

# Christi Williams

*Are Chancie and Micah  
willing to gamble on  
playing for keeps?*



## TAKE A CHANCE ON LOVE



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by  
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## Chapter One

Chancie de Leur glanced at the two studiously casual men once more before dismissing her assistant for the night. Neither of the big, broad-shouldered men showed outward signs of awareness that they were being watched. Instead, they stood at military ease in matching green and beige uniforms. Hands folded in front of their belts, each of them held a right elbow hovering over the dull black butt of a holstered gun.

Judy Weinrich eyed the two troopers blocking the exit. “Are you sure, Chancie?” she whispered. “I can stay if you want.”

Chancie considered the two men glancing from the corners of their eyes at Judy. Their training would lead them to be suspicious of Judy’s spiky blond hair, baggy jeans, and pierced nostril. Judy looked like a teenaged rock fan instead of Screening Services’ ace assistant, but Chancie couldn’t have stayed in business without her. She’d become so used to Judy’s presence, she sometimes forgot how other people reacted to her appearance.

Chancie sighed and resisted the urge to roll her eyes. *Cops*. Always ready to judge.

Then, she brought herself up short, doing an abrupt mental about-face. She herself was judging by appearances. So they were cops. So they wore uniforms. They also represented the new contract that would pay next month’s rent on this office.

She shrugged and grinned at Judy. “Get out of here while you have the chance. Go on your hot date before I change my mind and chain you to your desk.” She pointed through the open vertical slats of the wide front window, toward the glow of headlights penetrating the December dusk from the parking lot. “Parker’s waiting.”

Magic words. Judy grinned back, swooped a plaid flanneled arm over her desk for her coat, and nudged the two troopers aside in her hurry to get out the door. They gave ground unwillingly, but stepped back in tandem when a chill gust of night air hit them. The heavy wood entry door slammed shut and Chancie was left alone with two armed men.

She tore her eyes from the window and the sight of Judy’s slim form scrambling eagerly into the passenger seat of Parker’s shiny new sports car. What a mismatch: traditional, well-groomed Parker and music video-inspired Judy. Neither truly belonged in Hawk Point, Wyoming. But they seemed happy together, and Chancie realized she was a bit jealous of Judy. How long had it been since Chancie herself had so looked forward to meeting a man? For at least the last year, all her contacts with the male gender had involved business. With a jolt of longing, she wished that just once she could spend a minute with a man she hadn’t booked through Screening Services.

Shivering, Chancie turned from the window that sparkled around the edges with cold. She pasted on her professional smile, showing off the straight, white teeth that she’d finally been able to get fixed. So much had changed about Chancie de Leur in the last couple of years. She couldn’t afford to jeopardize any of her hard work now because she felt a little winter mooning for someone to love her.

“Young love,” she said brightly, nodding after Parker’s departing taillights. She tried to draw the patrol troopers into a friendlier stance, and also, she realized, a lighter attitude toward Judy Weinrich. Chancie knew she succeeded, with one of the troopers at least, when he raised nearly electric blue eyes to hers and smiled back.

The other remained distant, aloof, his dark brown eyes following the low slung car swinging out of the parking lot. Make, model, and license number duly noted, Chancie thought. Parker had better drive with extra care tonight.

“Well, gentlemen, who’s first?”

At last she had the second trooper’s attention. His dark gaze swung from the window to her, and suddenly she didn’t like him looking at her. His brown eyes drifted from her soft kid boots to the top of her highlighted bronze curls, and that unreadable blank stare sent a chill through her. She much preferred the bright blue gaze of the first cop. His sapphire eyes didn’t remind her of Kenny.

But she liked the dark-eyed trooper even less when he opened his mouth. “I guess I’m first, honey,” he said.

Chancie stiffened, her efficient calm threatening to snap. She didn’t like being called honey, and especially not in her office, the office she worked darned hard, long hours to keep going.

Self-doubts she’d thought long buried made her throat tighten. Had she done something to indicate to this oaf it was okay to call her little pet endearments? She fast-forwarded in her mind from the moment of the troopers’ arrival to Judy’s departure, reassessing each movement and word. Her review turned up nothing out of order. But then little usually was out of order in her carefully detailed life. She made sure of that.

No. She was tired, that’s all. The cop’s behavior was rotten, not hers. She retreated behind an icy wall of professionalism, taking a couple of steps backward to round the corner of Judy’s desk. Snatching up the top two forms from a stack of the proper five-part documents, she seated herself with a flick of her chocolate suede skirt.

“Name?” she said with as much frost as she could muster.

“Arthur Brinegar, honey,” he drawled. “What’s yours?”

She clenched her teeth. She didn’t grind; the orthodontist had drilled into her during months of work in her mouth that grinding one’s teeth was a nasty, immature habit one could break if one really tried. And Chancie tried, for the sake of a perfect smile. She still wore her plastic retainer at night so she wouldn’t inadvertently gnash her pearly white molars, even in sleep.

She locked gazes with the dark-eyed cop. How did Judy deal with it day after day? All the men, with their insufferable inflated male egos. The testing procedure that should have been humiliating instead seemed to bring out the lurking beast in some men. Chancie thought she’d seen it all when it came to male boorishness, and she was glad she didn’t have to test on a regular basis anymore. Judy did most of the testing. Poor Judy. She deserved every penny of the raise she’d been hinting she wanted for Christmas.

“My name is Chancie de Leur, Trooper Brinegar. I own Screening Services. Please remove your hat, coat, and the belt with all your paraphernalia.”

“The owner, huh? That’s what I call personal service. I’m real impressed.” Brinegar placed his dark green campaign hat atop his coat in one of the reception area chairs. Then he moved deliberately into her line of view, the black patterned handgrip on the heavy gun at his belt directly at her eye level. Raw power emanated from the man, from the gun. Chancie wondered if Brinegar got his kicks from trying to intimidate all people or just women.

“Knock it off, Artie.” The second trooper had sunk into one of the midnight blue bucket chairs lining the rough wood walls. Legs casually spread, he’d removed his uniform Smokey Bear hat and placed it with Brinegar’s on the seat next to him. He raised a hand to brush back glossy black hair before casually crossing his arms.

His hair color contrasted strikingly with his blue eyes. The planes of his face fit his skull tightly. Maybe a hint of Indian there, Chancie thought, as she stared at him. His broad chest tapered to slim hips and long, powerful legs.

She found herself drifting, assessing what she shouldn’t be in her line of work. Her gaze kept straying up those rangy limbs to his crotch. Her cheeks heated.

The trooper with the striking coloration smiled as if he hadn’t noticed where she was looking. He had gorgeous white teeth, she thought, as he said, “Quit hassling the lady, Art. Let’s just get this over with.”

Chancie yanked her attention back to business, struggling to keep her face professionally blank. Brinegar, deflated a bit by the tone of the other cop's voice ruining his fun, removed his laden belt. The cop with the arresting blue eyes nodded. She could almost read the thought directed her way: It's okay, lady.

Killer smile, Chancie thought. I wonder if he's married. She caught her thoughts almost roving into mooning territory again, and pulled her attention back to her work. Judy had the forms all properly filled out. She said, "May I see a photo I.D., please, Trooper Brinegar."

Brinegar reached for his wallet, his movements slow and deliberate. He reminded her of a predator, of Kenny, actually. Same build, same coloring. He even wore a similar cologne, and Chancie breathed through her mouth to avoid inhaling the familiar scent. She dreaded being alone with Arthur Brinegar and wished the other cop, the nice cop, had volunteered to go first.

She asked Brinegar to confirm that the name, address, and employer on his form were correct, even though his entire appearance confirmed he was employed by the Wyoming Highway Patrol. As he leaned to comply, she consulted the name on the second form: Micah Taylor. Micah: a nice, old-fashioned name. Micah Taylor seemed like a *Nice Man*. Also a *Sexy Man*. She risked another peek at him from behind Judy's computer screen before she rose to escort Arthur Brinegar to the restroom. Micah Taylor caught her looking and smiled again.

Well, he'd spied her giving him a second looking-over. But at the same time she'd caught his blue eyes studying her. She wondered if the exchange meant anything. She was rusty at these boy-girl games, but felt a definite flutter in the pit of her stomach. She was happy she could still recognize the pieces of the game even if she didn't remember all the rules. Her knees trembled as she rose to precede Brinegar down the hall, but not from Brinegar's nearness. It was the thought of Micah Taylor that had her shaking. Suddenly she had the most vivid picture of Trooper Taylor naked: all tall, lean muscle. She had a lot of trouble making the vision go away, even though she knew she *had* to make it go away. It was imperative that she keep her mind on what she was doing.

"If you'll follow me, please." Her voice quavered. She refused to turn her head to see if Micah Taylor watched her walk across the short-napped gray carpet, even though she could feel the heat of his eyes centered on her ass. She could feel Arthur Brinegar's eyes as well through the suede fabric of her drop-shouldered shirt, and forced herself not to shudder at the definite contrast of hot and cold.

Micah Taylor watched the woman with the dark honey-gold hair give the cold shoulder to Artie. He admired the way Chancie de Leur handled herself, all cool and collected. He liked the way she looked too, that soft brown outfit reminding him of Taos and sunshine, chasing away the winter chill. He especially liked the way she filled out what she wore, breasts nice round mounds in front and ass very nice round mounds swinging most invitingly in back. Not to mention that wild tangle of honey gold hair cascading down her back. Yeah, he definitely liked looking at Chancie de Leur.

He wanted to fuck her.

*Whoa. Whoa.* Wait. Where had *that* come from? He usually had an extremely taut rein on distracting thoughts during working hours. But suddenly, without any warning, all the synapses in his brain were firing with sex signals aimed in Chancie de Leur's direction. And once the picture of her naked presented itself, he found all his concerted effort couldn't make it go away. In a matter of seconds she had imprinted on the most primal part of his brain.

His hands clenched with effort. Maybe he could override her nude image by thinking of other things. He looked around the office, trying to calculate how much money she had sunk into the plush office furniture, expensive looking carpet, and computers and fax machine and printers and intercom telephones. So she owned this business. A woman like her could afford to sniff at a highway patrol trooper's salary, he thought.

Usually, rich women put Micah off. Money attracted money, and Wyoming highway troopers were historically underpaid, although since the latest energy boom and the resultant loosening of

state purse strings he didn't exactly qualify for food bank rations anymore. Still, he didn't think he made anywhere near what this woman obviously made.

But even if he didn't have a hope with Chancie de Leur, he remained acutely interested. He couldn't help himself. There was something about her, a slight hesitancy that made him think the cool veneer was an act, something she'd learned in order to operate this kind of business.

He mused while he waited. That assistant of hers. Dressed like a gang member. Probably bad for business.

But if that were true, why would Chancie keep her? There was more to this stimulating woman than met the eye, Micah was sure. He stared down at the floor as he waited for his turn, hands knotted, eyes unfocused, thinking about Chancie de Leur.

He was lost in thoughts of a deeper exploration of Chancie de Leur, thoughts that, despite his resolve, had her shedding the pieces of that velvety brown getup. For him. Slowly. One-by-one.

Chancie halted at the end of a short hallway. Brinegar almost knocked her over, using the excuse to grasp her elbow and pull her way too close.

She extricated her arm. "I'm fine, really, Trooper Brinegar." She opened the door to the restroom. She would follow the testing script precisely, and she would be safe. "Please wash your hands."

Brinegar complied, looking over his shoulder at her, but she didn't encourage small talk. She laid the form she carried on top of a stack of plastic bins in the hall. She opened one of the bins and removed two small white boxes, extending both. "As you can see, these kits are both sealed in plastic wrap and unopened. Please choose one."

From now on, the client would do as much as possible of the touching of his chosen box and its contents. Chancie hated this part of the business. Judy seemed to handle it with nonchalance, but Chancie found the actual bare bones of what she did for a living distasteful and had been more than glad to hand it over to Judy.

Brinegar shrugged. "It's for your own protection, sir," Chancie insisted. He picked, and she laid the other aside, reclaiming the form from the top of the stacking bins. "Please unwrap it," she said as she donned a pair of latex surgeon's gloves. Brinegar grinned at the sight of the gloves, reaching to undo his pants.

Oh, boy, one of those, Chancie thought. A latent exhibitionist. I knew it; I could see this one coming. She held up a warning finger. "Please unwrap the kit, Trooper Brinegar."

Brinegar complied, exposing a plastic cup wrapped in a plastic bag, along with two small bottles and caps. She checked the restroom. No wastebasket. The doors under the sink cabinet were locked, fresh blue dye stained the water in the toilet bowl. She explained the procedure while Brinegar's hands hovered restlessly over his unbuttoned fly. "Fill the plastic cup to the line if you can. Put the cup on the shelf, and open the door as soon as you're finished. Do not run any water. Do not flush the toilet."

In one swift motion, she twisted off the faucet knobs, grabbed the dispenser of liquid soap, shut the door and whirled into the hall. "You can begin now," she called through the door.

She let out a breath. She'd done it. Arthur Brinegar was safely inside until he produced the specimen that would allow him to return to work. The government regulations on drug and alcohol testing had been a godsend for Chancie, who'd jumped at the opportunity to go into business for herself. Industries from trucking to railroads to giant chain stores now had their employees tested regularly at random intervals. She held many small, local contracts, but lately had begun chasing the big ones. Screening Services had grown to cover ten states, with five satellite offices. Just last month she'd landed the Wyoming Department of Transportation contract. Brinegar and Micah Taylor were the first highway patrol troopers to be tested without having been involved in a traffic accident.

At first, Chancie had done it all herself: pursuing the contracts, answering the phones, doing the actual testing. But it had become too much, snowballing beyond her ability to handle Screening Services alone. When Judy Weinrich had applied for the job, Chancie had been so desperate she'd

hired her on the spot, nose-ring and all. Chancie and Judy had grown into Screening Services together, and as a result, she overlooked Judy's personal shortcomings, such as her fondness for flannel shirts and cargo pants as office attire.

She liked Judy. Outward appearance aside, Judy was sharp and dedicated, a rock in a crisis. Judy also had a wild sense of humor that cut through the tension of running a business where a lawsuit over a test result was always a distinct possibility. Somewhere along the line, Judy had begun cataloguing all the men who passed through the doors of Screening Services. In one code word, a man was summed up, pegged for future reference. Chancie already knew Arthur Brinegar's designation: *A*, for Aggressive. There were worse: *F*, for Flasher; *G*, for Groper. She was hoping Arthur Brinegar wouldn't graduate from an *A* to an *F* or a *G* while he was in the restroom. There were also better designations: *N*, for Nice; *E*, for Easy to Deal With; *W*, for All-Around Winner. Micah Taylor, so far, was an *N*. Neither she nor Judy had reason before to include an *H*, as it was totally against the rules to even think of fraternizing with clients, but Chancie was willing to bet Judy would agree to add a category of *Hot* for Micah Taylor.

The single letter designation would appear somewhere in the man's computer file. It wasn't fair, Chancie supposed, to measure a person in one word. On the other hand, forewarned was forearmed. Any edge in this male-dominated business helped. No one except she and Judy knew what the innocuous letter meant, and it was certainly better to know what to expect than to be stuck alone after hours with an unanticipated Groper.

Brinegar opened the door a crack. He didn't come out; he merely stood there with the door partially opened.

"All finished?" Chancie asked.

Brinegar's mouth worked. He flushed from his stiff dark green collar up to his hairline. He said quietly, "I, uh, I can't."

A changed man. Chancie stifled a sigh in favor of the impersonally friendly approach. "Quite all right. It happens often. Would you like to wait while Trooper Taylor tests? Sometimes just a little wait time will do the trick."

Chancie could see Arthur Brinegar resented being lumped in with the *happens often* group, as if his masculinity were somehow in question. His jaw clenched, and he preceded her rigid-spined down the hall to wait. But at least his chagrin kept him from progressing along the alphabet, as she had feared he would. If Arthur Brinegar followed Judy's tongue-in-cheek guidelines, he'd be docile as a pup from now on. She grinned behind his back as she walked behind him, discarding his unused test kit in the reception area's trash. Maybe they'd have to add a new designation just for Brinegar: *P* for Puppy.

But she changed her mind when she tested Micah Taylor. Maybe this man deserved two letter designations. Besides *H*, he could also be a *P*. *P*, in her private shorthand from now on, would stand for Perfect Gentleman. Taylor listened attentively and followed directions. With him, she wouldn't have to worry he'd snuck someone else's specimen in under his armpit or tucked in the waistband of his pants. She doubted she'd have to defend herself against untoward attention, because he was all business. When he finished and opened the door, his plastic cup filled right to the mark sat on the laminate shelf.

She felt his nearness as she checked the temperature of the specimen, then watched as he poured the specimen into two separate bottles and capped them tightly. She asked him to verify that the numbers on the gummed strips she signed and placed over the caps matched the numbers on his chain of custody form. All very proper and by the rules of the Drug Test Manual. Extremely unromantic.

So why did her stomach flutter whenever he raised those blue eyes to hers, liquid heat instantly spreading between her legs despite telling herself she was inching toward trouble every time she looked into his eyes? If he just said the word, she thought, she would willingly be spreading her legs. Could the raw attraction she felt merely be that of the man in uniform that all women were supposed to fall for? Was she dazzled by the brass on his chest and collar, flustered by the seven-point gold badge with the state seal on it?

This was getting ridiculous. She had to concentrate on the task at hand. She told him to return the bottles to their cardboard holes in the white box. Then she tore off two sheets of the five-part form and placed them inside with the bottles, replaced the faucet handles, and asked if he wanted to wash his hands. He nodded. She took custody of the box and returned to the hallway, shutting the door.

When he came out, she forced herself to smile coolly. "All finished."

"Not quite." Micah Taylor looked down into her eyes, the blue of his irises thinning as the pupils enlarged. Chancie had read somewhere, probably in one of those gushy teen magazines years ago, that the human pupil dilates when looking at something pleasurable. She wondered if her own green irises had given way to wide black pupils as she looked back at Micah Taylor. She unconsciously licked her lips, and could have sworn she heard him stifle a groan.

He said, voice gravelly, "I noticed you're not wearing a wedding band. Are you married?"

"No. Widowed," Chancie said slowly. She couldn't encourage this man, in this place, her business office. No matter how much she might want to.

"Well, that's good. No, wait. I don't mean being widowed is good. I just meant—"

"I think I know what you meant, Trooper Taylor," Chancie said. She still held the white box. She couldn't indulge in anything even resembling flirting.

"I'm not either. Married, I mean." He reached out as if to touch her, changed his mind and snatched his hand away. Chancie thought it was a good thing he didn't touch her, and not just because it would compromise his test. If he made a move toward her she just might melt right in to him, liquefy into a pool of chocolate suede at his feet if he so much as put a hand on her. She needed touching so bad she thought she'd die from it sometimes.

"Are you engaged?"

"No."

"Seriously attached?"

"No."

"Seeing anyone?"

"No."

"Would you go out with me?"

*Oh, yeah.*

Chancie strained to keep her composure. "Trooper Taylor, to avoid suspicion over the accuracy of your test, which could affect your job, I don't think we should be discussing this right now."

He studied her intently, blinked, then backed up a step. "You're absolutely right. I apologize."

Relieved, and also disappointed, Chancie turned to precede him toward the reception area, where she locked the box in the refrigerator.

Brinegar sat in one of the bucket chairs, eyeing the two of them suspiciously. Chancie supposed they might have taken more than an ordinary amount of time to get back. But Micah Taylor didn't react to Brinegar's curious glance. He merely buckled his heavy black webbed belt back on. Then he retrieved his Montana-creased green hat, took the seat next to Brinegar and folded his arms across his chest, straightening those incredibly long legs out in front of him.

"You ready yet, Artie?" he said, with a hint of a superior smirk from beneath the brim of his hat.

"Yeah, I'm ready," Brinegar said sourly.

Again Chancie had to face being alone with Arthur Brinegar. She hoped he wasn't one to take his failures out on others, like Kenny used to do.

But Brinegar cooperated woodenly. He went through the motions as mechanically as Chancie, and when it was over neither trooper looked at her as Brinegar re-donned his gun belt, hat, and jacket in the reception area. But Micah Taylor did glance at her once more before shutting the door on his way out. His startling blue eyes sent a veiled message, and with a jolt of what she thought might be happiness Chancie knew the flame that sizzled low in her had likewise been kindled in him.

She watched the twin black patrol cars pull out of the lot and drive away. She shut down Judy's computer and her own, and then went around turning off lights. When she'd done everything she could think of to pass some time, she stood for a moment in front of the darkened window. As she waited, the December night settled on the high desert of Wyoming with diamonds of frost that spread on car windshields and sparkled on pavement beneath street lamps. Christmas lights twinkled on the houses in the new subdivision across the road. The thought occurred that she hadn't even taken time to put up her own tree yet.

The phone she'd been waiting on rang.

She picked it up with trembling fingers. "Screening Services."

With no preamble, the male voice said, "I'm glad you're still there; I was afraid I'd miss you. From now on, I'll get tested at the urologist's or the hospital. Would that take care of ethics considerations between us, Chancie de Leur?"

She hesitated. "You'll have to take that up with WYDOT, Trooper Taylor. I have a contract. They may require that you pay the testing fee yourself if you don't use us. It's not an inconsiderable sum."

"Call me Micah. I'll do what I have to do. My test is over. Now will you go out with me?"

Again she paused, and he rushed to fill the electric silence humming between them. "I know you probably get asked out a thousand times a week, but would you please just consider seeing me?"

She stuttered. "N-no, I don't."

The silence stretched again. "Did you say no, you won't?"

Chancie hastened to correct, "No. I said, No, I don't get asked out much. And yes, I would like very much to see you, Micah."

She could hear his surprise when he spoke. "You don't get asked out much? I find that hard to believe."

"I'm very busy, and most men find that I'm too cold and businesslike."

This time he paused before saying softly, as if to himself, "Fools." Then he said, "Cold? There's a furnace burning in you, lady. I could feel it from ten feet away."

Chancie didn't know what to say. Was she so obvious? Did her loneliness flash like an inferno, advertising her availability? Please, no. She'd worked so hard to present a competent exterior, to wear a poker face like the rest of the big boys, to hide her easy feelings and never, ever, cry when she lost.

"I'm sorry," Micah said in a low voice. "I probably shouldn't have said that. It's just, you make me feel like I know you, like we're already friends." He added in a more normal voice, "Hey, don't worry. Nobody else can see it. Just me. Sometimes I can sort of read people, if you know what I mean."

"That's spooky," Chancie said, shaken. She remained unconvinced she didn't have a sign flashing *Lonely Heart* in big red neon letters on her forehead.

"I talk too much sometimes," he said quietly. Holding the phone away from his mouth, his voice was almost drowned by background traffic noise in whatever parking lot he'd pulled into in order to make his call. Then he must have moved it back near his lips because she could hear him clearly again. "No, listen. It helps, in my line of work. It helps to know if the guy in the car you've just stopped is thinking of pulling a gun. It's not spooky. Hey, I know another thing. I know there's no real harm in your assistant. You like that, don't you? That I can see she's a good person under the trash she wears?"

"Judy isn't trash, she's just very young."

He said, "I apologize, yet again. I get the feeling I'm getting off to a very bad start with you, and that's not what I want at all. I want you to say yes. Please just say yes, you'll go out with me, and end this wordplay."

Chancie smiled. "I just did."

"That's right. You did." She could hear relief in his voice. It made her feel better to know Micah Taylor was nervous too. "When?" he added.

“When did I say it?”

His voice lowered intimately. “Don’t tease, Chancie. When will you go out with me?”

She shivered at the low tone of his voice. “W-what time do you get off?” she managed to stutter.

It was his turn to hesitate. “Tonight?”

“Yes. Tonight.” Was she pushing? He was absolutely right about what he’d sensed in her: she burned. Chancie half expected the telephone to melt in her hand. At the same time she was frightened out of her mind. This sudden fire for Micah was terrifying: a leaping conflagration could certainly warm her on cold, lonely nights. Or it could burn her to cinders.

“Midnight,” Micah Taylor was saying. “If you want me to change out of uniform, give me half an hour. There’s a restaurant down the street that’s open all night. The Inn. Meet me?”

A restaurant, not a motel. He hadn’t, she noticed, asked her to meet him at his house or apartment or wherever home was. She was safe enough. If what she really wanted was safety.

“The Inn, twelve-thirty.” Chancie drew a deep breath. “Okay.”

“Okay,” he agreed, and disconnected.

Chancie found herself shaking again. She felt supremely sexy, terrified and excited all at once. She had a date. For the first time in a long time, she had a date with a wonderfully attractive man. Her ankles felt like butter and her hand trembled, but she was able to get the receiver back on the hook without dropping it.

The whole episode with Micah Taylor seemed unreal to her already, as fleeting as the twinkling lights outside haloed with frost. But she knew with deep down certainty he’d show up at the Inn at midnight. He wouldn’t leave her hanging, he wasn’t that kind of man. She already knew that about him.

But the last thing Chancie needed right now was a man, even one as compelling as Micah Taylor. Over the Christmas holidays and into the new year, the plan was for Screening Services to begin operations in all forty-eight contiguous states. She and Judy would be swamped. The very last thing she needed was to start a new relationship with a new man.

And yet. And yet she’d waited a long time for somebody to recognize the spark that burned in her. Micah Taylor had seen it in a few seconds.

*Hold back.* Hold back; be safe, she told herself. Emotions were dangerous. Kenny had taught her that. It was a lesson learned hard, but one she didn’t dare forget.

She started to leave the office, then remembered and turned back. Efficiency. The edge that kept her skating on the edge between disaster and success. She placed a minute *A* in ink next to Arthur Brinegar’s name.

She thought a moment, pen to lip, and then laid it down on Judy’s desk without making a one-letter notation on the second form. She hadn’t yet made up her mind about Micah Taylor. She decided she would leave Micah’s secret classification blank. For now.

## Chapter Two

Chancie unlocked the front door of her bi-level house and stood in the darkened hallway removing her coat. The soft murmur of the television came from the living room, and yellow light from the table lamp there pooled out into the hall.

Sneaking on stockinged feet, she walked to the back of the sofa. She leaned to kiss the top of Jamie’s head. Without looking up from the screen and his new video system, he said, “Hi, Mom.”

“Can’t fool you, huh?”

“Nah, heard you coming. Mrs. Benson won’t let me turn the volume up.”

“Don’t start, Jamie. You know how lucky we are to have her. Otherwise, I’d have to leave you alone way too much.”

“She won’t even let me go outside.” Jamie swung his legs off the arm of the sofa, ready for another full-blown argument about the rules and Mrs. Benson’s enforcement of them.

Chancie sighed, rolling her head from side to side on her tired neck, trying to work out the kinks that sparring with Jamie always brought on. “Did you do your homework?”

“I don’t have any.” Jamie stood, throwing the video controller on the sofa, hands balled on his hips. He stood almost eye to eye with her now, and Chancie still couldn’t believe how darkly handsome he was becoming. But along with growing up came the inevitable rebellion, and it broke her heart to fight with Jamie. He still hadn’t gotten over her refusal to let him get a tattoo, at *ten*, like everybody else did.

She couldn’t believe it herself when she replied, “You’re not everybody. You’re my son.” Such inanities reminded her of her own mother, whose favorite line had been, “Because I said so, that’s why!” Chancie had sworn she’d never use the tired old phrases on her children, and yet, when logical explanations failed to sway Jamie into compliance she found herself using the same power plays as her mother. She knew Jamie resented Mrs. Benson and the authority the older woman had over him. What Jamie needed was a father. But in the absence of anyone willing to take on a ten-year-old boy, what else could she do? Let her son run loose on the streets with no supervision?

“Jamie,” she said tiredly, drawing the name out.

“I don’t have any homework!”

“I bought you a computer. I never see you use it. You told me last week you have a big project for Language Arts due before Christmas break. And your math could use some extra effort. I’ll help you after dinner.”

“I don’t want your help. I don’t want to do math. And I don’t want any dinner. I just wanted to go to the mall after school and hang out with the guys, that’s all. But no, I have to come straight home like some big baby and sit in front of the screen with Mrs. Benson. She doesn’t watch me, Mom. She’s so damned old, half the time I’m babysitting her!”

He stalked out, slamming the door to his bedroom for good measure. Chancie sank onto the sofa, cradling her head in her hands. She honestly didn’t know what to do with Jamie anymore. Should she run after him and cry, “Watch your language, young man, or I’ll put soap in your mouth.” How Victorian. How utterly useless in the face of what Jamie was bombarded with every day, from the influence of his friends at school, to the junk available on the Internet, to the garbage programming she tried her best to limit on television. She was endeavoring to raise her son with good values in a hedonistic society, and oftentimes felt she was losing the battle.

Alma Benson entered silently from the kitchen and perched on the opposite end of the sofa. Her face lined with worry, she said softly, “Should I have let him go, Chancie?”

Chancie rested her head against the back of the sofa and looked sightlessly at the ceiling of her living room, where a cobweb wouldn’t dare dangle now Alma lived here. “You know I don’t like the mall, Alma. If they were old enough for the information to be printed, several of Jamie’s friends would have had their names in the newspaper police report already. I won’t have my son hanging out at the mall and getting into trouble. He can go to the library to work on his project, he can go across the street to Brandon’s, or he can have friends over here. He knows the rules.”

Alma hesitated, rubbing the prominent knuckles of one hand with the fingers of the other. “Truth to tell, I haven’t seen Brandon for weeks. I don’t think Jamie has much to do with him anymore.”

Chancie rolled her head sideways on the back of the sofa to look at her housekeeper. Alma’s expression was hard to read because she sat backlit by a crimson ginger gar table lamp, but Chancie didn’t like the tone of the older woman’s voice.

“I’m afraid to ask. Is there something more going on?” She lifted her head to face the older woman.

Alma bit her lip. “Well, I heard Brandon got caught at school with some marijuana.”

“You’re kidding. Brandon and Jamie are in elementary school. Brandon’s dad’s a lawyer; his mother’s a nurse. Where would he get marijuana?” She stared at Alma in alarm.

Alma hesitated. “Brandon’s father doesn’t live at home now; they’re getting a divorce. His mother works long hours at the hospital, and the boy is alone a lot of the time. The world’s a different place, Chancie. Eight-year-olds act like teenagers; twelve-year-olds act like college kids.

It's tough to grow up right with nobody to show you the way except movies and television, where everybody's a smart-aleck with a sassy mouth."

"You're not making me feel better, Alma," Chancie said with a tinge of bitterness. "I am what the sociologists call a single parent, you know. What are my chances my own son will grow up free of emotional problems?"

The housekeeper's hand crept across the blue-and-red print sofa to grasp Chancie's. "You do the best you can for Jamie. He knows that, even if sometimes it makes him feel caged. Children need limits even if they don't like them."

"So they can push against the limits we set." She sighed.

"That's right." Alma nodded, prominent strands of gray in her hair reflecting the light. "A bit at a time, you'll have to let Jamie go. It's only natural that he fights you, especially when he sees everyone else being set free to do their own thing, as the kids say. Those parents letting their kids do whatever they want aren't helping them any."

Chancie squeezed the veined hand that held hers, gently because of Alma's arthritis. "Thanks, Alma. It's just, it's so hard sometimes. I look at Jamie and expect to see a two-year-old with mischief in his eyes, racing around the room on his fat little baby legs. Instead I'm greeted by a sullen young man who has hints of a mustache. He's so headstrong. It seems like we're always shouting at each other. I don't want it to be like that."

"Time is a funny thing, isn't it, dear? The older you get, the faster it goes. Jamie has too much free time on his hands, and you don't have enough. My days are such a blur, I need a nap in the afternoon just to keep up. And, oh, by the way, that's what Jamie meant about babysitting me. He caught me napping when he came in from school."

Concerned, she leaned forward to peer into Alma's face. "You're feeling all right, aren't you? Are we wearing you out, Alma? Do you think you should see a doctor?"

"Don't be silly, dear. I'm sixty-six years old and Jamie's ten, that's all. It's a big difference."

Chancie sighed. "The difference between ten and thirty is big too. I thought if I had him while I was young, there wouldn't be such a gap between us and we'd speak the same language as he grew up. The joke seems to be on me."

"You'll find that Jamie will get closer and closer to speaking your language as he gets older, Chancie. The trick is to get through these next few years with a good relationship intact. Go talk to him, dear. Don't punish the boy for being unhappy."

She rose and stooped to kiss Alma's dry cheek. "What would I do without you?"

Alma's eyes twinkled. "Why, Chancie, I don't know. You'd be in a real pickle, wouldn't you?"

Chancie, already crossing the carpet to Jamie's door, laughed in agreement. She knocked. Getting no response, she opened it a crack. Her son lay on his bed with his eyes closed, cordless earphones clamped over his head. Chancie could hear the bass from where she stood and shook her head in dismay. The floor was littered with Jamie's discarded clothing. Drawers hung open from the bureau, spilling more wrinkled clothes. Toys and games were piled haphazardly on shelving units lining one wall from floor to ceiling, a layer of dust coating every surface.

Alma had been banned from Jamie's room, and Chancie agreed that the young man needed his sacrosanct space. Chancie could come in, but she couldn't look in drawers or closet, or read his personal stuff. The deal had been that Jamie would keep the place picked up and cleaned, which duty he was obviously disregarding. Chancie's one offer to help clean his room had been rebuffed. Now, with the marijuana business so close to home, she wondered if she should trust Jamie quite so far as she had been doing.

The boy opened brown eyes so like his father's and stared blankly at her. He didn't remove the earphones or turn down the volume.

She stepped over a pile of wrinkled jeans, and reached to pull one of the black headphones away from Jamie's ear. The boy didn't twitch a muscle. She shouted, "I told you you're going to go deaf if you don't knock it off! Turn it down!"

Slowly, defiantly, Jamie reached up to peel the headphones from his dark wavy hair. He didn't bother to stop the music, which sounded tinny coming at Chancie from a distance but which she

knew wasn't the case because the darned things were of the highest quality and therefore the most expensive.

Chancie sat on the edge of his twin bed. Jamie neither attempted to make room nor moved to get away from her. "I can show you a picture of what kind of damage repeated loud noise does to the ear, Jamie," she said.

"I don't want to see any stupid picture in your damned biology book, Mom."

When had her son started cursing on a regular basis? She hadn't noticed before. It made her feel even more like a terrible mother.

"You resented my leaving you to go back to school, didn't you? I'm sorry. It was something I felt I had to do. Do you resent me now, for spending so much time away on business?"

Jamie's lip curled. "I don't *resent* anything. You're making big bucks, aren't you? You can buy me anything I want, right?"

"Jamie, you know you can come down to the office after school if you want. We could spend a little more time together."

He closed his eyes again, shutting her out. "Mom," he said tiredly, "if you're not on the phone, you're opening new offices or training new people in Houston or Orlando or Saudi Arabia. You don't have time to talk to me."

*Guilty.* Jamie could sure push her buttons. She forced herself to smile. "I've never been to Saudi Arabia."

"Yeah, well, wherever. It doesn't matter. Wherever in the world you are, I'm locked up here in the house, alone."

Chancie studied the face that was so like Kenny's, even down to the full, pouting lower lip. Kenny had pulled this *poor me* act on her, and she'd fallen for it. For years. According to Kenny everything that had gone wrong in their marriage, and very much had gone wrong, had been her fault.

"I've never left you alone, Jamie. I have always been, and will always be, here when you need me. You know that."

He opened his eyes and stared hard at her. "No, I don't know that, Mom," he finally said. "You're gone more and more all the time. All I've got left here at home is Mrs. Benson, and she's *old*. She doesn't understand me, and she won't let me do anything. You treat me like a baby. Why don't you buy me some diapers if you want to buy me something!"

Jamie rolled over violently, thrashing and kicking to cover the fact that he had begun to cry. Chancie almost landed on the floor from one of his knobby knees shoving her aside. Instead she knelt, running her fingers through the curly hair on Jamie's neck. He needed a haircut. She thought, How in the world am I going to tell him I'm going out tonight when he feels so abandoned already? It's selfish and greedy to be thinking of Micah Taylor's eyes, his mouth, his long, lean body and my own adult needs, when Jamie needs me so much.

"We have an evening, Jamie," she said. "A whole, long, uninterrupted evening, and we're wasting it fighting. I'm sorry you feel bad. What do you want me to do to make up for it? Huh? Come on, talk to me." She tickled his neck, a favorite when he was a little boy.

He stilled, as he always did at the touch of her fingers on his neck, almost hypnotized. She halted so he would talk.

"Don't stop." His voice was muffled in his pillow.

"What do you want, Jamie?"

"Tonight, or do you want my lifelong goals?" He rolled his head slightly so he could see her expression.

"Don't be sarcastic. Let's start with tonight. Want to do some math? Why did I take three semesters of algebra in college if I can't help you?"

He rolled his big dark eyes and wrinkled his already short nose. "Sheesh. Okay. I don't understand what we're doing in class anyway. Maybe you can explain it."

"And then what?"

“And then what else do I want? Jeez, Mom, an hour out of the house at night, okay? Is that so much to ask? I’d like to see my friends once in a while when we’re not chained to our desks at school. We never have time to talk or anything.”

Chancie paused. “At the mall? Honey, you know I don’t like that idea.”

“Because two ditto-heads got caught kifing stuff?”

Chancie frowned. “Ditto-heads?” she asked. “Is that something you picked up from TV?”

“The word really isn’t *ditto*, it’s worse. I just can’t say it in front of you.” He had the grace to look embarrassed. “I’m sorry. And I’m sorry I came down on you so hard. But I want out of this house sometimes, Mom.”

Chancie’s hands clenched. Where in the world was Jamie picking up these expressions? Her first instinct was to clamp down on him even harder. But that wasn’t working, was it? Against her better judgment, she said, “Okay. One hour, a couple times a week. Not every night. And don’t make me sorry I agreed to this, Jamie.”

He rolled completely over toward her and they reached simultaneously to hug hard, the way Jamie had always insisted on. No little sissy hug for her son but a big bear hug, or else it didn’t count.

When he finally pulled away, leaving her nearly breathless, Chancie said, “What’s going on with Brandon?”

Jamie stiffened, looking away. “Brandon’s a ditto-head too,” he said quietly.

Despite what Jamie called his former best friend, Chancie was slightly reassured. Jamie showed sense in not wanting to associate with Brandon if he was in trouble. But she felt bad that the long relationship between the two boys had apparently ended. “Can’t you talk to him about it?”

“There’s nothing to talk about. Brandon tokes and I don’t.” He rolled back over.

Tokes? What kind of knowledge was being passed around elementary schools these days? She sighed. Jamie could be so hard, so unforgiving. So much like Kenny, who had held a grudge like a miser with a hoard of gold. But she, of all people, would not encourage her son to associate with drug users. Brandon, apparently, was past tense in this house.

“Tickle,” Jamie demanded, arching his neck in anticipation. “For five minutes.”

She laughed. Jamie seemed so young when he commanded her to tickle, the Jamie she’d always known and always would know. She felt she’d won her son back, at least most of the way. She couldn’t think about how far Jamie really had gone from her, or how far he would go yet. He was growing up way too fast, and she, the businesswoman, missed out on most of it. “My fingers will go numb.”

“I don’t care. Do it, Mom. Please?”

Her son. Did he have to beg to be touched? Not from her, not ever. She brushed at his neck with her fingertips until her hand actually did go quite numb.

After a lasagna dinner, Jamie’s favorite, Chancie did the dishes and let Alma sit on the sofa and watch television. Examining her nails while Jamie did homework across the shiny oak table from her, Chancie thought she’d have to touch up the damage done to her polish job by scrubbing pots before going out to meet Micah.

Jamie finished the last problem without her help, and slammed the book shut. Before he retreated to his room and Alma to hers, she’d better break the news.

“Jamie, I have something to tell you,” she said. She reached across the tabletop to halt Jamie’s exit and signaled to Alma, who was on the verge of leaving them alone. “Please stay, Alma.”

Her eyes wandered around her cozy kitchen. A lacy Boston fern flourished in a window, Alma’s baby. Chancie had what she called a brown thumb. All her own plants died either of neglect or from too much fussing and water. The appliances gleamed; Alma couldn’t stand grease or fingerprints, and bought more glass cleaner than Chancie would have thought one person could use in a lifetime. The hardwood floor was burnished to a high gloss.

