to Craig's go-between girlfriend on the counter and asked that it be registered. While she filled out the form and paid the small fee, David had ample opportunity to study the address, but there was no helping that. She couldn't very well turn around and say, "Please don't look at this envelope. I'm sending money to my brother, who is a fugitive, you see, and there is a chance that you might be a reporter or even an FBI agent." So she said nothing.

"See you tonight?" David asked in a deep quiet voice as she turned away from the window to leave.

Holly hadn't even thought about the classes; she'd been too intent on getting that cashier's check sent off to Craig. "Tonight," she confirmed, but her mind was on the letter she had just mailed. It would reach its destination, Los Angeles, within a day or so. Had she done the wrong thing by making it easier for Craig to keep on running? She knew she had.

She would have left then, but David caught her arm in one hand and stayed her. "Are you all right?" he asked, ignoring the impatient post-office clerk, who was waiting to weigh and stamp the package he still held.

Holly nodded quickly and then fled. In her car, she let her forehead rest against the steering wheel for a moment before starting the engine and driving away. As she pulled into a supermarket parking lot a few minutes later, she was still trembling. She loved Craig; he was her brother. But she almost wished the FBI would catch him. That way there wouldn't be any more lying, any more hiding, any more guilt.

She got out of the car, locking it behind her, and went into the supermarket. Think about the couscous you've got to test today, she told herself. Think about the spices you'll need. Don't think about Craig and especially don't think about David Goddard. It was a coincidence that he was in the post office just when you were. It was a coincidence!

That seemed unlikely, but by the time she had chosen a cart and gotten out her shopping list, Holly had convinced herself that she was being fanciful again. Paranoid, like Craig.

* * *

He was wearing a navy blue football jersey with white numbers, jeans and polished leather boots. Holly, exhausted from a day of making couscous over and over again, gave herself a mental shake. What did she care what David Goddard wore, for heaven's sake?

Her beautiful aquamarine eyes looked hollow and smudges of fatigue and worry darkened the flawless skin beneath. David ached for her. Things were going to get worse, maybe a lot worse, for Holly Llewellyn before they got better.

If they ever got better.

Again he lingered, quietly helping her with the mess left behind by thirteen people struggling with a complicated German recipe. I'll have to go through this eight more times, Holly thought dismally. All the rest of this week. All of next week.

"Coffee?" David asked, drying his hands on one of the pristine towels provided by the store.

Holly found the idea oddly appealing, considering that, on at least one level, she was afraid of David Goddard. "I don't know, I..."

"Please?"

She felt the pull of his blatant masculinity and tried to field it with words. "You didn't take your fruitcake home last night," she said. "The janitor must have thrown it away."

David folded his arms and arched one eyebrow. He saw through what she was doing; she just knew it. "I threw it away myself," he replied, watching her. "I was afraid you might taste it and flunk me on the spot. Now, are we going for coffee or not?"

Holly couldn't help the nervous, weary chuckle that escaped her. "I'll make you a cup at my place." Now what made her say that? She never brought men to her house; only Skyler came there and he usually invited himself.

"Great," agreed the alarming David Goddard before she could take back the offer. "I'll follow you in my car."

Holly put on her coat, thinking that the kitchen table at home was still littered with reference books and parts of the manuscript Elaine had been indexing all day. The remains of that day's couscous experiments probably covered the counters, since Madge wasn't supposed to clean until the next morning; tonight she was only babysitting.

Reaching the parking garage, Holly was jarred to find that David's car was next to her own. Not for the first time, she had the unsettling feeling that he always knew where she was and what she was doing. But that was silly. He was a gentleman, that was all. A rare enough animal these days.

"You wanted to make sure I didn't get mugged," she guessed distractedly as he unlocked the door of a small, ordinary brown sedan.

David executed a teasing salute, but Holly was looking at his other hand. The car keys he held were affixed to a chain bearing the insignia of a nationally known rental agency. He rented his car? That seemed odd, just as the vehicle itself was odd, unsuited to him in a myriad of vague ways.

Puzzled, Holly got into her own car, started the ignition and, doubts notwithstanding, led the way to her sizable "cottage" on Spokane's quietly elegant South Hill.

"You rent your car," she said the moment they were in her living room. Not "welcome to my house," not "take off your coat," but "you rent your car." Holly felt stupid.

"Yes," David confessed readily. "Mine is in the shop."

Of course, Holly thought, but she was still bothered on a subliminal, barely discernible level. She drew a deep breath and forced herself to smile. "About that coffee I offered. This way to the kitchen."

David followed her across the shadowy living room, lit only by the dying fire in the hearth, and even though he was walking behind her, she was aware that he was taking in a tremendous amount of information just by looking around.

"Be prepared for a mess," she chimed, to cover her uneasiness. "My assistant and I spent the day making couscous."

They entered the kitchen and Holly stopped so swiftly that David nearly collided with her from behind; she felt the hard wall of his body touch her and glance quickly away.

Madge was at the sink, just finishing an impromptu cleaning detail, but her presence wasn't what caught Holly so off guard. Skyler was sitting at the table, sipping coffee. Why hadn't she noticed his car outside?

He looked up and there was a challenge in his brown eyes as they assessed David Goddard. "I don't believe we've met," he said coldly, rising from the bench at Holly's table to glare at David.

Skyler was acting like a jealous husband and it infuriated Holly, but before she could say anything at all David crossed the room and extended his hand to Skyler.

"David Goddard," he said in crisp introduction.

Madge took in the scene with bright, interested eyes, but did not say anything. Neither did Holly, who was too taken aback by the intangible storm that was suddenly raging in her quiet, cozy kitchen.

"Skyler Hollis," came the grudging response.

David took in Skyler's sleek blond hair, elegant green sweater and custom-made slacks in one swift, indigo sweep. "Did you ever appear in GQ magazine?" he asked.

Madge made a chortling sound and turned back to the sink. Holly rolled her eyes heavenward and then stomped over to the counter, where the coffeemaker waited.

"I own a stereo store," Skyler announced, either missing the reference to his wholesome good looks or choosing to ignore it. "What do you do, Goddard?"

David, Holly saw in a quick glance over one shoulder, gave a slow smile. "I'm learning to make fruitcake."

"Fruitcake," Skyler huffed, scowling. "I meant, what do you do for a living?"

"I'm a door-to-door salesman," was the icy and totally false reply. "I sell air fresheners. You know, those little bowls with the flowers in them—"

"Here's your coffee," Holly broke in archly, setting David's cup down on the just-cleared trestle table with a resounding thump. "Skyler, do you need a refill?"

Skyler shot her a look and carried his cup to the sink, where he thrust it into the hands of a sedately amused Madge Elkins. "No!" he barked.

"Am I breaking up a meaningful relationship?" David asked, lifting his cup in an unsuccessful attempt to hide a grin.

Skyler's look darkened; he leaned back against the counter and stubbornly folded his arms.

Holly was embarrassed and exasperated. "Skyler Hollis, will you just sit down, please? David is—"

"I know what David is," Skyler snapped before he stomped out of the kitchen. Seconds later, the front door slammed.

"I'm sorry," David said.

"I could swear I saw smoke coming out of that man's ears," Madge put in, receiving a swift look from Holly for her trouble.

The housekeeper smiled and shrugged, then took her leave without waiting for an introduction to David Goddard.

They were alone. Holly sighed heavily and fixed her gaze on her own cup of coffee.

"Are you in love with Skyler—what's his name? Hollis?"

The directness of the question brought Holly's gaze shooting up from the dark brew in her cup to David's face. "In love with him?" she echoed stupidly.

"You do realize, I hope, that if you marry that guy your name will be Holly Hollis?"

Holly burst out laughing. "You know, I never thought of that. I guess I'd just have to go on calling myself Llewellyn."

