

What She Wants for Christmas

JANICE KAY JOHNSON

She couldn't help loving him...



Janice Johnson

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Johnson J. K.

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All Teresa wants under her Christmas tree is Joe Hughes! Teresa has finally met her perfect man. Joe is gorgeous, strong and passionate...but he also has an intensely private quality that's a challenge to any self-respecting woman. And it's not as though Teresa really needs another challenge in her life. She's just moved to a small town in Washington, which her young son thinks is "cool" and her teenage daughter hates! And even worse, although Teresa's a darn good vet, the local farmers won't let her treat their livestock. But through it all, Teresa can't resist loving Joe. Even when she learns he's keeping a secret that threatens their future happiness....

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“Is something wrong, Mom?”

She ought to tell him she didn't expect to see Joe ever again. But she couldn't. Not at Christmas. “No,” she said shakily.

Mark nodded, apparently satisfied.

“You really like Joe, don't you?” Teresa asked.

Mark stopped playing with his Christmas gift from Joe. He lifted his head. Joe was the first man Mark had really cared about since his father's death. Losing Joe, too, would devastate her son. Her heart wouldn't be the only one breaking.

“Yeah,” Mark said carefully. “He's really cool. I was thinking—I mean wondering...well, do you think you might marry him?” The last came out in a rush.

She couldn't seem to speak, didn't know what to say.

The truth, she thought. Tell him as much of the truth as you can bear.

“If he ever asks me to marry him, I'd say yes.”

Mark studied her for a long moment, his eyes serious, then gave another decisive nod. “Good.”

What She Wants for Christmas

Janice Kay Johnson



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Janice Kay Johnson is the author of more than sixty books for adults and children. She has been a finalist for a Romance Writers of America RITA® Award four times for her Harlequin Superromance novels. A former librarian, Janice lives north of Seattle, Washington, and is an active volunteer and board member of Purrfect Pals, a no-kill cat shelter. When not fostering kittens or writing, she gardens, quilts, reads and e-mails her two daughters, who are both in Southern California.

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CHAPTER ONE

“CAN’T WE GO shopping?”

Thirty seconds after walking in the front door from a lousy day at work, these were not the first words Teresa Burkett wanted to hear from her daughter.

“Don’t whine,” she said automatically. “I didn’t let you whine when you were two, and I’m not going to start now.”

Nicole dumped a cat off her lap and rose from her slouch on the sofa. Sounding teenage indignant, she said, “Can’t I ask a perfectly reasonable question?”

“Certainly.” Teresa headed for the kitchen. “Go right ahead.”

Mark was already there. A typical ten-going-on-eleven-year-old boy, he was eating. String cheese, a bowl of some sugary cereal and a pop. Teresa shuddered.

She opened the fridge and grabbed a cola. Caffeine. She needed it quick. One long swallow later, she noticed the casserole dish, still covered with aluminum foil, reposing on the refrigerator shelf.

Stay calm. “You didn’t put dinner on like I asked.”

“Mo-om.” Her pretty dark-haired daughter looked at her as if she were an idiot. “It isn’t time to put dinner on. You’re home early.”

Teresa sighed. “I’m sorry. I forgot.”

Mouth full, Mark asked, “How was your day?”

“Crummy.” She made a face. “I did three spays, wormed two horses and treated a few miscellaneous cats and dogs. Otherwise, I hung around the clinic hopefully and helped Eric load his truck.”

The dairy farmers had decided their animals could afford to wait until the vet they knew—a man—could get around to them. They were a conservative lot, these farmers. Their daughters and wives might get their hands dirty helping out, but they didn’t make the major decisions and they didn’t become veterinarians.

A couple of the farmers had checked Teresa out by bringing their cats or dogs in for treatment. She had to assume that her appearance was part of the problem. Maybe if she’d been a big strapping gal, they would have accepted her gender philosophically. Instead, she was a slender five foot four when she stretched. Her wiry strength didn’t show. She looked petite and elegant, ornamental instead of useful.

Only, if they wouldn’t give her a chance, how the hell did she demonstrate her competence? A wave of panic washed over her. Financially and legally, she was Dr. Eric Bergstrom’s partner now; she’d bought into the practice. But she wouldn’t blame him if he got damn tired of doing all the work while she loitered around the clinic.

“Dr. Craig said you could come back to your old job any time.” Nicole was trying hard not to sound hopeful. “It’s not too late. The sale on this...house hasn’t even closed.” The pause was calculated; the three-bedroom farmhouse on the edge of town was not, in Nicole’s opinion, a suitable residence for a sophisticated teenager. She belonged back in the oversize, ostentatious, French-provincial style home they’d left behind in Bellevue, an increasingly ritzy community across Lake Washington from Seattle. Teresa was trying very hard to be patient. Fifteen was a tough age at which to have to move, but Nicole would adjust.

Assuming, Teresa thought ruefully, that her mother didn’t end up tucking her tail between her legs and running.

“Actually, I signed the papers today. It’s all ours. Give up, kiddo,” she said lightly, then groaned when the dogs leapt to their feet and raced, barking, to the front door. A second later the doorbell rang. “Are either of you expecting a friend?”

“Friend?” Nicole struck an astonished pose. “Who has a friend?”

Nonetheless, she trailed her mother to the door. Presumably even some hick neighbor would be a diversion in this outpost of civilization.

“Quiet!” Teresa snapped at the dogs. Golda and Serena quit barking and looked sheepish. She opened the door and gaped. If the man on her porch was a hick, might she never find civilization again.

He actually wore overalls and muddy work boots, as most of the farmers around here seemed to, but this guy was built. Muscles, shoulders wide enough to shelter a woman from a cold wind, long legs... He had to be at least six foot two. His straight dark hair looked silky, his lean face was tanned, his wide mouth set in the kind of grim line that served as a challenge to any self-respecting woman. But it was his eyes that riveted her. In that dark face, they were a vivid electric blue.

“May I help you?” Thank God, she didn’t sound quite as dumbstruck as she felt.

He moved his shoulders, as though uncomfortably aware of what had been going through her mind. “Dr. Burkett?”

“Yes?” A client?

“My sister suggested I stop by. Jess Kerrigan. She said you wanted some trees taken down.”

Trees? Jess Kerrigan? Teresa snapped out of it. Jess was the nice owner of those show-quality Arabians. She had actually agreed cheerfully to let the new vet treat one of them. And the conversation with her had even been useful. During a discussion of Teresa’s old farmhouse—Jess knew the previous owners—Teresa had asked about tree-toppers. Her client had remarked that her brother was a logging contractor.

“He’ll give you a good price,” she’d announced. “I’ll tell him to.”

“Oh, you don’t need—”

“We like to welcome newcomers to White Horse.”

If only the dairy farmers felt the same.

The man was still standing there on her doorstep waiting. Teresa pulled herself together. “Bless you. I’d forgotten to get your name or phone number from her. Why don’t you come in?”

He glanced down at his boots. “I’d better not. If you could just show me the trees...”

“Sure.” She stepped out and let the dogs slip through. Closing the door in her astonished daughter’s face, she smiled. “Around the house.”

She was conscious of him behind her in a way she couldn’t ever remember being. She couldn’t remember, either, the last time she’d hoped so fervently that a man had noticed her, as well. Unless... Oh, no—had Jess Kerrigan said anything about a sister-in-law? But of course he’d be married. Any man this beautiful had to be. In fact, any man over thirty with a half-decent character was married, never mind what he looked like.

The front lawn was springy under her feet. Too springy; it was half moss, shaded by the stand of mixed cedar and hemlocks to the south of the house.

“These,” she said simply, standing aside. “The realtor said one of them came down last year on the roof, which is why the house has a new one. I don’t want to take a chance on a repeat. Besides, I’d like a little more sun. The closets are mildewing.”

He nodded and rubbed his chin reflectively as he stood contemplating the fifteen or so trees, tilting his head back to gaze up, then glancing around as though her yard told him something.

“I thought I might leave the big cedar,” Teresa said, feeling the need to fill the silence. “It’s pretty.”

Without a word, he went to the tree. From a pocket in his overalls, he pulled a screwdriver and poked it into the trunk. “Rotten. Better take it out, too.”

“Rotten? Oh, what a shame.”

“Are you thinking you might get much for these trees?”

“Get much?” She blinked, then realized she didn’t even know the man’s name. When she asked, he looked surprised.

“Sorry. I guess I figured Jess would have mentioned it. Joe Hughes.” He held out one large hand. It completely engulfed hers. She liked the feeling, which took her aback. She’d spent most of her life trying to overcome the handicap of her size. Now she wanted to be overwhelmed by some primitive hunk of masculinity?

There was no denying it. That was exactly what she wanted. Their clasped hands brought other visions to her mind: his head bent over hers, his body pressing hers down, his— She firmly put the brakes on her imagination. He was married, she reminded herself. He must be. Besides, he hadn’t demonstrated any great interest in her. Maybe his tastes ran to six-foot Nordic goddesses.

But, no. He hadn’t let her hand go, and when she lifted her gaze to his, it was to catch a flicker of something in those eyes that sped up her pulse more than her first chance at surgery had. Were his cheeks tinged with red as he finally released her hand?

“Jess always says I have no manners,” he said ruefully. “I guess she’s right.”

“What do sisters know?” Teresa said, grinning at him.

He lifted one dark brow. Didn’t it figure he could. “You have some, too?”

“Two. I’m the middle child. I’m sure that’s why my psyche is so fragile.”

For a moment he studied her as gravely as he had the stand of trees. Then he smiled, slow and heart-stoppingly sexy. “You look fragile all right, but my mama always taught me appearances are deceiving.”

“Smart woman.”

His eyes lingered on her face as the smile faded. She felt flushed and dizzy.

“Five hundred dollars,” he said.

“What?” She stared at him.

“For your stumpage. The trees aren’t big enough to be worth much, but I can get them out easy enough—the truck can back right down your driveway. Pulp mill’ll take ’em. You’ll be rid of the trees and have a little cash.”

Thank heavens for his speech, the longest out of his mouth yet. It had given her time to realize he wasn’t offering five hundred dollars for her body.

“Does that include your taking the stumps out, not just grinding them down?”

“Yup. And burning the stumps and slash.”

“You’re on,” she said.

That eyebrow rose again. “Don’t you want to get other bids?”

“I already have. Two. One of the guys wanted to charge me two thousand dollars. Said the trees weren’t worth anything. He was going to buck them into firewood length and leave them for me. I’d have been stacking them for the rest of my life. The other fellow didn’t do stumps. He gave me the names of a couple of places that grind them down. I’m thinking of putting the vegetable garden there. How can I if the ground is full of roots?”

Joe Hughes nodded. “I don’t think anybody would beat my price, anyway.”

“Your sister guaranteed you.”