She rose to pour herself and Alma another cup of coffee. Coffee after dinner was Alma's habit, not Chancie's, but for tonight she joined her housekeeper in the acidic vice. Tonight she wanted to stay awake, and Alma's strong brew should keep her alert until at least two in the morning.

She pulled her ladder back chair across the bright rag rug under the table and re-seated herself. Jamie looked leery, probably afraid he was in for a lecture. His eyes dulled, shuttered without closing, already thinking of ways to defend himself except he didn't know yet against what. Alma looked curious, her blue-veined hands curled around the steaming cup after she added sugar and lots of milk.

"Well?" Alma prompted.

"Well," Chancie repeated brightly, a false cheery smile on her face. Inside she trembled, afraid Jamie would repeat the scene from earlier tonight once she said what she had to say. "I met a man. At work. I've got a date tonight."

"Tonight?" Alma glanced at the clock. It was already after nine. "What time is this date?"

"He gets off work at midnight. He's a highway patrol trooper."

"A cop? You're meeting a pig at midnight. Jeez, Mom." Jamie's voice was flat.

"Jamie, I absolutely forbid you to use that word. Don't think of him as a cop. Or a *pig*, young man. And where do you get this awful language, anyway? He's nice. We're just going for coffee, that's all."

Chancie felt like such a hypocrite. What had she first thought when she'd laid eyes on Micah Taylor and Arthur Brinegar? *Cops*. With a bad taste in her mouth, her lip curling. It was odd how people, even ordinary law-abiding people, cowered at the thought of the police. Did Micah have anyone to explain to, a daughter perhaps to whom he'd have to expound "She's not a drug tester, she's a nice lady." Society had become way too complicated, the supposed defenders of justice and the law somehow come to be viewed as oppressors.

A lock of wavy brown hair fell across Jamie's forehead. He looked so much like Kenny, Chancie wanted to cry. She had to remind herself that he wasn't Kenny, Jamie was her son. She mustn't fall into the trap of making Jamie pay for Kenny's sins just because he looked like his father. Jamie had always been her boy, her son, as opposed to their child. Kenny said so, and it was true. "*Your* kid," he said, sneering, whenever Jamie did something he didn't like.

Now Jamie was beginning the approach to manhood, and she couldn't lose him by falling into old habits and shutting out the pain he caused as she'd done to Kenny.

"Jamie, your dad's been dead two years."

"I know that, Mom."

Maybe Jamie had learned that chilly tone of voice from her. She hoped not; she hoped she hadn't taught her son to freeze his feelings. "Cold bitch," Kenny had said, over and over again until she believed it. "You're such a *cold* bitch, Chancie."

"I just get lonely for adult company sometimes, Jamie. You know, we discussed earlier how you need time with your friends. Well, I need friends too. Please try to understand."

"A cop," Jamie said under his breath. He shook his head, tousling his dark locks further. "I'm going to bed. Have fun on your *date*, Mom."

Shocked, Chancie let him get up and walk away before reaction set in. "I'm not marrying the guy, Jamie," she yelled at his retreating back. "You don't have to be so damned snotty!"

Why had she said anything? It was a date. One date. She confided too much in Jamie, relied on him too much for adult conversation and responses he couldn't provide. He was just a kid.

She'd ended up yelling at him again. Would she never learn? Well, now she knew where Jamie had picked up his favorite new cussword, didn't she? Right here at home, although the origin of dildo-head, which is what she was sure Jamie had been inventing a euphemism for, was still a mystery. Chancie put her forehead in her hands. Her eyes ached, and her shoulders felt as if ten-pound weights rested on each of them.

"I should just go to bed and forget the whole thing," she muttered.

Alma patted her arm. “Don’t you dare. It would be a big mistake to let that boy get his way on this one, Chancie. Lie down for an hour, put cucumber slices on your eyes. Get up and fix your face, and then go meet your young man. Have some fun for once.”

Fun? Did Alma really think the fancy maneuvering and churning feeling inside when a woman got interested in a new man was *fun*? It felt more like panic. Chancie really didn’t have the time or the room in her life for dating.

So why had she agreed to a date with Micah Taylor within minutes of meeting him?

Oh, lighten up, she told herself. You’re just meeting him for coffee. You’re not starting a heavy romance.

But as she rose, silver concha belt tinkling, she admitted she knew better. She didn’t know much yet about Micah Taylor, but she’d be willing to bet everything she had invested in Screening Services that he didn’t go around asking women out for coffee or anything else if he didn’t mean for something more to happen. Sooner or later.

And Chancie herself? She hadn’t accepted a date with a man in the two years since Kenny’s death because she hadn’t wanted anything to happen in the romance department. Sooner *or* later.

Yet she’d accepted Micah’s invitation. And she still didn’t know how she’d let him slip past her defenses, despite the obvious inducements of wide shoulders, extra-long legs, and the definite bulge of a nice-sized package in his uniform pants.

She headed for the stairs and her bedroom, saying, “Good night, Alma.”

When Alma didn’t answer, Chancie paused with her hand on the newel post. She turned around to see Alma watching her with amused, calculating eyes. She wasn’t fooling Alma into thinking she wasn’t going out tonight. She never could fool Alma about anything.

“Um, have we got any cucumber?” Chancie asked.

Alma laughed. “I’m sure we have, but I’ll be glad to check the refrigerator for you, dear,” she said fondly.

### Chapter Three

Chancie couldn’t make herself go upstairs without trying to patch things up with Jamie. She knocked on his door again, and at his muffled “Yeah,” stuck her head inside. She would say nothing about the state of his bedroom. That could be left for another time. She said only, “Good night, son.”

His back turned stiffly to her, Jamie stood with clenched fists beside his rumpled bed. But he wished her a good night in carefully controlled tones, and Chancie gently clicked the door shut.

In her own bedroom, decorated in country rose and green floral, she turned on the bedside lamp and pulled down the spread. She undressed to panties and bra, set the alarm in case she should fall asleep, and climbed in the big four poster bed. After tossing and turning a while, she got up and washed her face in the connecting bathroom, then stood appraising the figure reflected in the dresser mirror opposite the bed.

Not bad, not for thirty. She turned sideways, tightening her stomach muscles and lifting her breasts with her hands. The soft light, barely enough to read by, flattered her. Her hair shone with golden glints, and shadows at thigh and cleavage made her look even more curvy than she really was. She arched her back, assessing. In this light she couldn’t detect her stretch marks. Candlelight could actually make me beautiful, she thought, and giggled nervously.

She eyed the dish of cucumber slices on the bedside table, and wished she could lie still long enough to enjoy them. Perhaps she could make use of the calming exercises she’d learned years ago in Lamaze class. She lay down again and plopped two cool green circles on her eyes, then tried to empty her mind of all but pleasant, serene thoughts. She pictured a pastoral scene: a copse of leafy green trees and a meadow where orange coneflowers grew. She imagined birdsong and flitting white butterflies in the sunny meadow. She began the massage, lightly rubbing hips and belly with the tips of her fingers.

Into her fantasy, a man and a woman appeared. The woman wore a wide-brimmed straw hat with flowers in the ribbon band, and a long, flowing summer dress that clung to hip and breast. The man carried a picnic basket, and he bent to spread a blanket beneath one of the trees at the edge of the meadow. The woman removed her hat. Dark gold curls spilled down her back. She bent to pick a coneflower, laughing at something the man said.

The man straightened and turned toward the woman. Chancie could see his bright blue eyes soften as he gazed at her. She bent her head to the flower. The man approached her and drew her into his arms. She looked up into his eyes, electrified, mesmerized. She lifted her own arms over his broad shoulders, and he bent to kiss her, a long, lingering kiss that plumbed the depths of her mouth. His hands encircled her waist, thumbs drawing tiny circles at the swell of her breasts. The vermilion coneflower loosened in her hand, fell heedlessly as the kiss deepened and her fingers sought the silky hair at the nape of his neck.

Chancie groaned in frustration at her inability to relax and stop worrying every detail of her life. Imagining herself as some Scarlett O'Hara figure and Micah Taylor as Rhett Butler was pointless, and probably self-defeating. No man could live up to a digital Hollywood hero. Instead of soothing, this little exercise had aroused her. Her skin felt sensitized, electric. Her nipples stood in hard peaks that hurt inside the confinement of her bra. The pit of her stomach ached, and lower still she pulsed with emptiness between her legs.

If she didn't stop, she'd throw herself on Micah Taylor the moment she saw him again. Tear his clothes off in the parking lot of the Inn and beg for release from this torment right then and there.

She ripped the now limp and soggy cucumber rounds from her eyes and sat up. She needed a hot bath. Or a cold shower.

She padded to the bathroom again and turned on the tap. She couldn't bring herself to actually step into the icy spray, so she compromised with a warm shower. She washed her hair, shaved her legs, and then stood in the spray until the water began to run cold.

She toweled dry, rubbed all over with scented lotion, and dusted herself with bath powder. Then she returned to her bedroom, opened the top drawer in the dresser, and stood debating.

Satin, lacy, cotton, plain.

What difference did it make what she wore? But she caught her own eye in the mirror. She wasn't fooling anyone, least of all herself. She said in a stern whisper to her reflection, "You are not going to do anything you'll regret, Chancie de Leur." Seized with determination, despite the lingering throbbing of blood-infused flesh that refused to go away, she donned the plainest pair of white bikinis she owned along with a serviceable cotton bra. The thought that white cotton stripped off just as easily as black lace tried to come to the forefront of her consciousness, but she shook her head and pushed it away.

She blew her hair dry, reapplied make-up, fixed her nails. She checked the time on her digital clock. Almost midnight. She threw open the closet, chose a soft pair of trousers, a black wool blazer with fawn whip stitching, a cotton ecru sweater, and her favorite pair of black leather boots.

She crept down the stairs, gathered coat, purse, and car keys. On her way out, she flicked on the outside light. She would need its amber glow when she returned.

Micah Taylor cruised in the passing lane of I-80 east toward Hawk Point. He had some paperwork to do at the office, and then he could go home and change out of uniform. This had been the longest shift in memory. Usually nothing distracted him from the highway and his work. But tonight it wouldn't have surprised him if he'd slid heedlessly beneath the oversized tires of a tractor-trailer while he was busy woolgathering.

Later, as he sat and tried to fill out reports, he could see nothing but pistachio green eyes with a hint of uncertainty in their depths, a pair of full lush lips, and a mass of deep honey-colored hair that fell in riotous curls.

He was intrigued by Chancie de Leur's looks, all right. But what had really interested him was how she responded to his clumsy attempt to wrangle a date from her. She had a sense of humor

hidden under that cool exterior, an inclination to tease and be teased. Under the right circumstances, of course.

A lady. A business lady with a rigid façade and an aching loneliness that apparently no one had yet recognized, let alone been able to meet. An enigma. A challenge.

Sharp intelligence and soft beauty all wrapped up in a package of severe control. Somebody, somewhere, had taught Chancie de Leur to hold back, to bury her volcano under a glacier. Micah Taylor was a man who liked a dare. He couldn't believe his luck. He imagined again the lush body hidden under the touch-me clothes she wore. He wanted to undress her. He wanted to caress her. He wanted to be the man to cause her volcano to erupt, to bathe in the molten lava that he sensed boiled inside Chancie.

There was no getting around it with pretty words and euphemisms. He wanted her naked in his bed as soon as possible. Tonight would be good.

He got back in the patrol car that he took home with him in case he got called out at night. He thought, How to approach Chancie, what strategy to use? That sounded so calculating, but he didn't know how else to put it. One wrong move with that lady, he felt sure, and he'd be kicked in the ass and sliding down the ice away from her so fast he'd cause an avalanche that would bury any hope of ever getting to know her better.

His fingers tapped the steering wheel of the cruiser as he pulled up in front of his darkened apartment building and parked next to his personal vehicle, a full-size Dodge Ram pickup. He had no feeling one way or another for his present living arrangement. His apartment complex, in one of the characterless developments put up during the previous oil boom in southwest Wyoming, was a handy place to hang his uniform and lay his head at night, and that was all.

His ex-wife had sold the nice little house they'd bought, and disappeared after their divorce. They had no kids, so he guessed it didn't matter if the house was gone. He'd been mildly attracted to a few women between Mariah and the present, and dated a bit, but had found nobody he cared enough about to start paying attention to the real estate ads.

Now Micah appraised his sterile apartment in the harsh light of an overhead fixture, and shook his head. No pictures decorated the walls. The apartment manager had chosen the crooked, cheap, motel-quality drapes and sickly-looking, sagging furniture. It was fairly clean and he'd recently changed the sheets on his bed, but those were about the only things in the whole place that might appeal to a woman. What would make Chancie de Leur want to visit here?

He'd have to think carefully about that. He wanted to spend a lot of time with that lady, get to know what made her tick. The thought of the chase excited him, but only because it was Chancie he thought of pursuing. Nobody else in a long, long while had been worth the trouble.

Chancie was special. She was also leery as a doe in the crosshairs of a high-powered rifle.

Then it came to him. He hung up his uniform and threw on a pair of Levi's so worn and comfortable they fit like a second skin. He pulled over his head a sweatshirt with the Denver Broncos logo emblazoned across the front, tugged on his boots.

He'd let Chancie make all the moves. Whatever Chancie wanted, whenever she wanted it. For a woman like her, Micah could wait. He grinned. Well, he was almost sure that he could wait and not rip her clothes off at the first opportunity. He pocketed his keys and wallet, shrugged into a shearling lamb coat, plopped his Stetson on his head.

On second thought, he wasn't so sure about any of the choices he'd made tonight, including his wardrobe. He was pretty certain Chancie wasn't the kind of silly woman who couldn't make up her mind, or worse: the kind of woman who made stupid decisions like showing up for coffee in a cocktail dress and spike heels at the Inn on a night of icy cold air and frozen streets, thinking she was going to impress. Still, what he knew of Chancie and what he was guessing about her could be light years apart. He could only wait and see.

Chancie waited in her car in the parking lot alongside the Inn as the engine cooled and the windows began to ice over. The lights from the restaurant windows glowed, and inside she could see a lone server and the heads of two customers in a booth directly in front of her. She checked her

phone once more for the time. Could Micah have gotten past her somehow and already be inside, waiting?

She reached for the ignition to warm up the car, but waited as a battered four-wheel drive truck pulled up next to her. She rubbed a spot clear in the freezing steam on the car window so she could see. A cowboy hat emerged from the pickup; the door slammed. A man in a dun leather coat rounded the front of the truck, halted, and tried to peer into the fogged front windshield of her car. Chancie hesitated. Was it Micah? He was tall enough, and sinewy enough, but she could see nothing of the man's features in the shadow of his hat brim and through the ice crystals already reforming on the windshield.

He walked between the two vehicles, leaned to tap on her side window. Chancie couldn't get the power window down without turning on the ignition, so she hesitantly cracked the door open, ready to slam it shut again if the man were a stranger.

Micah's friendly smile greeted her. "Hello, Chancie," he said, his voice soft as a caress. He grasped the door handle, pulling the door open for her.

She swung her legs out and stood. Micah shut the door then paused, looking at her. "You showed up after all," he said.

Chancie put her gloved hands in her coat pockets. "Did you think I wouldn't?"

"I wasn't sure. You had second thoughts about it, didn't you?"

How did he intuit so much about her? She shivered.

"Are you cold? Let's go inside." He started to reach for her arm, hesitated, seemed to reconsider and dropped his hand. He wasn't wearing gloves, even in this bitter cold. He stood aside for her to go first in the narrow space between the parked vehicles and the outside wall of the restaurant.

Chancie, quivering, hugged herself inside her coat. She found herself wishing he'd reached for her, wrapped her inside his warm leather coat. She wanted to know the contours of his hard chest under her gloved hands, feel the length of those long denim covered legs against hers.

He held the glass door of the restaurant open for her. Overly warm, slightly grease-scented air washed over them. He stood close behind her but not touching while they waited for the hostess to seat them, took her coat and hung it up before seating himself in the corner booth.

The server brought glasses of ice water, two menus. Micah said, "Hungry?"

"No, thank you. I ate with Jamie and Alma earlier." At his questioning look, she hurried to explain, "Jamie, my son, and Alma, my housekeeper-slash-cook-slash-lifesaver."

"Sure you wouldn't like an appetizer or something? I'm starved, myself." He paused while she shook her head. "Your son, you said? How old is he?"

"Jamie's ten."

Micah looked at her appraisingly, and she knew he wondered just how old she was.

"I'm thirty. I was married at sixteen," she said in answer to his unasked question, before deflecting his curiosity back at him. "Do you have children?"

An unhealed pain entered his blue eyes, vanished as quickly as it had appeared. "No," he said shortly. "I wanted kids, she didn't. I lost."

She told herself she should let it drop. Yet she heard herself saying, "Was your marriage unhappy, then?"

"You might say that." Micah smiled, a grim stretching of lips.

The server reappeared. Micah gestured to Chancie, who ordered only a diet soda. He ordered a meal by number with coffee, black. They handed the menus back.

"If you ever became interested enough in someone to want to marry again, would you still want children some day?" She took a sip of ice water, gulping and almost choking on her own audacity. She'd been out of the dating loop for too long. She couldn't believe she'd asked such a personal question immediately after hitting such an obviously sore spot.

Micah leaned back, resting his shoulders against the vinyl booth, studying her, weighing his answer. Somebody like Chancie probably wouldn't want to start all over with diapers and midnight feedings. He couldn't let her see how much Mariah's refusal to have his baby had hurt him. At last

he said, "It's been a long time since I even thought about having kids. I'm thirty-three years old. I guess that's not ancient yet, but I can't realistically see babies in my future at this point."

"You're not saying it's too late?" Chancie's fingers clenched around the cold glass. What's wrong with me? she thought. Why can't I stop asking such probing, personal questions?

Micah sat up straighter. The talk of marriage made him skittish. He tried not to show it. "Something like too late, yeah," he said. "I can't see getting involved with someone young enough to still want children, if you know what I mean." He paused, then added, "Not biologically too young, but emotionally too young."

"You could change your mind."

Micah stared at her, trying to gauge her intent. "Maybe. I doubt it. How about you? You have one child, right? Ever think of having more?"

The spotlight of her own untoward curiosity turned back on her just as she deserved for being so snoopy, she wiped some of the condensation from the outside of the glass. "Jamie, I think, will be my one and only. I've got Screening Services now, and I don't think I could give another child the required time and emotional commitment. It wouldn't be fair to have a baby I couldn't give my very best."

So, Micah thought. All wrapped up in her business. No marriage, no babies. Chancie de Leur was setting down the rules for him right out of the starting gate. He guessed that was fair enough.

She felt Micah's blue eyes assessing her. What must he think of her, talking about babies right after she'd met him? She had always wanted another child, but hadn't been brave enough to defy Kenny about it again after she had Jamie. But now certainly wasn't the time to explore her feeling of loss, and she couldn't explain why she kept pursuing the subject. Micah had slipped lower on his spine in the booth. He looked, in contrast to her, so relaxed. She was nervous, that was all, so she babbled.

He said, "I'm guessing you're a very good mother."

She laughed, a strangled sound. "Jamie might beg to differ. He's at a difficult age."

"He doesn't like the idea of Mommy seeing anyone, is that right?"

Chancie stilled. "How did you know?"

"I was his age once. I remember I had this picture in my head of my mom, an idealized portrait of perfect womanhood that no one could live up to. She couldn't step one little toe outside what I thought she should be or I had a fit. It took years to find out that inside that discount store picture of the ideal mom was a real, live, breathing lady with as many hopes and fears and insecurities as anybody else. I think when I realized she was human, just like me, that was when I could finally really love her."

"You didn't love her before? That's a little frightening to contemplate, that Jamie might not love me."

Micah smiled reassuringly. "You can bet he loves you. He just doesn't understand you any more than you probably understand him. He'll have to mature into some empathy. Give him time."

"Alma said just about the same thing tonight."

Micah shrugged. "Alma sounds like a smart woman. I'm not so smart. I have to learn things the hard way." He paused. "Let's talk about something a little lighter, agreed? How'd you get a name like Chancie?"

His meal came, and while he dug in hungrily she explained how her father's penchant for blackjack and her older brother's inability to pronounce Chelsea had resulted in her lifelong nickname.

"A gambler, huh?" Micah grinned. "Is that where you get it, from your dad?"

"I never gamble."

"What do you call starting up the kind of business you're in if it's not a gamble?" He looked at her from above a laden fork raised halfway to his mouth, eyes like blue lasers on her, demanding absolute truth.

“The money. When my husband died, he had some life insurance. The drug and alcohol testing opportunity was there, and I took it. It still surprises me how fast it all grew, and is still growing. I was in the right place at the right time, that’s all.”

“I admire your gumption.”

Chancie watched him pack away his meal, wondering where he put it all. At last the ferrying of food to his mouth slowed a bit, and he said, “Sorry, I told you I was hungry. Want a bite?”

She shook her head.

“You sure? It’s pretty good.” He indicated a small portion of chicken cordon bleu remaining, with a spoonful of rice and some steamed broccoli.

She smiled, more relaxed now, even the residual sexual fluttering in her lower belly starting to fade. Apparently Micah was willing to overlook the uncomfortable start to the evening she had caused. “Go ahead. I’m not hungry, really.”

“How about dessert? Want to do the ice cream bar with me?”

“Maybe a small sundae,” she agreed. He signaled the server for more coffee.

As they stood at the dessert bar, he urged her to take more of everything: another scoop of vanilla, more gooey marshmallow I, more hot fudge.

Chancie laughed. “You’ll make me fat.”

“Never. I just want to watch you eat.” His blue eyes serious, he studied her face, gaze lingering on her lips.

“You’re going to watch me eat?” She stiffened defensively. Maybe he wouldn’t let her earlier interrogation of him pass. Maybe he planned on punishing her somehow. Kenny would have thought of a way.

He smiled, his eyes hooded. “I’m going to watch. I’m going to enjoy it too. You can learn a lot about a person just by watching them eat.”

Chancie shuddered. What fetish was this? Was Micah a little strange in the sexual fantasy department? “I don’t think I’ll be able to eat then, if you’re watching me.”

He escorted her back to the table, waited until she seated herself before sitting on the padded bench across from her. She couldn’t pick up her spoon, merely sat eyeing her sundae. He stared at her, and she could feel the heat of that blue gaze.

Then he said, “Look. I’m teasing you, a little. We don’t know a whole lot about each other. Relax, okay? I made myself a promise, and now I’ll make it to you. If you’d like to keep seeing me, I won’t push you. Until you say so, I will never make a move toward you. Do you understand? What’s between us will be on your terms. In the meantime, I can only dream. So eat your ice cream, Chancie.”

She gazed into those scorching blue eyes. His words touched something deep and secret within her. She hadn’t been aware of the tiny openings in her armor Micah Taylor found and effortlessly widened. His request unsettled her, but she couldn’t deny it also excited her. Without taking her eyes off his, she picked up her spoon.

Dreamlike, obeying a wordless command from inside herself more than Micah’s plea, she dipped into her ice cream. She opened her mouth. The first bite slid across her tongue and down her throat. He watched hungrily: the fit of her lips around the spoon, the smooth withdrawal, the flick of her tongue to the corner of her lips in search of a stray bit of chocolate.

She ate, and he watched, a lazy smile curving his lips while his own ignored ice cream oozed into a white lake surrounding a fudge island. She’d never realized eating could be such a sexually fraught pastime, but this slow devouring of each other with only their eyes could be described as nothing else. Chancie felt an intense heat rising in her as she continued to bring the spoon to her mouth and withdraw it, miming licking and sucking Micah without touching him. She wanted to devour every inch of him instead of this icy dessert, and she knew he knew that too. She’d played along with his fantasy and become caught in it herself.

She already realized Micah Taylor was a dangerous man. Dangerous to her self-image and her sense of command. Oh, he might say they would go at her pace but he was leading her nevertheless.

And she was finding she craved his guidance. But where did he lead her? And did she want to go? What insights into herself might a man like Micah Taylor help her discover?

She knew now what Micah Taylor wanted from her. No marriage. No babies. No messy entanglements beyond two bodies entwined in passion. Just pure pleasure beyond imagining, whenever she felt like indulging herself with him. Micah Taylor apparently wanted only sex. And maybe that's all she wanted as well.

But not tonight. She would be given time to think about what physical delights Micah Taylor offered, because at that moment the cell phone in her purse went into its buzzing and vibrating routine, bringing her back to the realities of her life.

Chancie took a look at the number, sighed, and said regretfully, "I'm sorry, Micah. I have to go. It's Judy. She wouldn't bother me at this hour unless it was an emergency. Call me, won't you?"

"No."

She looked at him questioningly, suddenly unsure of the rightness of what she'd done here tonight. Maybe she'd completely misjudged him, gone temporarily insane, acted like a wanton moron with a stranger. Maybe he'd been testing her, like Kenny always, always tested her. She'd forever failed Kenny's tests and maybe now she'd failed Micah's. It wouldn't surprise her.

"No, Chancie," he said, reading her thoughts again. "I won't call you. You call me. Whenever you're ready, whenever you want to see me. It's all up to you."

She found she couldn't open her mouth; she couldn't move. She'd never met a man like Micah Taylor, hadn't known such a man existed outside her own solitary, fevered imaginings. Pictures of herself and Micah together flooded her brain: *tearing their clothes off, clawing at each other as they tumbled to the floor, his cock demanding rough entrance and she welcoming that first plunge, her legs spread far apart, crying out his name.*

*Oh, yes, Micah!*

"Go on, honey," he said, bringing her crashing back to reality. She noticed she didn't mind him calling her that at all, unlike slimy Arthur Brinegar. "Make your call, take care of business. But you get back to me, Chancie. Here's my number. Call anytime. If I don't answer right away, I'm in the middle of something or on the road. Leave a message." He jotted numbers on a napkin.

She took it with trembling fingers, stuffed it in her purse along with the cell phone. "I-I will. Thank you for, um, the ice cream. And everything. Good night, Micah."

She started to walk away on wobbly legs.

As she left, she heard him say so quietly no one else except she could hear, "Thank you, Chancie de Leur."

And she knew he watched her every movement, the same hot images flooding through him as she was imagining. Imagining what they could do, together. Until darkness swallowed her and they couldn't see each other anymore.

## Chapter Four

"Chancie." Judy's voice came with some unidentifiable emotion through the cell phone. "The trainmaster called. We've got a probable cause in Douglas. I haven't been able to raise a collector."

"What? You left messages?"

"Yes. Nobody returned my calls. I've tried landline, I've tried cellular. I've left voicemails and texts. I even checked everybody's online status to see if I could contact someone by chat. Nobody's available."

Chancie went cold. Judy had used every backup, in the proper order. With all the technology Chancie had invested in, Judy couldn't find one collector within driving distance of Douglas. The railroad employees would have to be tested within two hours of whatever might have happened. She and Judy might possibly never know the details and didn't need them. The important thing was the testing. Chancie had contracted to have a collector within two hours of any point on the rail line. In the open spaces of Wyoming, where one could drive the interstate for hours without

encountering a settlement of any kind, posting a tester every two hours along the track had proved to be a tall order. And Douglas was nearly five hours from Hawk Point by car, if the roads were clear and there was no traffic delay.

Chancie's carefully built system of recruiting and training collectors had broken down. Her body temperature shot instantly from cold chills to hot anger. "Who's the primary in that area, Judy?"

There was a short pause as Judy searched for a name. Her voice came quietly over the phone. She had encountered that intensity in Chancie before, and it could be quite frightening. "John in Casper, then Cherry in Rawlins."

"Log the call for invoicing. I've got to get off the phone and see if I can reach Jeff."

Judy said, "Maybe if we just wait a few more minutes."

"I'll call you from Douglas." Chancie disconnected. Time was too precious. She passed the exit to her house and kept going; instead of stopping she called and left a message for Alma and Jamie. She'd take the interstate to the airport. She had a breath analyzer kit in the trunk of her car, along with a box of vinyl gloves and several unopened test kits in a canvas tote that she carried just in case. She punched another number into the phone.

A sleepy voice answered. "Speak."

"Jeff, this is Chancie. I have to be in Douglas right now. Can you meet me at the airport?"

One of Jeff's shining virtues was that he could change from lethargic to alert in a split second. The war had almost ruined Kenny emotionally. But, although Jeff Miller had been scarred too, his wartime experiences left him with the instincts of a puma and an amazing skill with anything that could be flown.

"Right there," he said, and hung up.

She tried to control her anger at the breakdown in her carefully built system. Sometimes, with no explanation, things just didn't work. It was Chancie's job to pick up the pieces and salvage what she could. In this case, she had the niggling feeling she was so angry because the call had taken her away from rapidly escalating sexual fantasies involving Micah Taylor and not really because of any misconduct on the part of her employees.

She'd sworn upon getting into the testing business that her personal life would never be allowed to interfere. At the time she made that silly vow she didn't have a personal life, but that wasn't the point.

Her breathing slowly calmed on the drive to the airport. She didn't know how he did it, but Jeff Miller actually beat her to the hangar. The rattletrap old pickup he drove looked like a pile of scrap, but ran like a race car. His plane, a twin-engine Cessna, looked in much better condition, and flew like a soaring eagle.

Jeff still moved with the grace and speed of a cat, even though middle age was fast overtaking his body and turning his slim musculature to a slight paunch. His long blond hair tied into a ponytail with a handkerchief and bobbing behind him, he sprinted from his truck to the hangar. Chancie followed, puffing and hauling her equipment. It wouldn't occur to Jeff to offer to help; that wasn't his job. They climbed into the Cessna and belted in. Chancie chewed her fingernails while Jeff did a preflight systems check, talked with someone on the radio, then circled toward the runway and take-off.

She hated those moments, getting in the air and then getting back safely to earth, but she liked the flight itself. She always felt so free in the air, safe in Jeff's steady hands on the controls. It gave her time in her busy life to pause and think.

She sat quietly beside Jeff in the dark. He disdained chitchat and preferred absolute silence. Jeff loved flying, probably the only thing in the world he did love. Chancie remembered once, when Kenny's mood swings had been particularly bad, exhorting unswerving love and obedience from her and Jamie and shoving them away when they opened their arms, she'd gone in desperation to consult Jeff.

"Why, Jeff," she had asked through scalding tears. "Just tell me why he acts like he does. Sometimes I think he hates us!" Jeff had looked coldly at her, just as Kenny did, as if he looked at a

dead animal in a steel trap, while he swigged straight from a bottle of Jack Daniels. "Because you're the enemy, Chancie," Jeff said at last. "Just like everybody else out there."

"But I'm his wife. Jamie's his son. He can't go on fighting that damned war forever," Chancie had cried. But Jeff would say no more despite her pleading. Her timing could have been better. She realized Jeff had a problem with the bottle, just like Kenny and just like almost every other vet she knew. But he tested clean for drugs and refused to fly if he'd been on one of his periodic binges, even giving her the name of another pilot to call if he should be impaired when she needed him. She suspected she could have had Jeff's pilot's license yanked until he got help with his alcoholism, and her conscience bothered her on that point every time she called him to come to her rescue. But he'd never given her a moment's anxiety about his sobriety at the controls, and so Chancie let the matter slide.

She couldn't have lived with Jeff for five minutes, but she trusted the taciturn vet completely in the air and so said nothing about his problem. It was ironic that she, the drug tester, felt that way. But at some point, she had to separate her occupation from the concern for a person's right to privacy. Jeff Miller's problem would remain his own affair unless and until he tried to mix drinking and flying.

The darkened Wyoming landscape drifted swiftly away beneath them. They ghosted over the Red Desert, following the interstate, and then turned north toward Casper. Lost in thought, Chancie was surprised when the lights of that other oil-boom town on the opposite side of the state came into view. Jeff spoke a few words into the microphone, and then the landing gear came down and they glided on to the runway.

"Need me to wait?" He didn't take his eyes off the glowing panel lights to look at her.

"I don't think so, Jeff, thanks. I don't know how long I'll be. I'll rent a car here and turn it in at the Hawk Point airport."

She thought of her over-extended credit card, and stifled a groan. A few more expenses like this and she'd be bankrupt. This particular job was going to cost her a bundle she could ill afford, but she didn't have any choice unless she wanted to lose the whole railroad contract. "Give your bill to Judy. I'll take care of it when I get back."

"I'm not worried about it. You've never stiffed me yet." Jeff waved her and her equipment off his plane, already dismissing her from his thoughts as he readied for the return flight to Hawk Point.

Chancie cursed the single available rental car all the way to Douglas. She'd expected a little economy car with good gas mileage, but got a monster Cadillac full of unfamiliar buttons and knobs she didn't know how to operate. She could barely reach the gas pedal with the seat belt unbuckled, but she found the headlights and the window defroster and she guessed that was all that mattered.

She reached the railroad crossing with nearly twenty minutes to spare off her deadline of two hours. Police cars with flashing lights still surrounded the scene, and she introduced herself to the nearest man with a badge while a tow truck backed ponderously up to the rails to attach a badly crushed vehicle. The police assured her no one from the train had left the site. Broken glass littered the ground, sparkling in the train's headlights and the flashing police lights. The train crew followed woodenly while Chancie crossed the tracks to speak with the night manager of a nearby convenience store about commandeering his restroom for the next several hours.

She worked fast to secure the location, taping off the toilet tank and depositing a package of blue colored drink mix in the bowl and removing the trash container.

She went through the checklist and the testing with each man in turn, none of whom gave her the slightest trouble. They acted dazed, but they'd all been tested before and knew what to expect. If they resented the fact that she treated them as clients and not individuals, they didn't show it. The law said they couldn't have the opportunity to get near alcohol for the next eight hours to prevent them from using the excuse that they'd needed a drink *after* the accident. This lame explanation had been offered by the captain of the oil tanker *Exxon Valdez* and a New York City subway driver, whose resulting disasters had led directly to the congressional Omnibus Testing Bill that now affected eight million transportation workers.

Chancie got into this business because she thought she could do some good, prevent any more accidents that caused untold human suffering and horrendous environmental damage. If the people responsible for public safety resented her, she could live with their opinion.

At ten in the morning, when the train crew finally left her custody and she stood alone outside the deserted convenience store, she was exhausted. Her breath plumed in frozen puffs in front of her face, and her feet hurt from standing so long.

She donned her leather gloves and packed away her test kits for a lab urinalysis later. No matter what the cops decided to do with the crew now, she had her samples safe.

She climbed in the Cadillac and headed back toward Casper. Nodding dangerously over the steering wheel, she made it to the package delivery office, where she air freighted the samples to the lab. Then she checked into a cheap roadside motel, where she slept restlessly for four hours.

She hadn't let herself think about what was really bothering her, a niggling under her surface thoughts that wouldn't let her rest. At the checkout desk, she glanced at the day's local paper lying folded on the counter. The headline above a picture of the crushed car from the night before brought the memory she'd been trying to repress rushing back into her consciousness. The newspaper article said four teenagers had died in the accident. She reserved the room for another night and spent the afternoon on the lumpy bed, crying her eyes out at the senseless loss of young life.

That evening, she called on John, the area supervisor who'd failed to answer his phone, failed to have his collectors coordinated to take over if he was unavailable, and cost her two days she couldn't afford away from the main office. Driven by a picture in her mind's eye of broken glass and blood, she chewed him out for a good half hour. She couldn't fire him until she'd found and trained a replacement, but in her mind John was as good as gone.

It surprised her when John, normally a burly teddy bear of a man, lashed back as she finally wound down. "If you'd waited another fifteen minutes, somebody would have been there. Myself if it came to that. You're so hell-bent on having all your fingers in the pie, you won't trust anyone else to do their jobs. I know you're going to fire me, but I won't give you the satisfaction. I quit!"

Stunned into speechlessness, she reclaimed the motel room she'd been planning to give up and spent the next day trying to find a replacement for John. With no luck as it turned out. Chastened, she went back to his house and apologized. He accepted his job back more graciously than she probably deserved, and she could now go home.

She debated whether to stay in Rawlins, a sad little town with only the dubious honor of the state penitentiary to recommend it, and talk to the area supervisor there. She checked the time and decided against it. Why have Cherry reiterate John's opinion that Chancie didn't have enough trust in her own people? Chancie had been given her lesson already. She could learn from her mistakes. She could be back in Hawk Point by dinnertime, spend some time with Jamie. And call Micah.

She had been running so fast and hard the last couple of years, she hadn't taken the time to set priorities. Apparently everyone around her, except Chancie herself, had noticed. She had to stop giving every detail in her life the same identical level of attention, every snafu the same almost obsessive concentration.

What was important to Chancie de Leur? She had to decide.

She drove the Caddy as fast as she dared across the most desolate stretch of the state, with the window down exposing her to the frigid air in order to keep her awake. The barren high desert and the white line lulled her; she was afraid even to use the car's cruise control in case she should nod off from lack of anything to do but steer. At least the roads were clear; she could be thankful she didn't have to watch for black ice. She flipped the radio dial back and forth. She couldn't find anything on satellite and only country stations on regular radio, so she turned up the wailing about lovers done wrong accompanied by twanging guitars and hoped it would keep her awake.

She tried to blot out memories that wouldn't go away: of Kenny telling her she was stupid and worthless, of John's round owl face as he told her she was consumed with control, of Jamie's thin shoulders slumping each time she missed a parent-teacher conference or Christmas concert at his school.

Instead she tried to listen to the music and keep her thoughts on the modern breed of cowboy epitomized by today's country western singers, with Wranglers so tight nothing was left to the frenzied imagination of female fans. From there, her thoughts automatically turned to Micah. Her own sexy cowboy. *Maybe*. Maybe he could be hers. If she wanted him, like she thought she did, and if he wanted her, as she was darn near positive by now he did.

She could steal a few hours in Micah's arms tonight and make up the sleep in her own bed. She concentrated on thinking of his body, his lean torso and broad chest. She thought of their date for ice cream, licking cold sweetness from a spoon as she'd wanted to lick his heated cock. She wondered if he would taste as good as he looked. She couldn't wait to try. The thought kept her wide awake, and the rest of her warm enough, that she could bear the icy blast on her face from the open window.

She called from the airport after turning in the car. She wanted to leave the message now, before she could change her mind. She was running on empty emotionally. She needed Micah Taylor, and neither Jamie nor anything else she had any control over would keep her away.

She claimed her own car, shivering violently until the Lexus warmed up. Then she checked in at the office by cell phone, drove home and spent the afternoon and evening trying to smile and act her ordinary self.

At midnight she drove to the Inn parking lot and waited.

Micah pulled up in his truck a little after twelve-thirty. This time she got out of the car to meet him. He said in a soft voice, "Hello, Chancie."

He wore the cowboy hat and fleece-lined coat, open despite the cold to show a denim shirt cut to fit his lean frame. He looked wonderful, like every Western girl's dream cowboy, and Chancie wondered if he actually owned horses. She herself, born and raised in Wyoming, had never ridden a horse.

As she stood looking at him, all her bravado vanished. The two days on the road, the horrible train accident, and the phone call she'd placed to his voicemail had dried up her store of courage. She just wanted to drink in the sight of him.

But after a minute or so of that, the puzzled grin left his face and he said, "Chancie, I'm real happy to see you. But it's cold out here. What do you want to do?"

Her lips felt frozen. She said, "Could we just drive somewhere and talk? I don't feel like sitting in public tonight."

He didn't seem surprised. She detected no flicker of emotion one way or the other. He said only, "Your car or my rig?"

Still hesitant, she said, "Mine, I think."

"You driving?"

At last she relaxed a little. She was unused to asking for exactly what she wanted in a relationship. Maybe Micah really would let things happen at her pace. "I'm driving. Get in."

Micah tossed his Stetson in the back seat. Chancie got in, put the car in gear, and started to back out of the parking space.

"Stop," he said.

She turned her head to look questioningly at him.

"Seat belt."

"I never wear one. I had a car once whose belt wouldn't unbuckle. Scared me to think I couldn't get out if I needed to." She smiled ingratiatingly, expecting to have her way.