David's impossibly blue eyes were filled with gentle humor. "I really am sorry if I caused any trouble, Holly. If you want me to apologize to Hollis, I will."

"No," Holly said quickly. Perhaps too quickly. "Skyler had no right to act that way," she added moments later, in more carefully measured tones. "He has no claim on me and if I want to bring a friend home for coffee..."

"Is that what I am, Holly? Your friend?"

Holly clasped her hands together in her lap. She was twenty-seven years old, an adult, but she suddenly felt like a fifteen-year-old on her first date. "I hope so," she said softly.

Graciously, David changed the subject. The muscles in his forearms worked as he reached for the sugar bowl and added a spoonful to his coffee. "You aren't even thirty yet, unless I miss my guess," he said. "How did you happen to accomplish so much by such a tender age?"

Holly was comfortable with the subject of her career, at least. She pushed aside the strange suspicions she had about this man who sat across the table from her and allowed herself to forget, for a little while, her worries about Craig and her impossible relationship with Skyler Hollis. "I was lucky. My grandmother wrote cookbooks, you know, and she taught me a lot. And I worked hard."

"You must have spent a lot of time with your grandmother," David remarked, watching her.

"My brother and I lived with her, along with our mother. Our father was killed in an accident when I was seven," Holly blurted out in a rush. There, she thought. If he asks about Craig, I'll know something is wrong.

She held her breath.

"Your mother and grandmother are both gone now?" David asked gently.

Holly was unaccountably relieved, though her throat tightened when she answered. "Grandmother passed away, yes. Mother married a missionary doctor and we don't see her very often."

David's rugged face seemed to grow taut for a moment. "You've never been married?"

Holly shook her head. "I almost was, once." Strange. She could think of Ben now, without hurting. "What about you?"

David laughed, but there was no amusement in the sound or in the ink-blue flash of his eyes. Holly knew before he spoke that he'd once been hurt, and very badly. "I got married during my second year of law school," he said. "Marleen was a graduate student in Animal Sciences."

There was anger as well as pain in his voice. Holly deduced that Marleen had not died, as Ben had. "And?" she prompted.

"And she's now in Borneo studying chimps. She finds them endlessly fascinating and far less demanding, I would imagine, than a husband."

The bitterness in his tone stung Holly profoundly. David still loved Marleen despite his anger; she was sure of it. And for some reason, that hurt. "I'm sorry," she said, getting up hastily to go to the coffeemaker and bring the decanter back to the table, where she refilled her own cup and then David's.

"Don't be," David replied succinctly. "Marleen is happy."

But what about you? Holly wanted to ask, though, of course, she didn't dare. She put sugar into her coffee—something she never did—and kept her eyes averted.

"You said you were almost married once. What happened, Holly?"

Holly's throat constricted again. "My fiancé was killed," she managed to say. "He was working on a construction project in Alaska and...and he fell."

"You loved him a lot, didn't you?"

Holly nodded. "I wanted to die, too, at the time. And I was so angry."

There was a short, companionable silence. The coffeemaker made gurgling sounds and the fire crackled on the kitchen hearth. David's hand came, strong and warm, across the tabletop, to shelter Holly's hand.

It was then that Toby shuffled into the kitchen, looking sleepy and rumpled in his cherished Spider-Man pajamas. "Is it time to go to school, Mom?" he asked, befuddled.

Holly's eyes darted involuntarily to David's face, then shifted to her nephew. "No, sweetheart, it's still night. Go back to bed."

Toby gave David a curious look. "Who's that?" he demanded.

"This is Mr. Goddard, Toby. He's a friend of mine, a student in my cooking class."

Toby assessed David again. "You cook?" he wanted to know.

David laughed and the odd tension Holly had felt was broken. "Not very well, slugger," he retorted kindly, "but I'm learning."

"I'm not going to learn," Toby said firmly, drawing just a bit nearer to David, sensing, as Holly did, that this was a man who liked children.

"Oh, yeah? Why not?" David asked. And he sounded truly interested, not patronizing. "Don't you think men should cook?"

Toby shrugged, not exactly sure what he thought. "Mom cooks enough stuff. Do you think men should cook?"

David thought. "Yeah," he answered presently.

"Why?"

"Because they get hungry."

Toby grinned. "Wanna see my airplane?"

David looked to Holly for her permission; she liked him for doing that. She nodded.

"Sounds interesting," the man said to the boy, and then they were off to Toby's room to inspect the radio-controlled Cessna. The sound of their retreating voices gave Holly an odd feeling of well-being. Which was immediately spoiled by the ringing of the telephone.

She answered with a brisk and biting, "Yes?"

"Who is that Goddard guy?" Skyler demanded without preamble.

Holly drew a deep breath, then let it out again. Control, she must maintain her control. "David is a friend of mine, Skyler." Sugary acid slipped past her resolve, dripping from every word. "I am allowed to have friends, aren't I?"

"Not men!"

"Good night, Skyler," Holly sang, and then she set the receiver firmly back in its cradle.

Seconds later, the telephone rang again.

"Hello?" Holly said sweetly.

"Don't you ever hang up on me again, Holly Llewellyn!" Skyler shouted.

Of course, Holly had no choice but to do exactly that. She then adjusted her answering machine to pick up on the first ring. If Skyler chose to call again, he would be cordially invited to leave his name, number and message. If he felt called upon to deliver a lecture, he would get only an electronic whirring sound in reply.

Holly was at the sink when David returned to the kitchen; though she didn't hear him, not consciously at least, she was aware of him in every sense. She stiffened as he came toward her, his boots making a melodic sound on the hard brick floor.

"Holly?"

She turned to face him. She couldn't keep her fingers from clenching the counter behind her.

David stopped, looking stricken. "You're afraid of me."

"Y-yes."

"Why?"

How could she explain, when she didn't understand it herself? She was afraid of David Goddard, and yet his nearness was causing every nerve ending in her body to jump and crackle like naked electrical wire. Not even Ben—tender, laughing, lost Ben—had ever affected her in quite that way.

"Holly?" he prompted.

Holly felt very silly and not a little old-maidish. She blushed and gave a nervous, shaky laugh. "It's not as though I think you're...I mean...I know you're not—"

He was closer now. Holly could feel the heat and the strength of him. He was not yet touching her, but God help her, she wanted him to. She wanted him to hold her and kiss her and— He did. He kissed her. He cupped his gentle, strong hands, one on each side of her flushed face, bent his head, and kissed her. His lips were soft and cautious, making no demands.

A strange warmth filled Holly, stabbing her in some places, soothing her in others. She trembled when his tongue persuaded her lips to part for him and she moaned at his thorough, masterful yet entirely tender conquering.

And his body was warm and hard against Holly's, pressing, igniting licking flames of unfamiliar, unexpected passion. It hadn't been like this with Ben, she reflected frantically. Not even when they actually made love.

David drew back suddenly, with an obvious effort. "I'd better leave," he said in a hoarse voice, his eyes not quite linking with Holly's.

She was wounded and still breathless. "David—"

At last he looked at her, and she saw anguish in the depths of his eyes, along with a cold, self-directed anger. "I'm sorry," he rasped, reaching for his jacket.

Holly wanted to cry. She wanted to laugh. She didn't know what she wanted to do, except make love to David Goddard and have him make love to her. And that wasn't possible, of course, because they'd only known each other for a day and because Toby was sleeping upstairs. "Don't be sorry. You didn't do anything wrong."

"Didn't I?" he asked, speaking more to himself, it seemed, than to Holly.

Holly couldn't believe the crazy things that were going on inside her, the aching, melting sensations. The howling hunger. And her breasts. Her breasts quivered with a need to be fondled, their tips still at eager attention. What was happening to her?

"Will you come and have dinner with Toby and me tomorrow night, David?" she heard herself ask.

A log fell in the fireplace, sparks snapping. The silence was terrible and so was Holly's suspense. Which would be worse: his refusal or his acceptance?