“Sisters are good for something,” he said, straight-faced.

“Yours seemed like a nice woman. She let me touch her horses.”

He heard the flash of bitterness, because those disconcerting eyes fixed themselves on her face again. “You’re a vet.”

“I’m a woman.”

His gaze flicked downward, then back to her face. “I noticed,” he said in a voice that had roughened just enough to be a compliment.

“Women are apparently competent to treat a five-pound cat. A thousand-pound Jersey cow is another story.”

He frowned. “Guess we’re a little backward in White Horse.”

“Eric—Eric Bergstrom, that is—warned me, but he thought the farmers would get over it. Judging from my first few weeks, they’re not in any hurry to.”

“We’ll have to see what we can do about that,” Joe said.

She made a face. “Don’t tell me you’re a dairy farmer on the side.”

“Nope. Hardly know one end of a cow from another. But I have friends who are.”

“Ah. You’re going to tell them what a sweet girl I am.”

He apparently didn’t mind her sarcasm, because one corner of his mouth twitched. “I’m going to tell them which end of their cow not to be.”

A cow’s ass. She liked it.

“Might come better from you than me,” she conceded. Her basically cheerful nature triumphed and she laughed. “When can you take out my trees?”

“Next week. Say, Monday.”

Monday was one of her days off. She could watch. She didn’t kid herself about what—or who—she’d be watching.

She smiled and held out her hand. “See you then.”

He glanced down at her hand and seemed to deliberate for a moment before he took it. His grip sent a shiver through her. When he released her, he flexed his fingers before balling them into a fist. Unfortunately his face told her remarkably little.

“Monday,” he repeated, gave a brief nod and headed for his huge shiny blue pickup without a backward glance.

Teresa wandered into the house. Both kids were waiting for her.

“Who,” her daughter demanded, enunciating carefully, “was he?”

“A hunk, wasn’t he?”

Nicole’s lip curled. “He was dirty!”

Teresa was in just the mood to provoke a little outrage. Musingly she said, “There’s something about a sweaty man...a day’s growth of beard...a little dirt under his fingernails...”

“But, Mom!” Mark stared at her as if she’d gone stark-raving mad. “Then how come you won’t let me go to school dirty? How come I have to wash my hands before we eat? How come—?”

“You’re not a man, stupid.” His sister didn’t even glance at him. “You’re a boy. A little kid. A—”

“You think you’re so grown-up? Then how come the men aren’t all lined up outside?”

“There isn’t anyone in this nowhere place I’d want lined up!” Nicole flared. “And can’t you tell when Mom is putting you on?”

“Actually, I wasn’t,” Teresa said calmly. “He’s a very handsome man. Now, can we quit bickering? He’s also a logger who is going to take those wretched trees out for us. Monday.”

“Cool,” Mark declared. “Can I watch?”

“Nope. You’ll be in school by then, remember? Registration tomorrow.”

“School!” Nicole collapsed on a kitchen chair. “Mom, what am I going to wear?”

“How about leggings and a sweater?”

“How about overalls and work boots?” her fifteen-year-old retorted bitterly.

“Seems to me a pair of sacky overalls is one of your standards,” Teresa agreed. “Good idea.”

“Please, please, please, can we go shopping?”

“Nope.”

“Why?” Nicole wailed.

“Because I don’t want to,” Teresa said reasonably. “And you have a perfectly adequate wardrobe. Now, can I turn the oven on?”

“Why didn’t you let me move in with Jayne?” Nicole jumped to her feet. “This place stinks!” She ran from the room and a moment later Teresa heard her feet thundering up the stairs.

She’d probably spend the rest of the evening on the telephone with her friends in Bellevue. The long-distance charges would have to become an issue eventually, but for now Teresa figured

they were a small price to pay. She sighed and saw Mark staring after his sister with almost as much bewilderment as his mother felt.

“Like Bellevue was so great.” He stuffed some string cheese in his mouth. “What’s for dinner, Mom?”

Thank God for one cheerful member of her family. “Chicken and artichoke hearts.”

“Cool,” he said again. He even submitted to a hug, though he didn’t have a clue why she felt compelled to give it.

“YOU SHOULD HAVE seen this guy.” Nicole flopped back against her pillow and rolled her eyes, even though Jayne couldn’t see. “I swear he had size-twelve feet, and these clumps of mud were sticking to his boots, and he wore overalls. I wouldn’t have been surprised if he’d been chewing on a piece of straw.”

“He’s your neighbor?” Jayne sounded properly horrified.

“No, he’s some kind of logger. Mom’s having some trees taken out.”

“Well, then, you’ll probably never see him again.”

“Everybody here looks like that,” Nicole said gloomily. “They’re all farmers or loggers or something. I heard these two girls talking the other day, and one of them is competing to become Dairy Princess at the fair next year. Can you imagine? The crown probably has horns on it!”

Nicole wasn’t sure why, but she didn’t tell Jayne her mother had thought the logger was a hunk. No, that wasn’t true; she did know why. She was embarrassed. Her own mother, for crying out loud!

“Listen,” Jayne said, “I gotta go. Maddy and Kelly and I are going to a film festival tonight. They’re running a bunch of foreign films. I don’t like subtitles, but Maddy says some of the guys are going, including—get this—Russell Harlan, so I’m wearing that red dress—you know, that one you helped me pick out—and my hair on top of my head in a scrunchy, and he can’t miss me, right?”

Talking to her best friend hadn’t helped, Nicole thought a moment later, hanging up. Now she was more depressed. She was the one who’d liked Russ Harlan, not Jayne. He had these really dark eyes and he wore an earring and he was super intense about things. She’d wanted him intense about her. She was the one he was supposed to be noticing, not Jayne.

“I feel like I’ve been sent to prison,” she said aloud to her empty room. Her room. Yeah, right. Her bedroom had had blue plush carpet and a cushioned window seat and its own bathroom. This room had peeling wallpaper, which her mother said they’d replace, and bare wood floors. Her gilt-trimmed bedroom set looked about as out of place as Nicole felt.

They couldn’t stay in this dump. They just couldn’t. Things were great in Bellevue. Nicole wished she’d paid more attention to all Mom’s talk about buying into a veterinary practice somewhere. She’d been looking for so long Nicole quit listening when Mom talked about why she liked or didn’t like this town or that vet or whatever. Big mistake. She should have listened carefully. Instead, first thing she knew, her mother had gone ahead and done it. A For Sale sign appeared in their front yard, and they all drove up here one Saturday to look at houses.

The sight of White Horse had put Nicole in shock. It had a whole two streets of businesses. One pizza parlor that she could see. One! The movie theater was this run-down little place that played a single movie at a time, a month or more after it’d opened in Seattle and Bellevue and even Everett. The high school was this huge ugly stucco building that must have been built fifty years ago. Mom thought it was great that you could walk anywhere in town. Great. Where were you supposed to go? The library? The bowling alley? Who bowled?

And she had to register for school tomorrow and start the next day. Mom insisted that moving during the summer was easiest, so she wouldn’t be the only kid whose first day it was. Nicole had believed her then, but that was before she’d seen White Horse. How many new kids were there likely to be in the high school? Two? Three? She could just see it now: heads turning as she walked into each class, the stares as she went down the hall.

Well, she didn't care what a bunch of farmers thought, anyway. What she had to do was figure out how to get her mother to change her mind and move back to Bellevue.

At first she'd thought it was hopeless, but lately she'd begun to wonder. The farmers around here didn't want a woman vet, which Nicole thought sucked, except for the fact that her mom was looking more discouraged every day. Her mom had figured White Horse was some kind of rural paradise; she'd given Nicole and Mark all these lectures about how the move was as much for them as for her, because in a small town like this they were getting away from drugs and crime and gangs. So everything was supposed to be perfect, right?

The first glimmerings of an idea brought creases to Nicole's brow. Wait a minute—Mom was catching the drift, but too slowly. Dr. Craig would hire someone to take her place at the animal hospital in Bellevue; then, even if they left White Horse, they might have to go somewhere else. What if Nicole could speed up the process? Show her mother all the crummy parts of life in this cow town? She could mount a campaign. She wouldn't want to be obvious; that would make Mom mad. No, she could be really subtle, just sort of coax Mom to really look around.

Surely that was all it would take.

By this time, Nicole was sitting bolt upright, legs crossed. Like tomorrow. She wouldn't let her mother stop at the school office. No, she'd insist that someone give them a tour, show them the lab facilities—did this school know what a lab was?—and the library. Another of the things Mom went on and on about was how important a good education was. Nicole smiled. If her mother thought they wouldn't get a good education here, they were gone.

Back to Bellevue. Yes.

JOE GLANCED at his watch. Noon. "Take an hour," he called, and the two men he'd brought out on this job nodded and carried their chain saws to the open back of his pickup.

They consulted briefly and then Brad Mauser said, "We're going to run into town and get some burgers. Want to come?"

Joe's glance strayed to the kitchen window of the farmhouse, where he could see the blur of a white face and dark hair. "Nah." He shrugged. "I brought a sandwich."

Though he was used to the scream of chain saws and the thunder of falling trees, the silence after the men left was welcome. Autumn sunshine warm on his back, he looked around at their morning's work.

A dozen trees lay on the ground between the house and fence, lined up as neatly as pick-up sticks pulled from the pile. Most of the downed trees had already been shaved of their limbs and were ready for loading. If all went well, they'd have the other half down this afternoon. Come morning, they could get the timber out of here and clean up. Give the slash a few weeks to dry and he'd come back and burn it. If he was smart, he'd come back on a day when Dr. Teresa Burkett was working and therefore not home.

The jolt he'd felt in his gut when she opened the door that day last week had scared him a little. She was out of his league. He was lucky to have a high-school diploma. She'd finished God knows how many years of college. He was a small-town boy with no ambition to leave his home. She was a big-city professional woman who probably thought White Horse was pretty and peaceful. It was. But, unlike him, she'd be heading for Seattle every time she got bored.

He couldn't afford to acknowledge his attraction to her or the spark of interest he'd seen in her dark eyes.

Sandwich, he reminded himself, before his glance strayed again to her kitchen window. He grunted and turned toward the driveway where his pickup was parked. Rounding the house, he walked right into her.

Joe reached out and grabbed her before she went tumbling. Eyes wide, she looked up at him. "I'm sorry! That was dumb. I wasn't watching—"

“I don’t know who was dumb,” he interrupted. “I’m the one who almost ran you down.” Reluctantly he let her go. Her shoulders felt as fragile under his hands as she’d declared her psyche to be. “Did you come out to see our progress?”

“Well, actually—” her tongue touched her lips “—I came out to invite you and your men in for lunch.”

He had trouble not staring at her mouth. “They went into town.”