He didn't smile back. "I don't mean to be a hardass, Chancie. But I've seen too much damage done in wrecks to sit here and let you drive without a belt. I insist you buckle up."

She drew in a breath. "Would you arrest me?"

He grinned. "I could. But I wouldn't. I'm asking you nice, though. Please buckle up. For me, if not for yourself."

"All right, Micah." She reached for the belt, clicked it into the lock. "Better?"

"Much." He faced forward again, leaning his head back against the rest.

She finished backing up, then drove through town and out past the city limits. At a little turn-out called Fourteen Mile that featured a spring fed pond, frozen over now into a solid sheet of ice, she pulled off and parked. She let the car idle, hands on the steering wheel and eyes straight ahead. A glow suffused the bluff overhanging the pond, and soon the moon began to rise, a sliver of gold that seemed so close she could almost reach out and touch it.

Even though the little traveler's stop featured restrooms, Micah doubted if they'd be disturbed at this time of night. As she sat and said nothing, he began, "Chancie."

"This isn't as romantic as I thought it would be," she said.

He felt a laugh rumbling deep in his chest. "Honey, we haven't done anything yet. You want me to hold you, meet me halfway over the console."

Chancie wanted him to hold her so much. She quickly unbelted and twisted over toward him, running her hands under the shearling jacket, seeking his warmth. The full winter moon crept slowly upward as she lay as closely against Micah's chest as she could. His arms curled around her, and she could hear the thump of his heart in his chest. They were alive, she and Micah, and those four kids in Douglas who'd tried to beat the train were dead. She should grab every moment she could with this man, squeeze each second of joy while she could. She could have suggested they meet at his place tonight but she held him off like a teen-aged virgin. Why?

Tears bathed her face. The moon glittered, its circumference trembling from her tears. A sob rose in her chest, and she held her breath, trying to stop it. Micah caught on to the fact that she was crying, and lifted her upper body by the shoulders for her to straighten up and face him.

"Chancie." He brushed her hair back, wiped at her tears. "What is it? What's wrong?"

She shuddered. "Micah, they're dead. Four kids in Douglas." She broke off, unable to continue.

"Is that where you've been the past two days? Why didn't you call me?" He tipped her chin up. In the moonlight, she couldn't distinguish the color of his eyes, but his forehead puckered in concern.

"I-I didn't think. I'm so mixed up. All I could concentrate on was getting the job done before I collapsed. Then I found out what happened—and that I didn't even have to be there—and on the way home all I could think of was you. I didn't want you long-distance. I wanted you with me. And now that you're here, all I can do is fall to pieces and cry. I'm so sorry, Micah."

He stroked her cheek with a fingertip. "So tough and so soft. I'm glad to know you're human, Chancie. I'm real glad you called because I've been wanting to see you too." He combed strong fingers through the curls fanning her cheeks. "You'd have made a good cop. You wait until the crisis is past to break down."

"Don't say that. I couldn't be a trooper like you. I can't even do my own job properly." She curled her upper body back over the hard plastic console to lean against his chest, where she suddenly felt she belonged. Micah didn't know all the details, but he was the most reassuring thing in her life right now. She clung to his strength, his support.

Micah stroked Chancie's head, then her back through her winter parka. Beneath the crackly parka, she wore a soft cashmere sweater that begged for the caress of a man's hand. He wondered if she was aware of the texture of the clothes she wore, their sumptuous feel under his fingers. Beneath her rigid manner, she pleaded silently for someone to touch her. It nearly drove him crazy to sit here and stroke her sweater and not her full breasts pressing against his chest. Did she think he was made of steel, a Superman? He said softly in her ear, "Do you think cops don't cry, Chancie?"

She held her breath. Could she tell Micah the truth? Kenny had always gotten extremely defensive and angry when she tried to explain what she thought or felt, as if her feelings didn't count. Kenny had taught her to lie about what she really thought, because the truth brought only raging tantrums and binges with the bottle. The truth hurt.

She had to know how Micah would react to the truth of what she thought. She had to know now. She expelled a breath, inhaled another, gathering her nerve for the plunge. She said, "I guess I thought cops became inured to human carnage."

His hand halted momentarily in its soothing massage, before he took up the feather-light circling again. "Inured to human carnage. The bigger the words, the farther away the blood is, huh?"

Don't worry, I understand what you're trying to do. But you mustn't think that because I've seen more bad accidents than you, I've become used to it. You never get used to it. If you don't believe me, I can get you statistics on police suicides."

She stiffened beneath his hand, almost pulled away. Micah tried to glide over her sudden withdrawal. "Ah, Chancie." He squeezed her lightly, drawing her back to the warm spot she'd created where his coat lay open to her heat. "Do you think I don't know people's stereotype of cops? I see it reflected in their eyes all the time when I'm in uniform. I saw it in yours that first night in your office. People are almost more suspicious of cops than cops are of them. You should know what I'm talking about. You're in the suspicion business yourself."

She raised her head, lower lip trembling. Hadn't she faced this most basic of truths about herself yet?

He smiled, trying to draw a return smile from her. "Well, you are. What is it that you think you do? What service do you perform? You try to catch people using illicit substances at work, or screen potential illicit substance users applying for a job. Sometimes we're in the exact same business. That lonely stretch of highway called I-80 is the biggest drug pipeline in the United States, and I also catch a hell of a lot of drunk drivers. I have to be suspicious in order to stay alive. It kind of goes with the territory."

She whispered, "How do you separate what you do from who you are? I've seen so much of the bad side of people, Micah. Sometimes I lose hope that there are good, decent people out there who aren't always trying to sneak something by. I try to, I thought I could, prevent some of the waste of lives. But I can't. I don't. The horrible accidents still happen."

He could see she was about to begin weeping again. He curled his hand around her neck, forcing her to look at him. "You have to believe we're the good guys, Chancie. We do what we can to stop the damage, but there are forces out there beyond our control. Accidents do happen. Roads get icy. People fall asleep behind the wheel. The best we can do is trust that most folks are honest and conscientious and doing their best, just like us."

"Is that what you really believe?" She took a deep breath, gathering her courage. Then she looked him straight in the eye. "Micah, I've always wondered, if you really believe there are good people out there, then tell me why cops associate only with other cops?"

"For a girl, you fight dirty, you know that?" His white grin faded for a moment before returning full-strength. "Yeah, cops fraternize with cops. Those are the people we know, the people we see every day. The people we know we can trust. But I'm trying to break that habit. Lately I've been seeing one really sexy woman in particular who is not a cop."

He ran his hands back under her coat and she willingly returned the favor. She found she loved the feel of the washboard of his ribs through denim. She smiled tentatively, looking deep into his eyes, her somber mood eased. Micah had helped immeasurably to restore her lost equilibrium.

His teeth sparkled in the moonlight when he smiled.

"Getting warm in here." She straightened, drew off her heavy parka, and tossed it in the back with his hat. Then she looked again into his eyes.

His eyes were heavy-lidded as he returned her gaze.

Something inside Chancie responded instantly to that look, her own needs suddenly washing to the forefront on a wave of heated desire. She bent her head slightly, and he raised his own to meet her. His lips were soft and warm, gentle against hers and just slightly open. Only the tightening of his arms around her told her that he held back for her sake. She kissed him tentatively, softly, expecting at any moment that he'd drag her over the console and take what she so timidly offered. But he took what she gave and no more.

His containment challenged her. She increased the pressure of her lips on his, tilting her head sideways and catching his lower lip with both of her own. She gave that sensuously full lip her attention for a while, running her hands lightly up and down his ribs and sides. Micah let her do what she would, his own hands kneading her spine from neck to waist. She straightened her head a bit and parted her lips to meet both of his. Then she impishly pulled her mouth away.

"How was that for a first kiss?" she whispered.

“Real nice, baby.” His voice sounded raw, and she regretted continuing to tease him.

“I can do better,” she offered.

“I don’t mind playing for a while if that’s all you want.”

“I love playing with *you*, Micah,” she said.

His eyes closed, he shook his head slightly as if swallowing back a rejoinder to her double entendre. She took the opportunity to begin kissing him again while he wasn’t looking directly at her. This time she kissed him like she’d wanted to since she first laid eyes on him, pressing her breasts as close as she could to his hard chest and bringing her hands out from beneath his coat to wrap them around the column of his neck and entwine her fingers in his thick, straight hair. She pulled his head closer, opening her mouth and grinding her lips to his. Her tongue sliced across his teeth to meet his, and the kiss softened instantly.

Their tongues tasted each other, dancing sweetly together inside his mouth. Then she slowly withdrew hers to its own warm cavern, darting back once or twice to invite his to follow. It did, and suddenly it was Micah kissing her, his hands massaging her jaw, rotating her head until her neck bent like a willow to rest on one of his broad forearms.

Clasped in his arms, she gave herself to his searching kisses, learning what pleased him, showing him by her response what roused her, murmuring wordlessly into his opened mouth when he groaned in frustrated passion. She drowned in the taste of his mouth, his hands tangled in her hair. Hot pangs of frustrated desire shot through her at each movement of his lips against hers.

Suddenly his arm stiffened inside the leather coat sleeve. He stopped kissing her and drew his head back to look sharply at her.

Dazed from his kisses, it took her a moment to decipher the look on his face. In the heat of her ardor, she’d unconsciously unbuttoned his shirt and slipped her hand inside. His flesh singed her palm now that she realized what she had done. She’d stepped outside the boundaries of her own rules. She guiltily withdrew her hand from its warm nest inside his shirt.

He whispered into her hair, “Are you sure this kissing in a car is all you need, Chancie?”

Pain burst in her. No, this wasn’t all she needed. But it was all she’d allow herself. She closed her eyes against the ache of what she really wanted, and said, “I need so much, Micah. I need this closeness so much. But I need time. Give me time.”

He waited until she opened her eyes. Then he said, “Tell me one thing true, Chancie. Do you want me?”

She ached with the need to be caressed, the secret places within her throbbed with longing to be filled with Micah’s cock. She’d been married for more than a decade, and in that time her body had been taught that this kind of kissing led to hot banging that made the mattress squeak and the crown of her head knock the wall. But her cool, analytical side wouldn’t stop reminding her of the pain that followed pleasure. She’d been taught to mistrust the closeness of lovemaking.

To trust was to hurt.

Still, it was unfair to confuse Micah with Kenny. Up to this moment, Micah had more than proved she could trust him. He kept his word about letting her temper the speed of their union. He hadn’t led her straight to his place. He hadn’t become impatient with her, cursed her, slammed a door in her face or gotten drunk to call attention to what an inhibited bitch she was.

She had to tell him the truth and take her chances. She said, “Micah, I fantasize about you. In my dreams I don’t carry around the baggage of a bad marriage. But in real life, I do.” She touched his cheek, ran the pad of a finger over his lips. “Yes, I want you. You can touch me.”

“Chancie.” He rocked her gently. “It’s enough just to know. Sorry I pushed when I promised I wouldn’t.”

She sighed. “Micah, I already decided you’re a perfect gentleman.” She snuggled up against his chest, thinking of Judy’s classifications. She knew now where Micah Taylor fit in.

He growled. “A gentleman, huh? I’ve apparently left a misimpression here tonight. Allow me to alter your opinion a little, ma’am.”

He bent his head to kiss her again. He hadn’t blamed her, called her names, rejected her. Micah Taylor, she realized with a rush of emotion, offered no threat, posed no danger. He wasn’t a

vengeful man. Infused with delight that perhaps she'd found the man she'd been looking for at last, she wanted to crawl all over him, bestow kisses on every part of his firm body, devour him until they fell exhausted from each other.

So she kissed him. Her hand had found its way back inside his shirt, to the steel hardness of his chest. In response, his fingers inched under her sweater until his hand encountered the elastic of her bra. Tugging gently, he released one breast to cool air. Her nipple hardened instantaneously, and he rolled it between his thumb and one finger, groaning into her open mouth. His hand left her breast to trail down her side and seek the waistband of her pants. They unsnapped and unzipped easily, and she maneuvered to allow him easier access, arching against the steering wheel. He paused.

"Touch me," she whispered. "Micah, touch me."

His questing finger slid down her belly, along ready wetness, and encountered her clit. The merest contact and she was coming, almost blacking out from the intensity of the sudden orgasm.

He held her while she slowly relaxed. Soon he was tugging her sweater down, while she stared at him with eyes still glazed with spent lust. She didn't understand what was happening.

Condensation fogged the windows of the Lexus, dimming the moonlight. She tried to read his expression by the dashboard lights, but finally had to rely on his voice to get some clue about what he was feeling. "Zip your pants up, baby," he said. "I think we should go."

"Micah?" she asked, dazed.

He buttoned his shirt while she clasped the steering wheel with trembling hands. Then he retrieved her bulky parka and his hat, setting the big gray Stetson like a chaperon on the console between them.

"Put your coat on, Chancie. Please." The trembling that showed in her hands started deep inside and shimmied up her whole body. She didn't think she could drive yet. She'd stopped too soon, way too soon, and her yearning body punished her for it. She'd had merely a taste of what she wanted to experience at the hands of this man, and he couldn't actually be serious about stopping now. When she didn't react to his plea, Micah said, "Come on, honey. Put your seatbelt on, put the car in reverse and let's go before I throw you in the backseat and we do something you're not ready for. I don't want any regrets between us, Chancie."

She shook her head, trying to clear it. Finally she gained enough control to do as he asked. She belted herself in, slipped the car into gear and pulled out of the lot at Fourteen Mile. She was grateful Micah had enough wits about him not to want to go any further in the uncomfortable confines of a car in winter. But then he insisted he wanted to go home. Alone. What did that mean? Had she done something wrong, something that turned him off so much he wanted her to go away?

All the way back to town, and after she'd dropped him off at his truck, and into the wee, weary hours of the morning when she should have been sleeping, the thought badgered her: He thought they might regret what they'd done, or that she would regret doing more. Maybe he was right. Maybe she wasn't ready. But her unfilled secret recesses continued to harass her the rest of the night, and wouldn't let her sleep. Her thoughts churned while she tossed alone in her bed, wide awake. *Would you have regretted making love with Micah, Chancie? No matter what, if that's all there was and all you'd ever get, would you regret it?*

She knew she would not. She only hoped, when the time came that Micah thought she might be ready, he wouldn't regret it either.

## Chapter Five

"Hi, Micah. This is Chancie. It's about six, and I know you're not home. But I was wondering if you were off on Sunday, and, um, if you'd like to go Christmas shopping with me. I'm truly sorry I can't see you before then; I have to spend some time with Jamie. Call and let me know. 'Bye."

His voicemail warned "end of messages," then gave him a menu of choices in case Micah might want to save it. He did. He would want to listen to it again to see if he could clear up his confusion.

He thought he'd understood Chancie's ground rules: sex only, when she was ready, no emotional entanglement or promises, thank you very much. He rubbed his eyes and sighed. Now she wanted no contact for days, supposedly because of her kid. He had his doubts about her excuse.

He called voicemail again and punched in the number to re-play the message while he mused. Maybe things had gotten too hot, too fast, for Chancie. Sunday was three days away, a long time for them not to see each other. Maybe she wanted to cool off, take time to think before she took the next step toward where they both knew they were headed. Maybe she had as much trouble as he enduring searing kisses that led only to some heated foreplay. While it was nice, it had been an odd encounter for a couple of adults. It kind of made him feel like a teenager again.

He listened to the message once more. Maybe she really did feel she had to pay some extra attention to her son. She'd hinted that the boy was a challenge, and her difficulty with him was probably compounded by having a new man in her life. He wished there were something he could do to help Chancie with Jamie, but probably the biggest help he could give her would be to stay away as she asked.

Which wasn't the easiest thing ever asked of him. Micah hadn't, by any means, forgotten Chancie's ripe body or torrid kisses. Every waking moment his own body longed for hers in a lingering, aching response that hadn't plagued him quite this urgently since he had actually been a horny teenager. But now he found that the invitation to go shopping opened an endless vista of possibilities he thought he'd been blinded to long ago: hinting of making a home together, sharing a family, building a future. These and more dangled before him, frightening him with their illusive three-dimensional reality.

Damn! He'd closed off that part of himself, declared it dead a long time ago. What was hope doing rising from the grave now, a shambling carcass he'd just have to seize by the throat one of these days and shove back down the dark hole?

He was falling quickly, crazily in love with Chancie de Leur, tumbling into an all-encompassing love that terrified him with its promise, and its peril. He'd opened his heart once before, and had it smashed flat as the copper pennies which as a boy he used to lay on the tracks, waiting for the screaming iron wheels of the huge passing freight trains.

Did he dare open up again?

He dropped his head in his hands. No. Chancie was right. He should just back off and take things as they came, not letting himself feel hurt if she didn't want to see him for half a week at a time. He'd admired her cool head from the start, her unemotional sensibility. He should try for that restraint himself. Maybe he wouldn't even return the call, let her think he didn't care one way or the other.

And whom did he think he was kidding? Micah raised his head and stared at the hulking outlines of his sorry living room furniture. Even in darkness the chair and scarred coffee table looked like sulky discards from a second-hand store. His apartment smelled stale, the air thin and uncirculated, as if the door and windows were never opened. He was seldom home. About all he had was work. And he didn't care. He'd closed himself off from more than his own emotions after the divorce, he'd basically closed himself off from life.

Well, maybe he'd had enough time to heal. Maybe he wanted his life back. Maybe he wanted a life with Chancie and her grouchy young son and a housekeeper named Alma.

He realized how little he knew about Chancie's life, just a few facts he could count on one hand. She was right to try to get the two of them away from their unthinking, heated desire for each other, to explore unknown facets of themselves that couldn't be revealed in bed. So okay, he'd call and talk to her, tell her he'd *love* to go shopping on Sunday, even though he despised shopping.

He looked at the illuminated face of his cellphone. Damn and double damn. Almost one in the morning. Micah used to like night and swing shifts, and now he hated them, everybody sleeping while he was wide awake. Chancie had a rough couple of days, only the previous night staying out with him until almost two. He couldn't call and wake her now, no matter how he hankered to hear her voice, longed to picture her in bed in her nightie, curled to the phone and the sound of his voice

in her ear. He'd catch a few hours of rest himself, set the alarm, and call her in the morning before she left for work.

If, after what had happened in her car, Chancie could wait three days, he could wait a few hours. He rose and crossed the darkened apartment toward his cold, lonely bed. He undressed and climbed between the sheets, and then lay sleepless, counting the minutes ticking away. A few hours of that and he began to admit that waiting for Chancie de Leur would perhaps be the hardest thing he'd ever done in his life.

Micah called Chancie at seven-thirty. He figured even if she didn't have to be at work until nine, she'd need time to breakfast and shower and put on her make-up and all the other things women did in the morning.

A young male voice answered.

*Uh-oh.* The legendary Jamie of the bad temper.

Micah said, "Hello. Is your mother there?" Anonymous. That was a good idea, he thought, pleased with himself.

"Who's calling, please?" The boy's voice cracked slightly. Micah sympathized. He could remember that awkward, emotionally rough age that the boy was just starting to enter, even as he cringed that Jamie and his polite rejoinder had outwitted him already.

"This is Micah Taylor, Jamie, returning her call." That should do it, let the kid know that Chancie had called him first.

"She's not here." *Clunk.*

The brat hung up on him! Micah punched in the number again.

"Jamie, I'd like to speak to your mother, please. And don't ha—"

"She's not here." *Clunk.*

Damned jealous, insolent, little... Micah left the thought unfinished, waited half an hour and tried again.

"I would like to leave a message for your mother, Jamie."

The boy hesitated.

Micah hurried to fill the momentary vacuum. "Tell her I called back. Will you do that?"

"She's not here. I don't know when she'll be back." *Clunk.*

The kid had to go to school some time. Micah would outwait him and give the message to Chancie's housekeeper, Alma. At eight-thirty he tried again, getting only Chancie's sweet, somewhat mechanical voice as his call was forwarded to her cell phone's voicemail. He disconnected.

On the dot of nine, he called Screening Services. A female voice answered, not Chancie's.

"Judy?" he asked. He didn't know the assistant's last name.

"No, this is Brenda. Judy's busy right now. May I take a message and have her call you back?"

Brenda? Who the hell was Brenda? Micah thought Chancie had made clear her office staff consisted of only herself and Judy.

Perplexed and becoming thoroughly frustrated, he said, "My name is Micah Taylor. I've been trying to reach Chancie de Leur. Is she there?"

"No, Ms. de Leur is out of the office until Monday. But I'll leave the message that you called, Mr. Taylor."

"Wait! Monday's too late." Micah found himself almost shouting into the phone. He tried to modulate his voice. "It's important that I reach *Ms.* de Leur today. How can I get a message to her?"

The woman's voice grew guarded. "I'm just a temp, called in to help out until Ms. de Leur returns. I'm not supposed to bother her unless it's an emergency."

Micah's voice grew smooth and slow with simmering frustration, each word enunciated clearly. "Let's just agree this is an emergency, okay, Brenda? How can I reach Chancie de Leur?"

"Uh, what is the nature of your emergency, sir?"

He halted. Chancie's temp guard dog had him over a barrel on that one. Could he say, "I'm supposed to have a date with her on Sunday, but her son won't let me talk to her to confirm it." That would be sure to impress Brenda. How about "The emergency is that I've fallen like an avalanche in crazy love with your boss, only I don't know her well enough to discover how to reach her to *tell* her that."

Ridiculous. The whole situation would be laughable if he weren't so eager to reach Chancie and tell her, *Yes*, he wanted to see her, and *Yes*, he couldn't wait for Sunday. He could say nothing of this to a temporary employee who'd probably assume he was out of his head. And maybe he was. It certainly felt like he was.

"Never mind," he mumbled into the phone, and disconnected.

He'd find her himself. He seized his tattered telephone directory, one of five or six he periodically found in plastic bags on his doorstep. He ran his finger impatiently down the columns. De Marco, de Sienna, Dewitt. No de Leur. Chancie's landline home number wasn't listed in any of the numerous directories, so he could get no address for her.

A cop had resources lay people didn't, and Micah thought instinctively of using those sources. He considered calling the dispatcher at the Highway Patrol office. He had his finger on the button of the phone, and then rejected the idea. He didn't think Chancie would appreciate him using avenues open only to cops to find her and might resent it. He couldn't afford to play detective with her and lose her in the process.

Frustrated, he slammed the phone book down on the laminate countertop in the tiny apartment kitchen. He had to cool down and think. If Chancie wasn't at the office, maybe he could reach her at home now that Jamie had left for school. He dialed her number again.

He got voicemail. He waited for her phone to go through its spiel, then said, "Chancie, this is Micah. If you can, call me back." He waited after he disconnected. No one called back.

Well, maybe if he stalled a while, the temporary secretary at Screening Services wouldn't recognize the voice of the demented caller who said he had an emergency but refused to leave a message. Perhaps the wait would give him time to settle down and make some sense. He'd take a shower and shave, give himself a while to regroup.

A half hour later, hair still damp and dressed only in a pair of baggy sweat pants and a T-shirt, he tried Screening Services again. A woman answered.

"Brenda?"

"No, this is Judy."

*Who's on first?* This whole morning had been like the old Abbott and Costello comedy routine. Something Micah had taken for granted would be easy had become ridiculously difficult. Take a deep breath, Micah told himself, and speak calmly. Funky Judy with the earring in her nose is the only one who knows how to reach Chancie. Be nice to Judy, Micah.

"Judy, my name is Micah Taylor. I had a date with Chancie on Monday, and another night before last. She called and left a message for me, but I've been unable to reach her. It's important that I talk to her. Can you help me?"

He heard Judy suck in a breath. "You did not. You've had two dates with *Chancie*?" Then suspicion slowly replaced surprise. This news about dates apparently didn't fit the Chancie that Judy knew. "Who did you say this was?"

"Micah Taylor. I'm a highway patrol trooper. Check your list for Monday. I was in the office then, and asked Chancie out, and she said yes." He grimaced at having to beg Chancie's offbeat assistant for a way to get through to her. "Do you remember me, Judy? One of the two troopers who came in as you were leaving? You also had a date on Monday evening, as I remember."

"And Chancie went out with you." Judy's voice was flat. Unsaid were the words, *a cop*. "I don't believe you. It's against the rules."

"It was all done outside the office. And she did see me. Twice."

"Uh-huh. Well, Trooper Taylor, I'll be glad to leave the message that you returned her call."

“Judy, please listen to me. If I don’t get the message to Chancie by Sunday, I’m dead in the water with her. Do you understand me? That kid of hers won’t let me talk to her. I must reach her. Please help me.”

“Jamie, huh?” Judy said. He could hear a smile in her voice, and it was as if sunshine suddenly broke through a blinding snowstorm. “What’s he doing, blocking your calls?”

“No, he’s answering the calls. He was hanging up on me. Now I just go straight to voicemail.”

“Yeah, sounds familiar. He hates Screening Services too. Drives Chancie crazy. You probably got her landline. But she has several numbers just so I can avoid trying to leave a message with Jamie. Tell you what, I’ll try calling her. If all else fails, she won’t go the full day without checking in at the office. Sooner or later she’ll discover Jamie has turned off all the phones again. I’ll make sure to tell her you called as soon as I hear from her.”

Micah knew there’d been a reason he hadn’t mistrusted Judy completely. An ally at last.

“Thank you, Judy. Very much. You’re a lifesaver.”

“Tell Chancie when you see her on Sunday that I deserve a raise, okay?”

Micah laughed. “I’ll do that.”

He didn’t hear from Chancie before he left for work, and then had such a busy shift he didn’t have time to check his personal voicemail. But he was already speed-dialing voicemail as he got out of the cruiser in front of his apartment.

Then he was listening to her sweet voice. “Micah, this is Chancie. I’m sorry you had such a bad time with Jamie. I’m going to work hard on changing his mind about some things. I may need help with that eventually. Would you maybe be interested in the job?”

She paused, apparently thinking about what she’d said. “Wait. Erase that. I don’t have conditions attached to what I hope is *us*. You and me, I mean. Jamie and I aren’t a package deal if that’s not what you want. I’ll be in front of the mall at two on Sunday. Hope to see you there. Good night, Micah. I’ll be thinking of you and missing you.”

Micah saved the message and played it again, listening for nuances in her voice that might tell him what she was really thinking. She was worried about the kid and his temper tantrums. She offered Micah the probably thankless job of becoming a father figure to a young boy with hormones beginning to stir which apparently caused his moods to fluctuate wildly. Meanwhile, Micah’s own hormones would be in constant turbulence over the boy’s mother. And the mother would be caught between the surly resentment of the boy and the raging lust of the man.

Yippee. What more could a guy ask?

Just last night Micah wished he could begin living and feeling again. Now Chancie offered the possibility to plunge headlong back in to a complicated relationship. *Not a package deal. Riiight.* Micah Taylor would not only have the opportunity to make ruinous mistakes with the mother, he’d have extra chances every time he encountered her kid.

He wanted to run away from the two of them as fast as he could, and at the same time he wanted to grab the opening Chancie offered with both hands.

Micah had only to fail to show up on Sunday and he could safely bet he’d never hear from Chancie de Leur again. If he showed up, he may as well ask her to marry him on the spot, because he doubted he’d be able to extricate himself from her so easily again.

He played the message back once more. Chancie extended a third option: sneaking around behind the kid’s back.

The idea rankled. Even though Micah had enjoyed Chancie’s sweet, stolen kisses in her car and very much enjoyed sending her over the edge into mindless ecstasy, he couldn’t see the two of them building any kind of relationship in the bucket seats of her Lexus. And if he could have her, eventually, in his bed, he didn’t want her getting up in the middle of the night and leaving him, in order to sneak back across town to wake in her own bed.

He wanted to wake up next to Chancie in the morning, maybe sometimes sweet-talk her into a little extra loving in the middle of the night. He wanted to sit across the table from her and eat his meals, wash his clothes in the same load as hers.

He wanted a home. He wanted a wife. Specifically, he wanted Chancie, however he could get her. If he had to take her rotten kid in the bargain, so be it. He'd win that little brat over too. Some way. Somehow.

Micah went to bed on an optimistic high. He didn't let himself think how smart and obstinate Jamie had showed himself today. In truth, the boy had almost beaten him at the phone game.

No, Micah thought, once Jamie realizes what's good for him, he'll never hang up on me again.

He drifted into sleep. He didn't stop to think that he had yet to meet the real Jamie de Leur, in person.

## Chapter Six

Chancie spotted Micah crossing the crowded parking lot, checked the time, and smiled. They'd both arrived early. The sun shone brightly for December, but that wasn't why she felt warm inside. The good feeling came from the fact that Micah seemed as eager to see her as she was to see him.

She remembered once, after they'd been married a year or so, Kenny had stopped the car on the way home and said he had to see a friend. He left Chancie sitting alone for a long time, seething. When he finally returned, she'd said, "Don't ever do that to me again, Kenny. I'm not your dog." He had brushed her anger off, unable to understand why she was mad, or else happy that he'd succeeded in making her mad. But all these years later the incident stuck in her head, a harbinger, she realized now, of things to come in her marriage to Kenny. She should have seen it then; it would have saved her a lot of grief later.

She shivered, all the good feeling of a moment ago gone. Kenny had chased her and chased her, not giving her a moment to herself, calling and coming over and asking her out every night. For a short while she'd felt for Kenny what now spread inside her when she thought of Micah, a trickling, honeyed warmth that she had been sure was love.

Kenny had chased her, caught her, then killed her love for him by slow, torturous degrees. Would Micah do the same?

Micah's long stride brought him within inches of her very rapidly. His whole face suffused with gladness. Then he said what she was fast becoming used to hearing after a separation: "Hi, baby."

"Hello, Micah." She had invited him here to the mall, to spend the afternoon with her. Micah didn't pursue or press. He didn't demand her love, or sulk when he didn't get instant gratification of his wishes. He thought only of her wishes and set his own aside, waiting for her to be ready.

Which she thought she was, even if he didn't think so. He looked wonderful. He wore tight jeans and boots and the dun leather coat. His short black hair gleamed with blue highlights in the afternoon sun. She said, "You look nice. I'm so glad to see you."

Micah squinted, checking out her snug denims, turtleneck sweater, and leather blazer in return. "I think I'm supposed to say *you* look nice, and you do. But since we break all the rules anyway, you can go ahead and finish telling me how great I look."

He grinned, preening a bit. She stepped closer and planted a quick kiss hello on his neck, before slipping her arm beneath his. "You smell good too. Would you like to go inside? Everything's melting out here and the snow's turning to a mushy mess. We're going to get splashed if we stand here much longer."

A stream of people entering and leaving the store detoured around them. "Yeah, I guess we'd better."

Chancie tugged him toward the big double glass doors of the discount store. "You don't sound happy about it, Micah. Don't you like shopping?"

"Not very much. And especially not in holiday crowds. I only came so I could be with you."

She smiled. "You're sweet. And it's Christmas. We can't very well avoid the crowds."

She thought she heard him say softly, "Well, we could." The store greeter offered her a basket at the same instant Micah spoke, so she couldn't be sure she'd heard right but she still felt a smile tugging at her lips.

“Here, you push,” Chancie said. She had to place Micah’s hands on the cart. “It will give you something constructive to do.”

She pulled a list from her purse. A methodical shopper, Chancie soon had the cart piled with wrapping paper, ribbon and packaged bows, cards and decorations. They stood in line to pay, Micah glumly fingering all the junk from keychains to gum at the checkout, and then Chancie helped him unload it all into the trunk of her car.

“Now for the real shopping,” she said, and grinned at the look on his face.

“That wasn’t it?”

“That was wrapping paper, silly. I have to get presents to wrap inside the paper.”

“What kind of presents?” he asked, apprehension written in his tense stance.

“Oh, Micah. The kinds that really put a man through the wringer. Blouses and purses and jewelry, robes and slippers and sweaters.”

“You’re kidding. Will I have to sit on one of those little velvet benches and wait for you to try it all on?”

He looked so horrified, she relented. “I’m teasing you. I do have to buy all that stuff, but not for me.” She steered him back toward the mall. “I brought you along to help me pick out something for Jamie. He’s getting harder to buy for all the time. I don’t know what to get him.”

“Boy stuff, huh? I think I might be able to handle that.” He looked slightly mollified.

“Girl stuff first,” she warned. She guided him into a more upscale clothing store than the midprice outlet at the opposite end of the mall. Chancie stopped at the perfume counter, dazzled. Micah wore a look of long-suffering patience as Chancie and the sales clerk discussed the merits of various scents.

Chancie settled at last for a tiny bottle that cost more than a hundred dollars. Micah’s jaw dropped at the price Chancie didn’t even blink at. “For Judy,” she explained.

She picked out a black leather bag and wallet for Alma, slacks and a blouse and sweater. Trying to sound nonchalant, Micah pointed to the gray and white houndstooth sweater, and said, “What size is that?”

Chancie said, “A sixteen. It’s for my mother. She’s, um, chesty.”

“Chesty, huh?” Micah examined the rack of sweaters, then his eyes slid toward Chancie’s breasts and quickly away. “What size would somebody wear who’s maybe nicely endowed but probably not described as, um, chesty?”

Chancie had never thought of Micah Taylor as cute. Handsome, yes. Sexy, absolutely. But at that moment, she thought his efforts at subterfuge altogether endearing. “Well, it depends. Who are you buying for?”

“Maybe my mother,” Micah said swiftly, coloring at the fib.

Chancie, secretly glad he was such a poor liar, couldn’t resist teasing him further. “Have you ever bought clothes for your mother, Micah?”

“I don’t remember. I might have.” His attempt at looking her in the eye failed, his gaze alighting somewhere on her forehead. A beefy woman, arms laden with shopping bags, tried to squeeze between Micah and another rack of sweaters close behind him.

“Well, what size did your mother wear then? Is she built like that?” Chancie pointed toward the broad back of the large woman making a beeline for the fifty-percent-off rack. “Or more like that?” She indicated a very tall, willowy sales clerk returning an armload of fitting room rejects to the floor racks.

Micah looked briefly at the two women she pointed out, then back directly at Chancie. His brow furrowed. “No, she’s more like you, I guess.”

Chancie raised her eyebrows in disbelief. “Hmm.”

Micah’s mouth twisted, and Chancie took instant pity on him before he became thoroughly discouraged. “I wear a ten, Micah. Try a ten, but save the receipt in case it doesn’t fit your, um, mother. In some clothing lines a ten fits like an eight, and then I wear a twelve instead. And also the opposite can be true, a ten fitting like a twelve.”

“Good idea. I’ll do that.” Obviously immensely relieved, Micah smiled broadly. “Thank you, Chancie.”

As always, Chancie’s knees turned slightly to water at the sight of Micah’s smile. She noticed, not for the first time, the two deep dimples in the bronzed skin of his cheeks. He probably wasn’t aware his own feelings played openly across the handsome planes of his face. Micah Taylor seemed devoid of guile and she wondered if he had a hard time on the job. Police officers had always seemed a rigid lot to her.

But she liked Micah very much, just the way he was. She knew he possessed an inflexible discipline, and gave a lot of ground just to please her. The urge to touch him surged too strong to deny. She ran her hands beneath the flaps of his jacket and hugged him hard, right there in public in the middle of the store. “You’re welcome, Micah.”

Caught by surprise, his hands full of clothes and ludicrously, a black leather purse, and wedged between two heavily laden racks of colorful sweaters, Micah couldn’t move to hug her back. But she felt his chin touch the top of her head in a benevolent return effort.

She had never done such a thing to Kenny, grabbed him in public and hugged him. She had never felt the least desire to do so. Micah made her feel good, about him and about herself, and she followed instincts with him that she didn’t know existed. And Micah always found some way to show approval of her impetuous urges to show him that she liked him.

She felt herself beginning to bud under Micah’s sunny regard. A Chancie she had thought crushed under the weight of Kenny’s constant disapproval, instead survived and burgeoned anew with Micah’s careful tending.

“Let’s go someplace fun,” she said, seeking acquiescence in Micah’s bold blue eyes. “Let’s shop for a ten-year-old boy. I’ve put you through enough torture in women’s clothing for one day.”

“I appreciate that, Chancie,” he said honestly. “But I’d force myself to shop all day with you, if that’s what you really wanted. Even groceries.”

“Groceries are the worst, huh?” She grinned at him as she headed for the checkout counter.

“I can’t cook worth spit. So I hate picking the stuff out, since I know it’s all going to end up burnt beyond recognition and tossed in the trash.”

“But you like to eat. I know that from watching you gorge yourself at the Inn the other night.”

He looked pained. “Wait a minute. Gorged? I didn’t know I gorged.”

“Sorry. But, honestly, where do you put all the food you eat? You’re so well-built.” Chancie withdrew her credit card, refusing to think of her outstanding balance, and extended it toward the clerk.

“Well-built, huh?” He puffed out his chest. “If you tell me more about what an Adonis I am, I’ll forgive you for saying I gorge.”

Micah teased along with Chancie, but the amount rung up on the register for her few purchases made his eyes feel like they wanted to bug out. The way she threw money around caused him some moments of extreme unease, especially since he was aware he could never compete in the rarified air of her financial world. The thought put a damper on their casual bantering, for him at least.

Chancie noticed the young sales clerk giving her and Micah disapproving glances. No more than seventeen, she probably thought old people like Chancie and Micah shouldn’t be making eyes at each other and flirting in public.

The girl’s reaction made Chancie dread her own child’s response when he saw them together. She’d have to plan Micah’s meeting with Jamie carefully.

Micah drew a deep breath, once freed from the racks of women’s apparel. In the tiled concourse between shops, his arms laden with string-handled bags, he said, “What’s Jamie like? Tell me about him, so I won’t pick him out a size sixteen when he needs an eight.”

Chancie laughed. “I’ll tell you one thing: Jamie hates getting clothes for presents. He feels he’s been cheated out of a real gift if he gets a shirt or pants. Yet he’s getting too old for action figures. And, oh, by the way, don’t ever mistake his extensive collection, if you see it, for *dolls*. Dolls are for girls.”

Micah shifted the bags from one hand to the other. “He’s at the age where there’s suddenly getting to be a big distinction between boys and girls, Chancie. Does he seem kind of hovering between being a boy and being a man?”

“You got it. He’s interested in girls, but from a safe distance. He’d rather spend time with the guys. Most of his old toys are in boxes on the floor of his closet, but he won’t let me get rid of them or even store them away. I think he spends time in the bathroom practicing shaving even though he hasn’t got hair on his face to shave. Yet he wouldn’t miss cartoons on television on Saturday morning for anything.”

“Ten is a rough age. Twelve is going to be harder. And sixteen harder yet.”

“Can’t wait.” Chancie rolled her eyes. They walked the entire length of the mall, stopping in every store that didn’t sell clothes. Books? Jamie wasn’t much of a reader, to Chancie’s great regret. A computer? He had one, almost new, a new slimline laptop that he could use at his desk or in a chair. They looked at everything from video games to outrageously expensive high top sneakers, finding themselves retracing their steps without having discovered the perfect gift for Chancie’s son.

Everything Micah suggested, Jamie already had or wouldn’t like. His anxiety over the way Chancie apparently bought Jamie anything his little heart desired grew by leaps and bounds.

Chancie was beginning to feel desperate when Micah suggested, “A gun?”

She went completely still. Jostled from all sides by the throngs of people, she stood frozen. “No guns,” she finally managed to say.

“A nice .22, perfect for a ten-year-old. With supervision. It sounds like he’s already got everything else a boy might want.”

“No guns, Micah,” she repeated. “Please don’t mention them again. And if you’re trying to say I spoil Jamie rotten, you’re probably right.”

Moisture glistened in her eyes. Micah could have cut his tongue out. It appeared he’d hit two of Chancie’s sore spots at once. Nice going, Taylor, he told himself. He said hesitantly, “Chancie? What’s wrong?”

She could barely speak. Her whole body trembled. “Jamie’s father killed himself at Christmas time two years ago. Not with a gun. But the season brings it all back. Micah, I couldn’t give my son a gun for Christmas.”

He dropped the bags, just let them fall to the floor. He took her upper arms in his hands and rubbed them. Then, seeing that did little good, he seized her and hugged her to his chest.