"Yes," he said finally, and with some reluctance. "I know better, but I'll do it."

"Seven?" Holly asked with a calmness that amazed her. "We could go on to class afterward."

David wasn't looking at her; it seemed that he couldn't. The telephone jangled but the answering machine picked up instantly. The silence was heavy, pulsing.

"Seven," he said hoarsely, and then he was leaving, striding away from Holly with determined motions.

After she'd heard the front door close and the engine of his car start up with a fierce, revving sound, she could move again. She locked the house and turned out the few lights that still burned, then made her way upstairs.

Her bed looked as it always had—the same Pennsylvania Dutch quilt covered the practical flannel sheets beneath. The same brass headboard glistened in the light from the lamp on her dresser. The same two pillows waited, neither having ever borne the weight of a man's head. Not Skyler's certainly. Not even Ben's.

The bed was unchanged, but Holly's feelings about sharing it were vastly different. Tonight it looked lonely and cold rather than spacious.

Shaking her head, she went into the small bathroom adjoining her room, washed her face, brushed her teeth, stripped off the black slacks and red sweater she had worn that night, and finally the wispy panties and bra underneath.

Holly stood naked before the full-length mirror on the back of her bedroom door. She saw a well-proportioned if unremarkable body, curved in some places, hollowed in others.

She permitted herself to remember that long-ago summer, between high school and college, when she and Ben had given in to the dizzying, constant demands of their youthful bodies. She had

not soared, as books and movies had led her to believe she would, but she had not been traumatized, either. Ben's lovemaking had been gentle and pleasant, if not truly fulfilling.

But now, as the result of one brief kiss, Holly knew that, with David Goddard, her body would respond with abandon. It would sing. It would quiver.

The prospect was completely alarming.

With flouncing motions, Holly stormed over to her dresser, wrenched open a drawer and pulled out a long T-shirt-style gown. She quickly put the garment on, as though that would dispel the crazy hungers, the yearnings, that had lain dormant until one particular man had kissed her.

Determinedly, she got into bed and settled into the warmth of the soft flannel sheets. Unable to sleep, she tossed this way and that, plumping her pillows, lying down and sitting back up again.

After almost twenty minutes of this, Holly faced a very disturbing fact. Sure as the sun would rise in the morning, sure as the December snows would fall, David Goddard was going to make love to her. It was inevitable; it was inescapable. The self-control she needed in order to feel strong and safe would desert her.

Tears burned in Holly's eyes and flowed down her cheeks. She would be changed forever and then she would be left because David was not what he seemed to be, not what he claimed to be.

All her instincts warned that this was true and yet she could feel herself sliding toward him, careening down some steep psychological hill. And there was nothing to grasp, nothing to break her fall.

She rolled over and sniffled, tucking both hands under her face the way she had as a little girl. Skyler. She would think of Skyler and everything would be all right.

What did Skyler look like? She couldn't remember. After dating the man for months, she couldn't remember!

"Oh, damn!" Holly cried into the quilt edge that was bunched in her hands. Again she tried to summon Skyler's face to her mind but it wouldn't come; instead, she saw David's dark hair, David's strong jawline, David's ferociously blue eyes.

"Who are you, David Goddard?" Holly wailed inwardly, her mind full of shimmering tangles of fear and joy, happiness and dread. Who are you?

Except for the wild, thunderous beating of her own heart, there was no answer.

4

David bent and tapped the side of the glass fishbowl with an impatient index finger. The two goldfish floated, one above the other, just staring at him, their shimmering fan-shaped tails barely moving.

"You guys are really boring, you know that?" he complained in an undertone. "I bought you to give this place some color and flash and what do you do? You just sit there, watching the world go by. Swim, dammit!"

The fish regarded him implacably, still hovering midway between the surface of the water and the bottom, with its blue rocks and shifting plastic fern and dime-store diver.

"No class," David grumbled, turning away and wrenching the damp sweatband from his forehead in one irritated movement.

Still breathing hard from his customary morning run, he stumbled into the bathroom and took a quick shower. Later, as he dried himself and dressed—in the living room, for God's sake—he wondered how the hell he was ever going to impress Holly Llewellyn with a place like this.

Draping a towel over his shoulders because his hair was still dripping wet, he took in the goldfish, the unmade sofa bed, the spots on the carpet. No class. Like those seventy-nine-cent goldfish, the place had no class.

The telephone rang and David, who had been indulging in a fanciful nostalgia for his real apartment in faraway Georgetown, was startled. He put images of good art, the hot tub in his bathroom and the ivory fireplace out of his mind as he lunged for the instrument.

"Goddard," he answered, and the long-distance buzz coming over the wire told him that he'd been right. This was his call from Washington.

"Zigman here," Walt replied. "The Bureau staked out the address in L.A., Goddard, but they must have muffed it somehow, because Llewellyn didn't bite."

David had a headache. He had hoped the FBI would be able to collar Llewellyn immediately; like a child about to have a sliver pulled, he'd wanted the whole thing to be over with. "He was an agent himself once. He probably knows the signs."

"Yeah."

"Does this mean I can drop the case and come back to Washington?" Part of David hoped it did, while another part wanted to watch Holly Llewellyn forever.

"Hell, no. The little lady sent him a letter, didn't she? You saw it with your own eyes, Goddard. That means she's in fairly regular contact with our boy, doesn't it?"

David resented the "little lady" reference. Holly was so much more and the phrase seemed to demean her. "Holly is a woman, Walt. With a brain."

Zigman's laugh traveled three thousand miles to annoy David as instantly as if he'd been in the same room. "Goddard, you are going soft. Don't get to liking this broad too much. She's in line for an indictment herself, you know."

"For what?" David snapped.

"Christ," Zigman swore impatiently. "For aiding and abetting a fugitive. Are you going to wake the hell up, Goddard, or do I have to send somebody else out there to handle this thing?"

David bit back all the fury that surged like bile into his throat. He'd never been pulled from a detail in all the time he'd worked for the service, and he wasn't about to start now. Besides, he couldn't be sure how another agent would manage the situation. And it was delicate. Holly's emotional state was delicate. "I can handle it," he said.

"Wouldn't have sent you if I didn't think you could," Walt replied in smug tones. His cigar stub was probably bobbing up and down in his mouth, and David wished he could be there to squash it into the man's teeth. "Keep a sharp eye out, Goddard. Llewellyn could turn up there. If he does, I want him busted. On the spot."

The thought made David half-sick, and he closed his eyes. His wet hair was dripping cold trails down his neck and he began drying it with one end of the towel. He could imagine the look on Holly's face if he casually wrestled Llewellyn to the floor in her living room. "Yeah."

"Can you handle him by yourself or do you want a detail? The Bureau has an office in Spokane __"

"You keep the Bureau the hell out of this, Walt! I mean it!" The outburst was too sudden, too emotional. David drew a deep breath and stopped toweling his hair to sigh. "Llewellyn is a former agent," he reiterated a moment later, when he could speak more moderately. "If he sees a bunch of three-piece suits and crew cuts watching his sister's house, how do you think he'll react?"

"He'll split, just like he did in L.A."

"Right." David sighed again, running one hand through his hair. "Let me handle this, will you, Walt? If I need the Bureau, I can always call them in."

"All right," Walt agreed in his gruff, wry way. "But you remember why you're there. It isn't to make fruitcake, Goddard. Or time."

David's headache was infinitely worse. "Yeah," he agreed after a long, long time. "I'll remember."

"Good," came the brisk reply. "When do you see the broad again?"

Enough was enough. He'd let that word pass once; he couldn't do it again. "Don't call her that again, Walt. If you do, your nose will be where your right ear is now. I'll see to it."

Zigman swore and rang off.

David held the receiver in his hand for a long time, doing some swearing of his own. Craig Llewellyn was going to show up in Spokane, he could feel it in his bones. It was only a matter of time. Holly was going to be destroyed by the inevitable arrest, by David's deception.