Damn, she was beautiful, tiny, with these huge brown eyes and delicate features emphasized by the severity of the French braid that confined her dark hair. But it was neither the tiny nor the beautiful that got to him; it was the defiance in her eyes, coupled with the smile that played most of the time at one corner of her mouth.

“Well, then.” She met his gaze boldly, though now her cheeks were touched with pink. “Can I talk you into lunch?”

“You don’t need to cook—”

“I already did. Homemade minestrone soup and fresh-baked bread.”

“I’m too dirty to come in.”

“You can take your boots off.”

What could he say? A moment later he padded in stocking feet into her bathroom to wash his hands. Waiting for the water to warm up, he frowned at his image in the mirror. What the hell did she see in him? All that met his eyes were dirty denim, callused hands and a haircut that was long on function and short on style. She’d discover soon enough that his conversation could be summed up about the same way.

But, by God, at least he was clean when he returned to the kitchen. She’d set the table there: two quilted place mats, a glass jar of spiky asters and late daisies, stemmed water glasses, silverware laid out properly, with an extra fork for some unseen dessert. It was pretty—and made him feel awkward. Only the sight of her black Labrador lying under the table belied the formality.

Her eyes touched his face and shied away. “You’re my first guest in this house. I thought I’d celebrate.”

He nodded and sat down while she ladled steaming fragrant soup into his bowl and offered him slices of crusty warm bread.

“Would you like a beer?” she asked, and he relaxed a little. At least she wasn’t pouring French wine.

“No, thanks. I don’t drink when I’m going to operate a chain saw or heavy equipment.”

“Oh. No, of course not.”

“I haven’t seen a woman blush in a long time,” he heard himself say.

That did it. Her cheeks were now as rosy as though a winter freeze were biting at them. But she also laughed.

“I don’t usually blush. I think it must be you.”

Him? What was she saying? If she’d been any other woman, he would have known, but her? Why him?

“I’m sorry if I’m making you uncomfortable,” he said clumsily.

He almost thought he heard her sigh. “Are you married?” she asked.

His heart did a peculiar heavy-footed dance in his chest. “No.”

Her cheeks hadn’t faded one iota. “Engaged or...or...”

He helped her out. “No.”

“Oh.”

A slow smile was growing on his face. “Are you going somewhere with this, ma’am?”

“I’m just curious,” she said with dignity.

He laid down his butter knife and said quietly, “Good.”

Their eyes met and held for a long quivering moment. The breath of air he sucked in seared his chest.

"I know you're not married," he said. "Are you divorced?"

"Widowed." Pain, or at least regret, twisted her mouth. "Five years ago. My husband was an idiot. He made an ultra-light from a kit. He was flying it when it drifted into some electrical wires. The day was windy—" She snorted. "But he had to go up."

"You didn't approve of his hobby, I take it."

"I hated it!" He felt her tension. "I haven't forgiven him yet."

"I don't blame you," Joe admitted. "I've never understood why someone would risk losing everything—" a woman like you "—for some kind of momentary thrill."

"It was what he did to the kids." Her eyes appealed to him for understanding.

"Tell me about them."

She did, while Joe had three bowls of soup and more slabs of bread than he wanted to count. The woman was not only beautiful, she could cook. And he'd better quit thinking this way.

Mark, he heard, was almost eleven, a fifth grader who'd taken the move philosophically and had already signed up for soccer.

"Boys," she said, with an expressive shrug. "They always seem to play in mobs and accept one more kid without question. Girls, now..."

Her fifteen-year-old, whom Joe had seen over Teresa's shoulder last week, was another story. When he asked about her, an odd expression crossed her face, half amusement, half exasperation.

"She had friends—although I didn't like them very much. Moving is a lot harder at her age. I just wish she'd try."

"With her looks, she won't have any trouble getting dates."

"Thank you." Teresa flashed him a grateful smile. "She is pretty, isn't she?"

"Looks a lot like her mother."

A shadow crossed Teresa's face. "I don't know if that's a blessing or a curse."

He heard a car out in the driveway and assumed his men were back, but she didn't seem to notice. "Because you have trouble being taken seriously?" he asked.

"Uh-huh." Her faraway expression faded and she jumped to her feet. "Listen to me. And I tell my kids not to whine. Will you have some apple pie, Joe?"

He ran an internal check and decided he could squeeze in a slice.

While she cut it, she chattered some more. "We have four cats and the two dogs—you've met them. Most vets have even more animals than that. It's an occupational hazard. I keep encountering ones that need homes. At least they're happy here." She set two plates of pie on the table.

"From our own trees," she said with satisfaction, lifting a forkful to her mouth. "This is the life."

For how long? he wondered. About as long as he'd interest her? Or was he misjudging her?

If he was smart, he wouldn't bother finding out. But he'd never been accused of belonging in any program for the intellectually gifted, now had he? He told himself he'd hurt her feelings if he didn't ask her out. They'd made too many spoken and unspoken acknowledgments to each other for him to drop it here.

He insisted on carrying his dishes to the sink. There, he turned to face her. "Any chance you'd have dinner with me Friday night?" he asked casually enough that she wouldn't feel pressured if he was reading her wrong.

She smiled saucily. "I'd say there's a chance."

"You remind me of my sister," he said without thinking.

"Jess?"

"No, the other one. Rebecca."

"Looks? Or because we're both mouthy?"

He hesitated a little too long. Sooner or later she'd meet Rebecca and discover they didn't look anything alike. Sure enough, it was the smart mouths they had in common.

Apparently unoffended, Teresa laughed. "I'll look forward to meeting her. Tell me her husband is a dairy farmer."

"Nope. Owns a string of rental stores."

"I've been in the one here in town. His?"

"Mmm."

"Is there any pie your family doesn't have its finger in?"

"Not many," Joe admitted. "My brother, Lee, owns an auto-body repair place on Third. Rebecca sells wallpaper and blinds out of Browder's Flooring. Jess—but you know her. Her firm cleans the veterinary clinic, as I recall. Our father sold insurance until his heart attack a few years back."

"You must have a heck of a grapevine."

He grimaced. "You have no idea."

"Your men are peering in the windows," she said suddenly.

He turned and waved, hoping he wasn't blushing. He could imagine how they'd razz him if they got a good look at his stocking feet and the pretty table set for two.

"Six o'clock?" he said.

She blinked. "Why does that remind me of five hundred dollars?"

He stared at her. "I have no idea."

"Six," she agreed, and he nodded.

"Thanks for lunch."

He got another one of those impish grins. "Thanks for not dropping a tree on my house."

"Bad for the insurance rates," he said laconically, and let the screen door slam behind him while he sat down on the porch to lace up his boots.

CHAPTER TWO

WHEN JOE HAD ASKED about Nicole, the very mention of her name had been enough to prick Teresa with exasperation, amusement, puzzlement, frustration and even reluctant admiration. She'd no doubt gotten an odd look on her face. There was a good reason for it. In the past week, Nicole had obviously changed her tactics. Teresa wasn't foolish enough to think she'd given up.

For example, last Wednesday Nicole had gone along sweetly and willingly to register at the high school. When Teresa stared doubtfully up at the building and said, "Gee, it's kinda ugly, isn't it?" Nicole didn't jump right on her mother's minor criticism and try to make something major out of it.

Instead, she gave a dainty shrug and said, "It probably doesn't matter, as long as the district has spent their money where it counts."

What kid ever thought of a school district in terms of a limited budget and priorities? Not Nicole, that was for sure. Wary, Teresa trailed her up the wide stairs and in the double doors.

Sounding sanctimonious, her daughter whispered, "Don't they have handicapped access?"

"I'm sure they do," Teresa returned dryly.

The guidance counselor in the office was friendly. She agreed to put Nicole in third year French even though the class was technically full. Nicole's face fell with exaggerated disappointment as she examined the offerings.

"Oh, I was really looking forward to taking song writing this year."

"Maybe you should worry about bringing your algebra grade up, instead," her mother suggested.

The counselor had a twinkle in her eye. "Perhaps you'd like to try drama, Nicole. You look like acting might come naturally."

"Only if it's in the form of melodrama," Teresa muttered.

Her daughter gave her a glare. "Yeah, okay," she said to the counselor. "Why not? There isn't anything else."

"It's too bad you missed new-student orientation," the counselor concluded brightly, "but there's no reason you and your mother can't wander around the building right now. Here's a map, so you can find your classrooms—"

"Are the rooms unlocked?" Nicole sounded so earnest Teresa was immediately suspicious.

"Why, yes, I think so. You'll probably find some of the teachers—getting ready for the onslaught tomorrow."

"Can we look around?" Nicole asked when they left the office.

"Well, of course." Teresa nodded at the map and schedule Nicole carried. "What's your first class?"

"Um...algebra. Room 233." She peered around doubtfully. "Are we on the second floor here, do you think?"

They were; 233 was just down the hall. Nicole insisted on glancing in. It looked like any other classroom to Teresa, if a little old-fashioned. The ceilings were high, the woodwork dark, and a smell of floor polish was underlaid with that of chalk and the pages of new textbooks, piled on a table by the door.

The chemistry lab looked perfectly adequate to Teresa, as well; Nicole critiqued it as they wandered between high black-topped tables furnished with microscopes and glass beakers and petri dishes. Teresa, filled with nostalgia for her own high-school days, was able to tune her daughter out. She'd had a mad crush on her biology/chemistry teacher, in part because he inspired her with his own passionate interest in the unseen organisms that cause disease or well-being. It had taken her a while to realize she was more excited by cell division than she was by him.

They progressed to the library, where Nicole prowled the shelves, returning to announce, "This collection is ancient! How does anybody do any research here?"

“Fortunately White Horse belongs to an excellent public library system,” Teresa reminded her. “In fact, the local branch isn’t two blocks from here. You can go over there on your way home from school.”

Her daughter frowned at her. “Don’t you think they ought to have a better school library?”

“Yep. I’ll join the PTA and campaign for a bigger book budget.”

“Fat lot of good that’ll do me,” Nicole muttered.

“Probably not,” Teresa admitted, “but it might achieve something before Mark gets to high school.”

“I suppose you think his education is more important than mine!”

Teresa gave an inward sigh. “You know that isn’t true. But I see no reason you won’t get a perfectly adequate education here. Let’s face it, at this level it’s the teacher that counts. The teacher, and the effort you are willing to expend.” She added some briskness to her voice. “If you get bored, next year you can start taking some classes at the community college in Everett.”

“I’m supposed to be happy when you pulled me out of a great high school—”

“Rife with drugs and gangs.”

“—and moved me here.” Examining a banner decorating the wall above a bank of metal lockers, Nicole curled her lip. “This one is full of Future Farmers of America.” Every word was a sneer. “What am I supposed to do, learn how to milk a cow?”