Passersby looked at them curiously, but Chancie shut them out by closing her eyes. It felt so good to lay her cheek against Micah’s broad chest. She had forced herself to tell. The Christmas season was a grueling endurance test for her and Jamie both. The memories were too horrible for them to enjoy a spirit of giving. The hard glass bubble in her chest that contained the secret of Kenny’s death dissolved a little in the telling. She had thought the shards would kill her if the bubble of keeping the secret ever exploded. But she had survived talking about it with Micah.

She unclenched her fingers from his green and cream wool shirt, forcing herself to stand erect without his support.

He searched her face worriedly. “You okay?”

She blew out a breath, shook her head. “I’m okay. I pretend a lot, just to get through this time of year. So does Jamie. You had no way of knowing. I’m sorry if I scared you.”

“I’d do anything except hurt you, Chancie. Sorry I brought up bad memories.”

“Don’t blame yourself, Micah.” She bent to pick up her bags before they got kicked away by the milling horde. She straightened, and he reached to take them from her, watching her closely. “It’s just something that’s always there. It’s worse at Christmas, and I never know when it’s going to rear up and bite me.”

“Do you want to talk about it, Chancie? Go somewhere and have a cup of coffee and talk?”

She thought about it, about what she wanted to do. She looked into Micah’s blue eyes, squinted in concern. Concern for her. For her problems, her fears, her worries. She didn’t want coffee. She didn’t know if she wanted to talk. She did know she wanted the comfort Micah offered.

Before she could take the thought back, she said, “Can we go to your place for a while, Micah?”

He stood quite still, looking at her. Then he slowly nodded. “Sure,” he said. “If that’s what you want, Chancie.”

Again Chancie had to be reminded to buckle up when they took her Lexus, loaded with packages, to his apartment. The apartment house sat on the rocky desert floor, surrounded by asphalt and concrete. Apparently no one lived here long enough to plant a lawn, or care if there were no trees.

Chancie said, “Is it all right if I dump all my Christmas stuff here at your place? Maybe come by after work and wrap presents where Jamie can’t snoop?”

She took in the atmosphere of the place as she sat in the car, accented by late afternoon sunlight reflecting off badly streaked windows. It looked so unloved and lonely.

Micah hesitated only fractionally before saying, “Sure. I’ll give you a key.”

For Pete’s sake, Chancie thought. He’d faltered when she asked. Was he just being a cop, afraid she’d steal something, or look in his bureau drawers?

Or was his hesitation more basic. How far would he let her push before he said, *I think that’s enough*. Chancie was becoming uneasy about taking all the initiative. She thought she sounded bossy, instead of assertive as she’d been taught in management classes. If Micah minded her aggression, and there were times when he seemed to pause and reflect, yet he didn’t stop her. He let her do what she wanted, at her own pace. She wondered what he was really thinking. She wished she had his ability to read people just so she could read him.

He escorted her to the door, both of them laden with bags. On a concrete front step, she waited while he slid a key in the lock. He opened the door and ushered her inside.

The drapes were shut, the light dim. Micah moved to turn on a light, but she freed one hand to touch his, stopping him. Very few pieces of furniture lined the walls. She had a good idea of what this bachelor’s dwelling looked like already. She thought the atmosphere might be better not brightly illuminated.

She dumped her packages on the couch, saying, “I’ll take care of this stuff later. Do you have a candle? Candlelight would be nice.”

Micah’s laughter rumbled behind her. She knew she’d disconcerted him at the mall, thrown a bucket of cold reality on the fun they’d been having by exposing him to the grim facts of her life. It made her feel slightly better now to hear him laugh.

“I have a flashlight,” he offered, depositing his load beside hers on the sofa cushions.

He left her momentarily. Chancie removed her blazer and laid it on the sofa, then sat on the floor, pushing the coffee table away. Micah returned with the flashlight and a tissue. He set the flashlight on end on the coffee table, draping the tissue over the lighted end, and Chancie giggled.

“How’s that?” he asked. “Romantic enough for you?”

She was still smiling. “Perfect.”

He settled himself beside her on the floor, long legs stretched out beneath the low table. He said, “I’d offer you something, but I wasn’t expecting company. I only have beer or coffee. I don’t suppose you’re a beer drinker.”

“Sometimes I drink beer. But I don’t want anything to drink, thank you, Micah.”

He propped himself on one elbow, looking into her face. “Okay. Want to talk yet?”

“About my marriage? I was lonely while I was married to Kenny, and I’ve been lonely since. That’s about all there is to that story.”

He considered that statement before asking, “Any idea why Kenny killed himself?”

She shuddered. “He wasn’t happy. He did it with drugs. Prescription drugs, but he got them from several doctors and took them in illegal, and finally fatal, dosages. Now you know the reason I ended up in the drug testing business.”

“People do what they do for a lot of reasons, Chancie. If you know what motivates you, you’re a step ahead of some of us.”

She tried not to sound bitter. "If I can stop even one more suicide, I'd be happy. Kenny did what he did to punish me. I'll probably never get over it."

"And Jamie?"

Chancie sighed, holding her head in both hands. "And Jamie. Kenny never wanted Jamie. I guess Kenny thought I'd remain his innocent little sixteen-year-old bride for life, always ready to drop everything and help him sort out his problems. He liked to raise the stakes, escalate the situation, I think just to test if I really loved him. And Jamie came between Kenny and me."

"But in a good way." Micah's voice was thoughtful.

"Oh, sure, yeah. For me. In the best way, from my point of view. Jamie saved my sanity, made me see, while he was growing up, exactly what was wrong with his father. Kenny refused to mature. And it drove him over the edge when I finally realized that, and tried to climb off his private rollercoaster."

"You were going to leave him?"

"Yes. He said he'd kill himself first. I thought it was just another ploy to get me to stay. But in the end that's just what he did."

Micah ran one finger up and down her forearm. "You're an amazingly level-headed woman for having taken a tour through hell with that guy. How old was he, anyway?"

"When I met Kenny, I was thirteen and he was twenty-seven. He'd been out of the service almost four years."

Micah's forefinger paused in its exploration of the nubby texture of her sweater sleeve. He tried to keep his voice neutral, but he felt a rising fury on behalf of a very young and helpless Chancie who had been forced to grow up way too fast. "You said you married at sixteen. Your parents let you marry a thirty-year-old messed-up vet, when you were sixteen years old?"

Chancie laughed raggedly. "Mom said he'd settle me down. I guess I was a hopelessly wild teenager."

"You were a baby. They should have locked you up or sent you away," he said, his voice husky with emotion. "Someplace where you would have had a hope of getting sprung eventually. You were blindsided and railroaded, Chancie."

She settled her fingers over his. "Oh, Micah, I'm not entirely blameless. I was sure I knew what I was doing. I wanted to marry him."

"How could you know what you wanted, at that age?"

"You're right, of course. I can see that now, when it doesn't do much good. I guess that's why I'm so overprotective of Jamie. I try to make up to him for what he's missed in his life, like a father and a family life. But I'm gone so much now, I know the situation isn't good for him."

"You're carrying way too much guilt, Chancie. Let it go a little bit. You weren't responsible for Kenny's happiness or lack of it. In fact, it sounds like the guy was seriously off center even without his military experience." Micah's fingers locked with hers. Then his voice changed to a mock Sigmund Freud. "So when do I get to meet ze young man, eh, Fraulein?"

She hesitated. "I'd like you to meet Jamie, Micah. But I've warned you, he's not easy to get to know. So *when* is up to you."

"I just said I wanted to."

"Really?" She smiled doubtfully, but Micah's face retained its serious set.

"Really." He looked at her, at her eyes, her hair, her lips. "Right now, if you want."

She shook her head, her decision made. "Not right now. Right now I have something else entirely in mind."

Micah Taylor had an amazing effect on her. He lifted her spirits, made her feel blameless and free. He made her laugh, gave her the confidence to believe that she was worthy of a good and decent relationship. She wanted to show her gratitude. She wanted to share this remarkable lightness of being with the man who'd helped generate it. Although she loved talking to Micah, right now she didn't want to talk anymore.

She raised her hands to the neck of her sweater and tugged it off. Then she leaned over to reach for the buttons of his shirt.

Micah's hand quickly enclosed one of hers, crushing her fingers together, halting her. His eyes blazed, even in the dim light. His voice rasped. "Set my limits, Chancie. I have to know. Now. Because once we start I don't want any confusion about trying to shut down."

"No limits, Micah," she said softly, and thought she really meant it.

She tugged her hand from his grasp. She knelt beside him and continued unbuttoning his shirt. She urged him upright when she was finished with the buttons, peeling the shirt from his shoulders and arms, then urged him down to the floor on his back. She sat on her heels to admire his body.

He watched her. She regarded the muscular chest and trim abs that tapered to a slim waist. Then as if she could keep her hands off him no longer, she leaned forward, fingers already tracing a journey down the warm path they'd already memorized: strong shoulders, prominent collarbones, square pectoral muscles capped by tiny hard nipples.

She ran her hands down the roped muscles of his arms. Swinging one leg over both of his, she leaned forward to lay lace covered breasts on his chest. His arms pinioned to the floor by her hands, she blindly sought the now-familiar heat of his mouth. She murmured his name repeatedly against his chin, his cheeks, his sensuous lips, before actually kissing him.

His legs moved beneath her and she settled naturally into the notch between them while she nuzzled his lips. His mouth opened instantly, welcoming. She explored daintily the soft inner side of his lips and the ridges of his teeth with her tongue. Heat rose from him to envelop her, the hard maleness of his perfect body enticing against the soft skin of her belly.

His fingers moved restlessly, hands curled palm up against her restraint. He could have escaped whenever he wanted, but he controlled himself and let her explore at her own pace. She ran her hands back up his strong arms as he raised them and curved them over her back, searching for and then unclasping her bra as their tongues mimicked the motions of the ancient dance of love.

She elevated herself slightly so he could slide the straps from her shoulders and free her from the scrap of satin and lace that lay between them. At last she could luxuriate in the sensation of Micah's skin against hers, the smooth skin of his chest brushing her nipples. The rise and fall of his diaphragm under her accelerated as the rate of his breathing increased to match her own. The kiss changed intensity and deepened.

He clasped her to him and rolled them over in one fluid motion. He cupped a breast with his hand, one of his knees positioned between both of hers. He broke the long kiss to look into her eyes, as if to ask again, "Is this what you want?"

She laid her hand over his, pressing his fingers to her breast, and opened her denim-clad legs to allow him to lie between them. He groaned, his head dipping to lave gently one peak and then the other, both tingling in anticipation of the feeling of his lips. While he pulled softly at one breast, arousing sensations that brought a cry to her lips, his finger circled the other nipple in butterfly motions.

She rocked beneath him, maddened by the barrier of the two sets of jeans that held them apart. She could feel the powerful thrust of him between her legs, even through layers of clothing. She wanted him. Wanted him and herself naked. Now.

She tried to slide her hand down between them, but Micah pressed closer, not allowing her to reach his zipper. He slid down her body, away from her questing hand. Chancie whimpered in frustration.

To soothe her, he kissed the length of her belly to the waistband of her jeans. Her hands hovered near his ears, ready to tear the denim at her waist away at the first opportunity. But as he nuzzled still lower, nipping the cloth that covered her, Chancie forgot her purpose, moaning and wrapping her fingers in his thick black hair.

He raised his head, again asking permission before proceeding. Heat and wetness and want pooled between her legs. She could only whisper, "Micah."

"Do you want me to stop?" He pinned her with his gaze.

For answer she reached for his broad shoulders, fingers digging into the muscle. When he didn't respond immediately, she dropped her hands to the offending button on her jeans and ripped it out of the hole herself. But when she scrambled for the zipper tab, he firmly moved her hands

away to do it himself, pulling it down over the metal teeth so slowly and soundlessly she didn't know he'd finished until he was tugging at the open flaps to get them off her. She lifted her hips willingly. Boots and socks, jeans and panties, were peeled away and discarded.

Then he raised himself over her again and began kissing her deeply, drawing sounds from Chancie's throat as she begged wordlessly for what his hard body promised. But he moved aside, erection pressed against her hip, as his hand stroked downward to the soft, wet heat at her core.

Discovering her clit, his hand cupped her mound, two fingers sliding wetly inside as his palm pressed and stroked. Once again Chancie simply exploded, the climax that had been building taking her so hard and so fast she lost her breath.

Micah nibbled her ear while she recovered from her quivering, the hand that had given her such intense, explosive pleasure now drawing tiny circles on her left hip.

When she could talk without gasping, she said, "Micah, why?"

He breathed into her ear, "For right now, I will do for you what you won't do for yourself. Just think what it will be like when you're finally ready for all of me, Chancie."

She shivered and he held her tighter. She could still feel the insistent hardness of him against her hip. "Don't make me wait anymore. I'm ready *now*, and so are you."

"No, you're not ready, Chancie. We've barely begun exploring each other."

Was he trying to drive her crazy? She sat up, staring down into his enigmatic eyes. He played her like a maestro, and she sobered enough to wonder if maybe she should be frightened of this man, who uncovered secrets she wouldn't admit aloud even to herself. Her hand rested on the hollow of his stomach, near his navel. She moved her fingers slightly. His eyes glinted. And then she knew for certain what Micah wanted, his secret desire.

She reached for the button of his jeans, and this time he didn't stop her. She repeated his ministrations to her, down to removing his boots and then kissing her way downward from his nipples to his navel. Her hand closed around his velvet shaft, and she raised her head for a fraction of a second to gauge his reaction before continuing.

She knew, from the way he looked at her, he couldn't stop her now if she decided to straddle him and ride him to completion. But somehow she also knew he'd question its rightness for the rest of the time they would be granted together. So she lowered her head, letting her long curls trail across his taut abdomen and muscular thighs. He gasped at the first touch of her lips, arching his back, his hands involuntarily twining in her hair.

Her tongue trailed down his long length before she took the smooth knob in her mouth. Then she was lost in pleasuring Micah, in drawing responses from him that mirrored the sharp ecstasy he'd given her.

They ended some time later with limbs entwined, her head on his chest, as she listened once more to the thundering of his heart. Sometime during their loving the flashlight had been knocked over, its light extinguished, and they hadn't noticed.

## Chapter Seven

Chancie and Micah lay spooned together. Sounding sleepy, he said, "We didn't finish shopping."

"They're open till eleven during Christmas. What's the hurry?" Chancie rolled over, murmuring into the skin of his chest, hoping she could get him to consider further penetration of the sexual situation between them. She snickered at her naughty thoughts, blowing on his nipple in the process.

"That tickles," he said. "And I need fresh batteries for our candle."

Chancie laughed aloud, giving in. She had gotten all she was going to get today from Mr. In-control. Micah obviously was not up to discussing any more sex right now. And he was right. They were in absolute total darkness, able to locate each other only by feel. Which, she thought, wasn't a totally bad thing.

She moaned dramatically. "Oh, dear. It's so dark in here. *However* will I find my clothes?"

“You’d better find your clothes, lady,” Micah teasingly warned. “You can’t go shopping naked. Nobody else gets to see that luscious body but me.” He sat up, pulling her with him. She leaned against him, searching in the darkness for his lips for a kiss. He kissed her back, but without the passion she’d engendered in him a short while before.

She reached for his cock questioningly in the darkness, finding him hard and ready again. He *was* responding. Why didn’t he kiss her?

He scooted her none too gently on her bottom away from him, scraping her bare flesh on the cheap carpet. “Get your clothes on right now,” he said.

“You’re giving me rug burns, Micah Taylor.” Chancie grappled in the darkness for her clothes, finding her bra and what might be her jeans. Or maybe they were Micah’s, it was hard to tell. “You are the most maddening man.”

He laughed low in his throat. “I know. But you ain’t seen nothin’ yet.”

Chancie balled up the jeans and threw them at the sound of his growly laughter in the darkness. He knew exactly what he was doing, holding her off, steadily increasing the tension between them, and he was enjoying it. He must have caught the jeans she pitched at him and they must have been his, because she soon heard him zipping up.

“You like what you’re doing to me, don’t you? That you can make me come with one touch.” She was glad they couldn’t see each other, because her cheeks heated at the admission.

“Yeah,” he said, and she could almost see him grinning. “I like that a lot. We’ll have to do it again soon. Now put your clothes on.”

She sighed and got dressed. But she wasn’t defeated. He might make her leave now, but she’d be back. He still had possession of most of her Christmas presents, minus the one she would take home in the form of a shiveringly wonderful memory to hug to herself tonight.

She said, “Don’t forget my key, unless you want me to pack all this stuff back into my car.”

“No need.” Micah’s voice sounded more certain this time about her invading his apartment when he wasn’t there. “I’m going to turn on the light now. We could break our fool necks in here in the dark.”

Already on her feet and searching by feel for her jacket, Chancie paused. “Do you think we’re fools, Micah?”

The ceiling light blazed on, bathing them in its harsh yellow glare. “Maybe,” he conceded, staring hard at her. “At this point, who knows? I like everything I know about you so far, but that isn’t really very much yet, is it?”

She sobered at the muted tone of his voice. Maybe she’d made a big mistake here with him. “Are you having second thoughts?”

“Come here.” He leaned against a pitted wall that badly needed painting, at the foot of a set of stairs that must lead to his bedroom. She took in the long, lean length of him, and her heart turned over. What if Micah meant to end it now?

He beckoned with one finger, a crooked smile on his lips. Chancie crossed the room and he enfolded her in his arms, resting his chin on the top of her head.

“I met you seven days ago,” he said. “A lifetime, and only a short week. Yeah, sometimes it scares me, how fast I’m falling for you. I messed up before. I’d be a liar and a fool if I tried to pretend I don’t have any reservations about us.”

“Do you want to slow down even more? I’ll tell you true, Micah, I have a hard time keeping my hands off you.” She raised her head to gaze into his troubled blue eyes.

“How much slower can we go? Days go by when I don’t see you. I’m a monogamous man so you don’t have to worry about me losing interest or anything like that. It’s up to you how long it lasts between us. I climbed on this ride for the duration. I’m going at the speed I think is best for you.” He grinned. “Just don’t ever think I don’t like your hands on me.”

She frowned, all the closeness they’d experienced evaporating in the light of his serious tone. “What is this, some point of honor? You say you’ll go slow, therefore there’s no turning back? I won’t hold you to anything, Micah. I won’t insist that you continue with me if you don’t want to, just because of something you said and didn’t mean.”

“Oh, no. Oh, baby.” He pressed her head against his chest. “Don’t misunderstand. I meant every word. It’s just, I’m trying to give you time. We’ve both been burned once. If things don’t work out between us, I don’t ever want to hurt you, Chancie.”

“I’m a big girl, Micah.”

His inner elbow pressed intimately into the pillow of her breast. “Yeah, you are. I’m sorry I upset you. Just forget I said anything, okay?”

She caught her lip between her teeth for a moment. She knew it would be nearly impossible to forget how he’d voiced his misgivings. “Okay. Did you still want to go shopping with me, or should I just drop you off in the parking lot?”

“We’re going shopping. Get your coat.”

He released her, and while she went to retrieve her blazer and purse, she heard him rummaging around in the kitchen. When he returned, he held out a spare entry key.

She hesitated just momentarily, then closed her fingers around it.

They returned to the mall, ending up in the toy store. Chancie had insisted before that Jamie was getting too old for more toys, but now she looked forward to the bright colors and overflowing displays to cheer her up. And besides, she had no idea what else to get for her son.

While Micah wandered the aisles, Chancie stopped to watch a boy about Jamie’s age manipulate a remote-controlled car around the front of the store. The car was small, and amazingly fast and agile. The boy seemed totally enamored of the car’s ability to spin around cardboard displays and its seeming eagerness to leap away at top speed.

When Micah had completed his tour of the store and joined her, she gestured to the black and neon green car. “What do you think?”

Micah grinned. “I’d like to have it myself.” Then he hesitated before adding, “But have you checked out the prices in this place?”

“Expensive, huh?”

He rolled his eyes. “Whew! I might be able to get a full-size model down at the local dealership for what that little bitty one costs.”

The clerk, a middle-aged woman who had been busy behind the register until now, joined them. Chancie began to question her, finding to her dismay that purchasing the car of course also meant buying extra battery packs and a costly recharger. Plus it ran on an application on a smartphone or tablet computer, neither of which she had consented to buy Jamie yet. The whole package, if she bought him the tablet he wanted, added up to several hundred dollars.

Each sold separately. Chancie had heard those words thousands of times on the toy ads from Saturday cartoons, the modern toy manufacturer’s mantra, but she’d had no idea how expensive buying for a child could get once the computer and cell phone industries got ahold of toys. And she should have been prepared, because as the years passed everything for kids got more and more expensive as more and more technology was tapped for entertainment purposes.

“My goodness,” she said, stunned.

Micah took her elbow, steering her away from the clerk’s bright sales chatter and the tempting sight of the little car still whizzing around the store.

“This is the biggest rip-off I’ve ever seen,” he muttered. “You’re not seriously considering buying that exorbitant pile of plastic and also a computer he’d need to run it?”

“Micah, I have to get Jamie something. He’d love it.” She didn’t like the stormy look in Micah’s blue eyes. Was he bound and determined to fight with her after the closeness they’d just shared?

It seemed so.

“I can’t believe it. From what you’ve said today, that kid of yours owns at least one of everything in this mall. It sounds to me like you’re trying to buy his love, Chancie.”

“I—what? I am not!” Her back stiffened, and she jerked her elbow out of his grasp. “How dare you, Micah Taylor? You don’t even know Jamie. You don’t have kids, so you’re making an awfully broad judgment about me and mine on no experience!”

Micah's own brows lowered. "That's hitting below the belt, Chancie. Not having kids wasn't my idea, remember?"

"Well, dammit, it's true. You haven't met Jamie, so how would you know what he's like?"

The clerk eyed them curiously, a hint of embarrassment on her face. This was the second time in one day Chancie and Micah had drawn attention in a store. The way they were going, they'd be kicked out of the mall pretty soon. Chancie cringed a little, but Micah didn't back off one bit.

His chin jutted. "That little detail was supposed to be taken care of, remember? You said I could meet Jamie, and I still want to. Whether you still want me to or not."

"Fine with me. You're switching to days this week? Come to dinner tomorrow night." Chancie could jut her chin too.

"I will," Micah raised his voice, but he was suddenly grinning down at her. "What do you want me to bring?"

Chancie felt a return grin tugging at the corners of her mouth. She'd begun to enjoy this tussle, and didn't want it to end just yet.

"Just yourself, you big lug. Six o'clock, and don't be late. And I'm buying that car and the tablet for Jamie."

Micah's face sobered. He lowered his voice. "I really do think it's a mistake, Chancie."

She raised her hands, palms up. "Micah, I don't know what else to do."

He put an arm around her. The clerk's expression changed from chagrin to puzzlement as she watched the drama, open-mouthed. Chancie could almost read her thoughts: Were the two of them fighting, or what?

Or what, as it turned out.

Micah pivoted Chancie toward him and placed both hands on her shoulders. "You drive a hard bargain," he said. "Okay. Let me pay for half of it then. The car and the computer. They can be from both of us."

Micah Taylor dazzled Chancie. He puzzled her, swung her around on her axis, and tipped her world upside down. She didn't know what to say.

Letting him pay for half of Jamie's Christmas felt like a commitment, in an odd kind of way. Letting Jamie's gift come half from Micah meant he planned to share in their holiday. And that was a promise, of a sort, wasn't it? Christmas wasn't any old day, it was a red-letter major one to a kid. And in her case and Jamie's, it was even more poignant because they had such mixed feelings about it.

When she didn't answer, Micah prompted, "Okay?"

Chancie gazed into blue eyes whose pupils seemed bottomless, fathomless, as Micah stared back at her. "Okay, Micah," she managed to say. "If that's what you want."

"It's what I want."

"Then you'll join us for dinner on Christmas day too?"

His eyes crinkled at the corners. "You know that's what I've been angling for all along, some good home cooking."

Chancie felt her eyes widen, the corners of her mouth droop. The way he ate, she believed him. "Really? All you wanted was a meal? You should have been asking Alma out instead of me."

"Nah. I like you fine, even if you can't cook." Micah smiled. "But I do accept your invitations. Both of them."

The clerk broke in. "Um, have you folks made up your minds?"

"We sure have. About some things, anyway." Micah's eyes flashed a message at Chancie, before he dropped his hands from her shoulders and faced the saleswoman. "We'll take the car. I don't suppose you sell the tablet computer as well?"

Micah took the car, and all its components, to his apartment to add to the rest of Chancie's gifts. Chancie drove home, with the taste of one last searing kiss from Micah lingering on her lips.

But although she and Micah had weathered their first argument, she should have known better than to expect the rest of the day to brighten.

She had called ahead to tell Alma she was on her way home. Jamie waited for her in a chair in the living room, arms folded rigidly across his chest. The first clue that she was in for a confrontation should have been the blank television screen. Chancie rarely came home to a turned-off television.

She kicked off her boots and curled her feet under her on the sofa. Might as well get it over with. And how she *hated* it when Jamie brought out that self-pitying attitude in her.

“What’s up?” she asked.

Jamie glared at her. “I thought you were going Christmas shopping.”

She nodded. “I did.”

“Then how come you didn’t bring anything home?”

“For your information, Sherlock, I left them at a friend’s house so you wouldn’t peek.”

Jamie refused to take the bait. “Even Grandma’s present?”

“Even Grandma’s. I bought her a sweater.”

“Alma’s present too?”

Chancie glanced around. “Is she still here? I can’t tell you what I bought her if she hasn’t gone yet.”

“Nah. After you called and said you were coming home she left to go to the movies with some other old bag.”

Chancie gasped. “James Carlton de Leur! That was unforgivably rude. I hope you don’t talk like that to Alma’s face, after all she’s done for you.”

Jamie studied her with no sign of remorse. “So who’s your friend? It’s the cop, right?”

Chancie’s muscles tensed. “I think we should discuss my friends when you’re in a better mood.”

Jamie laughed sourly. “You sure know how to pick *friends*, Mom.”

She rounded on him, unable to stop the impulse to shut him down before he said something she’d find hard to forgive. “I’ll tell you something, Jamie. I don’t especially like your friends either, but because you like them, they’re welcome in this house. I don’t pick your friends, and you sure as hell won’t pick mine.”

He went completely still. “In this house? Wait, the cop is coming to this house? To *our* house?”

Chancie wanted to scream. Was everybody in the world, except herself, an expert at perception? How had Jamie arrowed in on such an accurate conclusion from what little she’d said?

“As a matter of fact, Micah is coming to dinner tomorrow. I’d appreciate a little cooperation in making the evening enjoyable for him.”

“Enjoy all you want. I won’t be there.” Jamie got up to leave, but Chancie was quicker, springing up and seizing him by the upper arms.

“Your presence in this house tomorrow night is not open to question, Jamie. Do you understand me? You will be civil to my guest, if not downright gracious. I will not have you acting your usual disagreeable, sulky self. Have you got that?”

He stared her down. “Yeah. Because you’ve got enough on your mind already. Right, Mom? I’ve heard it all ten thousand times before. First it was the business. Now you’re trying to replace Dad.”

“Jamie.” She tried to hug him, but he pulled away. She kept her grip on his elbows because if she let go, he’d run to his room and slam the door. “My God, you make me feel so guilty. Do you want me to stay right here in this house all the time with you? We’d starve to death!”

“Is that why you’re after this guy? For the money? We don’t need so much money, Mom. Can’t you get a regular job? I’ll sell my new computer if you want me to.”

She rested her forehead against his, and he allowed it. “Jamie. It’s not money, son. I don’t ever want you to worry about that.” The money worries she meant to keep to herself. “It’s just really, really hard to be an adult and to be by myself all the time. I like Micah very much, and I just wish you’d give him a chance, that’s all.”

Jamie pulled away slightly to look at her with Kenny’s dark eyes. Confusion and the need for comfort warred on his face. He said, “But you’re not alone. You have Alma and me.”

Chancie could feel herself blushing, the heat rising from her collar to her forehead.

Jamie watched her, comprehension slowly beginning to dawn. His eyes widened as realization hit. He was old enough; he watched enough television that he could put the pieces together. He said simply, "Oh."

He tried to yank his arms away, but Chancie held on. He looked down at her fingers making white marks on his arms, then back up at her. He shook his head as if to clear it.

Chancie remembered what Micah had said about boys being unable to accept their mothers as human, in this case sexual, beings. Obviously, in Jamie's view, Chancie had stepped *way* outside the boundaries of how a good mom was supposed to act.

What had Jamie said, that she was trying to replace his father? If Jamie had anything to fear, it was that he would get a stepfather exactly like Kenny. But Chancie couldn't say anything like that to Kenny's child. What, then, could she say?

"Listen. Jamie, listen to me." She shook him slightly, but it was like jostling a zombie, no reaction. "I promise I will try my best to stay home more. Okay? I'm sorry I've disappointed you. Jamie? Would you at least look at me?"

He complied, but that made her feel worse. The dark eyes beneath thick black lashes were blank, desolate.

"Okay, don't believe me. I'll just have to show you then."

She let him go, and he turned listlessly toward his room. She wondered dully if her son were crying, just as she was, and wondered why loving had to be so painful. As well as so awfully complicated.

## Chapter Eight

Chancie hadn't read her horoscope lately, but it seemed she was destined for a knock-down, drag-out fight. With somebody. As soon as she got inside the office door the next morning, Judy wanted to see her. Judy wore a frown, and her body language screamed *trouble*.

The deliciously good feeling that had flowed through Chancie the night before at Micah's apartment seemed very far away in time now, and receding farther at the speed of light. First Micah, then Jamie, and now Judy appeared determined to dispel the lingering glow Chancie wished fervently to continue basking in.

Chancie sighed, stamping clinging new snow from her boots. "It's Monday morning, Judy. Can it wait?"

The assistant shook her head, spikes of blond hair waving. "I don't think so, Chancie, or I'll lose my nerve."

Chancie's lipsticked lips stretched in a forced version of a smile. "I don't think I like the sound of this."

Judy didn't smile at all. "I think you'll like it less before we're finished."

Chancie walked into her office, took off her coat, and seated herself behind her desk, a much larger version of Judy's.

"Okay, I'm ready. Hit me."

Judy followed right behind. "You're not making this any easier, Chancie."

"Am I supposed to? What are you trying to tell me, that you're quitting?"

"As a matter of fact—"

"No. Wait." Chancie stared at her assistant. "Judy, you have got to be kidding."

To delay the shock waiting to set in, she thought: Something's different about Judy, and it isn't only her mood. At last she grasped what she'd been searching for: Judy's nose-ring was missing this morning.

"I'm not kidding, Chancie," Judy rushed to fill the stunned void of Chancie's silence. "Parker says with the experience I've gained here, I could really be making good money."

“Parker says.” The bite of breakfast Chancie had snatched earlier turned sour in her stomach. She thought she might have to make a run for the restroom and get rid of it before she could face the rest of this morning. She managed to ask, “And what does Judy say?”

“Look,” Judy insisted. She held out her left hand, on the fourth finger of which perched a new marquise diamond ring. She raised pleading eyes to Chancie’s. “Parker wants to marry me. Can you beat that? He wants a house and kids, and he wants them with me. Chancie, try to be happy for us.”

Chancie obeyed her heart instead of her head, and rose to hug her assistant. When she could finally let Judy go, her eyes swam. She said, “Oh, I am happy for you. Congratulations, sweetie.”

The wattage of Judy’s radiant smile could have lit the office. “I’ve got an appointment at eleven to get my hair cut and dyed back to its natural brown. Parker’s always hated this fake blond mop. I took the liberty of calling Brenda, the temp, to cover for me here. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Of course I don’t mind.” Chancie’s head spun with all the information Judy had imparted in less than five minutes. She couldn’t just let Judy walk out. What would Screening Services do without its backbone? If Chancie was the heart of the business, Judy was the support that held the whole thing up and kept it going. Chancie had to find out more about Judy’s plans, see if there was any way she could change them and convince her to stay.

Chancie the personnel manager swung into action. “So we have almost two hours to talk?”

Judy nodded slowly, eyeing her warily.

“Put everything that you can on hold this morning, Judy. Let’s get some things straightened out.”

Judy had been on the receiving end of some of Chancie’s talks before, but she obediently perched on one of the chairs facing the expanse of the big oak desk. Instead of rounding the corner of the desk and taking her own seat, Chancie took the visitor’s chair next to Judy.

“Okay,” she said, feeling as though she were opening the bidding at an auction. “Tell me what it’s going to take to keep Judy Weinrich at Screening Services.”

Judy twisted the diamond ring on her finger, not meeting her boss’s eyes. “I’ve been talking to Parker”

“And?” Chancie prompted.

“Um, I told him I thought I had too much responsibility for too little pay. And, um, that I would appreciate some help around here.” Judy raised her eyes from the sparkling diamond to confront Chancie directly. “I can’t do it by myself anymore, Chancie! The phones, the invoicing, the coordinating of collectors, the training, the dispatching, handling all the field offices. It’s too much.”

She put a consoling hand on Judy’s shoulder. “I understand. I’ve often felt the same way. I thought we could hold out until the money from the pipeline contract came through, but we’ll find some way.”

Judy twisted sideways in the chair to face Chancie. “I really don’t want to go anywhere else. I like it here at Screening Services, most of the time. I’ve sort of grown into the job, if you know what I mean.”

“I know exactly what you mean. You’re talking about gaining confidence and competence. I’ve seen it; Parker’s right.” Chancie chewed her lip thoughtfully. “Go on.”

“The thing is, I think I could do your job, Chancie. I’m starting to feel stifled as a secretary, and I want the opportunity to go for it. Parker says there are other jobs in office administration I could try for, now that I have the experience.”

Everything suddenly fell into place. Chancie had long ago learned this negotiating tactic, the simple act of waiting for the other person to reveal exactly what they wanted. Now Judy’s secret desire to take over Chancie’s duties corresponded directly with Chancie’s need to back off from the constant pressures of the business, their requirements fitting like the pieces of a complex jigsaw puzzle. If she could only swing the financial aspect.

Chancie leaned back, studying Judy. Could Judy handle the Byzantine minutiae of contract negotiations, the myriad details of setting up a regional training conference in a strange city, living

in motel rooms and eating her meals alone in restaurants? It was a high-pressure, lonely existence, and Chancie was nonplussed to learn Judy envied her for it.

What would happen to Judy's relationship with Parker if she traded places with Chancie and was therefore seldom in town? Six months from now, would Judy be back in Chancie's office with tears in her eyes, saying, *I just can't be away from Parker like this anymore and I want my old job back.*

Well, the future couldn't be predicted. Two weeks ago Chancie wouldn't have believed she would find herself in the initial throes of a passionate new relationship with Micah Taylor. Judy's desire to take over Chancie's job suited Chancie at the moment: she'd have time to repair her deteriorating maternal tie to Jamie, and she'd have much more time to spend in Micah's arms.

Assuming, of course, that's what Micah wanted as well.

Chancie would have to take a lot on faith. She would have to believe everything would fall into place and work out. Could she do it? She didn't have much experience with faith or hope or trust.

Judy squirmed under Chancie's prolonged scrutiny, but held fast to her resolution and didn't back down. At last Chancie said, "How many extra people do you think we need?"

Judy considered. "At least three, for now. More if we go to forty-eight states from our present ten."

Chancie noted the fact that Judy had unconsciously followed her lead in saying *we* when talking about the future. Judy, Chancie remembered, had never actually said she was quitting. She had just let Chancie make that assumption. Hm. Judy was better at this negotiating stuff than Chancie thought she was.

Chancie kept her face as immobile as possible, a trait her father had taught her all good gamblers mastered.

"Three, huh? Okay. Get ahold of the Workforce Services people, or put an ad in the paper if you want to handle the extra phone calls yourself."

Judy's jaw dropped. "I'm going to do the hiring?"

"Well, sure. What have we just been talking about here?" Chancie shrugged. "You'll find the right people, Judy."

A pleased smile tugged at the corners of Judy's mouth. "And the training?"

"Call the lawyer and brush up on contracts. I'll do as much as possible of the staff training myself. If you want my job, you'll be on the road a lot once you learn the ropes. I won't warn you, you should know by now exactly what you're getting into. We'll see then if Parker likes what he's helped create."

The triumphant grin hovering on Judy's features finally broke into a full smile. "I can handle Parker. I'll just keep reminding him of the size of the down payment we need for the house he wants to buy. Uh, which brings us to the little matter of my new and improved salary."

Chancie wondered if her poker face slipped just a little. Could she afford a cut in her own net profit from the gross in order to keep Judy happy? Overhead from the far flung offices was killing her, and she'd just promised to hire three more people here. She had her own house payment, the car payment, medical and dental for herself and Jamie, Alma's paycheck. It just went on and on.

Chancie would have to call the bank again. She and the loan officer, to her steadily increasing alarm, were fast becoming bosom buddies. She knew from her previous visits the names and ages of the three tow-headed children who smiled out from the photograph on his desk. The last visit had been so recent she knew what he planned to get each of them for Christmas.

"How much are we talking about, Judy?"

Judy straightened her shoulders. "I was thinking along the lines of maybe double what I make now?"

Chancie raised her eyebrows, blew out a held breath. "How about raised by half for now," she countered. "Then we'll talk again in three months."

When Judy hesitated, Chancie added, "Three months, I promise."

The phone rang. Simultaneously, the front door opened and the package delivery man entered to pick up the day's samples shipment. Judy jumped to her feet.

“Deal,” Judy declared. She held out her hand.

Chancie decided she liked this new, self-confident Judy. She shook the extended hand.

“You’ll have to spend some of your new salary on a wardrobe, you know.”

“Already thought of,” Judy tossed over her shoulder on her way to take care of the ringing telephone. “Parker wants to wait for the after-Christmas sales.”

Parker. On that parting note, Chancie sank into her own chair behind the big desk and began opening the mail. Right now, Chancie would like to throttle young Parker and choke some of his big ideas concerning her assistant out of him. No, make that big ideas concerning her *office manager*. Soon she’d have to come up with a whole new title if Judy was indeed going to take over all Chancie’s duties, something approaching *partner*.

Chancie slit more envelopes open, examining their contents and sorting them into piles. Oh, well, she couldn’t blame Judy for being ambitious. She herself seized opportunity wherever she could, with little in the way of support along her climb to success. It fit in with her concept of what feminism was all about to help boost Judy’s career.

But could she afford such a move now? No matter how much Chancie wanted to stick close to home, she took a big risk in letting someone so young and untried represent Screening Services to the outside world. If she wanted a life for herself it all came down to handing over the reins, loosening the tight control that she held over everything. If she wanted to start over again, she had to let go.

She drummed painted nails on her desk. This was all Micah Taylor’s fault, really. He’d opened the floodgate that dammed up her reserve and her tightly governed emotions, both of which had instantly swirled away in the torrent of simply letting go of her inhibitions. Micah Taylor and that young guy, Parker, no more than a kid, hitting her with a one-two punch when she was off guard. Not to mention almost totally out of capital. Again.

The thought niggled that it was her own fault she was broke and so deep in debt. Chancie admitted she spent way too much on unnecessary items. Such as the computer that sat unused in Jamie’s bedroom. Micah said she tried to buy her son’s affections. The accusation had stung badly last night, and still did. She could hardly admit to herself that as soon as Jamie talked her into buying him the ignored computer, he was getting a tablet model.

Which she had bought for him so he could operate some remote control cars.

Her life was out of control. There was no maybe about it. Micah was right: she was trying to hold Jamie’s affection with presents she couldn’t afford.

Chancie didn’t know what to do about money, exactly, beyond tightening her belt and trying to see the current financial crisis through. She’d done it before, and more than once, but now dear Parker had raised the ante by pushing Judy into precipitate action. And just that suddenly, Chancie was in over her head again.

Parker. Parker the young man about town. Chancie toyed with the gold-handled letter opener, spinning the blade on the leather blotter without seeing it. What was it Judy said Parker did for a living?

Of course. The blade spun to a halt as Chancie leaned back against the padded headrest of her executive’s chair. How could she have forgotten. Parker handled money. Parker handled other people’s money. He had trained as an accountant, but when he graduated he’d gone into life insurance, and then estate planning.