Why the hell had he accepted the dinner invitation, dammit? Suppose there was a replay of that episode when he'd kissed her, in the kitchen? What then? David had spent most of the night reliving that ill-guided indulgence and imagining all the sweet pleasures that could have come after it.

He shook his head, trying to dislodge the thought, but his body recollected perfectly. Heatedly. He'd had his share of women, of course, but none had ever made him feel quite the way Holly did. She could reach past the hard finish painted over him by his Secret Service training. She could so easily reach past it.

Maybe Walt Zigman was right; maybe he was losing his ability to be objective. Maybe he was getting soft.

David allowed himself one rueful, humorless chuckle. Soft was definitely not the word. Not where Holly Llewellyn was concerned.

* * *

The day was a full and busy one, but it took forever to pass, all the same. Instead of thinking about her newspaper column, as she should have been, every turn of Holly's mind seemed to lead to David Goddard.

Elaine was gathering together the leaves of the manuscript she had been working on, preparing to leave. "What time is the hunk coming over?" she asked.

Color leaped into Holly's cheeks and pounded there. "What hunk?" she asked tightly, a little annoyed that Elaine could read her preoccupation so easily.

"Don't give me that. I'm talking about your date with David Goddard and you know it. What are you serving? What are you wearing? Do you want me to take Toby home with me for the evening?"

"Once your questions start coming, there's no stopping them, is there?" Holly countered, still flushed. She took the disk containing her pitiful effort at a cooking column from the computer and shut off the machine with an angry flourish.

Elaine was not intimidated, but she did back off just a little. "I could take Toby home," she offered again. "Roy and I enjoy him so much, and—"

"Toby is staying right here!"

"Why? Do you need him as a buffer, Holly?"

Holly had been halfway out of her chair; now she sagged back into it. "I wouldn't use Toby that way, Elaine," she said, but the doubt in her voice bothered her.

"It's all right, you know, to want time alone with an attractive man. It's not going to scar Toby's psyche or anything."

In spite of herself, Holly chuckled. Elaine did have a way of lightening a situation. "Last night," she confessed after a few moments of reflection, "David kissed me."

"So?"

"So it was weird, Elaine. The earth moved. Bells chimed. All the corny stuff you see in movies and read about in books—it all happened."

Elaine beamed. "That's great!"

"It is not," Holly insisted, her face set and serious again. "It's terrible. That man is dangerous, Elaine."

"Dangerous? Why?"

Now Holly felt foolish and she couldn't quite bring herself to meet her friend's eyes. "He's not like Skyler. He's—"

"Thank God for small favors."

Holly was putting her computer disk into its paper folder, turning off the printer, clearing her desk. Anything to keep from looking directly at Elaine. “You don’t like Skyler, do you? I can understand why Toby doesn’t, but you should.”

“He’s all right,” Elaine conceded with a heavy and somewhat dramatic sigh. “It’s just that he’s so, well, you know, safe. Boring.”

“He’s reliable, that’s what he is,” defended Holly. “I might marry him.”

“If you do, you’re crazy. You don’t love Skyler, Holly.”

“How do you know?” Holly demanded. But she wished with all her heart that she could love Skyler, truly want him. Even need him. It made her mad that she couldn’t.

“If you loved him, ninny-brain, you wouldn’t be all hot and bothered because David Goddard is coming to dinner. You haven’t thought straight all day.”

Holly slumped. “I’m not ‘hot and bothered’!” she lied in a plaintive wail.

Elaine only laughed. “Let me take Toby home with me. Please? I promise to give him the most nutritionally balanced TV dinner in the freezer, and I’ll bring him home after your class lets out.”

Holly hadn’t even thought about the class. Dear Lord, that was one more thing to add to the worries she already had, like what she was going to serve David Goddard for dinner and what she was going to wear. She wanted to look attractive, but not predatory....

It was as though, by their long and friendly association, Elaine had learned to look right inside Holly’s brain and read her every thought. “Wear something sexy. Leopard skin, maybe.”

Holly laughed. “Leopard skin? This is a quiet, casual dinner, not a movie about barbarians! And I have no desire to look ‘sexy.’”

“Pity,” Elaine said, looking entirely serious. “A woman ought to wear something sort of Frederick’s-of-Hollywoodish once in a while.”

Holly only shook her head, amazed. She wanted to ask if Elaine herself ever wore such garments but didn’t quite dare.

“Hey, Tobe!” Elaine yelled, shaking off the look of deep thought, beaming again. “Come on! You’re coming home with me tonight!”

The TV, blaring in the family room, went silent. The next sound, in fact, was a little boy’s whoop of delight. Toby bounded into the room, already struggling into his jacket, his face shining. “Do you think Uncle Roy will play Donkey Kong with me?”

Elaine gave the child a conspiratorial smile. “Yes. But you must promise to let him beat you at least once.”

Toby squared his small shoulders manfully and looked charitably reluctant. “Oh, all right. But just once.”

There was a whoosh of goodbyes, Toby planting a quick, wet kiss on Holly’s cheek, and then a swirl of cold air when the back door was opened. And they were gone.

Holly sighed, and as an aching sense of loneliness grasped her, she took herself firmly in hand. “Frederick’s of Hollywood!” she muttered irritably as she went to the freezer to take out falafel and couscous experiments from last week’s chapter of her new cookbook.

She slammed the foil-wrapped packages down on the countertop, near the sink. If David Goddard didn’t like eating experiments, the heck with him. What did he think this place was, a restaurant? Why, if he said one single word, she would...she would...

Holly sighed. Who was she kidding? She put the foil packages back into the freezer and took out the special beef stroganoff she’d been saving in case Skyler’s parents decided to come to Spokane on one of their infrequent visits.

After straightening the kitchen and throwing together a green salad, she raced upstairs to take a shower and exchange her jeans and madras shirt for something more—more what? Sexy?

Still dripping from her shower, wrapped only in a bright pink bath sheet, Holly shoved the white cashmere suit back into the closet. It was too clingy, that was all. Entirely too clingy.

She brought out a flowing blue dress, interwoven with tiny silver threads, that she'd picked up in Iran only the month before. Even then she'd had no idea where she would wear such a thing, but she hadn't been able to resist the gown's quiet elegance.

She returned that garment to the closet, too. After all, it had that deep neckline and it was too formal. Whatever she chose would have to do for the cooking class she had to teach after dinner, she reminded herself.

Finally, Holly settled for tailored black slacks and a soft mulberry sweater. Not exactly suited to making Belgian fruitcake, she thought, but at least she would look halfway decent when David arrived and she could always push up the sleeves later, when it was time to conduct her class.

Hurriedly, she brushed her hair, applied her makeup and brushed her hair again. She allowed herself one cool misting of the expensive perfume she'd once bought on a dash through the Paris airport.

When the rites of womanhood had all been performed, she stood back from the mirror to look at herself. Her lipstick was crooked, and she wiped it off and reapplied it, this time using a lip liner. "Color inside the lines, now," she mocked herself.

David arrived promptly at seven o'clock, just as they'd agreed. Not a moment before and not a moment after. Something about this small precision bothered Holly, but she pushed the feeling aside.

There was a fire crackling in the living room fireplace and the table in the rarely used dining room had been set with pretty china and her grandmother's silver. David looked impossibly handsome in his gray slacks, creamy white sweater, and navy blue jacket. No indeed, this was no time for silly doubts.

"Come in," she said, stepping back.

David smiled, but the look in his eyes was weary. Perhaps he'd had a hard day at law school. He extended a bottle of wine and then took off his coat. "Where's Toby?" he asked, and the expression in his indigo-blue eyes was suddenly expectant.