“Wouldn’t hurt. I had to,” Teresa said unsympathetically. “Have you seen enough? Shall we go find Mark?”

Rolled eyes. “Yeah, I’ve seen enough.”

Outside they found Mark involved in an impromptu soccer game with a bunch of boys who ranged from third or fourth grade on up to middle-school age. He trotted over.

“Can I stay awhile, Mom? For an hour or two?”

“You bet.” She cuffed him lightly on the shoulder. “Have fun.”

Nicole turned the full battery of entreaty on her from wide brown eyes. “Since we have an hour, can we go shopping, Mom? Please?”

Teresa hated to shop. She didn’t care about clothes, seldom bothered with makeup, couldn’t remember the last time she’d worn a dress. How she’d given birth to a child obsessed with appearances would forever remain a mystery to her.

But this struck her as an intelligent moment to compromise. “Fine. We’ll see what the town has to offer.”

A smug smile curled her daughter’s pale mouth. Because she’d won? Or because she figured she had a chance to show her mother how inadequate White Horse was? Self-absorbed as she was, she probably hadn’t noticed that Teresa visited malls only under duress.

Teresa decided the answer was the latter when she shocked Nicole out of her socks by actually finding an outfit she liked. White Horse only had two clothing stores. One of them had beautiful, high-quality casual clothes for women. Teresa looked around happily. “I’ll never have to hit the mall again. I’ll just come in here and snap something up.”

“But this is old-lady stuff!”

“You mean, it’s not teenage stuff. I am not a teenager, believe it or not.” She headed for a display of cotton sweaters.

“Mo-om.”

She waved Nicole off. “Let me try these things on.”

Twenty minutes later, she paid for a pair of slim-fitting pants, a tunic-length sweater and a chunky silver necklace to wear over it.

A very sulky teenager followed her out onto the sidewalk. “Where am I supposed to shop?”

“The Everett Mall is only forty-five minutes away.”

“Everett!”

“Bellevue Square isn’t much over an hour. Surely some of those friends who used to pick you up every morning will come up here and get you once in a while.”

“Oh, right.” Nicole flung herself into the passenger seat of the car and slumped down, her expression tight. “They’re supposed to drive for almost four hours just to see me.”

Once behind the wheel, Teresa studied her daughter. She looked and sounded so unhappy Teresa reached out and stroked her hair. “Sweetheart—”

Nicole averted her face. “Oh, please. Spare me the lecture about making the best of it.”

Teresa hesitated, then started the car. Maybe, determined that her children be as happy about the move as she’d been, she had been insensitive to Nicole’s misery. On one level, she understood it; on another, she didn’t at all. She hadn’t been as social a creature as her daughter was. At that age, she’d been absorbed in her books and her studies and her ambition for the future. She’d had friends of course, but she didn’t remember missing them all that much when she went off to college. Probably she wouldn’t have missed them any more if her family had moved.

And here she’d been accusing Nicole of being self-absorbed. Maybe, Teresa thought ruefully, she was the selfish one. She’d convinced herself that the kids would be better off in small-town America because this was what she wanted for herself. She still thought this was a better place to raise children—but maybe Nicole was already too formed by her environment to adjust. Maybe, along with the veterinary practice and the farmhouse, Teresa had bought her daughter unhappiness.

The thought was an unsettling one.

IT WAS STILL on her mind on Friday as she dressed for her date with Joe Hughes. Nicole hadn’t been happy to hear that her mother was going out with the logger and that she was condemned to baby-sit her little brother. It didn’t help when Teresa pointed out that Nicole would have been sitting home, anyway.

Realizing her mistake immediately, Teresa tried to amend it. “You haven’t picked up any baby-sitting clientele yet—”

“How can I? I don’t know anybody.”

“Why don’t I put up a notice for you at the clinic?”

Nicole lifted one finger and traced a dispirited circle in the air. “Wow.”

“Joe mentioned brothers and sisters. Maybe they have kids.”

“Mom.” Nicole waited until her mother turned to look at her. “I don’t care if I baby-sit. I don’t need the money. There’s nowhere to shop, remember? Nobody to shop with? Okay?”

Teresa gritted her teeth at the snotty tone, but decided to let it pass. This time.

She ended up wearing the outfit she’d bought in town that day with Nicole. If Joe showed up in a suit and tie, she’d whisk back into the bedroom and exchange the leggings for a calf-length gauzy skirt.

As it turned out, he wore jeans and a plaid sports shirt that echoed the extraordinary blue of his eyes. His eyes took in her appearance with one swift assessing glance and returned, obviously approving, to her face.

“Do you like Mexican food? I thought we’d go to La Hacienda here in town.”

“Love it,” she assured him, standing aside. “Joe, I’d like you to meet my kids. Nicole, Mark, come here.”

He shook hands solemnly with both, didn’t remark on Nicole’s teenage sulkiness and agreed with Mark that soccer was a popular sport in White Horse.

“One of my nieces plays select soccer,” Joe said. “She’s darn good. They go to tournaments all over the state.”

“That’d be cool.” Mark’s eyes were wide.

Briskly Teresa ended the preliminaries. “See you, guys. I don’t know what time I’ll be home.”

In the pickup, Joe said, “I feel a little guilty leaving them behind. I could feed them, too—”

“No!” she exclaimed, then saw his surprise and amusement. She made a face. “Nicole’s driving me nuts,” she admitted. “I need a break.” There was more, of course. The moment she’d answered

the door, she'd remembered why she'd wanted so badly to go out with this man. The fantasies she'd indulged in this past week had not included her children.

"You ought to talk to Jess. Her oldest is, uh—" he obviously had to calculate "—twelve going on thirteen. She's been a pain in the butt lately."

"Maybe I will. Tell me, how many nieces and nephews do you have?"

"Uh..." More calculations. "Seven. Lee has four, Jess two and Rebecca one. Although she's expecting another."

"And you all live here in town?"

He offered her that heart-stopping grin. "Pretty overwhelming, huh?"

Had she sounded rude? She would have liked to see her own sisters and their families more often, but...

"My younger sister was so nosy," she said. "Still is."

"My mother is the nosy one." His big shoulders moved. "I ignore her."

Teresa could imagine that. His rock-solid steadiness was part of what attracted her, but it wouldn't make him a flexible man. So to speak.

"You don't have any kids?" She hoped her question sounded casual.

"Never been married." The statement so carefully held no inflection it should have stopped her from commenting. It didn't.

"You're kidding."

Joe shot her a glance. "Why's that so surprising?"

"Because you're, ah..." Fumbling for words, she settled for the truth. "You're a hunk. I can't believe some woman didn't snap you up."

"Like a tasty fly?" he asked wryly.

Teresa couldn't resist it. She chanted, "There was a young woman who swallowed a fly..."

"And now she'll die?" he concluded.

Of happiness, maybe, Teresa thought, but had the sense not to say.

"I guess the whole analogy is a little—" she grinned "—distasteful."

He groaned. "Oh, God, a woman who likes puns."

"Didn't someone say it's the highest form of humor?"

"Are you sure it wasn't the lowest?"

"You should have heard us in vet school," Teresa said cheerfully. "We were bad."

"Question is, are you hungry?"

She blinked and looked around. Heavens, they were parked in front of the restaurant. How long had they been here while she blathered?

"Starved," she admitted. "A day of standing around always makes me think about food."

He started to circle the truck, presumably to get the door for her; she didn't wait. If he wanted a lady, he could look elsewhere. But all he said was, "Things no better at work?"

"Heck no." Teresa sighed. "Let's talk about something else."

Over enchiladas, they did. She chattered on about her years of school; he merely shook his head when she asked if he'd gone to college.

"How'd you get started in logging?"

"Summer jobs," he said easily. "By the time I got out of high school, I was already a cutter—I was the one who climbed the trees to top 'em, or take some limbs out. Pay was too good for me to bother looking around for any other line of work. My boss encouraged me to learn to cruise—that's estimating what a stand of timber is worth, so you can make a realistic bid on it. I always had a head for math." He shrugged. "Got some money put away, went into business for myself. Now I keep six other men working."

"You're a family of entrepreneurs."

“Who wants to work for someone else?” His gaze was shrewd. “Isn’t that why you bought into a practice?”

She paused in the midst of cutting her enchilada. “I suppose so. Well, partly. It’s not the money-making side of being a vet that interests me. I wanted more responsibility. In Bellevue I worked at this big clinic with half a dozen vets. It was like I just put in my time—I didn’t make the overall decisions, which sometimes bothered me. For example, I thought our charges were too high. Especially for preventative medicine. I wanted us to keep neutering and vaccination costs to the very minimum. The partners smiled and told me I wasn’t looking at the big picture.”

“You’re an idealist.” The faintest of smiles lurked in his eyes.

Teresa wrinkled her nose. “I suppose so. But partly I was being selfish, too. I was bored. In vet school I especially enjoyed the large-animal work, and we didn’t do any of that where I worked. I was hoping for a mix.”

“Which you found.”

“In theory.”

“They’ll come around,” he said quietly.

“Damn straight they will.” She frowned at him. “I’m going to get every one of those farmers to admit I’m the best vet they’ve ever had!”

“You show ’em.” His smile seemed a bit rueful, and she wondered why.

“Do you think a man could do a better job?” She tilted her chin up in challenge. “Come on. Be honest. What if you needed a mechanic to fix that...that hundred-thousand-dollar monster you had out at my place the other day. Would you hire a woman?”

“Skidder. And it cost a hell of a lot more than a hundred thousand.” Joe set down his fork. “Yeah, I’d hire a woman if I thought she was the best mechanic. You can’t outmuscle a machine that size, or a horse or a cow. You need to outthink ’em. I’ve seen Jess with those horses of hers. She’s a small woman. Those Arabs would do damn near anything for her.”

A sigh escaped Teresa, leaving her deflated. “Sorry. I get worked up.”

“It’s your livelihood.”

“I don’t like injustice.”

“Prejudice of any kind isn’t pretty.”

She almost asked what he knew about it. A handsome white male—he had it made, right? But she’d be a fool to leap to that kind of easy assumption. A kid could be the odd one out for any number of reasons. A teacher friend had once told Teresa there was a “leper” in every class, as if the group as a whole could only bond through rejecting someone who didn’t fit. Teresa had memories of some kids she’d gone to school with who didn’t fit. Looking back, she couldn’t even remember why. Maybe they gave off the wrong pheromones or something.

Not that there was anything wrong with Joe Hughes’s pheromones.

Figuring she’d pushed the limit on sensitive subjects, Teresa backed off over coffee. “Since clients won’t let me treat their animals,” she said, “I’ve been doing most of the billing and follow-ups. Do you ever have trouble collecting debts?”

His mouth curled. “I just tell ’em I’ll be back with the skidder and take their roof off in pieces. Check is usually in the mail.”