Parker the money man. Chancie tapped her lower lip with a long shiny fingernail, deep in thought.

Parker had a big hand in creating Chancie’s latest financial dilemma, and so he could help her get out of it. Parker could use his accounting skills to put her on a stringent budget. Straighten out the books and streamline the office accounts. Find forgotten funds in her checking account. Something. There had to be a solution to this expanding monetary mess.

The phone rang again, and this time Chancie picked it up because Judy was still busy with the delivery driver. When Chancie got off the phone, the driver was gone and Brenda had showed up to take Judy’s place for a few hours.

Judy grabbed her coat and waved cheerily on her way out.

Fine. Chancie didn't need Judy's input right now.

She promised herself she would have almost the whole plan worked out by the time Judy got back.

Micah radioed in at eight a.m., on the job the moment he got into the patrol car parked in front of his apartment. He cruised the snow packed roads in the passing lane of I-80 at a steady fifty-five miles an hour, switching from westbound to eastbound and back again, listening to the crackly voice of the dispatcher in Cheyenne giving the day's summary of bulletins and trooper safety messages.

Micah knew his slow pace irritated the hell out of commuters in a rush to get the fifteen miles from the smaller town of Rock Creek to work in Hawk Point City. But he also knew damn few of them had the guts to pass the impressive black cruiser outfitted with a big light bar on top and equipped in front with an imposing black iron nudge bar attached to the chassis. If he prevented even one idiot who hadn't checked the weather from sliding across the road and causing havoc, he could be proud of his day's work.

But he couldn't be too hard on the thoughtless public today. He hadn't expected the storm, either, and he should have known better. The week-long freeze had lifted yesterday; he'd had to walk through slush to reach Chancie at the mall. Anytime the temperature rose and a good melt occurred, it was a sure bet that Wyoming winter weather was gearing up for more snow.

If he'd had his head on straight, he would have known what kind of road conditions he'd wake up to this morning. But he'd hardly been thinking about checking the sky for signs of snow with that gorgeous woman standing there across the parking lot waiting for him. His head had been way up in the clouds somewhere. And later, at his apartment with his hand in Chancie's jeans, discussing the latest weather report had been the furthest thing from his mind.

He had been, still was, too full of Chancie. The thought of her, smell of her, feel of her. She'd been burned into his brain, not to mention other parts of his anatomy, and he couldn't escape her constant image.

Even when a big four-wheel drive zipped past westbound at sixty-five and a little blue passenger car followed, too close to the pickup's back bumper for safety, Micah couldn't banish Chancie de Leur from his head. He watched the two foolishly fearless drivers pull away, and automatically slowed to cross the median before suddenly connecting the pickup with a stolen vehicle report he'd heard earlier. The long line of probably cursing motorists in the eastbound lane behind him went on by while he sat in the median, waiting for a safe opening in traffic.

Micah's heart beat faster as he pulled out. The truck's taillights receded swiftly as Micah came up over the shoulder of the opposite side of the road, and the cretin did exactly what Micah was afraid he'd do. The taillights flashed as the driver caught sight of the patrol car coming up behind him and slammed on his brakes. The pickup started to fishtail wildly on the ice. Probably the driver was yet another one under the mistaken impression four-wheel drive trucks wouldn't slide on ice.

The driver of the little blue car didn't have a chance. In order to avoid a collision, the woman driver jerked the steering wheel to the right. The little car slid straight off the shoulder of the road and instantly plowed into half-frozen mud up to its front axle.

Micah radioed the stolen pickup's milepost location, while he steadily started to gain speed. The young male driver was lucky. He brought the truck under control without rolling it.

Micah hit the button for his lights. He followed for mile after tense mile, the driver of the stolen truck ignoring the flashing lights and siren, and refusing to pull over. In the distance, a white Hawk Point city police car and an SUV belonging to the county sheriff's office neared, sirens screaming. Both crossed the median and then followed Micah trying to stop the truck. As if it took three official vehicles to finally get his attention, the kid driving the pickup began to slow and eventually pulled into the emergency lane.

Micah followed, keeping a light, steady pressure on his own brakes to avoid bringing the cruiser to a sliding stop. The other two official vehicles pulled up behind Micah's patrol car. None

of the officers approached the stopped pickup. Micah's hands were slick with tension on the steering wheel, but he automatically followed policy for a felony stop: he hit the button for the P.A. system and ordered the driver out of the truck.

Micah waited, heart in his dry mouth, and then repeated the order. Still nothing happened. He pictured a standoff with the driver of the stolen truck, the sound of gunfire and the headlines afterward. All very dramatic, but not even remotely personally rewarding. Micah was the kind of cop who carried a family of five teddy bears strapped in a seat belt in the back in case he had to comfort a scared child, along with the more expected cop accessories like the shotgun propped beside him and in the trunk an M14 rifle of Korean War vintage rented from the National Guard for a dollar a year as well as a Colt AR-15/M4 carbine.

The names and faces of the troopers killed and wounded in the line of duty flashed through his consciousness: men he'd known who served no more, or who had to transfer out of patrol because of their physical or mental disability. He knew the nervous hair-trigger mentality of the city cop and the sheriff's deputy sitting in their cars behind him, because he felt it himself.

Micah had to stop what he knew in his guts would happen if the kid didn't cooperate and get out of the truck. Advising the other two officers over the radio what he was going to do, with cold dread he slowly opened the cruiser's door and got out, drawing his Beretta semi-automatic pistol from the holster on his belt. Time seemed to slow. With the other two officers fanning out to surround the pickup, Micah approached the driver's door slowly through the snow, the last two steps so forced he felt like he was plowing through syrup.

Micah could see through the driver's open window now. He stood slightly back from the truck door, out of a direct line of fire from the truck cab. "Look out!" the city cop yelled as the kid's head ducked out of sight. The kid was leaning over the seat reaching for something. It streaked through Micah's head that he would straighten up with a gun.

Micah held his breath. The young driver sat up. Micah's finger tightened on the trigger. Then the badly frightened kid, all blood drained from his stark white face, slowly extended a wallet through the open window.

Micah could suddenly breathe again, and hot anger at the kid's stupidity flooded in with an indrawn breath of cold air. He jerked the pickup door open and tried to yank the kid out by the collar. It was like tugging on a block of concrete. Micah yanked again. He couldn't budge the driver, who must have weighed closer to four hundred pounds than Micah's one-eighty. The city cop and sheriff's deputy approached, guns still drawn but relieved grins on their faces at Micah's predicament.

His hand still on the kid's jacket collar, Micah grunted and said, "Would you mind stepping out of this vehicle?" When the big kid finally complied, Micah patted him down for weapons, ignoring the low chatter and muted guffaws of the other two officers.

When at last he could face their good-natured ribbing, Micah gestured to the city cop. "He's all yours," he said.

Wyoming Highway Patrol didn't interfere in city police affairs unless they were asked. Well, Micah had been asked, he'd stopped the driver of the truck stolen in Hawk Point, but he didn't want anything more to do with it. He stood back, trying to slow his still-speeding heart. The humor in the situation had helped, but there was no denying the fact that he'd been scared pretty bad. When the kid was safely cuffed and the city cop was leading him away, Micah went to sit and recover from residual shakes in his patrol car.

At last the fear dissipated. He hadn't been paying enough attention. He'd been dreaming of Chancie and as a result could have gotten himself killed. He radioed the outcome of the stop to Cheyenne, watching the other two official cars drive off.

Micah still had to work the wreck. He swung around to see to the driver of the stuck passenger car.

He had to keep his mind off Chancie de Leur while he was at work. That was all there was to it.

Something bigger and stronger than himself had taken hold, and wasn't about to let go soon. The only solution Micah could see was for him and Chancie to find a way to get enough of each

other at night to propel them safely through the day. Otherwise he didn't think he could competently go on doing the job he'd always been proud of doing so well.

Judy swept into Chancie's office after lunch, pirouetting to show off her new look. Her hair had been cut into pixie wisps that softly framed her face, and dyed an attractive light ash brown. She wore an aqua suit with matching pumps and gold love knot earrings.

"You look absolutely wonderful, and very professional," Chancie said. "But what happened to waiting until after Christmas for new clothes?"

"I got out of the salon, and didn't feel right in jeans and flannel anymore. None of this is name brand, so Parker won't have a fit over the bill."

"Hmm," Chancie replied. She wondered exactly how far Judy would let Parker overshadow her before she rebelled, but with her own finances in such disarray Chancie was hardly in a position to advise Judy about when to buy clothes. Besides, it was Parker's talent for squeezing a dollar Chancie was interested in. "Speaking of Parker. When you get a minute, give me his number."

Judy looked slightly apprehensive, but did a good job of hiding it. Perhaps only Chancie, who knew her so well, would have detected the anxiety in Judy's posture. Maybe Judy really would make an accomplished negotiator.

"Don't worry," Chancie assured her. "I'm not going to lecture him, and I certainly don't want your man. The way you look, I don't think he'd be interested in a frumpy old woman like me anyway."

"Frumpy. Huh. I'll bet Trooper Micah Taylor doesn't think you're frumpy."

Chancie squirmed uneasily. She didn't want to discuss Micah, because she didn't know yet if there were anything lasting between the two of them to talk about. "Let's leave Micah out of this, Judy. We were talking about Parker."

Judy smiled, but wisely said nothing more about Chancie's love life.

"Parker has asked you to marry him, and wants to join our little family," Chancie began. "I've been thinking he should have to work to get you. If he agrees, and things pan out, you and Parker might both get some of the down payment for your house from Screening Services."

Judy leaned a shoulder against the doorframe. "Would you like to clarify?"

"I need financial advice," Chancie said.

Judy hesitated, as if she didn't want to hurt Chancie's feelings. "Parker's very conservative."

*And I'm not, is that what you're saying?* It was rather deflating for Chancie to discover even Judy secretly thought her profligate. "Okay. Good. That's good. Conservatism is exactly what I'm looking for. I'm in a mess, Judy, and I have to find a way out before I lose Screening Services."

Judy looked crestfallen, all her dreams of taking over the business threatening to be crushed by Chancie's confession. "Is it that bad?"

"Not yet. It could be soon. But don't worry. Our deal stands, no matter what."

Judy nibbled a fingernail. "Let me talk to Parker. He'll need something to keep him busy while I'm out of town, and we could use the extra money. I'd feel better if he was spending his weekends here at Screening Services on the books instead of at loose ends."

Chancie felt she could relax a little now. She'd fought her battle for the day, and come through relatively unscathed. "Thanks, Judy."

Judy touched a wisp of brown hair at her temple. "Thank you, Chancie. For listening to me and taking me seriously. I hope it all works out."

"I hope so too," Chancie said, thinking suddenly of other things in her life than her checkbook balance. "I hope everything works out for all of us."

Especially since it seems we're all getting in deeper together all the time, she thought.

## Chapter Nine

Chancie hurried home, in a dither to have everything ready by the time Micah arrived at six. She tugged off her coat and rushed toward the kitchen, but slowed her footsteps at the sight that

greeted her. She needn't have worried: Alma already had the table set with the good china and silver, and a standing rib roast browned in the oven, setting Chancie's stomach to rumbling. Fresh flowers graced the table, white carnations with sprigs of holly berries in a cut glass bowl.

But there were only two place settings.

The growling in Chancie's middle began to feel like panic. Alma had her back turned, busily stirring something in a pot on the stove.

"It all looks lovely, Alma." Chancie tried to modulate her voice, even as her hand clutched the back of one of the chairs. Alma had added two slender tapers in crystal holders flanking the intimate table set for a couple. "But this wasn't intended as a romantic dinner. I wanted you and Jamie here with me."

Alma set down her spoon and turned, revealing a red-checked apron that partially covered her sagging rayon slacks and sweatshirt. She obviously hadn't dressed for company. "I thought Jamie and I could eat in our rooms. We don't want to be in your way, dear."

"Jamie is here, then?" Some of the tension went out of her hand as Chancie held on to the ladder back chair. She'd been afraid Jamie would defy her wishes and disappear to a friend's house after school. "Micah wants to meet him. You two are my family, Alma. So please change your clothes and plan on joining us."

"Probably not a good idea, Chancie. The boy isn't happy about this. And I'm busy here." Alma half turned toward her steaming pots.

What little control Chancie had shattered. "Darn it, Alma! I'm nervous enough as it is. Would you please go get dressed? I can stir gravy while you're gone."

Alma hesitated, as if debating with herself whether to press Chancie right now. "If you like, you change first, dear. I'll finish everything up here. It will only take me five minutes to get something out of my closet. I think you'd better take some time to talk to Jamie before your young man arrives."

Chancie tried not to sound confrontational, but it was hard. It seemed she could handle anything except her personal affairs. "You think I'm rushing things, don't you?"

Alma shrugged. "Doesn't matter what I think. I want you to be happy. And I want Jamie to be happy."

"And Jamie isn't happy."

"Well, no. But I don't think you need me to tell you that."

"I'll talk to him. But you put two more plates on this table right now, Alma, or I'll do it myself."

Alma picked up her spoon and resumed stirring. "Whatever you say, dear."

Chancie crossed the big kitchen toward the hall and knocked on Jamie's door. He didn't answer. She opened the door to find him in his usual don't-bother-me position on his bed with the earphones drowning out all other sound.

Chancie negotiated the clutter on the floor, and sat beside Jamie's prone body on the mattress. He didn't open his eyes. His chest rose and fell rhythmically. Chancie watched for a moment, then lifted one of the earphones. "I know you're playing possum," she said. "If you don't open your eyes, I'm going to tickle your feet."

Jamie's toes curled defensively inside his socks at the threat. His eyes slitted open.

Chancie reached across her son's body to flick off the music. Jamie watched her from beneath dark lashes, saying nothing.

Chancie straightened her back, looking into Jamie's eyes. He clenched his jaw, but Chancie continued gazing at him. He gave no sign of even blinking, let alone of being ready to talk to her.

At last she said, "It would please me very much if you would come out to dinner with Micah and Alma and me. It would please me more if you could unbend enough to accept Micah's presence in our house with common courtesy."

When Jamie still refused to verbally acknowledge her presence or her request, Chancie went on, "I have some important things to tell you. About work and about some changes I'm making. I can't explain right now, but I think you'll like what I have to say."

Absolutely no reaction. Chancie sighed, ruffling her son's hair. "I'll admit this dinner probably wasn't a good idea so soon, Jamie. I'm sorry I rushed you into meeting Micah when you weren't ready. I know it's asking a lot, but please try to make the best of this one night."

Jamie gave no sign that he heard or understood. Frustrated, feeling too rushed to spend necessary time with her son and terribly guilty about it, Chancie rose and left, shutting the door quietly behind her.

She could only hope Jamie would cooperate through the evening, but in her heart she knew better. She remembered too many times when silence had filled the house after one of Kenny's rages, times when she'd retreated into herself to avoid the pain of her husband's unfounded, drunken accusations. Times when, God help her, she hadn't been able to banish Jamie's fear and sadness because she'd been too full of those emotions herself. She couldn't blame Jamie for emulating her turtle act now. After all, the boy had learned to tuck in and hide under pressure from her. And also from Kenny, who had never faced a problem without chemical backup of some sort in their entire married life.

Chancie had learned new ways to deal with stress, but seemed unable to pass those techniques on to her son. She would just have to try harder, now that she was making the extra time. She just hoped she wasn't also making a big mistake in forcing Jamie to accept Micah in their lives before the boy had finished sorting out his feelings for his father.

Micah arrived at Chancie's house promptly at six. He was still upset about the stolen truck incident, and wondered if he should say anything about it to Chancie. Then he decided he wouldn't. He didn't want to scare her off with the details of a cop's life before he even had a chance to get to know how she'd react. He rang the doorbell, juggling a dozen long-stemmed yellow roses in a box in one hand and a bottle of wine in the other.

He studied the profile of the cedar-sided house as he waited, thinking once again that Chancie was used to a much higher standard of living than he could offer her. He felt dwarfed, waiting there on the front doorstep of the bi-level house that towered over him, wondering if the slacks and camel wool jacket he wore were appropriate.

Chancie herself answered the door, and his mood brightened at once. She wore something soft and flowing, bright red to match the season, and the light behind her lent her dark honey curls a copper aura. She smiled in welcome, and all was instantly right with Micah's world. It didn't matter if he didn't know how to dress well or pick out the proper wines. Chancie's smile made all those details inconsequential.

"Hi, baby," he said in a low voice. The mere sight of her took his breath away, but he managed to add, "I brought you something."

Her tremulous smile widened as she took the florist's box. She stepped aside, the legs of her velvet outfit swirling around her calves. "Come in, Micah," she said. Her voice quavered slightly.

"Nervous?" he asked as she shut out the cold draft behind him.

She nodded. "Very."

"Me too."

He studied her, standing there in that alluring getup. Once again she'd chosen clothes that solicited stroking. He fervently wished he could oblige, but felt constrained by the fact he was in her house with her family somewhere nearby. "I'll try to be my most charming," he assured her, adding, "Want a hug?"

"Yes," she whispered. "So far, I've spent the hour I've been home snapping at Alma and lecturing Jamie. I'm ready to collapse. Hold me for just a minute, Micah."

She bore the box of flowers and he still held the neck of the wine bottle, but they fit together just right, her head instinctively seeking its accustomed place against his hard chest. One hand slipped beneath his shearling jacket and the camel blazer, and she squeezed him around his waist for a moment.

Micah resisted the urge to grasp her round buttock with his free hand and mold her to him, claiming her mouth voraciously with his in the process. That sort of reception wasn't what she

needed right now, no matter how much he might need it after his hellish day. Instead he pulled her shoulders to him and kissed the top of her head.

They broke apart at the same instant. Chancie looked flushed and guilty, just from that small contact. "Let me take your coat," she said in a restrained, formal voice, not meeting his eyes.

Micah stifled a sigh as he set the wine on a small table beneath a mirror on the foyer wall and shrugged out of his shearling jacket. He supposed they'd get through this night somehow, but it wasn't going to be easy with both of them nervous as caged wolves.

The tension level began to ease perceptibly when she led him across an attractively furnished living room toward a big combination kitchen-dining area where a matronly woman bustled about.

"Alma," Chancie said, "I don't think we're dying of starvation just yet. Slow down for a minute and meet Micah."

The older woman with heavily gray-shot hair wiped her hands on the front of a checkered apron she wore to protect her frilly blouse and navy blue skirt. She peered up into Micah's face, while offering a smile and a knobby hand. "Pleased, I'm sure, Mr. Taylor."

Micah took the hand gingerly, barely compressing its obviously arthritic contours. "If I get to address you as Alma, I'd prefer you call me Micah." He handed Alma the bottle of wine.

"I hope you like roast beef, Micah."

"I sure do, ma'am. And if it tastes anything like it smells, I'm going to love yours."

Alma simpered prettily, hugging the wine bottle to her bony chest. Chancie said, "You'll finally have someone to do justice to your cooking, Alma. He eats like a horse."

Chancie turned to find a vase to put the roses in, leaving Micah to face Alma alone. He wasn't sure what to say after a comment like that. His flustered silence increased when Alma patted his arm, whispering conspiratorially, "Chancie eats like a *canary*. Myself, I always went for a man with a good appetite. My Henry could eat a whole roast chicken and a pot of potatoes when he came in from work, and he was always built slender like you."

"I never said I didn't like the way he eats, just that it's a wonder to behold," Chancie called from where she was stretching on tiptoe to reach the highest shelf of a cupboard. "Micah, stop flirting with Alma and come reach this vase for me."

Alma winked broadly, and Micah finally realized they'd been ganging up to tease him, trying to put him at ease. His tension slipped another notch. He smiled down into Alma's wrinkled face before going to Chancie's aid.

When they had the roses in water and safely removed from the wilting heat near the stove, Alma said quietly, "Don't you think it's time to get that boy out here, Chancie? The meat's carved, and it's going to get all dried out and cold if we don't sit down soon."

Chancie bent her head one last time to sniff the fragrance of the roses, as if putting off what she dreaded doing. Micah felt sorry for her and suddenly nervous again. Chancie lifted the vase and carried it with her like a shield, setting it on a table in the living room on her way to summon Jamie.

"We can start setting the food out. They'll be here in just a second."

Micah turned away from watching Chancie go, grateful for Alma's suggestion as to what to do with his dangling hands. Alma got him scooping out a mountain of mashed potatoes while she scurried between stove and refrigerator and table, setting a filled gravy boat, a dish of whipped butter and a basket of hot dinner rolls on the lace-lined surface.

Micah opened the wine while an inordinate amount of time seemed to drag past. At last Chancie reappeared with a wavy-haired boy who kept trying to tug away the hand she clutched. All activity in the kitchen ceased. Alma said too loudly into the silence, "Well, here's our boy Jamie now."

Jamie's eyes sought the floor and stayed there, as though he'd just now noticed something unusual and interesting in the shiny surface. Chancie performed introductions. The boy refused to meet Micah's eyes or even to look at the hand he woodenly shook at his mother's insistence.

"Those candles are going to melt away. Let's sit," Alma said, sparing them all further awkwardness.

Micah seated Chancie first, but Alma had already pulled up her own chair by the time he finished. “We don’t stand much on ceremony around here,” Alma said, patting the chair to her left, at the head of the table and directly across from Chancie.

Micah took the indicated seat. While he was shaking out a linen napkin, Alma said, “Well, let’s not just sit here like stumps on a log. Somebody start passing the food.”

Chancie began with the bowl of mashed potatoes, passing it to Jamie. The boy took a mere dab, and then held the heavy bowl slightly out of Micah’s reach, making him stretch across the table for it. The test of wills was repeated with every dish on the table, but Micah bit his tongue and said nothing.

He wondered if Chancie noticed what her son was doing, and decided she did when her expression tightened a little more each time she passed a dish on to Jamie. But at last they sat with plates full, and began eating. Chancie tried to draw Jamie out, asking questions about his day and receiving monosyllabic answers.

After a considerable silence, Alma rescued the flagging conversation. “Maybe you can tell by my lack of citified manners that I grew up on a ranch, Micah.”

Having contributed nothing to the conversation so far but doing as much justice as he could in the interim to the slab of beef Alma had deposited on his plate, Micah answered gratefully, “So did I.”

“Ha,” she exclaimed, pointing her fork at him in triumph. “I knew it all along. Where were you all at?”

Chancie looked slightly chagrined that she hadn’t known this fact. Micah smiled across the table at her to indicate her ignorance wasn’t her fault, then turned to Alma. “We had a place in Montana. Outside the Blackfeet Nation reservation. The tribe bought it back when my dad was ready to retire. My mother still lives there, as a matter of fact.”

“You didn’t want to be a rancher?”

“I always wanted to be a cop, from the time I was a little kid. My mother’s brother was with the reservation police and I used to drive him crazy with questions.” Micah shrugged deprecatingly. “I hope I’m half the peace officer, and the man, that he was.”

“What was his name?”

“John Taylor,” Micah said quietly.

Alma colored when she realized what information she’d unwittingly extracted. “Oh.”

Micah glanced at Chancie. She was staring absently at Jamie, but looked up when she felt Micah’s gaze on her. It had been a huge cross for his mother to bear, but these days almost half of babies were born to single mothers and it wasn’t such a big deal anymore.

“Don’t be sorry,” he told Alma. “My parents weren’t married, but they were happy. My dad was a big Swede, Carl Johanssen. My mother is part English, part Blackfeet. Her name is Anna Taylor.”

Now Alma shot a glance at Chancie. The housekeeper looked slightly uncomfortable about monopolizing Micah and the conversation. But Chancie just smiled fondly at the two of them and went on eating. Jamie kept his eyes steadily on his plate.

“Do you miss riding?” Alma asked with a note of wistfulness. “I do.”

“I still ride. If you’d like, you can take either of my horses out any time you want,” Micah offered. “They tend to get fat over the winter and need the exercise.”

For the first time, Micah noted a glimmer of interest from Jamie. At the mention of horses, the boy’s fork paused in its steady journey to his mouth and back to his plate.

“Oh, I couldn’t,” Alma said, staring down at her misshapen hands. “I don’t think my poor old bones could take the jarring anymore.”

“If you change your mind, they’ve both got a pretty smooth gait,” Micah assured her. Then he took his courage in hand and said, “Jamie, would you like to go riding with me sometime?”

The boy almost choked on a bite of beef before clearing his throat and muttering, “I don’t know how.”

Micah looked toward Chancie. Her eyes glinted in the candlelight, offering silent support. Micah turned his attention back to Jamie. "I'll teach you. It's not hard."

Jamie kept his eyes averted. "My mom doesn't let me out of the house much."

It was Chancie's turn to almost choke. "Good grief, Jamie. You can certainly go riding with Micah." She reached for her water goblet instead of the wine.

"You could go with us," Micah said to her. "I could borrow another horse."

Chancie's face blanched. "N-no, thank you. But Jamie is free to go if he wants."

"Chicken," Jamie said *sotto voce*, to all appearances addressing his plate and not his mother.

Micah stifled a smile. The kid had guts, he'd give him that. Maybe not so many brains, but then a boy couldn't have everything. "So what do you say, Jamie? Want to go out tomorrow after school if it's not too cold?"

"It'd be almost dark by then."

"Well, we could just go feed them this week after I get off work, and get you used to being around them. Then we could ride on Saturday. How does that sound?"

At last Jamie looked up from his dinner, grimacing in Chancie's direction. His look said, *Do I have to?*

She looked back at her son without expression, motherese for *I think you should go and I'm choosing not to help you get out of it*. She said aloud to Micah, "Come by for some dinner before you go feed your horses tomorrow."

Jamie looked back at his plate, trapped between the adults. His mouth drooped miserably, and he asked to be excused soon after Chancie issued her invitation to Micah. Chancie took pity on him and let him go. He'd behaved as well as could be expected, and she didn't want to push it. The ambience at the table buoyed almost immediately with Jamie's absence, Alma and Micah turning to fond reminiscences of ranch life and Chancie asking questions that elicited more memories.

Micah learned that an accident with a hay baler had driven Henry and Alma Benson from the land they hadn't owned and into town, with Henry never really recovering from the loss of his arm. When Henry died, Alma had been left with nothing except a pittance from Social Security, and considered Chancie her salvation from the welfare, as she put it. Alma said staunchly she had never taken charity a day in her life and hoped she could work for Chancie until the day she died.

Chancie said in a shocked voice, "Honestly, Alma!" and the older woman replied evenly, "Well, every word of it is true."

Micah learned Chancie harbored an inordinate fear of horses, which she thought until tonight she'd concealed from Jamie. Micah was touched by Chancie's trust in allowing her son to go near his own horses, and teased he'd have Chancie herself barrel racing by springtime. She laughed and shook that glorious head of curls, saying, "Never. No way. Absolutely not."

Forgetting Alma's presence for a moment, he said, "You'd knock all the cowboys out in a skintight pair of jeans and some proper cowgirl boots."

Chancie blushed, and Alma hooted laughter. "I always wanted one of those pink hats the rodeo queens wear," Alma said. "Maybe you could get one of those too, Chancie."

"Uh-huh. That's just what I need." Chancie rose and blew out the candle nearest her. Alma pushed her chair back, preparatory to clearing the table.

Micah placed a hand on the housekeeper's arm. He whispered, "Go watch TV or something. I'll help clean up."

Alma grinned. "I knew there was a reason I liked you," she whispered back.

Chancie leaned between them to blow out the second candle. "I haven't even got my back turned and you two are flirting again," she said sternly.

"Micah's doing dishes," Alma announced. She held her hand over her heart. "I think I'm in love."

"Ma'am, if I were just a little bit older," Micah said gallantly as Alma rose.

"It would have to be by about twenty or thirty years, dear, or we'd cause talk," Alma finished for him, ending their fun. "Guess I'll butt out now and leave you two alone." From the doorway before disappearing she added, "Micah, it was a great pleasure meeting you."

Chancie was already stacking dishes and Micah started on the other side of the table. He said, "Your Alma is something."

"She likes you too. I've never heard her call anybody *dear* but Jamie and me."

They worked together companionably for a while, Chancie running hot water in the sink and rolling up her sleeves to the elbows to plunge them in the suds after loading the dishwasher. Micah shed his jacket, grabbed a dish towel and began drying pots.

Chancie said, "I learned a lot about you tonight. It's nice to have some of the gaps filled in, although I guessed you were Native American."

"Indian. It's okay to say it." He hesitated. "Maybe we should spend more time talking."

Her lips tilted in a secret smile. She murmured, "Do you really think so?"

Micah stepped away to survey her attractive backside, appealingly covered in crushed red velvet.

"Nah," he decided. "If I eat here often enough, Alma will soon have me divulging all my secrets. You can just listen in. Then you and I can think up better ways to spend our private time."

"I wish we had some private time," she said, turning to tug the dish towel from him and dry her hands before placing them on the shoulders of his dress shirt. "Kiss me quick," she demanded.

Micah intended to comply, but the warm welcome of her open mouth tempted him beyond the containment of a little peck. He delved into that velvety softness, crushing her body to him and holding her there by the lush nether curves he'd admired only moments before.

And Chancie kissed back, pressing her breasts with their taut nipples against his shirt, rubbing and purring deep in her throat like a contented Persian cat. He wanted to undress her right there in her kitchen, divest her of those red velvet trappings and have her naked on the countertop. He wanted to hold her forever, bury himself inside her at last. He wanted—

"Mom!"

They sprang away from each other. Chancie's hand flew to her mouth; Micah's grabbed the dishtowel to drape it nonchalantly in front of his bulging fly. Jamie stared at them from the arched doorway.

"I thought he was gone," the boy said accusingly. "I heard a door shut."

"A-Alma must have gone to her room," Chancie managed to say. She ran her hands down the front of her velvet tunic to smooth it. "We were just finishing the dishes."

Jamie looked at the bowls and platters of food still on the table. "Yeah, right." He turned and stomped away.

"Jamie, what did you want?" Chancie cried after her son.

"Just never mind, Mom," he yelled from the hallway. "I can see you're really busy! Finish the damn *dishes*."

His bedroom door slammed. Chancie looked at Micah with wide green eyes. She said, "Whoops."

Micah didn't know whether to laugh or yell himself. That damned jealous kid had Chancie spinning in circles. She couldn't please everybody all the time, no matter how hard she tried for Jamie's sake.

He put his arm around her, trying to ignore the slight stiffening of her spine in response. "It'll be okay," he said. "Give me a week to work on him. He'll come around."

"Oh, Micah. Do you really think so?" Chancie's hands sought his waist through his shirt, where she clung tightly.

"Yeah," he affirmed with more bravado than he felt. Jamie de Leur was one tough little brat and would go down kicking and screaming. Micah recognized all the signs, because he'd been a tough little brat himself with five bigger brothers always beating up on him. Still, if he could handle scared drivers of stolen vehicles surrounded by cops with guns, he could handle one ten-year-old with a stubborn hang up about his mother's new boyfriend, right?

Micah sighed and swore to Chancie without much conviction, "Jamie will get used to the idea of us being together. Just you wait and see."

He did his best to ignore the voice in his head that whispered something about famous last words.

## Chapter Ten

The appointed days of the week Micah had given himself to win over Jamie's affections began to pass. Both Micah and Chancie thought they dragged by interminably.

Each evening Micah arrived at Chancie's for dinner. These were much less formal affairs, where he didn't feel out of place in jeans and boots. Chancie greeted him with affection, the simmering passion he could detect in her forcibly curbed, and he knew they were falling into a routine that would be devastating to both of them to discontinue if Jamie ultimately wouldn't accept having Micah around.

After some wonderful meals where he came to appreciate Alma almost as much as Chancie did, Micah would wait while Jamie got himself dressed in clothing warm enough to withstand the Wyoming outdoors in December. Then he'd drive the boy in his pickup to the place north of town where he boarded his horses, almost an acre of unincorporated land belonging to a sheriff's deputy acquaintance, Clay Thorpe.

Thorpe's dog barked a couple of times when they drove up, just enough to warn Thorpe and his wife someone was around but not enough to make a nuisance of himself. When Micah and Jamie reached the barred gate of the corral, Jamie would open the door of the truck and get out with as much enthusiasm as if he were a death row prisoner being led to execution.

The first day, Jamie merely watched and refused to approach the Appaloosa mare and gelding. But after that he reluctantly began to help Micah bridle and saddle the horses by the light of an aluminum cone lamp mounted on the stall. After much urging he would climb into the saddle on the spotted mare and let Micah lead him around the corral, even take the reins and guide her himself if Micah forced him to. But he wouldn't admit by word or expression that he was enjoying any of it.

Jamie forked hay more readily than he rode, struggling with the heavy bales and the wire cutters. He even mucked out the stalls and as much as he could of the frozen corral without too much muttering under his breath. Micah came to admire the kid's silent fortitude, but he still felt the urge to shake some compassion for his mother's predicament into Jamie.

Micah thought he'd never find the key to opening the boy's locked emotions. By Friday he was about to give up on winning over Jamie. They were ready to leave. While Micah hung up his tack and finished straightening things up, Jamie wandered off toward the gate. Micah hurried faster than usual, his fingers and toes getting numb from cold.

He hadn't turned off the light yet, their signal to go. For some reason he turned to look behind himself instead, and caught the boy hugging Thorpe's ugly mutt beyond the bars of the metal corral. Micah stood watching Jamie, whose emotions were unguarded for a moment, and the dog. He knew he'd discovered an important key to the boy's affections.

But Micah didn't know whether to use it or not. Jamie hadn't volunteered anything personal about himself, and clearly wasn't ready to treat Micah with anywhere near the warmth he showed to Thorpe's dog.

Yet how long would Micah and Chancie have to wait to gain the boy's trust? The urge to nudge Jamie along toward accepting him was too strong for Micah to deny. At last he decided almost anything with Jamie couldn't hurt.

"Like dogs, huh?"

Jamie stiffened. His hand froze where it had been fondling the animal's fuzzy ears. The poor dog looked to be what Micah's father had called Heinz 57, a product of too many cross-breedings to tell what varieties of canine its ancestors might have been. Micah crossed the corral toward the fence, trying to seem nonchalant.

"I like dogs," the boy finally answered. "But Mom won't let me have one."

The boy had strung two sentences together. Micah had to grab for the support of the top rail of the corral to keep from falling over in shock.

He lifted one boot to hook its heel over the bottom rail. It wouldn't do to seem too eager. "Your mom probably thinks she'd have to take care of a dog. I'll tell her what a good job you do with the horses. Maybe if we work together on it, both try to convince her, you could have a dog."

Jamie glanced up, his face full of a sneering cynicism that was too old for his young features. He said flatly, "I don't need your help. My mom and I got along just fine until you started hanging around."

Micah knew from what Chancie told him that was a baldfaced lie, but he admired the kid's bluster. His week was passing, and he'd made absolutely no headway with Jamie. He gave up on the subject of dogs for the time being, but an idea formed that wouldn't quit nagging him. He couldn't give up all hope that he might yet win.

They drove back to Chancie's house, where Micah and Chancie had only a few minutes together. Micah asked her a hurried question without much explanation, and she reluctantly agreed to trust his judgment. Micah felt he'd won a major battle, if not the weeklong war, when she assented.

He went home alone. Again. If the difficult evenings with Jamie were hard on Micah, the nights he spent alone were harder. Beginning with dropping the boy off and then having to take his chaste leave of Chancie, Micah's nights became unbearable endurance tests where he paced the floor of the small apartment or lay in bed staring at the darkened ceiling. He missed Chancie. He even, truth be told, missed Jamie a little. Being at Chancie's house every night, if only for an hour or so, showed him vividly what he'd been missing all these years. Lights twinkled on the Christmas tree that had appeared in the corner of her living room, she and Alma teased and laughed, their phones rang almost constantly for one or another of them, and the smell of Alma's baking invariably perfumed the air.

Home. He knew he was building up an idealized picture that was probably nowhere near the reality of the life Chancie lived. Alma was baking so much because it was Christmas. He doubted if she cooked all the time; she probably ordered take-out pizza once in a while just like everybody else. Chancie and Alma, and Chancie and Jamie, sometimes sniped at each other when they were hurried or impatient. It wasn't all sugarplums and spun icing at Chancie's twenty-four hours a day.

But it was a hell of a lot better there than here. Sometime during the week, the Christmas presents Chancie left with him had disappeared. He suspected she used her lunch hour to wrap them, and now he hadn't even the comfort of other people's gifts to keep him company in the bleak rooms.

Micah and Chancie had agreed to cool their ardor while Micah got to know Jamie better. But the bargain got steadily more burdensome to keep as the week progressed and Micah's almost constant erection chafed, never letting him forget the implied reward that lay at the end of a successful stretch of seven celibate days. And the knowledge he read in Chancie's eyes when he kissed her virtuously good night—that she desired him as much as he did her, that she longed for their self-imposed exile from each other to be over so they could continue where they'd left off, with her naked body branding his—didn't help one bit.

Why had he agreed to such insane terms? This week was going to end up driving them nuts. Only once, when she said she couldn't stand it anymore, had she come to him in the night. Soft, warm, wet, giving, they took turns with mouths and hands, all silken friction, excitement building until the darkness imploded for each of them.

Yet she ended the night crying because he wouldn't give her what she wanted. "I see stars when you touch me. Do you know that? I don't care about the future! Right at this moment, I only care about now. Do I need to beg, Micah? I will. I have no pride left when it comes to you."

"That's not it, baby. You know that's not it." He was at the point where he wondered if this state of suspension, weeks involving only foreplay or nothing at all, hadn't become a kind of exquisite torture to see which of them would break first.

"Have you had this particular problem with other women?" she demanded, sitting up and swiping tears from her cheeks as if she didn't want him to know she was crying.

“You’re well aware I don’t have a physical problem, Chancie. I’m killing myself to hold back, only because of you. Because you’re so damned important to me. I don’t want to make a mistake.”

She twisted to stare at him. “Bullshit,” she spat. “This is not just about me anymore. You’re afraid.”

“You make it sound like there’s something wrong with being afraid.” Suddenly he had the urge to put his clothes on. He lowered his hands from behind his head and sat up beside her. It didn’t feel right to be arguing with her while lying down naked, although he couldn’t have explained exactly why those circumstances made him so uncomfortable.

“You *do* have a problem, Micah. And it’s called trust. You need to trust me, and trust that we’ll be stronger together than we are separately. It’s starting to look like I’m going to be changing my *whole life* in the next few months. I’m not scared to admit I’m afraid. But I’m going to do it anyway, because things can’t go on like they are.”

“The difference is you’re not changing your *whole life* just because of me.”

The sudden silence in the room was like a thunderclap. The look on her face when he said that, as if he’d slapped her, was almost his undoing. He wanted to take it back, kiss her and make it better, lay her back on the bed and make the world and all its problems go away for at least a little while.

But he didn’t. He pulled the sheet up over himself, and watched her get out of his bed and throw her clothes on, while he said and did nothing to stop her.

She turned her back on him wordlessly and left. Frustrated, and angry. And he couldn’t blame her.

Now Micah told himself: two more days. Two more days until the big test. Tomorrow, Christmas Eve, and Sunday, Christmas day, and he and Chancie would have their answer. He tried to talk himself out of discouragement. He could survive two more days.

Maybe.

On Saturday morning the sun delayed rising, the winter days short and crisp. Micah woke late, hurrying through a cold breakfast and a shower. He had a lot to do, but he’d promised Jamie they would ride today and he wouldn’t put the boy off.

He opened the front door, his breath puffing out in a frozen plume, and reached for the morning paper. He shut the door on the cold and ran his finger down the classifieds, wondering if it was too early on a holiday Saturday to call. But the woman he reached when he punched in the numbers said three o’clock was fine. Micah said he’d be there, and hung up.

He pulled on a coat and gloves, and went out to start the pickup. Its engine whined before finally catching, and he had to sit with his foot on the gas to make sure it didn’t die. When it finally warmed up enough to move without choking, he put it in gear and headed toward Chancie’s.

Chancie arrived at Screening Services promptly at nine. Judy had set up this special appointment with Parker, and Chancie didn’t want to miss it. The office had a deserted, weekend feel to it, and Chancie turned on a few lights to dispel the solitude.