Holly was a bit embarrassed. Now she was going to have to say that Toby was spending the evening at Elaine and Roy's, and it would look as though she'd been setting the scene for a steamy seduction. Why, oh, why had she lighted the fire and set the table so carefully? "He had a previous engagement," she said.

"Good," David replied smoothly.

"Good?" Holly echoed, confused.

David laughed. "A man's got to have a social life," he answered, and Holly remained off-balance because she didn't know whether he meant that Toby needed a social life or he did.

They ate in the dining room, with the candles lit—Holly had been too shy to light them, so David had done it—with the wine and the good china and the glint of the aged silver flatware. Holly hadn't entertained a man in this particular way in as long as she could remember, and she was uncomfortable and distracted, not knowing what to do or how to act. The fact that she silently flogged herself for being silly didn't help; she still felt like a fifteen-year-old about to go to her first prom.

"Do we have time to sit by the fire for a while," David asked easily, setting his wineglass aside, "or are we off to tackle the mysteries of Belgian rum sauce?"

Holly laughed, even though the thought of sitting in front of a romantic winter fire with a man —with this man—patently made her nervous. "We have a few minutes."

He stood up, but instead of coming around to pull back Holly's chair, as Skyler would have done, he started gathering up dirty dishes. Holly was disappointed for a moment, but then she decided that one act was as considerate as the other and began to help.

Holly waited, every nerve screaming, for him to kiss her. He didn't do it while they were clearing the table, of course, and in the kitchen he kept the dishwasher door between them as they put the china and silverware inside. Was he shy or something?

Holly's cheeks stung with color. Elaine was right, she castigated herself angrily, you're hot and bothered!

Once the dishwasher was churning away, David caught Holly's hand casually in his and led her back to the living room as though it were his house. As though they had all the time in the world.

"Maybe we shouldn't—" she sputtered, lifting his hand so that she could peer at the watch on her own wrist. "It's getting late—"

David sat down on one of the soft Indian pillows facing the fireplace and pulled Holly after him. She tumbled against him, and her heart lurched into her throat at even that small contact, driving the breath out of her lungs and causing a curious ringing sound in her ears.

She settled herself primly on the other pillow, careful not to look at him. She knew that she would see the familiar, quiet amusement shining in his navy blue eyes.

"Holly."

She swallowed, knotting her hands together in her lap. "What?"

"Look at me."

She looked at him because doing otherwise would have been foolish and petulant. Even infantile. "So, I'm looking already," she said.

He laughed and that was at variance with the look in his eyes which, instead of humor, betrayed a reluctance of some kind. A hurtful reluctance.

Holly was stung. David wanted to resist her as badly as she wanted to resist him! Wasn't she attractive? Did he find her— David bent his head and kissed her, and an almost inaudible groan rumbled up through his chest and brushed against her lips. He was only nibbling at her mouth, tasting it as though it were a delicacy to be savored. He muttered something, and to a dazed Holly, it sounded as though he'd said, "Why?"

She couldn't think of that now. She couldn't think of anything except the havoc that reluctant kiss was causing inside her. She shivered and placed her hands on his strong shoulders, where they moved of their own accord to caress his neck.

He kissed her in earnest then, his tongue exploring the sweet depths of her mouth, enlisting her own to respond in quick, fevered parries. His hand moving gently up and down the length of her thigh caused the flesh hidden beneath to quiver.

Holly wanted to die and she wanted to live forever. She wanted to stop and she drew him nearer, allowing him to shift her body and his own so that they were both prone before the crackling fire.

His hand left her thigh to move up over her hip, underneath her soft mulberry sweater, over the flesh at her waist, over her rib cage. He freed her from his sorcerer's kiss to nibble gently, provocatively, at her earlobe and her neck.

"I want you, Holly," he said in that forthright way of his, his voice a gruff caress against the base of her neck.

Holly shivered, even though there was a heat pulsing inside her that made her long to fling off her clothes. "David, I...we..."

"I know," he chuckled, and his hand had found the catch at the front of her bra. There was a feeling of sweet, wanton freedom as her breasts were released, and then his fingers were soothing her, searching out a nipple that already awaited them at strictest attention. "Tell me to stop."

If Holly hadn't been so bedazzled, she would have slapped him. "I can't..." she admitted, her words falling away to a groan as he found that arching nipple and rolled it gently between his fingers.

He drew her sweater slowly upward, his hand cupping the captured breast, shaping it for conquering. When he bent his head to lave the throbbing peak softly with his tongue, Holly gasped with pleasure and arched her back in reflexive surrender.

"We...can't do this..." he managed to say as his mouth blazed a path from the conquered breast to the one that awaited sweet defeat. "We can't..."

"I know," Holly agreed. But when his tongue touched the untended nipple, she knotted her hands in David's rich, mink-soft hair and held him close.

Holly Llewellyn was to wonder many times, sometimes with regret and sometimes with relief, what would have happened if the telephone hadn't rung when it did. Its cold, jarring jangle made David thrust himself away from her as if in fury.

Stung and shaken and still needing, Holly hastily fixed her bra and stumbled off at a half jog to answer.

"Hello!" she gasped, winded and embarrassed. She could see David from where she stood and he was just staring into the fire, his broad back rigid.

"Sis?"

Holly wanted to cry. Not now, she thought frantically. Oh, God, not now! She lowered her voice. "Hello, Craig."

"'Hello, Craig'? Is that all you've got to say?"

Holly stiffened, very conscious of the man sitting before the fireplace. Her breasts were still heavy and warm with passion, their peaks moist. She tried to breathe properly. "What should I say, Craig?" she asked petulantly, forgetting this time to keep her tone at whisper level.

"I tried to pick up the money," Craig rushed on angrily, frantically. "Guess what? There were crew cuts all around Cindy's place!"

Holly trembled, then drew a deep breath. "Crew cuts?" she repeated, confused. David's back stiffened almost imperceptibly, or was that a trick of the firelight? He didn't appear to be making the slightest effort to hear what was being said, but appearances could be deceiving.

"FBI agents. Holly, they were everywhere! Did you turn me in?"

"Of course I didn't!" At this outburst, David turned his head, assessing Holly with a look she could read all too well: it was full of stark, angry pity.

"Just listen," Craig rasped. God in heaven, how desperate, how hunted, he sounded. "I'm going to need money, Holly, and if I have to come there and get it, I will!"

"You can't do that! Toby would be—"

"Toby. Always Toby. Don't you ever think about anybody besides that kid, Holly? What about me? I'm your brother, remember?" Craig stopped to draw a harsh breath and then began to cough. It was a frightening sound.

"You're sick!" Holly exclaimed, watching David. He had turned his eyes from her again and was now gazing into the fire, one knee drawn up under his chin. "Craig, please—turn yourself in. They won't hurt you, I swear it!"

"I'll call again tomorrow!" Craig roared impatiently, and then he slammed the receiver down so hard that Holly flinched. She was on the verge of tears when she placed her own receiver in its cradle.

The silence in the living room was complete, except for the snapping merriment of the fire. David looked at Holly but did not rise from his seat near the hearth. Holly closed her eyes momentarily, in a vain effort to shut out the reality of Craig and his problems, then drew a deep breath to steady herself.

"Y-you're a lawyer," she began, speaking as casually as she could. "If someone is wanted by the law, and another person...a person close to them...knows where they are and sometimes gives them money..."

David rose slowly to his feet with the grace of a predatory animal, but he kept his distance. And it was more than a physical distance. "Then that person is guilty of aiding and abetting a fugitive," he said evenly. "They could, under some circumstances, be imprisoned."

Holly trembled and bit her lower lip. When she closed her eyes against the possibility, her already precarious balance was affected and she swayed. David was instantly clasping her shoulders, holding her upright. And while there was a gentleness in his touch, there was little sympathy.

"I can help you, Holly," he said hoarsely. "If you'll just allow yourself to trust me, I swear I can help you."