She laughed. “Okay. So we should get a rabid Doberman and plan to turn it loose on anyone over thirty days late?”

“There you go.” The smiling intimacy in his eyes was enough to make her think about other even more intimate expressions—and about the approaching end to the evening.

Surely he would kiss her. She hadn’t been on a date where the man didn’t at least give her a peck on the lips. Although truth to tell, she hadn’t been on that many dates. After Tom’s death, she had gone into shock. It must have been a year or more before the numbness began to wear off, letting her be mad as hell at him. And miss him.

She was embarrassed to remember her astonishment when a fellow vet asked her out to dinner and to the symphony. She'd almost blurted, "Me? You want me to go with you? Why?" Then a vague memory of such rituals had clicked in, and she'd realized that, yes, he was a man and, yes, she was woman. Both single. Good Lord, he was interested in her!

She'd gone; why not? She knew him, if not well. It seemed an easy reintroduction to the world of dating. She wasn't all that impressed, either with that date or the scattered few that followed. She never had liked groping for conversation or realizing halfway through dinner that she didn't want that wet mouth to cover hers.

No such problem tonight. Obviously she'd been celibate too long. That had to be the explanation for why she kept staring at Joe's hands, big and tanned and callused, and imagining how those calluses would feel against her skin. Tom had been an airline pilot. Smooth well-kept hands. Nothing like this man's.

And that mouth, tight and controlled. He tilted it into a smile from time to time, even grinned roguishly, but somehow she never had the sense he was really relaxing. Oh, yes, she'd like to see him lose control.

At this point in her speculation, of course, she realized that he was watching her with interest, one eyebrow raised, and that she must have been staring, her expression giving away God knew what. She'd never been accused of being poker-faced.

Damned if she didn't blush. "Sorry. I, uh..."

"You were thinking," he said tactfully. Then a grin twitched the corner of his mouth. "Not that I wouldn't be interested in knowing what you were thinking, but to get back to your question, actually I don't have too many problems with debt collection. As you know, I get half up front, which is enough to pay the men. A lot of my work is on a larger scale than your job. I log land that's going to be developed, for example. I suspect it's the smaller bills people put off paying."

"I hate dunning people." Teresa made a face. "But then, that's what I let myself in for when I insisted on a partnership."

"In a perfect world—"

"In a perfect world, everybody would have plenty of money to pay their bills. And my daughter would be eagerly making new friends. And the woman you take out on a first date wouldn't spend it whining."

"You haven't whined. You've talked about your problems. I don't mind."

"You haven't talked about yours," she said.

His lean dark face went expressionless again. "I guess I don't have any pressing ones at the moment."

If he'd just quirked an eyebrow or smiled apologetically or done anything else, she'd have believed him. As it was, she had the feeling she'd just walked up against an electric fence: invisible but powerful.

The waiter presented the bill; Joe paid. Outside, the sun was sinking in the west over Puget Sound and the hazy line of the Olympic Mountains. It must be eight-thirty, but days were still long at this time of year. Teresa didn't protest when Joe used his hand on the small of her back to steer her toward his pickup. As if she didn't know where it was.

"Sure you don't want to go to a movie?" Joe asked.

"I wish I could," she said, meaning it. "But I'd better not. I have to be at work awfully early tomorrow."

He nodded, and she wished she could tell if he had asked again only to be polite. The short drive to her house was mostly silent. She wondered what he was thinking, anticipated that moment when he'd turn toward her, hoped her children would be tactful enough not to dash out to meet her when they heard the engine. She should have rented them a video, something engrossing. Next time...

The pickup pulled into her long driveway. She needed to mow again, she noticed, with one tiny corner of her consciousness. The rest of it was occupied with agonizing. What if he didn't kiss her? Maybe he'd invited her out because he'd felt cornered; she'd been obvious enough, coming right out and asking if he was married. Maybe he didn't like direct women.

Then they might as well forget the whole thing right now, she admitted.

The pickup slowed, stopped. No dogs; the kids must have let them in the house. He killed the engine. The front door of her house didn't fly open. He turned toward her.

Teresa took a deep breath and smiled. "Thanks for dinner, Joe. I enjoyed myself."

"Me, too." His voice had roughened slightly. With surprising awkwardness, he said, "I don't suppose we have an awful lot in common, but...maybe we could do it again."

Was that a brush-off? Good Lord, why was she panicking? This was a first date! If it worked, it worked. If it didn't, it didn't.

"Sure," she murmured.

He reached out more tentatively than she might have expected, although his hand was solid and warm on the back of her neck. His thumb traced a circle around the bump of her vertebra, which had the effect of tapping a Morse code directly into her spinal cord. This feels good. More. More.

He bent his head as though giving her time to withdraw. Fat chance. His lips were soft and dry and as warm as that big hand, gently massaging her neck. Their mouths brushed together, once, twice, before his settled more firmly on hers and nudged her lips apart. By that time, she was enthusiastically participating.

If he minded her leaning into him and nibbling at his lower lip, his groan wasn't a good way of telling her. His other hand gripped her upper arm and tugged her even closer. Somehow his mouth was hot and damp now, and his tongue had touched hers, circled it just like his thumb was circling on her nape. She felt as mindless as a teenager making out with the object of her first crush.

More. More.

Joe was the one to pull back a little and let out a shaky breath. "I think," he said huskily, "we'd better say good-night."

"Good-night?"

"Isn't that the appropriate way to bid someone farewell in the evening?"

Consciousness was returning. She tried to straighten with dignity. "I knew what you meant."

"Good." The trace of amusement in his voice didn't show in the molten blue of his eyes. His hand tightened on her neck, then released her. "How about a movie next week? I'd suggest tomorrow night, except..."

When he hesitated, she finished, "I might have a rebellion on my hands. Next week sounds good."

He muttered something inarticulate, gave her a quick hard kiss, then got out. She was dazed enough to wait until he came around and opened her door, offering a hand to the little lady so she could hop down from the high seat. He walked her to the door, smiled, his eyes intense, touched her cheek and left her there.

It was the first time since her husband's death she'd gone out with a man she wished wasn't leaving.

CHAPTER THREE

NICOLE WAS DISCOURAGED, but she wasn't about to give up. This was her life she was talking about!

Mom didn't even listen when she tried to tell her about her day at school.

"The bathrooms are gross," she said. "And the girls are all ignoring me. It's like I don't even exist."

"Are you sure you're not ignoring them, too?" her mother asked, handing her a cookie and a glass of milk, as if she were five years old, home from a day at kindergarten.

"I'm not walking around grinning like some idiot, saying, 'Hi, I'm new!' if that's what you mean," Nicole said disagreeably. She bit into the cookie, which was still warm.

"How about the boys?"

She shrugged. "Oh, some of them are coming on to me. Like I'd be interested in any of them. But I guess you wouldn't understand that, would you?"

Mom's eyes narrowed and she held up one hand. "Okay, that's it. Time for a little chat."

"Little chats" were lectures. Nicole wasn't going to argue during this one. She shouldn't have said that; Mom didn't date very often, even though she was still pretty, and it wasn't like she was marrying the guy. The dig had just slipped out.

Mom put her hands on her hips. "A. I will not put up with any more snotty remarks. I know you're unhappy, but you don't have to make everyone else unhappy, too. B. I will have no sympathy for your unhappiness until you start making some effort to adjust to the move. You'd decided you were going to hate this place before you even saw it. Why not give it a chance?"

Tears came in a rush and Nicole wailed, "Because I was happy before! What was so wrong with that?"

"Absolutely nothing," her mother said gently. "But you can be happy again. Happiness is inside you, not a place."

Nicole took a deep breath, sniffed and wiped at her tears. "Jeez, Mom, you ought to write greeting cards."

Her mother gave her a mock frown. "Okay, it sounds sappy, but it's true, believe it or not."

"Are you happy?"

One of the nice things about her mother was that she really thought about questions like that before she gave an answer. It would have been easy to snap, "Of course I'm happy!" whether she was or not. But she frowned a little and finally said, "Yes, I think I am." She actually sounded surprised. "This move is something I've wanted to do for a long time. Our house in Bellevue fit your dad better than it did me. I like small towns, I like Eric, I like this house." She wrinkled her nose. "I guess I like a challenge. And I've certainly bought into one, haven't I?"

The screen door banged and both Nicole and her mother looked up. Mark kicked the kitchen door shut, dropped his backpack on a chair and headed straight for the fridge.

Mom's face brightened. "How was your day?"

Nicole knew what he was going to say even before he said it.

"Cool! Can I have this chocolate milk?"

"Sure. Still liking your teacher?"

"Yeah, she's okay." He'd found the cookies. "She's into astronomy. I like stuff like that."

"Make some friends?" Mom asked casually, as if it was that easy.

He shrugged and shoved a whole cookie into his mouth. Around it, he mumbled, "I hung around with a couple of guys all day. Can I watch TV?"

"Yes, you may watch TV. For half an hour."

“Gol, I don’t have any homework or anything.” He grabbed three more cookies and his chocolate milk and headed for the living room.

Nicole blew her nose. Her own brother hadn’t even noticed she’d been crying. “How come it’s so easy for him?” she asked.

Her mother kissed the top of her head. It felt good. Comforting. “Maybe because his personality is different. He’s always been cheerful and outgoing, uncomplicated. Maybe because he’s a boy, and boys accept newcomers more readily. Maybe just his age. It’s harder to leave your friends when you’re a teenager.”

“Then...why wouldn’t you let me stay in Bellevue? I could have finished school there.”

Brown eyes serious, her mother faced her. “For lots of reasons. I might have considered it if you’d been a senior, but you have three more years of high school. I don’t think Jayne’s parents were really prepared to finish raising you, and I didn’t want to let them. I’m already in shock at how fast you and Mark are growing up. You’ll be gone before I know it. But I’m not ready yet, and neither are you. You’re still a kid, and you’re mine.”

She hardly ever sounded that firm. Secretly Nicole didn’t mind. She’d wanted to stay in Bellevue, but the idea of becoming part of her friend’s family had been a little scary. She hadn’t wanted to lose her mother or even Mark, brat though he was. She just didn’t want to move.

Now she nodded. But she wasn’t going to pretend she was Mark, either. “I still hate it here.”

“I know.” Her mother gave her an odd twisted smile. “But I hope, after a while, that you won’t. Think about getting a horse. That might be some consolation.”

Nicole had always wanted a horse more than almost anything else in the world. But she wasn’t about to let her mother buy her cooperation. She shrugged sulkily. “I’m not a little kid anymore.”

“Well, then,” Mom sounded as tart as a green apple, “don’t act like one.”

Nicole stomped off to her bedroom.