She booted up Judy’s computer in case Parker should need the records on the hard drive. Even that small bit of normalcy, the light from the screen, helped liven the inert atmosphere. Parker arrived soon after, cheeks ruddy from cold.

He looks so young, Chancie thought. Am I doing the right thing by placing my business in his and Judy’s hands?

“Thank you for coming,” she said.

Parker rubbed his palms together briskly, whether from the chill or an eagerness to get his hands on her books, Chancie couldn’t tell.

“Ready?” he asked, and she nodded uncertainly.

“Good,” he said. “Let’s get started.”

Parker seated himself behind Judy's computer, but Chancie didn't have long to stand there feeling useless. He soon had her busy fetching invoices and check stubs, quarterly reports and copies of her loan agreements.

He asked probing questions, delving into every nook and cranny of her financial morass, and Chancie answered as fully as she could. She wouldn't be accused of wasting Parker's time by holding anything back. The more he explored, the more she began to feel she was in competent hands, and she finally began to relax a little.

The phone rang. Chancie prayed it wasn't an emergency. Judy had left for the Colorado office on Thursday and wouldn't be back until tonight to spend Christmas Eve with Parker. There was no one to cover for Chancie if there had been a screwup somewhere.

"Screening Services."

"Chancie, it's Alma."

Alma knew how important this meeting with Parker was. Chancie held her breath before exhaling and asking, "What's wrong?"

"Jamie disappeared while I was in the shower. He left a note saying he was going to a friend's house."

Chancie clutched the receiver. "He knew Micah was coming over."

"Yes, dear."

"He did this on purpose, so he wouldn't have to see Micah. He knew I'd be busy at least until lunchtime, probably more like early afternoon. So he took the opportunity to run off."

"I'm afraid so."

"I swear I'm going to throttle him when I get my hands on him, Alma."

"Now, Chancie. You know this whole affair with Micah has been hard on the boy."

Chancie glanced at Parker, who didn't look up from the computer screen. She lowered her voice. "I just don't understand *why*. Micah's been nothing but patient with Jamie, and Jamie's been a total little snot in return. I really thought...oh, never mind. Where is Jamie, anyway? Did he leave any clue where he was going?"

Alma sighed. "You know he's smarter than that."

Chancie sighed too. "I also know he knows I don't have time this morning to call all over town looking for him. He gripes that I'm never home, but he sure uses the opportunity to slip out unobserved when it suits him, doesn't he? He's playing Micah and me for fools."

"Chancie, I think that's a little harsh."

"And I think you're a certified saint if you believe I shouldn't be mad at him," Chancie hissed into the phone to keep from yelling. "If Jamie shows up there at home, I want to talk to him immediately. Parker's given up his Saturday, in addition to it being Christmas Eve, to help me out here. I can't spend all day searching for Jamie if he's hiding out with his friends."

"I understand, dear. I'm sure Jamie's fine. I just thought you would want to know." Alma hung up.

Chancie rested her head against the rough wood wall near the phone for a moment, so angry and disappointed in her son she didn't care if she got slivers in her forehead. It had been so much easier when Jamie was small, when she could command him and he would obey. Now he was certainly old enough to cross the street by himself, cross town on foot if he felt like it, which he had apparently done to get away from her. And away from Micah.

"Trouble?" Parker asked mildly, distracted by the numbers on the screen in front of him. He'd taken off his overcoat and cardigan, and sat with rolled-up shirt sleeves.

"You might call my son trouble," Chancie muttered.

"You can go for a while if you like," Parker said. "I won't need you here for another hour or so. It will give me some time to go over these numbers again before I give you the bad news. If you're going home, why don't you bring your personal records when you come back."

Parker's last words should have given Chancie a chill, but she'd already reached the conclusion that he wasn't going to be falsely cheery about her finances, especially her personal expenditures.

Chancie doubted if she could find Jamie in an hour, but maybe she could intercept Micah and try to soften the blow.

“Thanks, Parker,” she said, grabbing her coat. “I’ll be back in a little while.”

When Micah rang the doorbell at Chancie’s, Alma answered. She had a funny look on her face he couldn’t decipher. She didn’t smile, and she wouldn’t meet his eyes.

“Oh, Micah,” she said, fluttering a hand. “Come on in, dear. Sit and have a cup of coffee.”

Micah smiled. He could already feel the warmth of the cup against his cold fingers. “Maybe just one cup, thanks. Is Jamie ready?”

“Jamie isn’t here.” Alma shut the door and stood twisting her hands together.

A frigid feeling crept up between Micah’s shoulder blades that had nothing to do with the temperature outside. “Where is he?”

“Well, I can’t say. He slipped out while I was showering. He’s at a friend’s, but he didn’t say which friend. Micah, I’m so sorry. I know he was supposed to be here to meet you this morning.”

Micah put his hands in his pockets to hide their tight clenching. He’d pushed too hard, and Jamie had retaliated. He tried a smile that he knew didn’t come off too well. “It’s damned cold outside to be riding, anyway,” he said. His voice sounded unconvincing even to his own ears.

They heard the crunch of tires on ice from Chancie’s car in the driveway at the same moment. Alma patted Micah’s arm in silent sympathy, and then left him standing alone in the hallway to meet Chancie.

She blew in, stamping snow from her boots. From the look on her face as she slammed the door behind her, Micah concluded it was probably a good thing Jamie wasn’t around. But when she lifted her eyes to Micah’s face, her stormy gaze softened.

“Micah, I’m so sorry,” she said.

“Everybody’s sorry. You. Me. Alma.” He shrugged. “Do you know what set him off? Was it just me?”

“I don’t think so.” Chancie tugged at his arm. “Come in and sit down.”

She pulled her coat off and shook her hair out. Micah perched on the red and blue sofa, and Chancie sat next to him. She picked up his hand and held it.

“I’ve told Jamie some things that I haven’t told you,” she said. “I didn’t know where we stood. You and me, I mean. Especially after the other night. So I didn’t talk much about the future.”

“Maybe it’s time to face the fact that we don’t have a future, Chancie.” His chest hurt when he said it. His body ached as if he were getting the flu, the hand she held hurt, but there it was: the bald truth and nothing but the truth. If push came to shove, Chancie couldn’t pick him over her own son. She was going to call it off between them.

“You’re going to break my heart, Micah,” Chancie whispered.

“I warned you from the beginning I might. I never meant to hurt you, Chancie.” Now his throat felt raw.

She crumpled, head against his chest. He tangled his hands in her glorious, riotous gold curls. “Go on and tell me what you told Jamie,” he said softly. “Maybe it will help me understand where I went wrong.”

“I don’t know if it’s possible to fully understand Jamie.” Chancie sniffed back tears. “He said he wanted me to stay home. I’ve been working on that with Judy. She’ll be going out of town and I’m going to stay here and run the office. I explained that to Jamie, but it didn’t seem to make any difference.”

“You’re trading places with your assistant?” Micah couldn’t help the amazement in his voice.

“Micah, you haven’t seen Judy lately. You wouldn’t recognize her. She threatened to quit. I know it sounds crazy, but I really think she can do my job.”

How much was Chancie willing to give up in order to please her son? “I don’t think Judy is the one I’d have trouble recognizing right now. Chancie, are you all right?”

She took a deep, shuddering breath. “Okay. The whole truth. I didn’t agree to Judy’s idea just for Jamie. I wanted to have time to be with you too. I didn’t want to be calling you from motel

rooms and missing you all the time. And if you're talking about giving up control, well, I'm going to have to start trusting somebody sometime so I thought I'd start with Judy."

She'd been making plans. Micah felt hollow inside. Didn't she see it wasn't going to work out between the two of them? Or should he say among the three of them? How could they think they might have a future together when Jamie hated him?

"There's more." Chancie continued, shuddering. Micah's arm automatically tightened around her shoulders. "I'm not who you think I am," Chancie said in a tiny voice.

All Micah's cop instincts bristled. What did she mean? Did she have a secret identity, a criminal past? Was there something else hidden between them, holding them apart? Impossible. He damped down his suspicion. He knew Chancie de Leur better than she thought he did. He knew she could never be happy while Jamie was unhappy. She was turning her whole life around for a kid who appreciated none of her effort.

"Okay, I'll bite," he said. He lifted her chin. "If you're not who I think you are, just who might you be?"

She wouldn't look at him. "At this very moment, Judy's accountant boyfriend is at my office trying to straighten out my books. I'm a fraud, Micah. I'm not the success you think I am. In order to keep my business, I may have to sell this house. That's what I told Jamie, and that's why I think he's so upset. I should have at least waited until after the holidays. I've been so thoughtless. Christmas is already hard on him. I could have waited a while, given him that much."

Micah looked at the Christmas tree in the corner, its lights darkened, and at all the presents piled beneath it. He thought of how he'd accused Chancie of trying to buy her son's love, and he felt ashamed. All the time she'd been struggling to keep her business alive and simultaneously keep everybody satisfied, he'd been thinking she was rich and spoiled.

"How bad is it?"

At last she met his eyes. "I won't know until Parker finishes adding everything up."

"I have some money saved up," he offered. "I could—"

"No way. I mean, no thank you, Micah. This situation is only temporary. With the federal regulations on enforced testing, Screening Services *can't* fail if I can just get through the next few months."

"Are you sure? Is this the right time to turn Judy loose, Chancie? I don't know much about business, but you're taking a big risk, aren't you? She looks pretty young to me."

Chancie lowered her eyes. "Yes and no, about the risk," she said. "I'm risking that Judy can't make a bigger mess than I did. But she and Parker are trying to build a future together, and I've tied their success to that of Screening Services. If I lose, they lose."

Chancie the gambler, hedging her bets. He smiled fondly. He'd known all along she could live up to her name, and now, when it was too late, he was discovering he'd been mostly right about her. He couldn't help warning, "Judy could walk out at any time, you know."

"Let's be realistic, Micah," she said. Two fat tears trembled on her lashes. "So could you." She took another deep breath. "But I'm betting neither of you will."

He admired Chancie's guts, but at the same time he had a strong sense of regret. Was it possible she just didn't know when to give up? He couldn't face Jamie's hostility for the rest of his life, or even for a few years until the kid was ready to leave home. Micah couldn't be the one to make Chancie choose between her son and her lover. Even at this moment, Jamie was missing and she felt she had to sit here and explain, making a choice between the boy and the man. Micah didn't want to go on feeling guilty for tearing Chancie apart.

His sense of fairness was violated by the situation. If it had been another man vying for Chancie's affection, he might have relished the fight. But Micah Taylor wouldn't go on battling a ten-year-old boy.

When he didn't answer her right away, Chancie said apprehensively, "What are you thinking, Micah?"

Could he tell her he thought she would lose her bet with herself? She was so brave, a formidable contender who could take it on the chin and come back for more. He had a much clearer

picture of her now and liked her more than when he had thought her lavishly wealthy. He admired her grit, but he couldn't let her go on thinking he was in her corner when he was backing out of the ring.

"I'm thinking you're the most courageous lady I've ever met in my life," he finally answered truthfully.

"But you also think I'm being too optimistic." It wasn't a question.

He squeezed her upper arms. How could he give her up now? But he had to. "Chancie, Jamie hates me. I don't think that's going to change anytime soon."

Her green eyes flared. She jerked her arms away, breathing heavily. "Micah Taylor," she said in a low voice, "you are really starting to piss me off. Don't you *dare* give up on me. You're coming to Christmas dinner tomorrow. You *promised*."

"And you're going to hold me to it, come hell or high water." He smiled sadly. He was going to miss her spunk as much as her fiery kisses and her sweet body responding instantly to his touch, although those memories would be enough to ensure many a sleepless night.

"You bet I'm holding you to it." She checked the time, muttered a curse. "I've got to get back to Parker. Would you just kiss me, Micah? For luck?"

So tough and so soft. Was her business woman's exterior all a bluff, a ruse she'd learned in order to survive? In one breath she commanded his presence at dinner, and in the next she seemed uncertain he'd want to kiss her.

*Kiss her goodbye?*

He shoved the thought away. If Chancie thought he was breaking her heart, his own felt remarkably battered at the moment. He raised his arms and she flowed into them, her lips seeking comfort and courage and strength from his. He gave all he had at the moment to that searching kiss, but he was afraid all he had wasn't enough for Chancie de Leur.

And Chancie wasn't fooled. Sensing his doubts, used to better and bolder kisses from him, she pulled away.

"I have to go," she said. She touched a finger to her trembling lips while she looked at him with an unanswered question in her eyes.

"Me too," Micah answered.

*Maybe forever.*

## Chapter Eleven

Chancie returned to the office, a box of receipts and what personal check stubs she possessed in her arms. She did most of her banking and bill paying online, so would have to either log in to all her accounts or give Parker her passwords. Parker, surrounded by stacks of files and loose papers and plastic binders, looked up with glazed eyes from the ledger he was studying. Chancie felt sorry for him.

"Want a break?" she asked. "I could buy you an early lunch."

"Let's go on," he answered. "I think I've about got a handle on the business, then I'll take a look at your household accounts." He nodded toward the box Chancie held.

She crossed around behind Judy's desk to put it at his feet, since there wasn't any room left on the surface. She felt inadequate, uncertain, and she hated that feeling. Everything seemed to be closing in on her at once, and her first impulse was to panic because she thought it all might blow up in her face.

She'd watched with a strong sense of impending disaster as Micah drove away from her house. Jamie had run away, just for the day, she was sure. But the message she got was that he couldn't handle the situation. Micah had seemed less than enthusiastic about her shaky optimism concerning their future, jarring her confidence even more. She didn't know for sure if Judy could deal with the responsibility she said she could. And now Parker looked so gloomy, Chancie wondered if he was already planning a funeral for Screening Services.

The whole house of cards Chancie had thought so carefully constructed, seemed poised to fall down on her head. She didn't know if she could take any more bad news today. Maybe she could ask Parker to put off his verdict until next weekend.

Instead she found herself asking, "Want some coffee?"

"Sure," Parker said without looking up from the computer screen.

Plow ahead, nose to the grindstone, eye on the prize. Keep on keeping on. What else could she do?

She'd begged Micah not to give up on her, well, ordered him not to, actually. She hoped he understood she'd been under pressure. But Micah couldn't give up because Chancie couldn't give up. Didn't he understand that?

She filled the glass pot with water. The machine hissed and bubbled emptily, sounding like Chancie felt. When she poured the water in, it settled down to its job of perking, the smell of roasted beans permeating the office.

Simple pleasures, like a good cup of coffee. Like laughter. Like making love. Her hands clenched.

Could she and Micah settle for little pleasures and let the big things take care of themselves?

Maybe she'd built her dreams too high, too fast.

Maybe it wasn't Jamie who ran Micah off, or Micah who scared Jamie away. Maybe Chancie herself, with her habit of trying to control everything around her, frightened those she loved into headlong flight away from her. She tried to force events, and people, into patterns they wouldn't fit. Because not having control meant being out of control.

She loved Micah. Too soon, too fast, who cared and what did it matter anyway? She'd been afraid herself that her attraction to him was merely his dissimilarity to Kenny. She'd been searching for Kenny's antithesis for a long time, and Micah seemed to fit perfectly. But somewhere in their admittedly short acquaintance, Micah had become so much more to her than balm to an ego she'd thought wounded beyond healing by Kenny.

Her thoughts now focused on Micah the person, Micah the man, Micah and Chancie together. She found her thoughts barely touched on Micah's contrast to Kenny anymore. But maybe Micah had inadvertently fed the domineering monster inside her by holding back in their relationship. Maybe, instead of waiting until he thought she was ready, Micah needed to make a few demands of his own. Maybe he should just pick her up, throw her on the bed, tear her clothes off and bang her until she passed out. But if anything, Micah was more stubborn than she was. He was holding out for his week to pass, as if there would be some magical transformation in Jamie by tomorrow and they could all live happily ever after.

She served Parker a cup of coffee, and stood watching him work, sipping hers while his cooled unnoticed. She studied his button-down shirt, his neatly trimmed hair, the rims of his tortoise shell glasses. She'd made fun of Parker in her mind for his seriousness, but now she appreciated the very quality that she'd found so amusing.

Judy was transforming herself, chameleon-like, to accommodate Parker. The change in Judy, while to Chancie's benefit and almost certainly Judy's own, still made Chancie a bit uncomfortable. She didn't believe that women should have to twist themselves inside out to please a man, oblige every wish and desire in order to catch a male.

On the other hand, there was such a thing as being too austere. Too uncompromising. She herself had been very close to such rigidity when she met Micah. She'd found herself admitting she hadn't had a date in years because men found her cold.

But Micah's holding out on her had one effect: she was more pliant than she used to be. Maybe she went along kicking and screaming and complaining, but she went along with his waiting game nevertheless. And she certainly didn't feel cold inside anymore. The fact that she'd called Parker in to help her out of a jam, and traded places with Judy, must finally prove Chancie's personality was altering, too. When a woman met a man she cared about deeply, maybe it was impossible not to change. Flowering, she had compared it to, when thinking about what Micah did for her.

And, hell, maybe this was all a crock. What did she know, really? She was so confused. Her personal life was as much a mess as her financial concerns. She snorted softly. Appearances could be deceiving. Perhaps Parker the money manager could give her some advice on how to straighten out other things in her life besides her checking account, starting with her rotten kid.

While she waited for Parker she tried calling around for Jamie, with as little result as she expected. Either none of Jamie's friends had seen him or they were hiding his whereabouts from her.

"Chancie, are you ready?" Parker asked, in a tone of voice that indicated he was repeating the question. He was standing in the doorway of her office.

"What? Oh, Parker, of course. Come on in." Chancie hung up the phone.

He stretched kinks out of his back before taking a seat. "I have a couple of questions."

"Shoot." She tensed as if he actually would pull a gun and shoot her.

Parker smiled. "Relax. I'll try to make this as painless as possible."

Chancie was beginning to understand what Judy saw in Parker. He had a wonderfully impish smile when he wasn't deeply burrowed into numbers.

Then he went for the throat. "You authorized expenditures of over one hundred thousand dollars in equipment in one month."

Chancie explained about the changing federal regulations and the need for new breath analyzers and the fact that all the satellite offices had overhead.

"When did you expect to recoup that kind of outlay?"

"I have ongoing contracts, and expect to sign several more in the next few months."

"The first thing you need to realize is that your business is a pyramid scheme. You constantly require new contracts to pay ongoing expenses. You do know you're in hock up to your neck." Parker paused and he lowered his voice. "Every doctor's office and hospital in the nation can invest a fraction of what you've spent in overhead and set themselves up to take business away from you. Also, you don't let the system you've devised work for you. From what Judy says, you hire a private plane at the drop of a hat to go flying off to do everybody else's job."

Chancie felt warmth seeping into her face. Judy had told Parker about the unnecessary trip to Douglas, and Parker was merciless.

"No doctor's office or hospital can offer the kind of coverage I do," Chancie said in her own defense. "I guarantee testing within two hours, no matter what."

"Okay," Parker spread his hands. "But the new offices are supposed to be paid for by the old ones, not vice versa. Going to forty-eight states from ten after the holidays is probably going to break you, Chancie."

"I was afraid you were going to say that," she admitted in a small voice.

"All I'm trying to say is, stay small and this business could grow phenomenally for a year or two. You could pay off your bills and then think about expanding. For now, you can use the equipment expenses as tax write-offs. I've run some projections, and you could double or even triple your gross next year if you agree to pass on the planned expansion. You could begin a concerted effort to dig yourself out of the hole you're in. In the meantime, you have got to find ways to economize or you're in great danger of going under."

*Learn to control your impulses, in other words.* When she'd been so proud of her ability to control everything. Chancie disregarded her own embarrassment. What Parker was telling her was too important. "I'm open to suggestions."

"Your operation needs to be lean and mean. Shut down the nearest satellite offices. They're too close to do you any good. If you're bent on opening others, make sure it's just a few at more strategic sites. This office is the center. All invoicing comes through here. All billing goes out from here. Keep your finger on the pulse and hire good people. You shouldn't have to ride in like a white knight every time some little thing goes wrong."

"Well, that sounds like what I wanted to work toward," Chancie said in a small voice. But she listened carefully while Parker described other ways to streamline the business. He stressed the

dangers of rapid growth and spending profits as fast as they came in, continuing to lecture Chancie as only a man schooled in numbers could.

Then he said, "My advice would be to sell if you can reach the point where you're actually paying your bills."

Chancie had never considered selling Screening Services. The suggestion shocked her. "May I ask why?"

"I don't mean to sound harsh, but it's my opinion you're not cut out for this business. Anyway, that's in the future, something for you to think about," Parker said. "Let's take a look at your personal situation."

So every bombshell Parker had dropped so far had just been preamble? Chancie tensed, her lacquered fingernails digging into her palms, awaiting more bad news.

"Number one," Parker said, ignoring her silence, "cut up your credit cards. Have new ones issued to the business, and use them *only* for legitimate, essential business expenses. Number two, fire the housekeeper. Get once-a-week cleaning help."

He peered at her when she gasped. "Are you all right? You look a little pale."

"I couldn't fire Alma." Chancie was almost hyperventilating. Her stomach roiled.

What would Parker suggest next? That she send Jamie to an orphanage so she could save money on food bills? She'd expected Parker to open fire with both barrels over the way she did business. She had asked for his help and undoubtedly deserved his censure. But Alma was different: Alma was family, even if she did draw a paycheck.

"I'll sell my house. I had already decided to give it up. We could live on the equity until the business gets on its feet."

Even though Chancie had mentioned this eventuality to Jamie and to Micah, she realized now she'd secretly thought Parker would pull some magic money rabbit out of a hat and save her from her own imprudence. Brought up short, she had to regroup. She'd been so desperate to prove to a dead man that she was capable of providing well for herself and their son that she'd almost lost what mattered most to her: Alma and possibly Jamie. And almost certainly Micah.

Kenny. She'd done it all to spite Kenny, who would never take her advice, never listen to her, never let her feel that she was competent or smart or worthy. *It's your fault, Chancie. Yours and that kid's. I'd be somebody if it weren't for you, taking all my money, draining the life out of me. I just give and give and give. And you take and take and take.*

Kenny's words. She'd believed them. Despite her denial, despite Kenny's selfish actions that contradicted his cruel words, she'd believed him, and been stupid enough to go on believing him. All the hours she'd spent studying, all the days she'd spent working and building the business, the *years* she'd spent transforming herself so she wouldn't be the woman Kenny saw when he looked at her.

The time away from Jamie that he resented so much, she'd squandered on proving a dead man wrong. If Kenny had hurt Jamie, how much more had she injured their son? If Micah hadn't begun to open her eyes, if she never had this illuminating, humiliating meeting with Parker, how long, if ever, would it have been before realization hit her? She was almost bankrupt in more ways than one.

Micah and Jamie. Chancie had a lot of work to do. Maybe harder work than she'd ever done in her life. At home. Not necessarily here at Screening Services.

"Parker," she said slowly, "you've certainly given me a lot to think about. I appreciate it so much. I'll take your advice. Most of it, anyway. Judy will be back in town soon. It's Christmas Eve. I think you should go home now. Thank you very much for coming in."

Parker's eyes blinked behind his glasses. He apparently wasn't used to being dismissed out of hand. To soften the blow, Chancie forced herself to smile, lips stretching across her expensive white teeth.

At loose ends after he fed and watered his horses, Micah drove slowly past Chancie's house again. Once again he didn't stop. Her car wasn't there, and even if Jamie had come home, Micah didn't know if he could face the kid right now.

He debated with himself. It was Christmas Eve, and the mall beckoned. Should he buy Chancie a Christmas present? Should he not buy her one? Tomorrow was the deadline he'd given himself, and if things didn't improve with Jamie it might be all over.

Micah didn't want to endure any more rejection from the kid. Not that he couldn't, but it was beginning to look like wasted effort to keep trying. So if he bought Chancie a present, it would look like he wanted to stay and tough it out with Jamie. And then, what if he later tried to walk out of her life? Providing, of course, he could ever make himself walk away from her.

Chancie wouldn't keep a gift that brought bad memories. She'd probably shred or burn or throw in the trash any gift he gave her, right after he walked out on her.

But he couldn't show up on Christmas day without a present for her. So should he buy one? Or should he not? Would he take the easy way out and just not show up at all?

Oh, to hell with it, he thought. He was already passing the mall, his subconscious having made the decision for him. He'd find Chancie a nice present, but not too nice. No jewelry. No ring, for example. He'd stay away from jewelry stores. Nothing personal for Jamie to throw a fit over when Chancie opened it. He'd buy her a pretty sweater, from the store where she'd bought her mother's. Size ten, he remembered as he pulled into the lot and parked.

But Christmas Eve in the shopping center proved almost too much for Micah. Cursing under his breath at the idiocy of the crowd of last-minute shoppers, he was bumped and jostled and elbowed too many times to count. Everyone wore the same frown he did. So much for the spirit of the season.

"Ho, ho, ho," Micah mumbled sourly as he wrestled an embroidered ecru sweater away from a horrible brassy blonde who gave him the finger before finally giving up the tussle for the garment. Once Micah had the sweater all to himself, he decided he didn't really like it. Its knit looked a little loose after the battle. He stuffed it back on the rack, ignoring the withering look the rough-edged blond woman sent him.

He turned bravely toward the perfume counter, a horseshoe shaped glass display that held uncountable brands of scent he'd whose names he had never heard of. The gorgon who manned the perfume section eyed him suspiciously from beneath heavily mascaraed clots of eyelashes. Micah decided against telling her that she should go powder her face: her make-up was slowly but surely collecting in the deep wrinkles on her cheeks.

Micah picked up a sample bottle, sniffed it, put it down and picked up another. The Medusa watched him, a pearl button on the collar beneath her turkey wattle chin quivering. At last he settled on one he liked, a spicy yet sweet perfume that suited Chancie's personality, in a vermilion bottle that reminded him of the ginger jar lamp in her living room.

"How much?" he asked, earning the gorgon's everlasting scorn. The saleswoman answered in a chilly tone that said if a worm like him had to ask, he couldn't afford it anyway, so why was he wasting her time?

"I'll take it," he said, smiling into her face just because he felt ornery. "You do gift wrap, right?"

"I do not," she said as if he'd offered her a personal insult. She pointed with one long claw toward the back of the store.

Micah was about to turn away with his purchase, when he caught sight of a familiar form standing among a group of boys just outside the doorway. Jamie and his friends huddled for a moment, then they all straightened, trying to hide wide grins. As they came into the store, they separated two by two, carefully avoiding the glances of any adult.

Micah, all his cop senses on red alert, watched Jamie and a buddy head for the women's department. Micah stuffed the perfume and receipt in his jacket pocket, already following Jamie, ignoring the saleswoman who was asking querulously if he wouldn't at least like a bag.

Jamie didn't once look back. He seemed to know exactly what he wanted, and threaded through the crowd with Micah several paces behind. At the women's wear department, Jamie paused, fingering a silk blouse and turning his head to see if anyone might be watching. Micah ducked behind a pair of dressing rooms not much bigger than two outhouses. When he peeked around a few seconds later, the second boy had taken up the watch, hands stuck nonchalantly in his pockets and his back to Jamie, while Jamie slipped the blouse off the hanger and inside his jacket.

The two boys started to walk toward the front of the store again. Micah was pushing people out of his way, and still he almost lost them. But he managed to stop Jamie before he reached the exit.

"Hold on." Micah reached out and seized the boy by the arm. Jamie twisted frantically, without even knowing who held him. The other kid ran like hell to get away and Micah let him go.

The gray silk blouse fell out of Jamie's jacket to the floor. Jamie finally ceased struggling and looked hopelessly into his captor's face. He froze.

"You," he said in a strangled whisper. Then he renewed his flailing and kicking, yelling, "Let me go! I hate you. Let me go, dammit!"

The sales clerk from the shoe section to their right approached. "Trouble, sir? Shall I call security?" Jamie stopped straining against Micah's confinement when he realized he was about to be busted by a bigger authority than his mother's boyfriend.

"No trouble," Micah answered. He looked at Jamie through slitted eyes. "We were just in such a hurry, I think the boy forgot to pay for something. We'll take care of it right now."

He bent to retrieve the gray silk blouse with one hand, first making sure he had a good grip on Jamie's wrist with the other. Size ten, he noted, and smiled grimly.

Micah dragged a stiff-legged, red-faced Jamie to the nearest cash register. "Have you got any money?" he asked in a harsh voice that said he knew the kid probably didn't.

Jamie shook his head mutely. Micah said, "I'm going to reach for my wallet now. If you run when I let go, I swear I'll tackle you right here in the middle of this store. Everybody in the place will remember both our faces for a *very* long time. You got that?"

Jamie nodded, cheeks pale. Micah released him and paid for the blouse. As soon as he had the bag in his hand, he grasped the boy's arm again.

Outside on the tiled concourse, a cluster of Jamie's waiting friends scattered as the two approached. Micah dragged the kid along by the arm through the jammed mall toward the main exit. Jamie actually had the guts to protest. "Where are you taking me?"

"To wrap your mom's present." Micah wanted to add, *you little brat*. But he controlled himself and kept his mouth shut.

Jamie took a deep breath. Tears flooded his eyes, but he gritted his teeth and didn't let them fall.

"Are you going to tell my mother?" Jamie whispered as Micah hauled him through the double doors of the exit.

Let the kid sweat, Micah advised himself. He deserves to be scared.

"What do you think?" was all he told the boy, who was now quivering in his grip.

He hoisted Jamie like a sack of grain onto the high front seat of the pickup from the driver's side, so the boy wouldn't have a chance to run away. Then he started the engine and headed for his apartment in oppressive silence. His conscience goaded him to give Jamie a blistering lecture, but the kid wasn't his to correct. He let the bleak afternoon silence deepen, thinking Jamie could be the one to break it if he wanted.

Jamie didn't. They pulled up in front of Micah's apartment house, and the boy still said nothing. Micah got out and waited for Jamie to do the same, but he merely sat there, so Micah went around to the passenger door and hauled the kid out.

"This is kidnapping," Jamie blustered as Micah put the key in the lock of his apartment door while holding on to the boy's coat collar.

"You can borrow my phone to call 9-1-1," Micah said.

Jamie's head swiveled to take in the living room where they stood, the frayed carpet on the stairs, the glimpse of the small kitchen visible in the light from the living room. "This place is a dump," he said.

"I'm not asking you to live here," Micah answered evenly. "Plant your butt."

The boy took a seat gingerly, on the very edge of one of the matted cushions of the sofa. Once again Micah noticed the pitiful, sagging state of his furniture. For sure Jamie was used to better. Micah felt shame that he'd even brought Chancie here.

But Chancie hadn't reacted as badly as her snippy, thieving son. On the contrary, she'd got right down on the floor and made herself at home. She'd loved Micah right here on this beaten-down carpet, and not said a word about discomfort or dissatisfaction.

Micah might venture to dream Chancie would be happy on a cop's salary, but this kid of hers was another story entirely. Micah glanced over his shoulder to make sure Jamie stayed put while he went to the kitchen to retrieve the neat paper sack of wrapping discards Chancie had left for him to put out on garbage day. He rummaged through the cabinet drawers, finally coming up with a pair of scissors and a roll of masking tape.

He returned to the living room and set the sack on the coffee table. Jamie looked at the design of the paper, which matched that of some of the presents under the tree at his house. His mouth twisted ironically before he raised hate-filled eyes to Micah's.

"Start wrapping," Micah said.

"You don't own me. You can't tell me what to do. You're not my dad." Jamie's fists clenched.

"You're right about that much," Micah replied coolly. "I'm not your dad."

"You can't tell me what to do, I said!"

Micah didn't back down from the boy's blazing dark eyes. "Now, Jamie, that's where I think you're wrong," he drawled. "I *can* tell you what to do because you screwed up. In front of a cop."

"That's blackmail," Jamie spat.

"Maybe." Micah shrugged, unconcerned with his own crimes at the moment. "Wrap the blouse. I think your mom will like it. Too bad you didn't have the money to pay for it. In your hurry to keep away from me all day, you must have run out of the house this morning without your piggy bank, huh?"

Jamie glared at him, but his shoulders slumped in response to the hint of threat that Micah would tell on him. He finally reached for the scissors, then ever so slowly for the wrapping paper. Micah suppressed a grin; the kid was beaten, but he still wouldn't admit it. Jamie was going to drag this wrapping business out to the bitter end. He, much like his mother and Micah himself, was too stubborn for his own good.

Finally Jamie finished. Once again he looked at Micah with challenge in his dark eyes. The resulting package looked exactly like it had been taken out of the trash and wrapped by a ten-year-old boy, but Micah would bet Chancie was going to love it anyway.

He checked his watch. It was near two-thirty and he had an appointment at three. Which he meant to keep even if Jamie had taken nearly all the joy out of his surprise. Maybe, Micah thought glumly, he could teach the kid by example, even though he seriously doubted it.

"I'll take you home now," Micah said, adding when Jamie stood empty-handed, "with your mom's present, if you don't mind."

He escorted Jamie clear up to Chancie's door to make sure the kid didn't ditch the package. Chancie herself came to let them in, surprise at seeing the two of them together widening her eyes, pleasure taking its place when Jamie shoved the wrinkled package at her. From behind her back the boy shot a shriveling glance, full of loathing and the dare to go ahead and tell, at Micah.

"I'm so glad to see you two," Chancie said to Micah. "What a surprise." And to Jamie's back retreating across the living room, "I want to talk to you, young man. I've been calling all over town looking for you."

She turned back to Micah, the present held loosely in her hands. "Where did you find him?"

Micah rolled his head on his shoulders, trying to loosen muscles he hadn't realized were so tight. "At the mall," he said.

He didn't add what Jamie had been up to when they'd met at the mall. He'd known all along he wouldn't increase Chancie's burden with Jamie. Maybe the knowledge that Micah alone knew what he'd done, and therefore could always spring it on him in the future, would hold the boy in line.

Chancie looked at Micah curiously, then glanced at Jamie already disappearing into his room. She was no fool. "What's up, Micah?" she asked softly.

"Nothing," he said, unable to meet her eyes.

He could see the hurt stiffness in her face, and finally faced the truth that he wouldn't tell her what Jamie had done because the secret knowledge actually distanced him from her and her delinquent kid. He could see recognition of what he was doing in Chancie's face, in her frozen smile, and in the fixed grip of her fingers on Jamie's present.

"Will you stay for supper?" she asked, voice dry and tight.

"Not tonight. I have to see a man about a horse." His joke about where he was going fell flat.

Chancie said, lips barely moving, "What are you doing, Micah? You've obviously made up your mind about Jamie and me. Why go through with it now?"

His arms ached to reach for her. In his thoughts, it was true he'd already given up on any kind of lasting relationship with her so long as Jamie was in the picture. But he still wanted her, still hurt for her. Maybe he always would.

"Damn if I know what I'm doing, Chancie," he admitted ruefully. "Jamie just about has me whipped. I guess I'll try one last time, because I'm too reckless to know when to give up. You make me crazy, Chancie. So crazy I don't know what I'm doing anymore."

She moved closer, into his arms, arms that swept up to enfold her without his conscious volition. His body knew what he needed, even as his mind tried to deny it.

"I just want you so much," he whispered into the tumble of burnished curls on her neck. "I really wanted this to work, Chancie."

"We'll work it out, Micah," she promised, and he wanted to believe her.

It was so much easier to believe Chancie when Jamie wasn't around.

## Chapter Twelve

Christmas day Micah woke to a winter fantasyland. A frozen fog had risen during the night and still hung above the houses and the tops of the trees, obscuring the sun in a curtain of white. Everything outside his window was painted with a sparkling whitewash. It was an absolutely still world for the moment, even the ever-present Wyoming wind subdued by nature's frozen beauty.

The sound that had awakened him came again: a high-pitched cry that demanded his attention *now*. He pulled on his jeans and opened the bathroom door. The furry ball confined to the torn, wet newspapers in the bathtub panted, frantically wagging a puppy-fuzz tail.

"You're going to get us evicted," Micah warned in a mock stern voice. "You're not even supposed to be here, bud. The least you could do is keep quiet about us breaking the terms of my lease."

The mongrel pup regarded him with moist black eyes before attempting once again to climb the slick surface of the tub. It landed sprawled on its fat belly in a clump of urine-soaked newspaper.

"Not very graceful, are you?" Micah picked up the wriggling ball of mottled black and brown fur. While the puppy licked his face, he surveyed the mess in his tub. "Yuck," he said. "I have to shower in there, you know."

He put the puppy down, hoping it wouldn't pee on the carpet since he couldn't very well take it outside for all the neighbors to see. He knelt to place food and water dishes on the floor beside him, and retrieved the old-fashioned windup clock whose ticking was supposed to have kept the puppy company during the night. "So much for conventional wisdom," Micah said to himself, recalling the countless times he'd gotten up to quiet the pup's piteous crying. He rolled the soiled newspapers into a ball before tackling the scouring of the tub.

The pup sat on its plump back end and regarded Micah with solemn eyes, sneezing violently once when it took a big, curious whiff from the powdered cleanser can. “That’s for cleaning,” Micah said. He pointed out the untouched dish of puppy crunchies. “That’s for eating.”

Micah had gone ahead and got the puppy for Jamie. It was a friendly little thing; maybe Jamie would like it as much as he did Thorpe’s dog. The puppy wagged its whole back end as if in agreement. Micah shut the door to keep it in the bathroom on the vinyl flooring in case of an accident, then stripped down and turned the faucet on. He stepped into the shower, soaped up, and began singing. The puppy howled along in chorus, and Micah decided to quit tormenting its ears with his off-key voice before one of his neighbors decided to call the police.

Micah wondered what Chancie was doing this morning, if she and Alma and Jamie had already opened their presents and were perhaps now eating breakfast. The thought of one of Alma’s meals made his stomach growl, and it continued to complain and torment him while he shaved. The puppy cocked its head at the sound and growled menacingly back.

Micah laughed, noticing how less lonely it sounded to laugh with company in the apartment, even if it was only a little mixed breed pup. Laughing all alone sometimes made him feel strange, a bit like he was losing touch with reality. Like conversation, laughter seemed to require someone to hear it and join in, in order to be valid.

He made scrambled eggs and toast, sharing it with the dog. It ate the warm food readily when compared to the ignored crunchies. Micah washed the few dishes in the sink, checked the time, and decided to clean the place to keep himself busy since he couldn’t very well show up for dinner at Chancie’s at nine in the morning.

He stripped the bed and remade it with clean sheets, all the while keeping an eye on the puppy for signs of nervousness that indicated it had to go. But it seemed content to curl up on the discarded sheets and nap while Micah dusted and ran the vacuum.

He checked the time again. Wow, a whole thirty minutes had passed. Before cleaning the living room, which might take all of fifteen minutes, he’d call his mother and wish her Merry Christmas.

He sat in a chair in the kitchen with the pup on his lap while the phone rang in his mother’s house in Montana. At last she answered, and he could barely hear her above the din in the background.

“I wish you were here, Micah,” she said. “Your brothers all came and brought the kids. It’s been a long time since you’ve seen your nephews. They’re getting so big.”

Micah could see in his mind the house on the reservation where his mother had gone after her husband died and the tribe bought the family ranch, the little pre-fab packed to bursting with relatives for the holiday. Anna, mother to six boys and grandmother to eleven more, all boys, must be in her glory right about now.

She went on to describe what each of her grandchildren had been up to lately and what they got for Christmas. Trying to steer clear of the subject of kids and wives and marriage, Micah said, “How have you been doing at the new place, Ma?”

“Fine, fine,” she assured him. “Don’t worry about me, Micah. I got the Senior Citizens and the bingo. I keep busy. How about you? I hate to think of you down there all by yourself on Christmas. Couldn’t you have got the time off to come home like your brothers?”

He couldn’t let his mother go on feeling bad about him being all alone today. “Maybe in the spring I’ll come up for a visit,” he said. “I’m going to a friend’s house this afternoon for dinner.”

“Just a minute, Micah.” Anna held the phone away from her mouth to say in a loud voice to one of the grandkids, “Look there, Jonas, the baby’s eating needles off the tree. Go stop him right now before he pulls the whole thing down.”