Holly longed to pour out the whole ugly story, to tell him how scared and confused Craig was, to explain that he hadn't meant to do all those awful things. But she didn't dare. The fact that she had almost given herself to David moments before, making a joyous offering of something she held dear, changed nothing.

David Goddard was still a stranger.

5

The rest of that week was dismal for Holly. She couldn't concentrate on her work and she was short not only with Elaine but with Toby. When Skyler called, offering an innocent-sounding invitation to lunch, she all but bit his head off.

In the evenings, of course, she taught her cooking class, and David was always there, always attentive—and never friendly. He might have been a total stranger, answering what casual questions Holly could contrive to ask with flat, clipped banalities. Not once did he stay to help with the cleanup, as he had those first two nights, and he certainly made no effort to contact her outside of class.

Holly was devastated and she was scared, too. Craig had nearly been caught in Los Angeles. How could the FBI have known where he would be if not for David's seeing the address on that letter she'd mailed? And that night, that shattering night when they had almost made love, David had said, "I can help you, Holly. If you'll just allow yourself to trust me. I swear I can help you."

He knew; she was sure he knew. And as far as Holly was concerned, that was reason enough not to see him again. Ever.

Except that she needed him, wanted him. Perhaps, though she couldn't often bring herself to examine the possibility rationally, she was even beginning to love David Goddard.

On Friday night, Skyler called to ask her out for dinner and a movie. Holly refused, pleading a headache, and went to bed early, setting the answering machine because Skyler had a tendency to be persistent. The telephone rang twice during the night, and a sleepless Holly timed the calls at eleven thirty-five and twelve-ten.

The next morning was one of those springlike days that sometimes creep into winter. Though there were still ragged patches of snow on the ground, the sun was bright and the sky was a painfully keen shade of blue.

The weather did much to bring Holly out of her doldrums, and to make up for some of the stresses of the past week, she suggested to a rather wan and distraught Toby that they take his airplane to Manito Park and fly it.

"I'm going to the Ice Capades this afternoon," Toby reminded his aunt, running his spoon glumly through the dish of oatmeal before him. "My whole class is going."

"I remember," Holly said softly. It hurt, this restraint between herself and Toby. It was a sad, pulsing ache. "You'll be back in plenty of time, I promise."

Toby brightened. "Okay," he chirped. "Let's hurry up with breakfast and go!"

His ebullience made Holly laugh, easing the bereft feeling inside her. "Let's do that. Be sure to wear your mittens because it's cold."

Toby nodded. As he passed Holly's desk, his oatmeal gleefully abandoned on the trestle table, he stopped. "Mom, there's messages on the machine. The light is flashing."

Holly glanced uneasily toward the telephone. Between Craig and Skyler, it was getting so that she didn't like to answer the thing at all. It wasn't likely that David had left those messages, she told herself, and she was in no mood to hear a lecture from Skyler or a lot of pathos from Craig. "I'll listen later. Right now, I'm in the mood to fly your Cessna."

"Me, too!" Toby agreed, and he was off again, in search of the warmer clothes he would need for a morning in the park.

Perhaps too conscientious for her own good, Holly went to the answering machine and frowned down at the little red light blinking so industriously, her finger poised over the "play" button. What if the calls had been from Craig and he was in terrible trouble? What if—

She stopped herself, sighed and drew back her hand. It could wait. Whatever it was, it could just wait. Any kind of hassle at this moment would be too much.

The park was sunny, and in places patches of green-brown grass dappled the grubby snow. There were lots of children around, their laughter ringing in the ice-cold air, and a goodly number of parents, too.

"I wish I'd brought my sled," Toby said wistfully, watching as some of the children pushed and pulled each other on Flyers and plastic saucers.

Something twisted inside Holly as she watched her nephew; despite all his friends at school, he was a lonely child, often feeling separate from the others. Alone. While Holly's own childhood had been far from ideal, she had had Craig. Toby had no one near his own age.

The little boy squinted up at her, a grin forming on his face, and the toy Cessna seemed huge in his small hands. "You thinkin' about my dad?" he asked directly.

Holly was stunned. Lately it seemed as though she went around with all her thoughts written on her forehead, so clearly did people read them. "How did you know that?"

Small shoulders, hidden beneath the weight of a down-filled snowsuit, moved in a shrug. "You get a sad look on your face when you think about Dad."

"We were very close once," Holly admitted distractedly, having to look away for a moment because of the tears that stung her eyes.

"Dad's a bad man, isn't he?" Toby probed seriously, his mittened hands working awkwardly with the airplane.

Holly shook her head so suddenly and so hard that her neck ached—as did her heart. "No, Toby. Your dad isn't really a bad man, though he has done some bad things. He's sick, Toby, and pretty confused."

"He doesn't want me."

Holly knelt in the snow, which crackled beneath the worn knees of her oldest jeans, and clasped Toby by the shoulders. "It isn't that way at all, Toby. Your dad loves you. But when people have the kind of troubles he does, they just don't seem to have room in their lives for other things and other people."

Toby's face was scrunched up in the battle against unmanly emotion. "I liked Mr. Goddard a lot. How come he didn't come back? Does he have problems, too, like Dad?"

Holly closed her eyes for a moment and drew a deep breath. "No, Toby. I don't think he has the kind of problems that your dad has. As for why he didn't come back—"

"He was a fool," put in a deep, masculine voice.

Holly and Toby looked up simultaneously, squinting against the dazzling winter sun, to see David standing over them. He wore a dark blue ski jacket and jeans, a contrite expression on his face and held his own model airplane in his hands.

"Hi!" Toby whooped, overjoyed.

While Holly was glad enough to see David herself, glad enough to shout, in fact, she was a little injured by Toby's enthusiasm toward the man. It was as though a hopeless day had just been saved at the last, cliff-hanging second. And there were all her misgivings, too...

"Truce," he said gruffly, extending one hand to Holly, the plane tucked under his opposite elbow now. "Please?"

Holly swallowed. It was sheer, foolhardy madness to get further involved with this man and she knew it, but she couldn't quite bring herself to refuse what she knew he was offering. "Truce," she croaked out, after what seemed like a long time.

Eyes of an impossibly dark blue swept over her so swiftly that she could almost believe it hadn't happened, and then they shifted to Toby. "Hi, slugger. Ready to fly?"

Toby was literally beaming. Again Holly found his obvious fondness for David Goddard unsettling. What would happen when David went away? What if he did something that would hurt Craig and thus Toby, too?

"I'm ready!" came the exuberant answer.

David proved to be a lousy pilot, always dropping his hand controls or sending his somewhat odd-looking model airplane plunging into bushes, but Holly was too amused to chalk this up as another reason to be suspicious of him. After all, he'd only said he owned a model plane, not that he was proficient at flying one.

In any case, David's ineptitude only seemed to endear him further to Toby, who patiently demonstrated again and again how to handle the craft properly. Holly stood back and watched, full of mingled dread and tender inclinations. She was glad, even relieved, when Toby offered her a turn with his airplane, for that gave her something to think about besides David Goddard and all the wonderful, terrible things that could come of allowing him into her life.

As the small airplane glided and dipped and roared overhead in a perfect circle, following the commands Holly gave it with her handset, Toby and David both applauded. Privately, she was surprised that she hadn't sent the thing crashing into a tree; her fingers wouldn't stop shaking.

Finally the morning ended; it was time to take Toby home, give him lunch and let him have a few quiet minutes before driving him to the Coliseum, where he would join his classmates for the afternoon performance of the Ice Capades.

Leading Toby toward her car, she glanced uncertainly at David. What would happen now? Did he want to talk? Would he just leave, or would there be a renewal of the dangerous attraction that seemed to be sweeping them together?

Holly felt stiff, almost formal. Walk away and don't look back! screamed her mind. This man is dangerous! But her heart said something entirely different. "We enjoyed seeing you again," she ventured aloud.