LEAVING NICOLE sulking in her bedroom and Mark in front of the TV, Teresa went to town. The farmhouse needed remodeling, starting with the basics, and she might as well take advantage of the rest of her day off. She hadn’t forgotten Joe’s sister worked at Browder’s Flooring, but Teresa told herself curiosity wasn’t why she’d chosen to start there.

A woman named Carol offered to help her, then let her browse in peace among the carpet and vinyl samples. Almost immediately she realized she’d better choose kitchen and bathroom countertops before the flooring.

The back of the store was a veritable treasure trove, if you liked redoing houses. Shelf after slanted shelf held tiles in a mouth-watering selection of colors and textures. Blinds in colors equally rich covered mock windows on the wall and were topped by calico and satin and wood valances.

Teresa headed straight for a lacy pleated blind that would be perfect for her old house.

At her murmured “ooh” of pleasure, an amused voice from behind her said, “A woman of taste, I can tell. I put that one in my own living room.” When Teresa turned, the woman held out one hand. “Hi, I’m Rebecca Ballard.”

Joe’s sister-with-a-big-mouth. In her mid to late thirties, she had little in common with him physically except the blue eyes. Her curly brown hair brushed her shoulders, her smile was as warm as a cup of hot chocolate, and she was just a little plump—and undeniably pregnant. Teresa liked her on sight.

“Teresa Burkett,” she introduced herself.

“The new vet.”

“Yes,” she said a little warily.

“Jess told me about you. Jess Kerrigan. She’s my sister. She said you were dating Joe.” Rebecca clapped her hand over her mouth. “And I was to pretend I don’t know,” she said sheepishly.

Teresa grinned. “He did mention the family grapevine.”

“More like a patch of blackberries. You know how fast they spread.”

Teresa's laugh felt good. "Yes, we had dinner. Your brother seems nice. He took out some trees for me and gave me a good deal."

"Oh, he's nice." Rebecca shook her head. "A little hard to get to know, but don't let that stop you."

She wanted badly to ask why he was so guarded, but refrained. This was, after all, a complete stranger. Her struggle must have showed, though.

His sister tilted her head to one side. "I'd love to tell you his life history, but I have a suspicion he'd be annoyed at me." She thought about it for a moment. "Well, probably not annoyed. Mad as hell. I'd better let him tell you in his own good time."

"You're probably right," Teresa said. "What I'm really here for is help picking out some tile. And window covers. And, heck, I even need a new kitchen sink. You don't happen to sell those, do you?"

"Nope, but I keep some catalogs on hand, so you can match colors if you're not planning to go with plain white or stainless steel. The hardware store sells Kohler and a couple of other brands. Shall I dig the catalogs out?"

Teresa spent a happy couple of hours poring over the tiles, carrying them to the vinyl, discussing how best to get the hardwood floors refinished.

"My daughter's room first," she said. "Nicole's miserably unhappy about the move. She keeps bemoaning her old bedroom's built-in vanity and window seat. Maybe I can shut her up by making her new one equally charming."

"How old is she?" Rebecca asked.

"Fifteen."

"You have my sympathy. My son, Alan, was barely sixteen when I met my current husband. Alan didn't think he liked him, and you wouldn't believe the stunts he pulled."

"Oh, I'd believe them," Teresa said grimly.

Rebecca tilted her head to one side again. "I don't suppose your daughter is petite, dark-haired and takes French III?"

"That's her."

"Ah. Alan's mentioned her." Rebecca heaved a wallpaper book onto the counter. "He thinks she's, uh, pretty."

"I don't suppose that's the word he used."

Joe's sister gave her a wry look. "I don't want to sully your ears with current teenage-boy terminology."

"Probably no worse than 'chick' or 'babe' or 'fox.'" Teresa contemplated briefly. "'Babe' and 'baby' were always my personal pet peeves. They're so...so..."

"Belittling?" Rebecca asked. "Sort of like going through life as 'Becky'?"

"Exactly!" Teresa raised her eyebrows. "You didn't start that way, did you?"

"No. Sam, my husband, asked once if I liked to be called Becky. I told him only if he wanted to be Sammy. That nipped it in the bud."

"I can see why," Teresa agreed, amused.

She borrowed samples of tiles, wallpaper and vinyl, then made an appointment for Rebecca to come to the house and take measurements. She'd let Nicole pick out her own wallpaper and window coverings—within reason.

Lugging the wallpaper books, she came in the back door to hear the phone ringing. Both the kids were upstairs. She dropped the books on the table and grabbed the receiver on the fifth ring.

"Hello?"

"Teresa, this is Joe. Joe Hughes."

"You're the only Joe I know," she said. "Hey, a poem."

He groaned. "Just don't add another line, okay?"

“All right. I can’t think of anything that rhymes, anyway. Except toe. And no. Neither of which are fraught with possibilities. Unless you want to get kinky.”

Silence. Then, “I won’t answer that one.”

“Very wise.” She leaned against the counter. “So, uh, what can I do for you?”

His voice was low and amused. “Do you want to get kinky?”

She chuckled. “I set myself up for that one, didn’t I?”

“Yup.” She could hear his smile, which sent a flood of warmth through her. “Actually,” he went on, “what I called for was to ask if you’d like to have dinner again.”

“I’d love to,” she said promptly. “If we can make it Saturday night, I could even stay out later than nine o’clock. I don’t work Sunday. It’s Eric’s turn to be on call.”

“Saturday sounds good,” Joe agreed. “How about a movie, too?”

“As long as it’s not too gory.”

“You’re a vet. You’re used to blood and guts.”

“Not human blood.”

“You’d faint if I cut myself?”

“Probably,” she said cheerfully. “There’s a reason I didn’t become an M.D.”

“Why don’t I believe you?”

“I don’t know. Why don’t you?”

He only laughed. She loved his laugh, a husky rumble that sounded just a little rusty, as if he didn’t laugh often enough. Well, he lived alone, so he probably didn’t. To keep their sense of humor intact, adults required children. Or maybe it worked the other way around: you required a sense of humor to stand your children.

THE WEEK SEEMED LONG without seeing Joe. It was funny, considering she hardly knew him. She watched for him in the grocery store and at stoplights. Logging trucks, a common sight in a town with two lumber mills, reminded her of him. She did see his sister, Jess, once to wave to, and Rebecca came out and took measurements. Teresa craned her neck every time she drove past the auto-body-repair place on Third. She felt like a teenage girl with her first crush. It felt like a first crush; falling in love with Tom had happened an eternity ago. The first flush of romantic feelings were unfamiliar but absurdly sweet.

The saving grace was that she was busy at work. Not doing farm calls; of necessity, Eric handled all of them. Which meant that the clients who arrived with a sick cat or an injured dog had to accept her or go to the other animal hospital in town, where, Eric had told her, the vets seemed to rotate more often than a horse threw shoes. Teresa was accepted. She brought an epileptic spaniel out of a prolonged seizure with phenobarbital, stitched up a Lab that had argued with a car, catheterized a cat with a blocked urethra and removed a fish hook from a dog’s lip. He’d apparently tried to snap up the fly when the owner was practicing casting.

As she calmly handled one emergency after another, it seemed to her that the staff was warming to her. They’d been pleasant but distant thus far: she was their employer, but that didn’t mean they had to like or respect her. She began to hope that they’d decided to do both.

On Friday morning, she had to put down a puppy with parvo. She comforted the owner, thanked the technician who was disposing of the body, then walked into the office and started to cry.

“Dr. Burkett?” someone said uncertainly.

She snatched a tissue and looked up.

Marilyn, the younger of the two technicians on duty, stood in the doorway. “I’m sorry. There’s a phone call—”

“That’s okay.” Teresa gave a wavery smile. “I just hate doing that. I should be colder, shouldn’t I?”

“No.” Marilyn’s smile trembled, too. Her own eyes, now that Teresa looked, were red.

Teresa took the call and saw another client a few minutes later. The routine marched on. But something had changed; for the first time, Marilyn and Libby, the other veterinary technician working that day, invited her to join them for lunch. It felt like a victory.

When Saturday night finally rolled around, Nicole whined only halfheartedly about having to baby-sit her little brother, who made only the obligatory objection to the words “little” and “baby-sit.” Joe knocked on the door promptly at seven, Teresa called goodbye to her kids and whisked out onto the porch.

Joe’s smile was the deliciously slow lazy one that muddled her insides. “Cabin fever?” he asked.

“Kid fever.” She smiled back. “Actually, they’re being good. Amazingly good. I figure if I make a quick escape, it might stay that way.”

Belatedly it occurred to her that, if she was imagining Joe as husband material, she ought to quit complaining about her children. After all, husband also meant stepfather. The way she’d been talking, he must think her kids were hell on wheels.

She made a point over dinner of bragging about them. Which, she realized in amusement, must mean she was thinking about him as a potential husband.

“Mark never seems to lift a finger, but he gets perfect grades. He’ll be starting in the gifted program, which I’m excited about. I know he gets bored sometimes.”

Joe only nodded. His face was annoyingly expressionless. She couldn’t decide whether she was boring him or whether he was only waiting for her to go on. Well, if he was bored—tough. She came as a package with her kids.

“Nicole’s a good student, too, but what she loves—besides boys, of course—is to dance. Ballet and jazz both.”

“There’s a dance school in White Horse, you know.”

“Is there?” She set down her fork. They were eating at a waterfront restaurant on Marine View Drive in Everett. Boats at a marina just below the big windows bobbed gently on quiet shimmering swells. “I hadn’t checked into it yet. I ought to get her started.”

“Two of my nieces dance.” Joe grinned ruefully. “I get to see the recital every year. Thank God they’ve progressed from the junior recital to the senior one. The first year, I thought the three-year-olds in their pink tutus were cute. By the second year, I was wondering why the hell their parents were paying for dance lessons when they were obviously too young even to learn how to stay in line, never mind how to pirouette.”

“I remember those days.” Oh, boy, did she. “Ragged rows of little girls—and an occasional boy whose friends hadn’t yet persuaded him it was unmanly to dance. Usually there’d be a couple who had some vague idea what to do, and one or two sucking their thumbs, frozen in terror. The rest would just kind of wander around.”

“One of my nieces was a thumb sucker. We have it captured for all time on videotape.”

“You sound like a fond uncle.”

His big shoulders moved uneasily, as though he didn’t know how to take compliments. “Yeah, I guess so. Tell you the truth, I’ve tried to stand in for Rebecca’s first husband and Jess’s ex. Neither of them was any great shakes as a parent. Alan especially—Rebecca’s boy—needed a man around sometimes. Before Rebecca remarried of course. I, uh, didn’t mind.”