Micah thought he was off the hook as far as talking about Chancie, but he should have known his mother wouldn’t forget. Anna Taylor had internal radar when it came to her boys, and she zeroed right in when she got back on the line. “This *friend*, is it serious with you, Micah?”

“I never said my friend was a woman, Ma.”

“You don’t have to say it, Mikey. It’s serious, I can tell ‘cause you don’t want to talk about her. What’s she like? Is she pretty?”

“She’s beautiful.” Micah couldn’t help answering his mother truthfully.

“So what’s the problem? How come I haven’t met her, or even heard about her before? Have you asked her to marry you yet?”

“Ma, I never said there was a problem.” Micah stroked the puppy’s ears. “I’ve only known her a couple of weeks so there haven’t been any marriage plans.”

“But you think it’s right, huh, Mikey? I can hear it in your voice, you’re serious about this woman. And when it’s right, you know it,” his mother insisted. “I knew your dad was the one the minute I set eyes on him. Big and blond and so handsome, standing there at that dance.”

“I know, Ma,” Micah said patiently. He’d heard the story at least a hundred times. “But Papa didn’t come to you with a ten-year-old son.”

“So that’s it. Well, we all got problems. Your father had that witch of a Swedish mother who hated Indians. He never would get up the guts to defy her and marry me.” The old resentment flared in her voice.

“Grandma wasn’t that bad, Ma,” Micah protested.

“Sure, not to you kids she wasn’t. She was an *old* witch by the time you knew her and some of her witchiness wore off. So anyway, true love overcomes all obstacles, Mikey. If this woman loves you, she’ll find a way to be with you. Remember that.”

Micah wanted to tell Anna she watched too many romantic dramas on the Hallmark Channel, but he refrained out of respect for his mother’s hard life experiences.

“I’ll keep it in mind,” he said. “I’ve got to go now. I love you, Ma. Merry Christmas.”

“To you too, son. Let me know right away when you’ve set a date, okay, Mikey? I just love weddings,” his mother said, already reprimanding another grandson as she disconnected.

Micah sighed.

He didn’t feel any better after talking to his mother about Chancie and Jamie. He didn’t have any solutions to the problem of Jamie de Leur. And he’d somehow gotten his mother’s hopes up that he was going to settle down and marry Chancie and present her with a few more Taylor grandchildren.

He checked the time again before hauling the vacuum down to the small living room coat closet, and depositing the sleeping pup on the sofa. He got his uniforms ready, fastening his WHP pins to the collar of one shirt, his name tag with years of service below the right pocket and his badge on the left. Soon he was finished with his usual weekend chores, and there was nothing more to do but wait for the time to pass before he could decently show up at Chancie’s door.

He tried to watch television on the big black monitor in his bedroom, his one major purchase since the divorce. The puppy snoozed beside him, and Micah drowsily lost track of the plot of the movie on TV while he thought instead of Chancie’s warm body.

How he wished Chancie lay here beside him instead of the little pile of fuzz he’d picked out for her son. How he’d like to have a whole Sunday to laze away with Chancie de Leur, dozing and watching television, and waking and making tender love, and then sleeping some more before waking to start all over again. Uncomfortably familiar with the taste and smell and contours of her, it was all too easy to imagine lying beside her, rolling over and spreading her legs, and giving her what she insisted she wanted from him.

Micah’s muscles twitched. He tried to disregard the constant erection that thoughts of Chancie brought, the aching hardness that refused to go away. What if he and Chancie never worked things out? Would he go around with this unfulfilled need throbbing in his pants the rest of his life? He’d thought he could control such unwanted primitive reactions to a woman by now. Once again, without even being present, Chancie had proved him wrong. He wanted her like crazy. But, holy crap, that kid of hers.

The puppy snorted, dreaming, and settled its cold nose deeper in his armpit. Micah quit squirming and tried to make up a little of the sleep he’d lost with the pup’s crying the night before. The little sucker was loud! But even with it quiet there was no going to sleep. Thoughts of Chancie kept intruding, keeping him awake. He kept picturing her licking him for some reason. The thought was agony. He punched the pillow beneath his head.

He didn't know which would be worse: if they broke it off before he actually had the opportunity to love her fully, or if he took her into his bed and then they decided to break it off.

He eyed the sleeping pup balefully. What would it be like to have no worries about the future, nothing to think about but what the present moment held? If that were the case with humans, he and Chancie would have leapt on each other the first night at the restaurant, because there was no doubt in Micah's mind she wanted him as much as he wanted her. And had since they'd very first laid eyes on each other.

Could his mother be right about love at first sight? Micah himself suspected love was largely chemical reaction. Once they exchanged kisses, or *licked each other's skin* or something, a blending of hormones happened so that two people got in each other's blood like a drug. And when he was away from Chancie, it certainly felt like the way drug withdrawal was described. When he was with her, he experienced a high that he doubted any amphetamine could match.

But if it was true that love was chemical, maybe it was worse than if it was merely all in his head or his heart. If he had Chancie in his blood for the rest of his life, there was no Narcotics Anonymous twelve-step program for recovering losers at love.

Whenever he was around Jamie, he swore he'd had enough and that he would give Chancie up. Then he'd come home and start thinking about her sweetness, her intelligence, about the heat that smoldered inside her, and he'd be off to the races again: daydreaming, fantasizing how he would not only *taste her*, but cherish her and love her and about the life they would make together.

Right now in the back of his mind, he was picturing how he'd carry the puppy in, present it to Jamie, and all would be well. The boy would love his gift so much, he'd accept Micah as his stepfather and they'd all live happily ever after.

He groaned. He was a goner. How could he even entertain such sappy thoughts when he now knew Jamie for the roadblock to his mother's happiness he was?

Micah smacked his lips. He honestly, right this moment, could taste the wetness between Chancie's legs. Just by thinking about her.

He seriously thought he might be losing his mind. He was no good at work, totally helpless around Chancie, lost at home. He'd talked to his *mother* about her. No doubt about it: he was teetering dangerously off his rocker.

What was he going to do? He had to make up his mind, soon, before he lost it totally.

Despite any visions Micah may have had about a big Christmas breakfast at the de Leur house, Chancie and Jamie and Alma sat down to frozen waffles and syrup. Neither of the women felt like cooking and cleaning up after an elaborate breakfast when they had a big dinner to worry about.

Chancie cleared her throat, still hoarse from the night before, when she'd talked and talked and talked to Jamie. Talked at him, was more accurate. She knew in her bones something beyond a simple shopping trip had happened between Micah and Jamie, but the boy would reveal nothing. She'd threatened to call Micah and ask him, but she knew he would probably refuse to divulge any more than he had at her door when he dropped Jamie off.

She discussed, again, the changes they were probably facing as far as selling the house and her staying around the office more instead of haring off all over the country. Jamie just shrugged as if the decisions that were so difficult for her didn't make any difference to him one way or the other. When she approached the subject of Micah the boy's vocal cords seemed to grow paralyzed. No matter how many times she asked, "Jamie, what's *wrong*?" he wouldn't even give her his customary one-word, monotone answer.

If she didn't know Jamie better, she would think he was afraid. But of Micah? The thought was absurd.

After she gave up, exhausted from trying to worm the whole story of what had happened yesterday out of Jamie, she had her talk with Alma. What a terrible time, Christmas Eve, to tell the older woman that Chancie's financial advisor suggested she let Alma go. Christmastime was already bad, but apparently she was determined to make it worse. Even after she assured Alma for

the thousandth time, “I *won't*. I promise. I'll find a way to keep you on,” Alma, too, looked terrified.

Chancie doubted any of them had slept well. Alma's face looked pale and haggard, and her own, the last time she'd checked the mirror, sported purple circles like bruises beneath her eyes. Jamie was sulky and withdrawn, his jumpy terror of the night before settled into dark brooding. Even opening the fancy remote-control car and the tablet computer failed to bring out a smile, and Chancie thought it had probably been a big mistake to put Micah's name on the card along with her own. But Micah had paid for half of the car; why shouldn't Jamie know that?

When she opened the pretty gray silk blouse with a gasp of pleased surprise, Jamie turned a sullen red and left the room before she could hug him or even thank him.

She sat stunned, surrounded by discarded Christmas wrapping like banks of brightly colored snow. She looked forward to seeing Micah. She hoped he was in a better mood than yesterday. But she felt chilled at the thought that he and Jamie would be thrown together once more.

They seemed to bring out the worst in each other, her temperamental son and her sensitive lover. Well, maybe Micah wasn't really her lover. Not technically. Not yet. They'd just sort of played at sex like a couple of teenagers who'd taken a vow of abstinence before marriage, and so she wasn't sure it counted. So they had nothing yet to fight about, since there was no real relationship between her and Micah to make Jamie feel threatened, right?

Maybe, she mused, she should set about remedying that right away. If they couldn't get along anyway, she might as well give Jamie and Micah something to not get along about.

Later she sat at the table scoring a ham before inserting whole cloves in the cross grooves and pouring Alma's special honey mustard sauce on it. Alma peeled spuds for scalloped potatoes, every once in a while wiping her eyes as if she peeled onions instead. Chancie rose and put her arms around Alma's thin shoulders.

“I'd stay even without pay, Chancie,” Alma offered sincerely. “I just want you to know that.”

“I know you would. But I wouldn't ask you to. I'm sorry I scared you. I shouldn't be burdening you and Jamie with my problems. Your home is with us for as long as you want. Now, the subject is closed, okay?”

“But if you can't afford it, how—”

“Don't worry about it, Alma.”

“But I do, dear. I worry about you. I can't help it. You've worked so hard, and now it looks like you—”

“Don't even say the words, Alma. I won't lose.” Chancie crossed her fingers superstitiously. “I'm not going to lose anything.”

*Brave words.*

Suddenly and mysteriously the dishwasher refused to work. Chancie sighed, unloaded the machine and started washing dishes by hand so they would have room in the kitchen later. She wished while she'd been charging up a storm on her credit cards, she would have charged a new dishwasher and saved herself and Alma so much extra work. Now it was too late. The dishwasher had apparently breathed its last and she'd already taken Parker's advice and cut up all her cards. She could only hope nothing so drastic happened at Screening Services before the new business ones were issued.

But those thoughts were only a cover for what she was really thinking. I'm not going to lose anything, she'd said. Oh, yeah? some part of her asked cynically. What about Micah? How much more of Jamie's crap do you think Micah's going to take?

If Chancie found herself inflexible in certain ways, in the matter of his word Micah was unyielding. He'd said he wouldn't make love to her until she was ready, and he hadn't. He *wouldn't*, even when she tormented him past any ordinary human male's endurance.

He said he'd give himself a week with Jamie to see how it went. The week was up, plus today. All Jamie had to do was act his normal, troublesome self this afternoon, and Chancie might never see Micah Taylor again.

Right this minute, Jamie was in his room brooding. Probably thinking up new ways to get under Micah's skin. She wondered if she could be charged with child abuse if she went and locked Jamie in his bedroom, and didn't let him out until Christmas dinner was over and Micah had gone.

If only Jamie would talk to her. If he'd tell her what was wrong, she could fix it, change it, make it all right. She was good at that, at rearranging and controlling things. She could make Jamie happy, she knew it, if only he'd open up and tell her what he thought was the matter.

*You're trying to let the cop take Dad's place.* Had Jamie built up some rosy picture of how it had been with Kenny? Some perfect vision of a lost father that no man could live up to? She never deliberately put Kenny down in front of Jamie, but she didn't gloss over the facts either. Jamie certainly had to remember the way Kenny belittled him, his rough way of demanding hugs after he made the boy cry, his drunken rages where he tried to make them both feel guilty because he was unhappy. *Unhappy.* Oh, God. Who of the three of them had been happy?

Jamie couldn't be pining for those times, that father. He couldn't be. Chancie wouldn't believe Jamie had forgotten what Kenny was like, inserted in his mind a studio photo of a model father in Kenny's empty picture frame. The very thought horrified her. What if Jamie inherited Kenny's mental instability?

What if years growing up in the oppressive atmosphere of their home had unbalanced the boy, caused him to think his father an angel and Micah some sort of devil?

Then Chancie would be at fault. For not leaving Kenny sooner, for not fleeing with Jamie before it was too late, for failing to protect her son.

Hot water in the double sink ran unnoticed until it almost overflowed. Alma warned, "Chancie!" and she jumped back to awareness and shut it off just in time.

"I think we could all use a nap," Alma said. "As soon as I get these potatoes in the oven, I think I'll go lie down."

"You go ahead," Chancie said. "I'll finish up here."

"What time do you expect Micah?"

"About one o'clock. Go on, Alma. Stop fussing. I'll be all right."

But the more Chancie thought as she tidied up the kitchen, the more one o'clock seemed to recede into the misty distance. She didn't want to sleep. She wanted Micah. She wanted the comfort of his arms, his deep voice saying everything was all right, that she wasn't to blame.

Before she could think twice, she dialed his number. He sounded kind of sleepy when he answered. Surely she hadn't awakened him at this time of day?

"Micah? It's Chancie."

"Hi, baby," he said automatically, and she thrilled to the tips of her toes. She was glad Micah was sleepy; his responses weren't so guarded as they'd been yesterday after whatever had happened with Jamie.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Really want to know?"

"I really want to know."

His voice deepened. "I'm thinking about you."

"What are you thinking?"

"Really want to know?"

He was teasing. A good sign. Chancie smiled. "Really."

"I was thinking of all the things we could be doing together right now if you were here with me."

"Like what kinds of things?"

He groaned. "Oh, baby. You really want to know?"

"If you ask me that one more time, I'm going to tell you what *I've* been thinking about us this morning." Chancie's smile grew wider and unconsciously her tongue flicked out to moisten her lip.

"You're a tease," Micah accused softly. "You wouldn't talk dirty over the phone. Someone might hear you."

“Nobody can hear *you*,” she challenged. She lowered her voice to a sexy whisper. “Tell me what you’re thinking, Micah.”

He did.

Micah drew very good word pictures, of how he would undress her, descriptions of her body and his, and how they would fit together and all the things they would do. Chancie could see it all unroll in her head while he talked, just like a movie. He kept talking about licking, her tongue on his skin and his on hers. When he finished, with descriptions of her legs spread and his tongue *in* her, she was limp.

“Can’t you come over right now?” she asked plaintively.

“And do what, sweetheart? Jamie’s home, isn’t he? How would it look, us so hot for each other we couldn’t behave? Give me some time to get myself together, take a cold shower or something.”

She sighed. She’d got him awake now, and he was getting grumpy as reality intruded. “You’re the tease, Micah. Here I am, all aquiver, and you turn me down again. Shame on you.”

He laughed at her distress, the cad. But she felt better for having talked to him, even if they hadn’t talked about what was bothering her.

“I’ll see you later,” she said, and rose on wobbly legs to go wash dishes.

Micah arrived promptly at one, the puppy for Jamie wriggling hidden inside his jacket. Chancie grinned, sitting them down in the living room, and went to get Jamie, hoping he could behave himself for once.

She led a very reluctant Jamie out toward Micah. The boy said woodenly, “Thank you for the Christmas present.”

“You’re welcome, Jamie. But look what we have here.” Micah pulled the puppy from his coat like a magician with a white dove out of a top hat. Chancie tried to act surprised.

She thought Jamie really was surprised. Or shocked. Or something. The boy stared blankly at Micah and then at the puppy. And then he burst into tears.

Chancie didn’t know what to say as Jamie ran from the room and slammed his bedroom door.

“Well, that went over like the *Titanic*,” Micah said. He plopped the puppy in his lap as it tried its best to stretch up and lick his face.

“God, I’m tired.” Chancie sat down next to him and picked up the wildly excited pup. She held it on her shoulder and crooned to it, trying to settle it down. The puppy wagged its tail and licked her cheek instead.

“That really makes me not want to kiss you,” Micah said sourly as he watched the puppy wash Chancie’s face with its little pink tongue.

“At least he wants to kiss me. I think puppy kisses are kind of sweet. I suppose you haven’t had any today?” Chancie shot back.

“As a matter of fact, for your information, I have.”

“So then what’s stopping you?” Chancie leaned over and kissed Micah, the pup excitedly taking turns licking both their faces. Micah’s taut lips finally relaxed under the double onslaught of kisses, and he began to kiss Chancie back.

“Would you like to tell me what happened between you and Jamie yesterday?” she asked when she came up for breath, looking into Micah’s sapphire eyes.

“I think Jamie should be the one who talks about yesterday,” Micah said stubbornly. He pulled away from her and crossed his arms, making the muscles strain against his shirt.

“Micah, won’t you tell me? Don’t you think I should know? I’m his mother.”

“No, Chancie.”

She sighed. Micah could certainly be obstinate when he wanted to be. “Then how about standing outside with this dog until it wets enough to safely be let inside for an hour or so. Alma and I will get dinner on the table.”

“I think Jamie should be the one to go outside and stand with the dog.” Micah clenched his jaw, refusing to look at her.

*Ooo-kay*. “You’re right,” she finally conceded. “It is supposed to be his dog.”

She rose and clomped over to Jamie's door, where she pounded on it with the side of her fist in a very unladylike manner. She was tired, she was cranky, and the tension in the house was getting thick enough to blind her.

"If you want to keep this dog," she yelled at Jamie through the closed door, "get out here and take care of it. It's a male dog, and I'm not putting up with any more male crap today."

Jamie opened the door, his eyes big in his head. "I'm not kidding, Jamie," Chancie said in a quieter voice. "I don't know exactly what's going on with you and Micah, but I've had just about enough."

She thrust the puppy at her son. Jamie had no choice but to accept it or let the poor little thing crash to the floor.

"Take that dog outside and let it do its business," Chancie continued in a level voice. "Then get back in here and wash your hands and sit down at the table. Don't even cross your eyes when you look at Micah or you're grounded for the rest of your life."

Jamie behaved himself for almost two hours, perhaps a new record, Chancie thought. They ate Alma's excellent dinner, then they all went into the living room at Chancie's insistence. The dishes could wait, she told Alma.

Alma, almost asleep in her chair, asked if anyone wanted pie. Micah groaned and rubbed his belly, but accepted. Jamie nodded. Chancie stopped Alma from getting up, saying, "I'll get it."

From the kitchen she heard the television click on, then only its background noise for a while. She cut the pie, dished out four portions, and scooped whipped cream on top.

She was really beginning to think they might make it through the day.

Then she heard an unfamiliar noise. She thought for a moment someone was choking or vomiting. Her heart skipped: Alma had been acting strangely ever since Chancie had talked to her. Was Alma sick?

Chancie listened for just a moment. The odd noise continued. She hurried toward the arched doorway to the living room on stockinged feet.

Jamie sat opposite Micah, the puppy on his lap. Micah sat stiffly, face utterly immobile. Alma, wide awake now, sat in another chair stupefied with shock.

Jamie's face twisted as he looked at Micah. Ugly, grunting pig sounds issued from his throat.

Chancie had left them for all of five minutes. What in the world had happened in that short space of time? Had Jamie lost his mind?

Seemingly out of the blue, Jamie said, "You're not just a pig. You're a dirty, bastard, Indian pig."

Chancie couldn't believe her ears. This was not her son. She didn't know who was speaking those awful, despicable words, but it was not the Jamie de Leur she had raised. Reacting before she could think about it, she raced over to the chair by the window and seized Jamie by an ear. The pup fell aside with a startled yelp and bolted behind the sofa.

Chancie hauled a yelling Jamie toward his bedroom and slammed the door on him. He should count himself lucky she didn't slap him silly, she thought, hands shaking with the urge to do just that. By the time she marched back to the living room, Micah was already in the hall with his coat on.

"Micah, wait. Please don't leave."

Chancie was frantic, all her carefully laid plans blown to bits by the buried booby trap called Jamie.

Micah's face. She didn't think she could bear the look frozen on his tight features. He brought a hand out of his pocket blankly, as if he'd never seen his own hand before. He shoved something at her, saying, "I got this for you. I'm done here, Chancie."

Then he was gone.

She sank down to the cold floor of the foyer after the front door closed. She was utterly exhausted, sick inside, bereft. She'd tried so hard. Micah had tried so hard. When it came to Jamie, all their effort was for nothing.

Maybe Micah was right to get out. Maybe Chancie couldn't take any more of this futility either.

The puppy came ambling from down the hall where it had tried without success to follow Jamie and climbed into her lap. Chancie picked up the warm, fat, innocent little body and hugged it to her.

She thought ludicrously: Now what am I going to do with the nice shirt I bought for Micah for Christmas? Then suddenly her chest heaved and she started to cry.

## Chapter Thirteen

Amazingly, Monday passed. It was a quiet day, a holiday since Christmas had fallen on Sunday. Chancie and Judy spent the day trying to catch up at the office. Judy had set up a couple of interviews with those applicants she could catch over the holiday weekend. Chancie spent the morning unpacking boxed test kits that had sat in their unopened crates for a month because everyone had been too busy to see to them, while casually eavesdropping on Judy's interviews.

Chancie's mind certainly wasn't on what she was doing. Several times she found herself depositing one client's test kits in another's plastic bin in the hallway. Her thoughts spun around and around as she thought of ways she might have done things differently on Christmas day, avenues she might have taken in order to prevent Jamie from attacking Micah.

The thought occurred to her that if Jamie was determined to hurt Micah, there was really no way she could stop him. Sooner or later the opportunity would have come, unless she kept the two of them so carefully compartmentalized in her life that they never crossed paths.

Could she do that? Could she start over with Jamie at home, satisfy him that Micah would not intrude anymore, begin to build the kind of life with her son she'd always envisioned? Could she keep Micah a secret, sneak out at all hours just to see him, arrange her schedule during the day so they could have a few stolen moments illuminated by a midnight moon when he got off night shift?

Why should she consent to that kind of half-life? Why should Micah?

Because Jamie was unhappy?

Echoes of Kenny's continual complaint rang inside her head. She'd twisted herself inside out, just as she believed women should never do, in order to try and please Kenny. She'd tried everything, acceded to his every demand for a long time. But ultimately nothing worked. Kenny was unhappy. And it was her fault. And that was that.

Now Jamie was unhappy, and she was considering doing the same thing for Jamie that she'd done for his father. She was pondering rearranging her life into patterns that didn't suit her, denying her own needs while crying inside, maybe for years, in order to please Jamie. *Because he was unhappy.*

And she still didn't know why he was so adamantly unhappy. After she'd calmed down enough to approach him again, Jamie refused to comment on why he had acted so unforgivably toward Micah. He bore the red mark on his ear from the pinch of her fingers without a word. He stolidly accepted her apology for hurting him, and offered no justification or apology of his own in return.

Chancie's eyes were red and swollen. Jamie's were quite dry. He was grounded until he apologized to Micah, which, Chancie admitted, might never happen.

She cornered poor Alma in her neat bedroom, where Alma had retreated after they had finished cleaning up the kitchen in shocked silence. "What in God's name happened out there this afternoon?" Chancie demanded.

Alma flinched, but answered bravely in the face of Chancie's fury. "They were watching television. Jamie was flipping through the channels. Something came on, and Jamie laughed. But it was a cruel sound, not happy. Then he started making those awful pig sounds."

Chancie's shoulders slumped wearily. She sat on the edge of Alma's bed, almost in tears again. She'd thought she would find some answers, some reason for Jamie's outburst that made even a little sense. "Just like that? Alma, I don't know what to think. Do you suppose Jamie needs professional help? Do I? I shouldn't have hurt him, dragging him away by his ear."

Alma said, kindly now that Chancie had calmed a little, “Don’t take on so. My dad used to drag us kids out to the woodshed and strop us. Didn’t hurt us none in the long run. I remember the barn cats, too, keeping the kittens in line with a growl and a sharp nip. Sometimes a little dose of hard reality does a lot more good than a whole bunch of useless talking.”

Chancie shook her head. “I still shouldn’t have hurt Jamie.”

“Jamie shouldn’t have hurt you, either. Nor Micah,” Alma said with a touch of asperity. “There was a whole lot of hurt feelings in that room. Micah is a good, decent man who didn’t deserve that kind of treatment.

Alma hesitated. “Chancie, have you called him?”

“Micah? No.” Chancie suppressed a small shudder. What in heaven’s name would she say to Micah?

“You should. Don’t let too much time pass, dear. A fierce hurt like that has a way of hardening to bitterness.”

Chancie could picture Micah bitter, all right, because she’d done nothing to alter Jamie’s despicable behavior. But could she make herself call him? She was so embarrassed, so perplexed. So lost without Micah.

Yes, she would call. It was the least she could do.

Chancie hugged Alma. “Thank you. You are so wise and I love you so much.”

Alma smiled, the balance of her world restored. Even her color was better. “Why, I love you too, dear,” she said.

Perhaps Alma was the only sane one among them. Chancie wished she could simply tell Jamie and Micah that she loved them too, and then have everything fixed up like magic. She called Micah and left a message on his voicemail because he didn’t answer.

Now, at the office, she left the test kits partially unpacked to try once again. She got his voicemail. She repeated her message: “Micah, this is Chancie. I am so sorry. Please forgive me. Please forgive Jamie.” Then she added softly, “I love the perfume. It’s perfect. Thank you.”

Tuesday passed. Micah got in from work at five. He would stay on days for two weeks before rotating back to nights on a six-week schedule. He took off his green trooper’s jacket and hung it in the small closet by the front door.

He hadn’t checked his voicemail again. Once was enough. Listening to Chancie begging forgiveness tore at his heart. He wished she would just quit.

He went upstairs and took off his uniform, hanging it in his bedroom closet. He changed into jeans and boots, then sat on the bed, lost in thought for a moment before going back downstairs.

At last he made himself rise and go down to the kitchen. He picked up his cell phone and then stood, hands on the counter, elbows locked, jaw clenched while he forced himself to listen to her message, the same message she’d been leaving since the previous evening: *I’m so sorry*.

If he saved the message, he wouldn’t be able to stop himself from listening to it again and again. If he erased it, she would probably leave another just like it.

He stood there for a long time. He didn’t know what to do.

Micah was sorry too. Perhaps Chancie would never know how sorry, because he wasn’t going to tell her. If he called her back, she’d just assume he wanted to go on the way they had been. And he didn’t want that.

And yet he did.

He left the house abruptly, slamming the door behind him. He had an appointment with a real estate agent to see some county property zoned for horses. He couldn’t go on living the life he had been living before Chancie, in the depressing, lonely little apartment. If he salvaged nothing else from his relationship with Chancie de Leur, he’d at least rediscovered a little part of himself that wanted a life outside work.

On Wednesday, Judy left for California to negotiate a big amusement park contract. She’d come in and shown Chancie some of the new wardrobe she and Parker had picked out, and Chancie

had to admit Judy now certainly looked the part of the confident business woman. The trip had been planned before Chancie's meeting with Parker, and it was too late to get refunds on plane fare and hotels booked for the holiday season, so they agreed Judy might as well go.

Chancie could only keep her fingers crossed. The contract with the giant amusement park for random testing of their employees wasn't a sure thing, and it would be up to Judy to sway the officials in charge to hire Screening Services. Then they would all have to hustle their buns to get an office opened and running smoothly in California.

Judy had offered employment to one of the women applicants before she left, a motherly sort named Agatha Hemphill who had previous office experience. Chancie spent the day showing Aggie the ropes, but since few people had drug testing experience and Aggie had none, Chancie still had to conduct all the tests herself.

Once again it hit her how much she disliked the actual nuts and bolts of what she did for a living. She'd begun her training at the local junior college as an emergency medical technician, but had quickly changed her major to business. She had realized early on that dealing with medical trauma wasn't for her; she was much better at dry, mind-exercising subjects such as business law and statistics.

She followed the script for the testing by rote, shutting off her personality in order to protect everyone involved. And maybe that was what bothered her so about her business: she could ethically make no human contact with the clients who passed through the doors of Screening Services, no friendly smile or asking how their kids were, no talking about their jobs or the new car they'd just bought. She must think of them as specimens. And they must regard her as the collector. No more, no less.

Micah had been right in saying that cops and drug testers were very much alike. The nature of their jobs made them solitary and untrusting. She had shut herself off so completely while married to Kenny that it had been hard for her to get outside the door every day to attend college classes. She slowly grew to enjoy the company of other people, and now her job forbade making any overtures toward friendship or trust.

It was a conundrum that fate seemed to continually block exactly what she wanted. She spent so much time detouring around obstacles, sometimes she lost track of her goal. Her goal had been to become a successful business woman. And if she could believe Parker and her own predictions, with a lot of hard work that might ultimately be true. Then, Parker advised her, sell. Because she wasn't cut out for this.

Then there was Jamie, whose problems seemed to grow instead of recede as she tried harder and harder to mollify him.

Her latest and most pressing aspiration had been to convince Micah Taylor that they were made for each other, a design at which she bombed badly.

Chancie tried to put it all into an ordered list, a prerequisite to problem solving. Jamie hated Screening Services because it kept her too busy to be a mother. She didn't really like her work, she merely wanted to feel that she'd succeeded professionally enough to keep their heads above water.

She wanted Micah Taylor and, she thought, he wanted her. But Jamie hated Micah.

How could all these things come together? There were vital pieces missing, and until Chancie found the answers she'd never solve the entire puzzle. She had to know exactly what Micah Taylor wanted. And she had to know exactly what Jamie de Leur's problem with Micah was.

She sat, stumped, in her office, finally deciding she'd let the whole mess stew in her head for a while. Sometimes her subconscious came up with solutions that all the conscious mind-contorting in the world couldn't crack.

She checked the time. The real estate agent she'd contacted yesterday was due to arrive any minute. Chancie tried to clear her brain of anything but this most immediate of issues: arrangements for the sale of her house and the purchase of a property that she could afford.

The agent arrived right on time, an album of pictures under one arm because she had time only for the merest glance at their online listings. An earnest, eager young man with a wide salesman's

smile, he offered to have Chancie's house appraised for her and to take care of other details of the double transaction so she wouldn't be bothered.

As he talked, Chancie leafed through the album. She rejected most of the photos right off. *Handyman's Special* were code words meaning the property needed extensive repairs she couldn't afford. *Cute Cottage* meant too small to hold three, or perhaps more people comfortably. In amongst those she didn't want were pictures of others she couldn't afford: large, imposing houses that looked as if they could shelter half the population of Hawk Point. Chancie wondered idly who could afford those mansions. And then she stopped flipping the pages.

Visions of Micah filled her head as she stared at a picture of a doublewide mobile home with a spacious yard, and horse stalls and a corral off to the side, all surrounded by a chain link fence. Someone had planted spruce trees near the home itself and around the perimeter of the fence for a windbreak. The trees were quite tall, indicating that they'd had some time to grow in the harsh environment of Wyoming's high desert.

She looked at the price. She could roll the equity in her house over into this property, and lower her payments by half.

"This is perfect," she said.

The real estate agent leaned over her desk to see what she had found. His smiling face sobered. "I'm sorry," he said. "I should have removed that. I had a firm offer on that particular property just last night. I'm going to pick up the earnest money this evening."

Chancie herself had no earnest money to counter the offer. She had to wait until her own house was sold before she could buy. Feeling deflated because someone beat her to the perfect house, she glumly leafed through the rest of the pages. But she found nothing so close to what she hadn't known she'd been looking for until she was outmaneuvered for it.

"Go ahead and make the arrangements to sell my house," she told the agent.

"Maybe something else that you like will come up for sale in the meantime," he said optimistically. "I'll certainly keep my eye out, Ms. de Leur."

Chancie saw him off, started to close up the office, and remembered she hadn't left the message for Micah that by this time was becoming habit with her. She knew any ordinary idiot would have given up by now since Micah didn't acknowledge her attempts to reach him, but Chancie refused to surrender to resignation that their truncated affair was well and truly ended.

She drove home, no closer to any solution than she had been when she started the day. She tried to emulate the salesman's hopefulness, but it wasn't easy putting on a cheerful face, especially when she was around Jamie.

She wanted Micah. And Jamie stood in her way.

Chancie fingered the key she wore like a talisman on a chain around her neck. Micah hadn't thought to ask for it back. Her fingers stilled as another piece of the puzzle suddenly clicked into place.

On Thursday, Chancie conducted an interview with a job applicant because Judy was still out of town. Almost overwhelmed by now with the sheer volume of paperwork that came through Screening Services every day, veritable mountains of records and invoices and bills she had thoughtlessly expected Judy to handle alone, Chancie hired the young man on the spot. Brett MacBride's office skills were rudimentary, but Chancie had other duties in mind for him.

While Aggie manned the phones and typed away on Judy's computer, Chancie introduced Brett MacBride to the intricacies of drug and alcohol testing. His first tries were on himself. Chancie showed him how to calibrate the breath analyzer. Then she held its plastic tip up to his face and said, "Blow." He did, and she commanded, "Harder." He complied, and she said, "Come on now, give it all you've got." His face turned red and his cheeks bulged with effort. She said, "Very good," and showed him his zero reading.

They did a urine specimen, following the script Chancie held in one hand so she wouldn't inadvertently forget anything. Then Brett tested her, and Chancie thought, with a bit of further training he would do very well. One day soon she might be able to hand the collecting over to Brett

MacBride. It would be a great relief to have a male employee who could actually remain in the room with male clients who'd previously tested positive for drugs, a task Chancie now had to call the city police to perform.

In the early afternoon, as she was going over the several different chain of custody forms various companies used prior to their digitization, Aggie broke in to say, "Judy's on the phone."

Chancie looked at Aggie expectantly, but the middle-aged woman said nothing further. Chancie picked up the handset on her desk.

"We've just broken for lunch, so I wanted to call you while I had a minute," Judy said.

"How are the negotiations going?"

Judy sucked in a breath and held it. "Not well. We're up against a California firm that's offering better terms for more varied services. Chancie, I think we're going to lose this one."

Chancie's hand tightened on the receiver. It was her turn to hold her breath. This was the setback that could bring the whole house of cards called Screening Services tumbling down around her. She could see all her creditors pounding on her door, the faces of the collectors she would have to lay off, the windows of her office boarded up and all the furniture sold.

Her first impulse was to drop the phone and get on a plane to California. She pictured herself shoving Judy away from the conference table so she herself could take over and save the day. Then she saw herself firing Judy for incompetence, and hiring someone who could do the job properly.

She remembered her motto: Nobody got the chance to screw up twice on Screening Services' time.

Then Chancie remembered that Judy's boyfriend, Parker, had advised her to cut up all her credit cards. She couldn't pay for air fare to California. And it wasn't Judy's fault that Screening Services didn't offer blood tests for illicit substances and DNA testing for paternity cases, or CPR, first aid, and occupational training seminars. Chancie had always been too broke to keep up. Instead of expanding services, she'd focused instead on expanding territory.

"Chancie?" Judy asked uncertainly.

"Hold on, Judy." Chancie rubbed her forehead. She was hunched over the phone, her shoulders and neck a mass of tight knots. "Let me think. How low are the other guys going?"

"Not much lower than we are, but enough to clinch the deal. They're headquartered right here in California; they can afford to be cheaper."

Chancie could make some new arrangements, shut one of the offices near Hawk Point and open one in California. She'd need California tax law advice on top of expensive California overhead. It would all have to be done awfully fast. And it would go against Parker's best advice for saving Screening Services.

"What do you think we should do?" she asked Judy.

"Honestly? I think we should take Parker's advice and let this one go, Chancie."

Judy waited while Chancie thought about it. The very idea went against the grain, and Chancie gritted her teeth while she tried to come to grips with Judy's counsel.

"Chancie," Judy said hesitantly. "If I don't get this contract, are you going to fire me?"

Chancie hesitated, struck by the anxiety in Judy's voice. Tension hummed between them on the telephone line.

Inflexible. Unyielding. Rigid. Chancie thought of all the words that applied to the old Chancie she didn't want to be anymore. She was reacting as Judy had always known her to react, and Judy expected the result that everyone got who failed Chancie de Leur.

Judy was trying her best. She wasn't out partying on a California beach and refusing to answer her phone. She was carrying out high-pressure negotiations on Chancie's behalf, and she'd come up against some stiff competition. It wasn't her fault Screening Services didn't give her the resources she needed to succeed.

Chancie saw young Brett MacBride eyeing her apprehensively. Her face must be betraying all she'd been thinking. She tried to loosen the knots in her neck, rolling her head slightly on her shoulders.

The new Chancie de Leur said, “I won’t fire you, Judy, no matter what happens. You’re too valuable to me and to this company. In fact, I’ve been thinking if you and Parker want to buy in to the business I’ll make you a full partner.”

Judy said slowly, “Is this for real? Have you been drinking, Chancie?”

“Very funny. Get some lunch,” Chancie said. “Then get on a plane and get back here. We have plans to discuss.”

She frowned as she hung up the phone. She didn’t have to remind Judy they would have to work ten times harder to make up for the lost revenue if she couldn’t get the signatures on the California contract. She’d be a nervous wreck until they could get together with Parker and decide exactly what their next step should be.

Chancie caught Brett MacBride still eyeing her warily. The prominent Adam’s apple in his neck bobbed as he swallowed. Poor kid. His first day on the job and he gets to witness a crisis. Well, he’d better get used to it if he wanted to work for Screening Services. At least he’d seen her delegate to Judy instead of rushing out in a blind panic to fix everything herself, as she might have done only a month earlier.

Chancie was rather proud of herself, now that she thought about it.

She smiled and told Brett, “Welcome to the testing business. It gets a little tense around here sometimes.”

He smiled back nervously. But Chancie felt heartened when he didn’t up and quit on the spot.

At home that night, Chancie sat on the sofa alone. She fingered the key at the base of her throat and thought, Why not? Jamie had gone to bed. Alma was watching television in her room. Chancie could call it a night, or she could go find out right now if she still had any place in Micah’s life.

Tapping on Alma’s door to tell her she was going out, Chancie got in her car and drove to Micah’s apartment. From where she sat in the Lexus, she could see a single light burning upstairs in his bedroom. As the car’s engine ticked, cooling, Chancie lost her nerve. She could back out of here right now and Micah would never know she’d come this close to forcing the issue with him.

She could stop calling and leaving those stupid apologetic messages that he never answered. She could let their aborted affair die a quick death. She could just give Micah Taylor up.

The thought grated. And worse, it frightened her. Because she’d given up so much lately, should she just roll over and play dead in everything? She’d worked hard to become the person she was now, the Chancie who fought for what she wanted.

She opened the car door, got out, and walked to Micah’s front door. She slipped the key into the lock.

In his bedroom at the top of the stairs, Micah Taylor heard the front door open. He froze in the act of removing his jeans, listening for the sound of the door to close. When it did, he crossed on silent, bare feet to where his WHP-issue Beretta lay in its holster on his nightstand.

He crouched slightly, legs spread and knees bent. He held the gun in both hands straight out in front of him.

The third step creaked as whoever it was continued climbing the stairs. A shadow appeared in his doorway. His finger tightened on the trigger.

The intruder paused in the light from his room, a cloud of burnished dark honey curls swirling around her head. Incongruously, she held a wrapped Christmas package in her hands. Micah took a deep breath and released his tight grip on the gun, opening the drawer of the nightstand to place it safely inside before collapsing to sit on the edge of the bed.

“Christ almighty, Chancie,” he said on a shaky breath. “I almost shot you. Why didn’t you call first?”

“So you could ignore me? I’ve been calling for four days.” She paused before adding, “I’ve been apologizing for four days. I didn’t know what else to do, Micah.”

He looked at her face. She had apparently been sleeping as badly as he. Purplish shadows darkened the skin beneath her eyes, and her face was so wan it shone a very pale blue like skim milk.

“You’re not the one who should be apologizing,” he said. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

She sagged a little in the doorway, closing her eyes for a moment. “I’m glad to know you think that way. I’ve been feeling awfully guilty.”

He cursed softly. How could anyone carry the burden of so much guilt? Did she think she was responsible for the whole world’s happiness? And he’d just increased her burden by ignoring her phone calls because he couldn’t take anymore. He hadn’t stopped to ask himself how much she was supposed to take.

“Come here,” he said. He couldn’t stop himself. Sitting shirtless, he opened his arms, gesturing with his hands. She came willingly, kneeling to throw her arms around his waist, where she clung ferociously. She still held on to the wrapped package.