David's lips curved into a half grin, one that said he understood her feelings because they so closely paralleled his own, but his blue eyes were sad. "Toby will be busy this afternoon?" he asked evenly.

"I'm going to the Ice Capades!" the little boy crowed before Holly could assemble a polite answer.

David's indigo gaze touched the child with real affection, then sliced back to Holly's face. "I need to talk with you, Holly," he said quietly. "To be with you. Will you have lunch with me?"

"Sure she will!" Toby announced with loud confidence, scrambling into the back seat of Holly's car, setting his airplane and handset on the seat and buckling himself into the seat belt.

David laughed, but that quiet ache was still visible in his eyes. "Please," he said.

Holly swallowed hard and nodded. "Shall I meet you somewhere?"

"I'll pick you up at your place in an hour or so, if that's all right."

Holly nodded again and got into her car, busying herself with the fastening of her seat belt and the turning of the ignition key. Anything so that she didn't have to look back and see David getting into that rented car of his, that car that didn't suit him. She couldn't bear the strain of wondering about him anymore, of weighing his motives all the time. No, just for this one day she was going to enjoy what she felt, without letting doubt spoil it.

While Toby consumed soup and a sandwich, his appetite made sharp by a morning of fresh air and exercise, Holly exchanged her Saturday jeans for a pair of fitted gray slacks, her T-shirt and poncho for a classic navy blue blouse with a tie at the throat and a charcoal velvet blazer. She brushed her hair carefully and put on makeup, too, telling herself all the while that she wasn't trying to be

attractive for David, not at all. It was just that as something of a local celebrity, she had an image to maintain.

Why she hadn't been concerned with that image earlier in the day, when she'd gone to a public park in her oldest clothes, wearing no makeup, was a question she didn't bother to examine.

When she returned from dropping Toby off at the Coliseum, David was waiting in front of her house. And he was driving a different car.

Holly parked her own Toyota in the driveway, locked it and went toward him, taking in the sleek lines of the red Camaro sitting at the curb. David got out, looking devastatingly handsome in jeans and a cream-colored bulky-knit sweater, and came around to open the car door for her.

"What happened to the rented one?" she asked. "The brown sedan?"

David shook his head, but he went back around the car and got in on his own side before answering. "I told you my car was being fixed, Holly. This is it."

Again, Holly was unsettled. This car looked and smelled so new, how could anything have been wrong with it?

"Don't weigh everything I say, Holly," David said watching her. "I'm a man, not a mystery to solve."

Holly said nothing. She couldn't deny that he was a man, but the part about his not being a mystery was certainly open to debate.

Lunch, eaten in a plant-filled restaurant overlooking Riverfront Park, the site of a world's fair and Spokane's coveted antique carousel, was a stilted affair.

Holly was as annoyed as she was self-conscious. Hadn't David said he wanted to talk to her? No, in fact, he'd said he needed to talk to her. So why didn't he?

His glass of white wine seemed to fascinate him; he turned it in one strong, sun-browned hand, watching the ebb and flow. The silence lengthened.

"I thought you said we were going to talk!" Holly blurted out impatiently. What was it about this man that undid her so? She felt sure that it was more than her rising attraction to him, more even than her doubts about his motives for spending time with her.

He chuckled and the sound was hollow and humorless. "You're in a lot of trouble, aren't you, Holly? Or, I should say, someone very close to you is. Why won't you let me help you?"

Holly bit her lower lip. She wasn't about to make any admissions about Craig and her involvement in his many troubles, but she wanted to. She wanted to let everything pour out. "I don't need any help and I'm not in trouble," she said stubbornly when David's indigo eyes impaled her with an unspoken challenge. "What gave you that idea?"

He made an exasperated sound. "I'm not an idiot, Holly. I was there when this person called, whoever they are."

If Holly felt alarm, she also felt a paradoxical sort of comfort. Could it be that, for all her imaginings, David really didn't know that her caller was Craig? "I think we should leave," she said stiffly.

"Fine," David replied, setting his wineglass down with a jarring thump and rising from his chair to draw back Holly's.

The flesh on the back of her neck tingled as it was brushed briefly by the hard wall of his midsection. Even that small contact stirred the melting warmth deep in Holly's middle and made her heart beat at a faster pace.

She was still shivering when they reached his car.

"Take me home, please," she said, struggling not to fling herself into his arms like some helpless bit of fluff and sob out all the things that were tormenting her.

"Don't worry," he replied in a terse whisper.

But, at the house, he lingered. Against her better judgment, Holly invited him inside for coffee. Just passing through the living room, where they had so nearly made love the night Craig called and ruined everything, made Holly's face burn.

She was grateful to reach the cookbook-cluttered, sensible kitchen. What could happen here?

Too late, Holly remembered the first soul-jarring kiss. That was what could happen here.

She busied herself with the coffeemaker, filling the decanter with cold water, putting a new filter and fresh grounds into the basket. She was so very much on guard that her shoulders ached.

"Holly."

She stiffened as she felt David approach, but could not bring herself to turn around and face him. His hands closed over her shoulders and began gently working the taut muscles there.

"Scary, isn't it?" he asked in a low voice, his breath brushing Holly's ear and part of her cheek.

"Wh-what?" Holly hedged. She knew she should break out of David's hold, but she didn't have the spirit to do that. Besides, the massage he was giving her felt so good.

"The way we need each other."

Holly lifted her chin, barely able to keep from letting her head roll as the muscles in her shoulders were forced to relax. "I don't want to need anybody," she managed to say.

"Neither do I," came the prompt, gruff reply. "But there it is."

He was close, the length of his body comfortingly hard and strong against Holly. Suddenly his hands stopped working her shoulders to cup her breasts with a bold gentleness that caused her to draw in a swift, audible breath.

"D-David—"

His thumbs were stroking her nipples through the thin fabric of her blouse and the gossamer bra beneath. "Let me make love to you, Holly," he said hoarsely, his lips now touching the outer rim of her ear and making every part of her leap with a stinging desire. "If we don't, I'm going to go crazy."

Holly trembled, her head falling backward to press into David's broad shoulder, her eyes closed. "At least you're still sane," she admitted, breathless. "I'm already over the edge. I must be, to do this..."

The delicious torment of her breasts stopped; he turned her swiftly to face him. And new torments, even sweeter than those that had gone before, took over as he kissed her. Holly's knees quivered, threatening to give out, and David supported her by pressing closer, fairly pinning her to the counter's edge.

When he drew back, he searched her face with that same broken, needing look in his eyes. "Holly?"

Flushed, Holly nodded, and that was answer enough for David. He lifted her up into his arms and, at her direction, mumbled into his neck, carried her upstairs and into the bedroom. There, he dropped her summarily onto the rumpled covers, and she had cause to be embarrassed again because she had forgotten to make the bed.

To hide that, she tried to make a joke. "You boldly go where no man has gone before, I'll say that for you."

The indigo gaze impaled her. "Are you saying that you've never..."

Hastily, coloring again, Holly shook her head. "No. My...my fiancé—"

He sat down on the bed beside her, his fingers woven together, hands dangling between his knees. "It's all right, Holly. Just tell me one thing: is this really what you want? If it isn't, I'll leave right now and we'll pretend that none of it ever happened."

Holly did not want David to go. She wanted him to hold her, kiss her, love her. But she couldn't say any of those things because her throat was constricted.

David must have read her need in her eyes and in the flush on her cheekbones, for he kicked off his polished boots and stretched out on the bed beside Holly, wrapping one arm around her, holding her close. She loved the clean scent of his hair and skin, the tender threat of his powerful body.

Eventually he kissed her again, tentatively at first, as though he expected her to push him away. When she didn't, the kiss deepened and with his free hand he began to caress her, cupping his other hand at the back of her head. After a very long time, she felt crooned in sleepy surrender, arching her back just slightly in acquiescence.