Okay, so he hadn’t been bored; he liked kids. Definitely husband material. Except that he couldn’t be as good as he looked. Otherwise, why wasn’t he married? Teresa didn’t believe in that “waiting for the right woman” stuff. Just like animals, humans reached an age when they were ready to mate. Occasionally that urge got sidetracked—it often happened to vet students, because they were too busy and too tired for the dating rounds. But Joe must be in his mid-thirties at least. So what had he been doing, instead of marrying?

“How old are you?” she asked.

He looked startled, but answered willingly enough. “Thirty-six. You?”

“Thirty-five. And yes, before you count back, I had Nicole before I started veterinary school. I must have been nuts. Fortunately, while Tom may have had his flaws, he was a great father. We did wait to have Mark until I was done with my schooling, though.”

“Does Mark even remember his father?”

“Yes, but his memories are fading,” she said with sharp regret. “He was in his second day of kindergarten when I had to meet him at the bus with the news that his dad was dead. It’s natural that he’ll forget him. I mean, all you have to do is think back. If you’re like me, you can hardly remember your kindergarten days.”

“I remember them.” Before she could begin to speculate about what his flat tone meant, he added, “That must mean you just passed the anniversary of your husband’s death. Does it still hit you hard?”

“It has before, but not so much this year.” She made a face. “I was so damned mad at a farmer who decided he didn’t really need a vet when he saw me get out of the car, it carried me through the day.”

His mouth had an odd twist. “Anger is a useful emotion.”

“Mmm.” All she had to do was remember the days after Tom’s death. “Very.”

Joe glanced at his watch. “Still in the mood for a movie?”

“You bet. I even looked at the listings in the paper. I don’t suppose you like sword and sorcery?”

He lifted an eyebrow. “Swordplay usually leads to some blood and gore. Don’t I remember that being forbidden?”

“It’s different from a contemporary shoot ‘em up,” she tried to explain. “Less realistic. In a fantasy, the blood doesn’t count.”

He loomed above her as he helped her out of her chair. More of that sense of being fragile and feminine that she usually hated. “I think you’re splitting hairs,” he said in amusement.

“Swirling capes and galloping horses are romantic.”

“The truth comes out! All women want is romance.”

She had to ask. “Is there something wrong with romance?”

Their eyes met, held. Her skin tingled. “No,” he said quietly. “There’s nothing wrong with romance.”

The other patrons and the hovering waitress blurred; for a heartbeat, only the two of them existed. Then she blinked, or he did, and the moment passed. He was laying some bills on the table, thanking the waitress, holding out Teresa’s sweater for her. Slipping her arms into it, Teresa gave her head a small shake. Had she imagined the intensity of that look?

Then Joe’s eyes met hers again, and she thought, No. I didn’t imagine it. Why else was he so wary now?

Her dates in recent years had taken her to French restaurants and the symphony and the opera. When half an hour later she settled into the plush seat at the movie theater, her upper arm just brushing Joe’s, Teresa decided this was more romantic, no matter what movie was projected onto the big screen.

The lights were already dimming; she was very conscious of the man so close beside her. She felt his every breath, knew when he glanced at her, even though she pretended to watch the previews. Would he put his arm around her? She would have liked to lay her hand on his thigh. Her eyes and the nearly forgotten recesses of her memory told her it would be solid, bulky. The muscles might ripple under her touch.

She swallowed hard, disconcerted by the strength of her longing. What was wrong with her?

Joe reached out and took her hand. She jumped, and he whispered, “Sorry,” and started to let her go.

She grabbed his hand and held on. His went still for a surprised moment, then relaxed and returned her clasp. He exhaled what might have been a chuckle.

Then he lifted their clasped hands and laid them on his thigh. Oh God, had he read her mind? He shifted in his seat, and the muscles under the fabric of his pants bunched. Teresa sat motionless, taking in every sensation. Heaven.

It wasn't Joe in particular, she told herself in panic; it couldn't be, not so quickly. He must just represent something to her—solidity, masculinity, a calm reassuring presence. A sexy body, honesty made her add; a sensual mouth, hands that knew how to touch a woman. In other words, a man. She'd turned into that pathetic creature, a sex-starved widow who'd take whatever she could get.

Well, no. She'd had other chances to take, and turned them down. This was the first time she'd been tempted to grab and hold on. Literally and figuratively. So maybe it was Joe. Maybe him in particular, or because he represented whatever she'd been looking for when she bought into the White Horse Animal Hospital and practice.

It might be fun to find out.

Eventually Joe let her hand go, and she made a tiny noise of disappointment she prayed he hadn't heard. But apparently he'd only released her so that he could put his arm around her shoulders. Now he tugged her closer to his warmth. Of course, the arm of the theater seat dug into her rib cage, but who was noticing? The feel of his mouth against her hair was far too tantalizing.

After a while, he murmured, "Ever necked in a movie theater?"

She sneaked a glance around to make sure no one had sat near them. Only a few others were scattered throughout the theater. The movie had been out for weeks and was probably about ready to disappear from Everett. Nobody was nearby at all.

"Not since I was young enough for a curfew."

"Me, neither. Want to pretend we're too young and horny to wait until we can find a deserted side road?"

Pretend. Oh, sure. She could do that. "Why not?" she whispered, and turned her head to meet his mouth. Pure excitement shot through her. It added eagerness and urgency to their kiss from the moment his lips claimed hers.

They kept it discreet. Nobody moaned or whimpered. Joe didn't rip her clothes off or throw her down onto the sloping aisle. Not, as far as she was concerned, for lack of wanting. After the first few seconds, pretty much anything would have been fine with her. Which was, when she thought about it for a fleeting moment, alarming. What was happening to her?

Whatever it was, it felt good. His hand brushed her breast, cupped it. His teeth grazed her neck. She nipped the lobe of his ear. She tasted the skin at the base of his strong brown throat. She kneaded the muscles on his shoulders and neck. She hadn't the slightest idea what happened to the sorceress in distress up on the movie screen. She didn't care.

When the credits rolled, they rearranged their clothing to leave. Teresa was very careful not to look at anyone else, just in case they'd glanced over their shoulders and noticed the couple in back. She didn't want to face a knowing smile or disapproving frown. Blast it, she was blushing again!

Thank God, she thought suddenly, that Nicole hadn't made any friends! What if one of them had seen her mother carry on this way? Nicole would have run away from home.

Teresa wasn't eager to meet Joe's eyes, either. They passed through the lobby and out into the night. A mist scented the air and glistened off the pavement and car windshields under the yellow sodium lamps. Joe unlocked the passenger door first and held it open for her. Inside, she stared straight ahead while he circled the pickup and climbed in behind the wheel. He didn't start the engine. She felt his gaze.

"I don't suppose you want to find that deserted road."

"I, uh, don't think that'd be such a good idea."

"Are you embarrassed or mad?"

She appreciated his bluntness. It made it easier to turn toward him. "Embarrassed," she admitted.

“I don’t usually act like a randy teenager.”

“I didn’t do any better.”

“I enjoyed it,” he confessed.

“Me, too.”

“Then?” He waited.

“Oh, heck.” She fidgeted with the seat belt. “I just don’t want you to think—”

“I don’t.”

“Oh, well, since we’ve settled that...”

He must have liked her sarcasm, because he laughed. “I’ll give you a chaste good-night kiss. On the cheek.”

“Something to live for.”

He laughed again, the sound less rusty than the first time she’d heard it. She had some use in life.

The good-night kiss wasn’t all that chaste. But this time, there wasn’t any potential audience, either. Her legs felt a little shaky when Joe walked her to the front door. She didn’t want him to go tonight, either, which made her wonder with renewed panic where, and how quickly, this relationship was headed. How long would he—would she—be content with kisses? Was she really ready to have an affair with a man she hadn’t met three weeks ago?

And in all honesty she had to admit she didn’t know him very well. They talked, they laughed, but he hadn’t let her see below the surface. Maybe he had no profound secrets, but everyone had a darker side. Every time she edged too close to a truly personal issue, his face went expressionless. Even kissing her, he hadn’t yet reached the edge of control. How could she make love with a man she’d never seen angry, despairing, laughing helplessly? She wanted to know that he went deeper than amusement, amiable charm, lazy sensuality.

Maybe she was expecting too much after two dates—well, counting the lunch, two and a half. It wasn’t as if she’d done anything to goad him to anger or despair, or that she was all that funny.

But then, she shouldn’t be thinking about making love with him, either. It was too soon.

Oh, how she wished it wasn’t.

CHAPTER FOUR

“DAMN IT, WE’LL JUST send you, anyway.” Eric dropped his scalpel and reached for a handful of gauze sponges. He was working on a shepherd with an ear hematoma. Teresa had anesthetized the dog and now stood watching her partner. It was a pleasure—in more ways than one. He worked quickly and neatly. He also looked damned good while he was doing it. Tall and rangy, he had close-cropped blond hair, a narrow intelligent face and gray-green eyes that could be as sharp as his scalpel. He didn’t stir up her hormones, though, and she couldn’t figure out why. In his own way, he was as sexy as Joe Hughes.

“What can they say?” Eric continued. “Even if you were incompetent, it’s not as though you could do any damage on a preg check.”

“Except be wrong,” she said. Knowing as early as possible that a breeding had taken was critical to the dairy farmers—thus the monthly pregnancy checks.

He grunted and clipped off a piece of suture material. “You know, we’ve been letting a few of the old farts keep you from doing farm calls. Truth is, plenty of the younger dairy farmers wouldn’t mind a woman. Some of them have wives who are darn near equal partners. All they care is whether you can do the job.”

“I can do it.”

“Then you take the farm calls today.” He nodded toward the office. “It’ll be a hell of a day. Ten farms, I think. You’ll be shoulder deep in—”

She didn’t need him to tell her what she’d be shoulder deep in. Cows—especially dairy cows—made a toddler with diarrhea seem like a poor producer. “I don’t mind,” she said.

Eric flashed her a quick grin. “Have fun.”

“And if we make someone mad?”

“We can afford to lose some customers. They get damned good service from us. If they go with another veterinarian, so be it. Their loss.”

“You’re a prince,” Teresa told him, and headed off to finish loading up the truck.

An hour later, she was driving through one of the mountain valleys, where an early snowfall already gleamed on the peaks. She found the first farm with no problem. A Dairy of Merit sign hung proudly out front. Long low red barns and green fenced pastures beyond made a postcard-pretty scene.

Teresa parked in front of the nearest barn and climbed out. She already wore rubber boots and overalls over a heavy flannel shirt. She was shrugging into the vinyl vest and reaching for a plastic sleeve to cover her arm when the farmer appeared in the barn door.

“Hi,” she said, holding out a hand. “Eric was tied up today. I’m Dr. Burkett, his new partner.”

The middle-aged man in the dairyman’s customary costume of jeans and high rubber boots shook her hand without noticeable enthusiasm. “Know dairy cows?”