How he’d missed her. His body remembered, each slight touch of her fingertips opening new floodgates of sensation. “I’m sorry I hurt you,” he bent to whisper into the mane of her hair trailing down to his groin.

She raised her face. “I guess hurting goes along with loving,” she said.

“I hope not. Or not this much, anyway. These last few days have been hell. I can’t imagine what you’ve gone through.” He looked into her green eyes, wanting to kiss her, wanting to tug her up on the bed with him, to tuck her up tightly against himself and hold her, and never let her go.

She said, “The way my luck has been running, I’m fortunate you didn’t shoot me. You’re going to have to get used to people barging in on you at all hours if you’re going to marry me.” She paused. “Micah, would you please make love to me now?”

He was struck mute, his hands frozen in the swirl of her hair. He felt his eyes widen as he looked down at her. His lips worked, but no sound came. Talk about marriage was the very last thing he’d expected. She had managed to shock him mute.

But she must be joking. Surely he’d proved these last four days that he wasn’t adequate husband and father material. He was surprised she was here at all, giving him a second chance when he thought no one got two chances with her.

His mother’s words came back loud and clear: *If she loves you, she’ll find a way.*

She set the package on the floor beside her and reached for the button on his jeans, never taking her green eyes from his. Her glossy lips moved.

“I’ve thought a lot about what you said that first night,” Chancie whispered. “Make love to me, Micah. Let’s really change our lives. Let’s make a baby together.”

## Chapter Fourteen

Chancie pulled her hand back and clapped it over her mouth in dismay. She’d done it again. Despite all her good intentions and her vows to stop trying to force people to conform to her objectives, she’d pushed Micah to ask her to marry him! And worse, she couldn’t just ask him to make love to her. She had to tell him she wanted to make a baby.

All she’d come here for had been to maneuver Micah into bed. Chances were, if she kept pushing, she might have got that much. But no, she had to bet everything. Had she lost her mind, raising the stakes on him that way? Why couldn’t she control herself around him?

Micah stared at Chancie, her green eyes suddenly gone wide with shock over the top of her fingers as she knelt in front of him. In the space of about sixty seconds, she’d offered him two of the essential components of making all his secret fantasies come true. Fantasies that hurt so much to take out of the storage of his battered heart and examine, he hadn’t dared admit they existed.

And what in the hell caused her make such an offer? From the look on her face, she’d startled herself as badly as she had shocked him.

He lifted her from the floor where she knelt. He pulled the heavy quilted coat from her shoulders and laid it over the pillows on his bed. Then he tugged at her hand to urge her to sit beside him.

“Take a deep breath,” he said. She did, and he seized the opportunity to fill his lungs as well.

“Better?” he asked. She nodded. “Okay,” he continued, “we have some things to talk about, Chancie. Much as I’d like to take you up on your suggestion that I make love with you right this minute—”

“We could make love, Micah,” she said softly. “All the rest of it, marriage and having a baby, I meant what I said. I’d love to have your baby. But if that’s not what you want, I guess I’ll just have to accept it.”

He closed his eyes at the sharp pain in his chest. “Two weeks ago, I told myself the same thing,” he said. “That if sex was all you wanted from me, I would live with it and be happy.”

“Well, I’m willing to try that. See how it goes.”

He glanced at her. Her green cat-eyes tilted at the corners, she looked unreservedly back. She would do it, too, he thought. Whatever it took. Whatever he wanted. Whatever he asked.

She wanted him that much.

He thought of her body and the way she responded instantly, wetly to his merest touch. He felt himself hardening just as immediately to her offer to try her and see.

Her hand crept to his thigh, and he covered it with his own, halting its progress before she discovered his cock’s eager willingness to go along with her crazy plans. “You’re too damned tempting,” he growled. He’d have to be knocked senseless to be unaware of the fact that she again wore something that moved easily on her body, a soft and touchable melon colored top that would slip easily over her head and a wrap skirt with one button at the waist that could be effortlessly unfastened. “We need to talk. I’m going to have to send you home so we can talk on the phone if you don’t behave yourself.”

“That wouldn’t accomplish anything. You don’t answer my calls. Besides, I can’t help myself,” she defended. “You’re awfully tempting yourself, sitting there half naked, showing off your pecs and abs.”

“I’ll get dressed.”

“Please don’t put yourself to any trouble. Unless you don’t like me looking at you, that is.”

“I’m not uncomfortable with you looking at me, as long as you like what you see. It’s cold in here, that’s all.”

She glanced behind him at the turned-down blankets. “Then let’s get in and cover up.”

“Chancie.”

She licked her lips. “With our clothes on if you want. I’ll be good, I promise.”

Micah laughed shortly. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

But he stood and moved her coat to the foot of the bed. Chancie kicked off her boots. Micah held the sheet wide for her and she crawled in, waiting for him to lie beside her before resting her head on his chest.

“Warmer now?” she asked.

This felt so right. Chancie in his bed, his arm trapped beneath her head, the two of them all cuddled up against the cold. Micah swore he’d control himself at least until he got some answers.

“Chancie, talk to me,” he said, trying to ignore the play of her fingers across his chest. “Finish telling me what you’ve been thinking.”

Chancie sighed. “On Saturday, Judy’s boyfriend Parker came in to help me get my books straightened out.” She went through the entire four days since she’d last seen Micah: Parker’s stringent measures for putting Screening Services firmly on its financial feet, Judy’s probably fortuitous loss of the California contract, the hiring of Aggie and Brett, the planned sale of the house which would allow Chancie to keep Alma as part of her family.

“It all started to come together when Parker suggested I also sell the business,” Chancie said. “Selling out was something I’d never considered, but when I thought about it, I knew that’s what I wanted to do. And that I didn’t want to wait a year, as Parker suggested. I want out now.”

Her hand stilled on his chest as she talked, but his hand stroked her back absently as he listened. "I don't understand," he said at last. "I thought you liked your work."

"I liked the idea of it. I liked the challenge of seeing if I could make a go of my own business. I like being in charge, but I guess you know that about me already." She laughed. "But I only got into the testing business because the opportunity existed. I've discovered I don't much like it. If I can eventually get my investment back, I'll try again at something else."

"Like what?"

"I don't know at this point, Micah. Maybe a clothing store or something simple like that." She again took up gently exploring the smooth skin of his chest, which along with his straight black hair was the legacy of his Indian blood, she was sure. She was careful not to touch his nipples or let her hand stray lower than the top of his ridged diaphragm. She'd promised to be good, she reminded herself. But it was getting most difficult to keep her reckless promise.

"It would suit you," he agreed. "You have good taste."

"I know," she said. "That's why I picked you." She raised her head to look into his slightly hooded sapphire eyes before plunging on. Then she put all her chips on the table for one last big bet. At this point she honestly could not help herself. "We could make beautiful babies, Micah. The first one could be born about the time I would be done turning over Screening Services to Judy and Parker. I could take some time off before I got a clothing store started, and Alma would help."

His eyes closed and his jaw tightened. She feared he was getting ready to shut her out again.

"Oh, Micah, don't you see?" she urged. "I know it sounds like I want a baby so I can leave my old life behind and have you take care of me or something. But that's not it, I swear. Things just suddenly all started to fall into place for me when I decided to sell the testing business. The timing is perfect. I always wanted another baby, but only with the right father. Can't you see? You're that man."

"You have beautiful dreams, Chancie. I wish I could share them with you," he said raggedly. His eyes opened and he stared at her with a deep pain in their blue depths. "But you're forgetting a couple of things. For one, I'm a cop. I don't have a safe little job where I can count on being home for dinner every night." He recounted the hair-raising episode of the chase and arrest of the driver of the stolen truck.

"Not all days are like that, of course," he said, kissing her forehead to make the worry lines disappear. "But sometimes it gets hairy. Can you handle that, Chancie?"

"It's true I'd worry about you every day," she said truthfully. "And I'd be there for you every night." She touched a finger to his lips, turning suddenly mischievous. "Just think about it, would you? Somebody has to marry cops."

Micah clasped her finger to his bare chest, refusing to give in to her logic. "There's still Jamie," he said quietly.

Oh, yeah. Jamie. Chancie's breath caught and then she began babbling rationalizations. "Well, if I had something like a little clothing store in the mall I'd be home more. I'd have regular hours and nobody calling me in the middle of the night to respond to an emergency. I think Jamie would be much happier in that situation."

Micah's other hand tightened on her back. "Jamie's coming up on his teen years. How will he feel about not only a new authority figure in his life, but a new baby brother or sister? Be realistic, Chancie. He hates me. How's he going to feel about any child of mine?"

Chancie tensed. Why did Micah always insist on dragging her back to cold reality even in the midst of what could have been some very hot passion? Couldn't they just get down to business and stop talking? She knew she'd sprung all this on him a little quickly, but did he really have to be so coolly rational *all* the time?

"Let's face it: nothing's perfect, Micah. Not even dreams," Chancie said flatly. "If you think we could live together without ever squabbling, or together raise my child *and* our child without some bumps along the way, *you* need to face reality."

"I have five brothers," Micah said. His dimples showed beside his incredibly white teeth as he talked of his family. "We fought like crazy, and sometimes nearly killed each other. I don't have

any illusions about what raising kids is like. One minute my mother was hugging us and the next minute she was scolding. But I've never encountered anything like Jamie before. He despises me. And I think it would put a big strain on us to try and live with that raw hatred day after day."

Chancie propped her head on one hand and rested her other elbow on Micah's chest to cover her eyes for a moment. Micah had circled around and hit back on the one sticking point for which she had no solution. Maybe Micah's real fear was that she'd done such a terrible job with Jamie, he couldn't trust her to raise another child properly.

She wished she had an explanation for Jamie's behavior. But she didn't. Yet.

And until she did, she couldn't lose Micah and her dream. She couldn't just let it all fade away while she waited for Jamie to grow up.

But she could put the dream on hold, if that's what Micah insisted on.

"One day Jamie will make you choose, Chancie. I won't let it come to that," Micah said into the silence.

She uncovered her eyes. Micah was still looking at her. She wanted him so much. She had to make this hopelessness go away, at least for a little while. She wanted him to remember only the good parts of her offer when she left him tonight.

"Okay," she said slowly. "How's this? You use protection until I can figure out what to do about Jamie."

Micah's eyes widened. Then the lines in his cheeks deepened and laughter spilled from him. He said, "You just don't know how to give up, do you, baby?"

She'd startled a laugh out of him. His eyes crinkled at the corners and his deep dimples appeared, and Chancie knew then he would accept her counterproposal. "I won't ever give you up, Micah, unless you tell me absolutely, positively, that you don't want me. Understand? I will never, never, never give you up."

She sat up, reaching for the hem of her melon-colored shirt.

She really was something. But Micah reached out to stop her from pulling the shirt over her head. "Wait," he said. "If you insist on this, I want to do the honors."

Chancie found herself lifted over Micah's body. He rose with her until they stood beside the bed again. His blue eyes flared a silent message before his lips descended on hers. Chancie opened her mouth to his assault, welcoming his ravaging kiss of pent-up need and returning it in equal measure.

His hands explored the full curves of her breasts through the soft fabric, dropping to her waist before slipping beneath her shirt. Chancie pressed her full length against him, belly tight against his rock hard erection, purring deep in her throat while his hands sought the clasp of her bra.

They came out of the kiss panting. The pupils of Micah's eyes were big enough to drown in and shiny black. Chancie stepped away ever so slightly, raising her arms, and he lifted the shirt over her head. His eyes dropped to her breasts, loosely covered in the satin cups of her matching melon-colored unhooked bra. She stood quivering with need while he undressed her with only his eyes. Then, ever so slowly, he slipped the straps from her shoulders and her hard-peaked breasts sprang free of confinement.

Micah was done fighting. He would never turn Chancie down again. Even if this once was all she ended up wanting, he'd make it a night to remember. He bent his head to kiss each soft shoulder, each silky breast, drawing each nipple lovingly into his mouth and sucking gently while he kept the other fully aroused with his fingers. He kissed his way down, tongue circling her navel, lower and lower until he was kneeling before her as she had knelt to him, lips tracing fiery kisses across the sensitive skin below her ribs.

Chancie's fingers wound themselves helplessly in Micah's thick black hair as he reached for the button that loosened her skirt and let it fall free. A scrap of satin panties peeled away under his questing fingers, falling down her legs to her ankles. His lips followed their silky trail, kissing her thighs, her calves, the arch of each foot as she stepped out of the bit of cloth.

He loved this woman, everything about her, from her stubborn refusal to give up to the dusting of freckles revealed on her bare skin. A groan escaped him when he had her finally, completely

naked. He grasped her ass with long fingers, kneading its roundness gently as his lips nuzzled the soft triangle between her legs. Chancie gasped his name, and Micah rose in one fluid motion to claim her mouth once more.

Now it was her hands hotly seeking, each button of his jeans a new challenge, making her whimper in frustration until she'd conquered all five. She craved this. She wanted Micah so much after the endless waiting. His hands bracketed her jaw as his tongue found its way back into the warm recesses of her mouth, strong hands that supported her so her trembling knees wouldn't give way while she completed her task. At last she had his metal buttons undone. She slid her hands around to the place where his waist met slim hips, and worked the jeans down over hard male buttocks that flexed beneath her fingers.

Micah held his breath as his cock sprang free. He rubbed its rigid contours against Chancie's lower belly as he wriggled out of the confining legs of his jeans. Chancie threw her head back, the tips of her hair trailing almost within reach of his hands on her ass. Micah's mouth sought the delicate rounds of her earlobes, trailing searing kisses down the long column of her arched neck. She sighed, whimpered, cried out softly, moaning his name. Her responses drove him to frenzy, but he controlled himself for her sake. This might not be Chancie's first time by a long shot, but he wanted it to be her best.

He descended to the edge of the bed, pulling her between his spread legs, one hand reaching to open the nightstand drawer while the other crept between her legs to seek the slick heat of her center. When he withdrew his questing fingers, Chancie cried her need aloud.

Chancie's thoughts were jumbled, all her reactions stemming from pure sensation. So far Micah had only allowed her a tiny orgasm, which was good because she thought she'd fall over if she was standing during one of the earthquakes he induced in her. But Micah's fingers were withdrawn from her only long enough to slip a sheath over his rigid hard-on, and then his welcome heat was back. He held her again, sliding his tongue along her body while his strong hands urged her down, down, into his lap and then the warmth of his bed. He turned with her in his embrace, laying her on the sheet before kneeling between her legs.

Once more their eyes met, a question still in Micah's sapphire gaze. *Are you sure?*

*Now*, she wanted to scream. *Micah, do it now!* She raised her hands to his broad shoulders, digging her fingers into the muscle, beseeching him wordlessly to satisfy her boundless yearning to have all of him inside her at last.

He entered her hot cavity in tantalizing increments, despite her widespread legs and clutching hands urging speed. And he had a lot of increments to give her. He held her green gaze, savoring the way her expressive face slowly gave away to the pleasure building inside her while he slipped inch by torturous inch deeper inside.

Chancie's fingers raked Micah's back as the tremors inside her once again turned to shudders of orgasm. Micah's cock filled her so slowly and completely the anticipation was nearly unbearable. When the clenchings inside her began to subside, he started to move at a rhythmic pace, rocking her gently in liquid fire. Chancie's legs wrapped tightly around his back and Micah's arms enfolded her upper body so securely she was almost sitting upright in his strong grip.

Sweet tension built between them. Layer upon layer, each slow, sure thrust, each lingering, sweltering kiss sent her another notch higher. Micah's protracted loving drove her to a fever pitch, his long length exploring previously untouched places deep inside. Finally with a hard thrust that sent her tumbling over the edge of the precipice she spiraled into a last shattering climax that left her weak and quaking.

When Micah felt the rhythm of the pulsating shocks inside Chancie begin to mount once more, he could hold back no longer. He joined her, his own release a long, slow incineration he thought he might actually die from before the lingering heat waves were finally extinguished.

He turned them so he lay on his back, still buried inside her. Their bodies cooling, she squeezed him gently inside her while they recovered breath enough to speak. At last Chancie managed to say, "I always thought the first time with you would be hot and fast, not slow and volcanic. We waited such a long time, I'm surprised you still had such control."

She lifted her head to look into Micah's eyes. They glinted back languid blue humor. "You didn't like it?"

"Oh, baby." Chancie sighed, echoing the endearment he'd used ever since their first meeting. "You're every woman's fantasy."

Then she glared at him. "But still, it's not fair. You'll have me eating out of your hand and begging for a steady diet of loving like that."

Micah gazed at her seriously, and Chancie's limbs liquefied in response. "It's what I wanted our first time to be, Chancie. Loving," he said.

Was he saying what she thought he was saying? Chancie's slowing pulse started to speed up again.

He lifted an elbow to prop them both up. One finger traced the outline of her jaw, her hairline, her lips. Then it dropped to lazily circle one rosy nipple.

Chancie sat in his lap in paralyzed terror mingled with hope, pinned by the force of Micah's smoky blue gaze.

"I love you, Chancie." He said each word very deliberately.

"Oh, God. Oh, Micah. I love you too, so much." She flung her arms around him, feeling his warmth and his strength and the deep down, essential decency and honesty of him. She thought she could just go on like that forever, holding on to Micah Taylor, while the world and all its problems outside his bed just faded away into oblivion.

But, unfortunately, the world didn't go away. Chancie and Micah lay talking, hugging, touching each other for a while, just enjoying the fact that they could revel in the newness of exploring each other's bodies. Chancie insisted he open the gift she'd brought, and Micah ended up wearing it in bed with her. When he happened to look at the clock on his nightstand a long time later, Chancie's glance followed. She was shocked to find it was nearly one in the morning.

"I have to go," she said regretfully, starting to disentangle herself from his busy hands.

"You said you expected fast and hot," Micah countered. "I've still got another try in me. I wouldn't want to send you away disappointed." Did she have to leave? He wanted to keep her there by any means.

"You don't play fair, Micah Taylor." Chancie again echoed his own words back to him, and he smiled, remembering.

She sighed dramatically, as if supremely sorry to go. Then she threw the covers back and leapt playfully on him, tugging the tails of his new shirt aside. "I'm ready," she declared. "Take me again. Hot and fast."

She laughed, tossing that glorious mane of copper tinged curls.

"Not quite that fast, baby," Micah teased back, reaching for the night table drawer.

Chancie pouted at the sight of the square package, but waited until he was ready. Micah liked her teasing. He liked her serious. He loved her, he admitted, any way he could get her.

He gave her fast and hot, and she met him thrust for thrust, fiery enough so that the residual heat would keep them warm as they sought their separate beds. Then Chancie reluctantly dressed and left him, raining goodbye kisses on his face and chest and hands as he walked her to the front door.

And then Micah was alone again, to find sleep as best he could. He kept the shirt on that retained the smell of Chancie's perfume. But he really didn't know how he could need any sleep after a night where he'd already dreamed his best dreams.

## Chapter Fifteen

On Saturday, New Year's Eve, Micah woke to fresh snow on the ground again. He pattered around the apartment, then went to the laundry and started his uniforms washing before heading to the grocery store. He pushed the cart listlessly up and down aisles where he couldn't find anything that looked appetizing enough to buy. Alma's cooking had quickly spoiled him; he could barely tolerate the thought of a microwaved frozen dinner these days.

He had a whole day to get through before he saw Chancie again, and nothing much to do to fill the empty hours. He would have gone and worked out, sweating off some of the sluggishness mixed with a peculiar anxiety that made his stomach ache when Chancie wasn't around, but the city rec center was closed for the holiday.

He resented not being able to just go over to her house, see if she or Alma had some chores to keep him busy, have some lunch, curl up with her on the sofa and watch TV. All the ordinary, day-to-day activities of living together were denied to him and Chancie, so long as her son continued to hate him.

He gazed absently out the big plate windows of the store as his few purchases were being bagged. The sun had come out, glistening on fresh powder, and there was no wind. It was one of those rare postcard-perfect winter days in Wyoming, a day for snowmobiling if they had got up early this morning and headed for higher country with deeper snow. They could have taken Jamie, and Alma too, if she wanted to go, and had a good time. Micah could picture Chancie's cheeks pinkened with delight and cold, her green eyes glowing with pleasure as they sped over the snow. He could feel her excited breathing in his ear as they flew down snow-packed trails.

The checkout clerk said loudly, apparently not for the first time, "Will that be all, sir?"

Micah sighed and swiped the debit card he'd unconsciously been clutching during his reverie, and then hauled his meager week's groceries out to the truck. He'd claimed Chancie's body, but he could make no concrete plans with her. He couldn't even ask for a Saturday so long as they had to keep their love a secret from Jamie.

He checked in at the Laundromat, transferring his clothes from a washer to a dryer. Then he drove out north of town to the land he'd put money down on earlier in the week. He just sat there for a while, slipped down on his spine in the driver's seat of the pickup, admiring the tall blue spruce trees and the well-built stalls where he would soon stable his own horses.

He hadn't yet had the opportunity to discuss with Chancie his purchase of the place. Her penchant for fantasy would have her making plans to move in after they were married and deciding which bedrooms their unborn babies would occupy. Micah didn't know if he could take much more of getting sucked in to her heady delusions right now. If opposites attracted, then Chancie was the dreamer and Micah the realist.

And Jamie was the worm in the apple of their happiness.

The corners of Micah's mouth lifted at his own sour humor. He had to keep some kind of droll perspective where Jamie was concerned. As time passed with no positive overtures from Jamie, Micah was beginning to think of the kid as the rotten center, the mushy core of what could otherwise be a solid relationship between himself and Chancie. If Micah didn't keep a lid of humor on his thoughts about the boy, he might find himself hating Jamie right back.

And if the kid ever came around, changed his mind and accepted Micah in his mother's life? Micah struggled against such probably fruitless hope, but he wouldn't want to be so far gone in resentment of Jamie that he could never forgive and forget the boy's malicious behavior.

Micah sighed again and shook himself mentally, turning the key in the ignition and starting back to pick up his laundry before heading to his apartment. He would see Chancie tonight. They'd each been invited to separate New Year's Eve parties, and decided they would try to attend both before the night ended. Micah could think of better ways to celebrate the new year with Chancie. But she wanted to go out, to show him off, she said. He'd grinned at that, pleased despite his embarrassment, and so they would go out.

Chancie spent the morning in Jamie's room, supervising and prodding. She'd finally had enough of the boy's nasty slovenliness. She thought of it as a reflection of his recent mental state and decided he would use one of the last days of his vacation from school shoveling out the mess in his room.

She was still angry with Jamie, and it showed. "I don't know how you can stand this mess," she nagged, opening the door to his closet.

"What's the matter?" Jamie asked, watching her. "Think there's a monster in there?"

“No. I was actually afraid of rats,” Chancie said.

“We don’t have any rats in Wyoming,” Jamie said airily, shrugging off her attempt to scare him into picking up.

“Don’t be too sure about that,” Chancie challenged. “You’ve probably got cockroaches in here too.”

“I do not,” Jamie declared, but he looked about uneasily at the discarded ice cream bar wrappers that had missed the trash container and plates crusty with old food sitting on the dresser top.

Chancie bent over to begin folding some of the clean clothes strewn across the carpet. When she started to open a drawer, Jamie jumped to bar her.

“Okay, okay. I’ll do it,” he said.

Chancie eyed him suspiciously. “What are you hiding in that drawer, Jamie?”

He reddened. “Nothing.”

“Let me see.”

“No.” He spread his hands protectively in front of the drawer.

Thoughts of Jamie’s friend Brandon and his trouble with drugs flitted through her mind. “I want to know what’s in that drawer, young man.”

Jamie looked desperate. “It’s just paper, see?” He yanked the drawer open and quickly slammed it shut. Chancie had the merest glimpse of pink ink on many intricately folded sheets of lined notebook paper.

Chancie frowned. So. She thought of all the phone calls Jamie had been getting lately, the giggly girlish voices that finally coalesced in her memory into a single giggly high-pitched voice. She thought of Jamie’s low whispers and his attempts to keep his conversations private, of his begging for his own cell phone so he could retreat to his bedroom to talk.

“You’ve got a girlfriend, don’t you?”

Jamie’s flush spread to his hairline and the tips of his ears.

“I see,” Chancie said slowly, when Jamie didn’t answer. “It’s okay for you to like somebody special, but not me. Is that the case?”

Jamie’s jaw tightened. No matter what tactic Chancie tried, he still refused to discuss Micah or what had happened between them to cause the Christmas disaster.

“You’re really giving me pain, son. Moms are human too,” she said softly before leaving him to ponder that on top of being grounded for the rest of his life.

Chancie left to pick up Micah at seven. The streets where snow had melted earlier now possessed a dangerous sheen of ice. She slipped on her front step but caught herself before she fell. Then the car slid off the concrete pad of the driveway and over the curb with a thump.

At a red light, she tried slowly applying her brakes. Hawk Point’s sand truck drivers must all be on holiday, she thought inanely as she slid completely through the intersection. Her car spun halfway around. A pickup coming the other way, whose driver had the green light and couldn’t stop in time, hit her Lexus head-on.

Her forehead smacked the steering wheel, and she blacked out.

Micah paced, checking out the front window of his apartment every few minutes. There was still no sign of Chancie.

He was nervous anyway, dressed in brand new clothes from head to foot, and the new stiff black boots pinched his toes. He wasn’t looking forward to meeting Chancie’s friends, people probably too fancy and well-to-do for him to relax and have a good time. And he wondered how she would like his cop friends, if she could fit in, or if she would be subtly snubbed.

He should have gone to pick her up instead of the other way around, he berated himself. She hadn’t wanted to antagonize Jamie by announcing her date, she hadn’t wanted to go in his ungainly four-wheel drive in her party clothes. She had a hundred excuses why they should take her car, and

Micah had given in. The street surfaces that he could see out his front window were sheets of shimmering ice. He should have insisted.

He checked the time, the window, the time again. Chancie had some faults, such as worrying too much and trying too hard to make everything perfect, but she was always punctual no matter how many irons she had in the fire.

He checked the time again, grasping his cell phone. Then he hesitated. Should he call the hospital? The Hawk Point police? Alma?

What if Jamie answered?

Well, what if Jamie did answer.

Micah punched in the numbers.

Chancie's eyelids fluttered. She lay uncomfortably across the console of the Lexus, and there was a face she didn't know looming over hers from the passenger side of the car. The face looked worried, she thought. Worried about her? She lost consciousness again.

Micah luckily reached Alma instead of Jamie.

"Chancie left over half an hour ago, Micah," Alma said. "Should I be worried?"

Yes. Micah heard sirens in the distance.

But he said, "No, I don't think we should worry. Not yet, anyway. Call me if you hear anything. I'll call you if—*when* she gets here."

He waited another quarter hour in sweaty-palmed agony. Then he called the hospital, feeling foolish and at the same time very, very scared.

The switchboard operator at the hospital couldn't tell him if Chancie was there, but put him through to emergency when he insisted. He told the emergency room clerk he was Chancie's fiancé and asked if they had anyone fitting her description. The voice said no, but Micah could hear the scream of a siren above the background noise of the emergency room. He left his name and number, just in case, and hung up, his mouth dry with fear.

Then he did what he couldn't bring himself to do when he couldn't reach Chancie before. He called dispatch in Cheyenne and asked them to get him any word they could on her from the Hawk Point police. The night dispatcher called about ten minutes later, informing him Chancie had been in an auto accident. Micah disconnected in sick dread and dialed Alma, his hands shaking.

"I'll pick you and Jamie up in five minutes," he said. He knew he should have insisted on taking Chancie in the pickup.

Chancie opened her eyes again. Two men in white lab coats stood over her. One had the cartilage of her nose pinched between two gloved fingers. A stethoscope hung down from his neck. He wiggled her nose from side to side, saying, "I can't believe it's not broken."

Her eyes wandered to the white ceiling tiles, the green curtains surrounding the cubicle where she lay. The surface beneath her had the peculiar solid-slippery feel of cotton sheets on plastic. A hospital gurney.

"You're awake, huh?" the second doctor said. "How do you feel? Does your head hurt?"

"No," Chancie answered through thickened, sticky lips. She could hardly move her jaw. "My fashe hurtsh." She lifted a hand to try and explore her face.

"Your face? I don't doubt that." The doctor gently pushed her hand back down by her side. He shook his head slightly, and Chancie wondered how bad she really looked. He held up two fingers. "How many do you see?"

She blinked, trying to clear her vision. "Two."

"Very good." He lowered his hand. "We'll get you cleaned up a little bit and then take some pictures of your head, just to make sure nothing's broken, okay?"

"Okay." Chancie was confused. She remembered leaving her house to go to Micah's apartment, but nothing more. The two doctors went out through the green curtains, and a nurse wearing a blue flowered smock came in, followed by two police officers.

She saw the uniforms, and her first muzzy thought was, Thank God, it's Micah! But these two wore the blue of Hawk Point city police. The nurse busied herself getting out cotton balls and a dish of Betadine and water. Then she seated herself beside Chancie and began to swab at her sore face.

Chancie winced. The brown-orange antiseptic stung.

One of the cops said, "We'd like to ask you a few questions, ma'am."

"Okay," Chancie said dubiously, since she remembered so little. The nurse noticed her difficulty in speaking, and swabbed some dried blood from her lips.

"Did you have anything to drink before you left your house tonight, ma'am?" the second cop asked.

Chancie didn't have time to answer. "I doubt there was alcohol involved," a deep voice behind the two policemen said. Micah appeared between the curtains. His presence made the tiny cubicle suddenly seem very crowded. She tried to smile at him, she was so glad to see him. But it felt like her face was cracking from all the dried blood so she gave up the effort.

Micah seemed to understand why she didn't greet him. His blue eyes radiating compassion and concern in her direction, he said to the two officers, "Can't your questions wait? She just woke up."

One of the cops looked from Chancie to Micah, who towered over him. He shrugged slightly. "Okay. Sure. We'll be right outside. Call us when she's cleaned up."

Micah stepped aside as they departed through the curtains. Then he came to hold Chancie's hand, looking every bit as uncomfortable as any regular healthy visitor to the emergency room, despite all the practice he must have had at emergency situations. "How you doing, baby?" he asked in a quiet voice.

She moved her head on the pillow, which tore a groan from her throat.

"We're going to get a few X-rays," the nurse said as the curtain opened and an attendant came in to wheel Chancie out. "Then we'll know more. If you'll excuse us, please?"

Micah backed out into an aisle between curtained cubicles, and Chancie had a glimpse of Alma's white face and Jamie's grim one where they stood waiting before she was whisked off down a tan-walled corridor.

"I should have picked her up in the truck," Micah muttered for about the tenth time. He and Alma and Jamie had retired to a waiting room for the duration.

"You're as bad as Chancie," Alma scolded. Her voice shook. "She's always blaming herself for everything. It was an accident. It couldn't be helped. Besides, you know you can't win an argument with her. If she wanted to take her car, she'd take the car."

Micah grunted. Chancie did have a hard head, but he still felt guilty. He should at least have lectured her more thoroughly about seat belts when he first discovered she didn't regularly use them. She could have been killed.

Jamie sat staring straight ahead in the dimly lighted waiting area. His face had a sickly green cast. Every once in a while a muscle twitched in his jaw. Alma patted his hand, but the boy didn't seem to notice.

"We should be thankful," Alma added, seeming to want to fill the silence with hospital platitudes. "It could have been so much worse."

"She could be dead, you mean," Jamie said abruptly.

Alma flinched. "Well, that. Or paralyzed. Or something," she whispered brokenly.

Jamie's eyes sought Micah's. The boy was suffering greatly and was badly scared. Micah wished he could comfort him. But Jamie's expression was unreadable, and Micah was afraid to say anything at all for fear he'd make Jamie feel worse.

Then Jamie said, "It's my fault. My mom could be dead, and it would be all my fault." His shoulders shook, but he didn't cry.

Alma made a sound in her throat. "Jamie. My lands," she said too loudly to cover the fact that tears were spilling down her own cheeks. "Everybody is so ready to take responsibility for an accident! How on earth could it be your fault?"

“She wouldn’t let him,” Jamie indicated Micah with a tilt of his chin, “come to the house because of me.” He took a deep breath. “Micah’s right. If he had picked her up instead of her driving, this wouldn’t have happened.”

“Well, now, hold on a minute,” Micah said, unwilling to let a ten-year-old shoulder his own burden of guilt. “There’s nothing to say my truck wouldn’t have been involved in an accident. I’ve seen a lot of four-wheel drives slide on ice and get into wrecks.”

“There! You see?” Alma swiped at her cheeks with a tissue before patting Jamie’s hand again. “Nobody’s at fault. We all agree it was an accident.”

Jamie looked questioningly at Micah. Micah returned the boy’s dark, wounded gaze, trying to think of something further to say. But before he could come up with anything appropriate, the nurse in the blue flowered smock appeared, saying, “She’s back. The doctor says there’s no concussion, and the police are finished with their questioning. You can see her now.”

Jamie ducked his head, not looking at Micah again, and the moment to approach rapport with the boy passed. Micah thought, Hell and damn. If I don’t always pick the wrong time to keep my mouth shut! Why didn’t I say something to him while I had the chance?

But Jamie surprised Micah by hanging back at the swinging doors that separated the waiting room from the emergency area. The boy raised his head to look at Micah, and blurted, “I’m sorry about what I said Christmas day. I didn’t mean it.”

*At last.* Micah swallowed a lump in his throat. He held out his hand. “Apology accepted. No hard feelings.”

Jamie shook Micah’s hand like the man he was becoming, although he wouldn’t meet his eyes again as they pushed through the metal-clad doors.

The three approached the long green curtains surrounding Chancie’s bed. Micah reached above Alma’s head to part the curtains. When Chancie saw them standing there in a group, she tried to smile. Somebody had put something shiny on her lips, but her nose was badly swollen and her cheeks and neck still bore traces of dried blood. She had black stitches in one nostril and the purpling of two monstrous shiners appearing under her eyes from the bump on her head.

Jamie’s eyes grew wide as he looked at the sorry state of his mother’s face. His throat bobbed convulsively a few times, and then he broke from Alma and Micah and stumbled to throw himself into his mother’s arms. “It’s all right, Jamie,” Chancie said awkwardly, patting his back. “I’m okay.”

The boy mumbled something into the front of her hospital gown. Chancie looked questioningly at Micah, but he could only shrug and shake his head. She said through painful lips, “What did you say? I can’t hear you, son.”

Jamie almost shouted, “I stole the blouse! The one I gave you for Christmas. I tried to kife it.”

Chancie exhaled audibly. Jamie was hugging her so tightly, Micah thought the boy might be hurting her. He stepped forward to pull Jamie away from his mother so Chancie could breathe. To his surprise, Jamie didn’t jerk away from his hands.

Chancie raised bruised eyes to Micah’s. “And you saw him do it. That’s what’s been going on between you.”

Micah nodded.

“And you didn’t say anything to me. His mother.”

Micah shrugged, offering no excuse. He just squeezed Jamie’s thin shoulders.

Chancie said exasperatedly, “Men,” and tried to roll her eyes. But the effort apparently hurt her, because she didn’t complete the gesture.

Jamie hung his head. He muttered, “I thought Micah would be like Dad. I thought he would use what he knew to hurt you. But he didn’t. I thought I could make him go away, before he hurt us. But I couldn’t.”

“You loved your dad, didn’t you, Jamie,” Chancie said softly, her gaze resting on Micah’s hands where they gripped Jamie’s shoulders.

Jamie nodded, wiping a hand under his nose. “I didn’t want to, though.”

“Sometimes love hurts, Jamie,” Chancie said. “And sometimes, with the right person, it heals. Micah’s one of the good guys, I promise.” She lifted misting eyes to Micah’s. If she started crying now, she was pretty sure it was going to hurt so she tried to hold back tears.

She already knew Micah Taylor could give and receive love. He had taken some convincing, but Micah wanted to accept joy and happiness with an open heart, and to give those gifts back freely.

To turn away from love was to deny the giver, and one’s essential self. Kenny, unable to give love, also could not accept it. At last Chancie could understand Kenny, a little, and begin to forgive. She had never once been able to give him peace, or joy, or happiness. Maybe her tormented dead husband had finally found a higher form of love that he could not reject. She hoped so. With a last wrench of release from her heart, she thought: Rest in Peace, Kenny.

Alma sniffed loudly, then blew her nose. She bent to retrieve Chancie’s clothing from a shelf behind the gurney, inspecting the bloodstains. “Probably ruined,” she said judiciously, shaking her head. “You’re a lucky girl, Chancie.”

Chancie looked into one dear face after another. She couldn’t get enough of the picture of Micah standing behind Jamie, with his strong hands on Jamie, and Jamie accepting the contact. It had taken no little amount of pain, a totaled car, and probably some scars on her face, but she’d brought them together at last. She wanted to close her burning eyes, but she couldn’t without the welling tears spilling out.

She’d taken a big risk gambling on Micah. Had it been only luck that she found her soul’s mate and kept him, or her own stubborn refusal to give up when she should have been beaten? Either way, she won. Judging from the expressions on Micah’s and Jamie’s faces, they all won.

“Ready to go home?” Micah asked.

Chancie nodded, ignoring the pain in her head. She didn’t know if he meant home to her big four-poster or home to his bed at the apartment. And it didn’t matter, so long as *home* meant going home with Jamie, and Alma.

And, finally, with Micah.

## Epilogue

Micah took Chancie home from the hospital, belting her securely in the pickup. He gave her such a severe look that spoke volumes about the terror she'd put him through that she remembered ever afterward to buckle up.

Her face healed nicely, with only the smallest of scars.

When Micah finally got to meet her friends after that New Year's Eve when they missed the party, he found they were her college friends, women like her who'd gone back to school as adults to try and better their lives. He and Chancie got to play matchmaker between one of her women acquaintances and a bachelor trooper friend of Micah's. So Chancie got Micah out in circulation more, and Micah instilled a bit of caution in Chancie.

Chancie shouldn't have been surprised that it was Micah who had beaten her to the perfect home for them, the one with the acreage and the firs and the stalls for his horses.

It was more like two years than the one Chancie had predicted before she and Micah had their first baby. Chancie stayed with Screening Services for the first year, helping to make it the successful enterprise she'd always known it would be while Judy and Parker made payments to buy it from their portion of the partnership. Chancie had a sneaking suspicion Parker might have been a bit pessimistic about the profits flattening after a few years, but she sold at a fair price and wished the young couple every success.

Micah wouldn't agree to Chancie carrying his baby for the year she exhausted herself getting Screening Services in the black and starting the new store. He doggedly bought boxes of condoms for a full twelve months, and since Chancie wouldn't deny herself the intoxicating pleasure of going to bed with him for any reason, he got his way on that at least.

Chancie finally did learn to conquer her fear of horses and to ride, although she was never really comfortable in the saddle. When Micah wanted company on long weekend rides, he asked Jamie or his friend Clay Thorpe instead of his wife.

The Christmas puppy grew into a huge thing almost big enough to ride like the horses, and always underfoot. But Jamie and Micah loved the gentle beast, so Chancie grew to tolerate the dog too. But her tolerance was severely tested each time he tried to climb in her lap as he'd done when he was small.

Motherhood the second time around was easier and more enjoyable for Chancie. She was less exacting, almost deliriously happy, and her whole life seemed to calm down as she grew to tremendous proportions in pregnancy. Micah paid inordinate attention to her hugely swollen breasts while she was pregnant and then nursing the baby, but Chancie was glad when she slimmed back down afterward and could fit into the kind of stylish clothes she sold in her new store.

Like all teenagers, Jamie wasn't always a delight to live with, but he openly adored his raven-haired, cobalt-eyed little sister and often relieved Alma of the chores of amusing and feeding her. Chancie and Micah named the baby Liena, a name Micah found in a book and which he said meant *a bond*, and it was true she bonded them all more tightly into a cohesive family.

But right after she was born, Jamie began referring to his little sister by a nickname that soon stuck as firmly as Chancie's had. Jamie would always remember the night in the hospital when he'd come close to losing everything that came to matter so much to him: his mother and her happiness, and a stepfather who treated him like his own son.

Just so he'd never forget how fortunate they all were, Jamie insisted, and they all eventually did call the little girl Lucky.

*The End*