When the blouse had been opened completely and laid aside, David unfastened her bra. Her breasts moved with voluptuous freedom, the peaks tightening in response to the fate that awaited them and the coolness of the air.

David continued to caress her, brushing the wanton nipples with his fingertips, charting the rows of her ribs, circling her naval. And all the while, he kissed her, seeking every depth and secret, consuming even as he cherished.

After a time, he kissed the line of her jaw, sampled her earlobe, traced a path of fire down the white length of her neck. When he found her breast and took the nipple full in his mouth to suckle, Holly arched her back again, electrified, and gasped out a senseless cry of welcome.

Meanwhile, his hand undid the tricky buckle on her belt, the button of her slacks and the zipper. Holly felt the fabric of both the slacks and her panties sliding downward and gloried in the sensation.

David left the sensuous warmth of her breasts to brush his lips down the length of her rib cage, first on one side and then on the other. He drew her slacks and panties down and away and kissed the hollows of her hips, making lazy, white-hot circles with the tip of his tongue.

Holly moaned with her need of him, so dazed she could barely see. When he shifted away from her and off the bed, she was stricken, until she realized that David was only removing his own clothing, that he would come back to her.

"Are you sure, Holly?" he asked softly as he stretched out beside her again, part of his lean, powerful body covering and making promises to hers.

"Yes," she managed to say.

He kissed her again, deeply and desperately, and their tongues engaged in a savage, fevered battle. His knee prodded her legs gently apart and then he was poised above her, bracing himself with his hands.

"God in heaven, Holly," he muttered hoarsely, "how I've wanted you...from the first..."

Holly's hands were moving up and down the sleek, rippled expanse of his back. She wanted to say something poetic, something memorable, but her arousal was such that she could do no more than gasp his name.

David groaned and entered the sweet sanctum of her body, carefully and with a tenderness that deepened the love Holly already felt for him. He moved slowly at first, rhythmically, sheathing and unsheathing, reacquainting her with the long-forgotten feel of a man's possession.

Holly's few experiences with her fiancé long ago had done nothing, nothing whatsoever, to prepare her for this. This was a glorious, blinding joy, one that centered all of her heart and all of her soul on the singular joining of this man's body with her own. She moved in time with him, making a soft, unselfconscious sound in her throat, a crooning, needing sound.

David's lips were everywhere, brushing her eyelids, tracing the line of her jaw, tasting her mouth. His tongue circled her lips in a way that was somehow territorial and fiercely arousing, and the pace he had set for her body increased by degrees until they both seemed to be hurling themselves at each other, frantic for a oneness that would consume them both.

When that moment came, David growled, his eyes closed, and shuddered upon Holly while she cried out and thrust her hips upward to enclose him as completely as she could.

They both sank into a sleeplike state for a time, their breathing ragged, eyes closed. David's fingers, tangled in Holly's hair, moved soothingly against her scalp. Then, suddenly and with devastating determination, he thrust himself free of her, cursing under his breath as he wrenched on his clothes.

Holly, shameless only moments before, now felt tawdry. She clasped the edge of the quilt covering her bed and pulled it over herself.

"David, what is it?" she finally dared to ask, watching wide-eyed as he completed the angry rite by jerking his boots back onto his feet.

He might have stormed out without saying anything at all if Holly hadn't spoken when she did, but then he froze, his back turned to her, rigid and impassive. "It was a mistake," he muttered at length.

"It was your idea!" Holly cried, wounded.

David lowered his head but did not turn around to face her. "Yes. It was my idea," he conceded raggedly.

"You feel guilty, don't you, David?"

Now he turned and met her eyes. "I'm sorry, Holly. I wanted you so badly I lost my head."

"You lost your head?" Holly was suddenly energized, electrified. But this time it was fury, not passion, that surged through her. Heedless of her nakedness, she flung back the quilt and bounded off the bed. "I beg your pardon?" she screamed.

David silenced her by laying three fingers gently, ever so gently, over her mouth. His eyes were dark with some pain that Holly couldn't understand and couldn't share. But whatever it was, she would gladly have traded her own confused, hurt feelings for it.

"Believe me when I tell you, Holly, that I've never wanted or needed a woman the way I needed you just now. Never. But it was a mistake. We can't let it happen again."

It would have hurt less, Holly was certain, if he'd slapped her. "What do you mean, it was a mistake? It was...it was..."

David kissed her forehead, wiped away the tears gathering at the corners of her eyes with practiced thumbs, then turned to walk away. He closed the door quietly behind him, but Holly waited until she was sure he was out of the house before flinging herself facedown on the bed to cry.

6

The telephone rang. Sitting up on the bed, brushing her tangled hair back from her face, Holly reached out for the receiver, overriding the answering machine downstairs. Please, God, she prayed, let it be David.

"I left you two messages last night!" Craig blurted out the moment she said hello. "Don't you return your calls anymore, or is it something I said?"

Craig. Holly settled back on the pillows, which still bore the scent of David, and sighed. "I'm sorry, Craig. I was busy and—"

"You were busy? Good God, Holly! Remember me? I'm your brother, the man who is in trouble?"

Holly's throat was thick with despair, and her head ached. "We all have problems, Craig," she reminded him quietly, thinking of David Goddard.

"Sure, Holl. I know you're probably all torn up about whether to pay your Keogh Plan before the end of the year and what color to paint your toenails."

The sarcasm, following the scene with David as it did, was too much. "Listen, Craig. I care about you and you know it. I do everything I can to help you. But you're the one who got yourself into this mess—kindly remember that!"

He subsided. "I know. Holly, I'm so scared."

Tears smarted in Holly's eyes, sudden and hot. It was a surprise because she had been certain that there were none left to cry. Images of another Craig, bright and fit and funny, rose in her mind. Dear God, what had happened to change him this way? During the troubled years after their father's death, when their mother had been so confused and distracted, he had been Holly's strength, her lifeline.

"I know, Craig, I know. I beg of you, give yourself up."

"I can't, Holly. I just can't. You don't know how these guys treat a fink—"

"Craig, they're not going to hurt you. I'll have a lawyer present. You're still a citizen and you still have rights."

"Not anymore, I don't," he muttered. "I've had dealings with al-Qaeda, Holly, and they know it."

"Why, Craig? Why did you turn to...to those people? Why did you do it?"

He made a strange sound and Holly was shattered to realize that he was crying. "I have a habit, Holly," he finally said.

Dread electrified Holly, and she bolted upright. "What kind of habit?" she whispered, her eyes wide and burning. "Dammit, Craig, what kind of habit?"

"Cocaine," he said.

"Oh, God," Holly groaned.

"Listen, I need money. Cindy managed to bring me what you sent, but that's gone now."

"No."

"What did you say?" Craig sniffled, and his voice sounded angry again.

"I said no, Craig. I'm not giving you money to buy poison! I absolutely will not!"

"Holly, I need—"

"You need help and I haven't been giving it to you! Oh, God, how could I have been so stupid—"

"Get the money, Holly. Send it to this address—" He rattled off a post-office-box number in a small Oregon town. "I mean it, Holly. If you don't, I'll be home for Christmas. And not to turn myself in."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying, sister dear," he answered with tart patience, "that if you don't help me I'll take Toby on the road with me. That's what I'm saying."

"No! I won't let you! I won't let you expose him to that, drag him around the country—"

"You won't be able to stop me, Holly. I know where he goes to school, and I know where you live. And remember I'm a former federal agent—I'll find the kid no matter where you try to hide him."

"Craig!"

"Send the money," he said. He repeated the address once more and then hung up.

Slowly, her hand trembling so hard that she had to make several attempts before she could manage the task, Holly replaced the receiver in its cradle.

She sat there on the bed, cross-legged, her head in her hands, until she heard Toby downstairs. "Mom!" he yelled exuberantly, probably still excited from his afternoon at the Ice Capades, "I'm home!"

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