“You bet.” She’d done some reading to update her knowledge, acquired during an internship in Minnesota. After that year, she’d looked forward to working in a warm clinic on animals she outweighed. But the cold stinky physical parts of the job had faded quickly from her memory, leaving the good parts: the satisfaction of helping with a difficult birth, of curing instantly a cow down with milk fever, the relationships with farmers. She’d come to miss the Jerseys and Holsteins, with their generally good natures and soft brown eyes.

This farmer jerked his head toward the open double doors. “I have the first batch locked in.”

Figuring he’d prefer someone laconic, she only nodded and grabbed her tray of syringes, prepared with anything she might need.

They passed the milking parlor, spotlessly clean. A dozen black-and-white Holsteins were lined up, heads locked into stanchions, in a concrete holding area. Teresa breathed in the odors, which she’d never found objectionable. Setting down the tray, she went straight to work.

“Number 23,” she said, peering at the ear tag.

The farmer nodded and referred to his clipboard. “Bred September 5.”

Teresa inserted her hand into the cow’s rectum and began cleaning it out. Green manure splashed at her feet. Eventually, concentrating, she reached in deep, feeling through the wall of the rectum for the uterus and the pea-size growth of a new calf. She smiled when she found it.

“Pregnant.”

The farmer nodded and made a check on his list.

“Number 138,” she said, moving on to the next cow. The rump shifted away and she grabbed the tail.

“September 10.”

“Nope,” she concluded at last.

They fell into a rhythm that she remembered and enjoyed; few words were exchanged, and those were to the point. Along with the pregnancy checks, she examined the cows that had recently given birth, treating a few for infections.

When she finished the first batch, the farmer released the metal stanchions and waved the animals out into a loafing area. Another man chased the next ten in. Grain lured them to thrust their heads through the locking mechanism. Teresa shook liquid manure off her arm, clad in clear plastic, and called out the first number.

When she was done, she threw away her plastic sleeve and hosed herself down. Manure sluiced off her boots and overalls.

The farmer asked if she wanted to look around, and she agreed. In a separate barn, she paused, gazing down at the calves. She scratched a snowy white soft head, and lips nuzzled her hand.

“Daughter takes care of those,” the farmer said.

Teresa nodded. Bottle-feeding the calves was often a woman’s job on a dairy farm. Typically the newborn calves were allowed to nurse for the first three to four days, for the sake of the health-giving colostrum, then bottle-raised on a milk replacer so the more valuable milk could be sold. By the time they were a month old, the calves were weaned even from that.

“Do you raise your own heifers?” Teresa asked.

He shook his head. “We send ours at three or four months to a farm in eastern Washington to be raised. Don’t have enough pasture here.”

That, too, she’d gathered, was typical of dairies on this side of the mountains. This farmer had a dairy herd of perhaps 160 cows, and as little as fifty or sixty acres. He wouldn’t be growing his own hay, either, as a larger farm might. Yet she was impressed with the cleanliness of the barns and the condition of the herd. The pregnancy rate was high, too, a sign that everything else was going well.

The tour over, the farmer walked her out to her truck. “Eric be back next month?”

Her heart sank at the question. “Probably,” she said, “although eventually we’d like me to be handling half the calls.”

“You’re quicker at the preg checks than he is,” the dairyman said unexpectedly.

A compliment? Or was he implying that she’d gone so fast as to seem careless?

“I always had a knack.”

“Either of you want to handle calls here, that’s fine.”

She felt like babbling gratefully. Instead, she nodded and offered him a smile with enough wattage to hint that he’d given her a gift. “You have a nice place. I look forward to working with you.”

He nodded now; she climbed into the truck, waved and drove away. Barely out of his sight, she began caroling, “Oh, what a beautiful morning!”

Of course, her whole day couldn’t be that easy. Three of the remaining farmers greeted her matter-of-factly. Three were wary and noncommittal. Two refused to let her do the preg checks. The last grudgingly let her into the barn only because he had two cases of milk fever and desperately

needed her to wield the syringe that would have his cows leaping to their feet and strolling off to the loafing shed as though nothing had ever been wrong.

He watched them go suspiciously, as though she might somehow have tricked both the cows and him. After a moment he grunted. "Since you're already here..."

She was tempted to try to work even faster to impress him. She curtailed the temptation. A mistake would kill her reputation for good. Instead, she worked deliberately, calling out numbers, wrestling with recalcitrant cow butts, confirming and denying pregnancy.

She was examining a pretty little Jersey when the farmer said gruffly, "That one has a blocked teat. Feels like a pea in there."

"I'll take a look when I'm done," she said.

They herded the Jersey into a station in the milking parlor, where Teresa could stand in the center aisle, three feet below the stall level. As the cow shifted restlessly, she manipulated the long pale teat.

"Let me tranquilize her," Teresa said after a moment. She chose the base of the tail for the injection and waited until the cow swayed. Then she pulled out her forceps and probed inside. It took only a moment to remove the hard whitish blob.

She showed it to the farmer. "Scar tissue. Probably left over from mastitis."

He grunted. "Snipped the teat, did you? I suppose we'd better treat her for mastitis now."

"I didn't have to cut it," Teresa said. "Just keep an eye on her."

"Ah." The look he gave Teresa wasn't warm, but it had thawed. Treating for mastitis meant the cow's milk was unusable. She'd just saved him some bucks.

He, too, walked her out to the truck. "So you're the new partner."

"That's right." She unbuckled the rubber overalls and peeled them down.

"I suppose I'll be seeing you again."

"We'll try to accommodate preferences," she said evenly. "But that may not always be possible."

He nodded, which could have meant anything from understanding to acquiescence. Teresa chose to take it as the latter. She'd done well.

Eric agreed when she got back to the hospital. "Two phone calls saying they liked you," he informed her when she'd tracked him down to the kennel. Their resident cat, a huge fat tortoiseshell, sat slavishly at his feet. He was petting the still-groggy shepherd, who now had one floppy ear.

She crossed her arms. "And the two who wouldn't let me in their barns?"

"One wants to know when I can come. The other says he's changing services."

"Oh, for Pete's sake!" She stomped across the room, then swung around violently. "If they'd just give me a chance..."

Eric closed the cage door and rose to his feet, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "Ol' Man Eide says he did only because he couldn't wait. He sounded grudging, but he's willing to concede you're okay."

"Eide? That was my last call."

"Yup."

"And he phoned you to praise me?"

"I think 'okay' is praise in his book."

Teresa pumped her fist. "Yes!"

Eric slapped her on the back. "You'll win 'em over."

Already, she reflected as she unloaded the truck, it felt as if she and Eric had worked together forever. As if they were best friends. It was a good thing they didn't stir each other's hormones.

"HE'S HERE AGAIN," Nicole said into the telephone to her best friend from Bellevue. "He didn't even make an excuse for stopping by this time!"

"He?" Jayne echoed. "Oh. You mean that guy. The one your mom is seeing."

"If she marries him, we'll be stuck here forever!" Nicole said hopelessly.

“Hold on. My call waiting is beeping.”

While Nicole sat listening to silence, she brooded. Couldn't Jayne tell how upset she was? Like some other phone call was so important.

Leaning against her bed, her door shut, she could still hear voices drifting up the stairs. Laughter. She felt...shut out. Even though she knew she wasn't really. Mark was down there in the kitchen with them. But she didn't belong.

Five minutes must have passed before her friend came back on the line with a rush. “That was him,” she said dramatically.

“Him?” But Nicole knew.

“Russ Harlan. He wanted to know if I'm going to a party tomorrow night. As if I'm going to say no.”

Nicole's chest burned with envy and hurt. She struggled to say something. Cool. I hope he asks you out. Something. But she couldn't. It was a relief to hear a beep in her ear.

“My call waiting,” she said. “Just a sec.”

The voice was hesitant and male. “Can I talk to Nicole?”

“Speaking,” she said coolly.

“Hi. This is Bill Nelson. I'm, uh, I sit next to you in English.” He waited for her to agree that she knew who he was. When she didn't, he stumbled on, “I have brown hair. I play football. I'm, you know, a linebacker. We...we talked yesterday. After class.”

She could hear him sweating. Bill Nelson was an okay guy, just kind of big and dumb. But she didn't care right now. Did he really think she'd go out with him?

“What do you want?”

He swallowed, making a gulping sound. “I...well, there's this movie in town. Steven Seagal. I thought...that is, I hoped... Would you go with me?”

She felt mean suddenly. “You're joking.”

Pause. His voice got a lot quieter. “No.”

He must be the tenth guy to hit on her since school started. She'd been nicer to the others. They were all such hicks they didn't deserve it. Hicks, like the one sitting at her kitchen table right now.

“I have a boyfriend. In Bellevue. I'm really not interested.”

“Oh.” Bill cleared his throat. “Okay. I, uh... Sorry. I didn't know.”

“No big deal,” she said ungraciously. “See ya.” She pushed the button to cut him off and bring Jayne back onto the line.

“Who was that?” Jayne asked.

“Some guy.” Nicole felt a little sick. She shouldn't have been so hateful. It wasn't Bill Nelson's fault that her best friend in the whole world had just snatched the coolest guy she knew away from her.

“Are the guys all lame?” Jayne sounded pitying.

Nicole gritted her teeth. “Of course not. You ought to see the quarterback of the football team. He's really fine. If I can just figure out how to meet a senior...”

“How hard can it be in a school that small?” Jayne didn't let her answer. “Well, listen, I gotta go. I'm supposed to help Mom with dinner. Then I need to call Kelly and Roz and tell them all about Russ.”

“Sure.”

“Wow, I wish you were here like you used to be.”

Nicole strained to decide if Jayne meant it or not. “Yeah,” she said slowly. “Me, too.”

She had other friends she could have called, but they'd been sounding distant, too. It just wasn't the same, when she hadn't been there at school to see Liza tell off her boyfriend, or hear the new government teacher make an ass of himself, or watch Coach Murphy get a speeding ticket right in front of the high school. Everything was different. One-sided. They told her all the latest, and she grumbled about being stuck in this backwater town. But life hadn't changed for them.

The kitchen door slammed. Nicole lifted her head. Was he leaving? But she could hear Mark talking excitedly and a low calm counterpoint. Careful not to be seen, she went to the window. Sure enough, Mark the traitor was taking a football out onto the lawn with Joe Hughes. They started throwing it, Mark's passes wobbling, Joe's perfect spirals.

Like Joe was his dad or something. Didn't Mark have any discrimination?

What made her maddest was that she was jealous. He never offered to do stuff with her. Actually, she thought she made him uncomfortable. Well, that was how he made her feel. Like neither of them belonged when the other one was around.

But watching her brother and him through the window, Mark chattering, Joe not saying much but making every catch look easy, as though her little brother had a great arm, she had this flash of *déjà vu*. Their yard in Bellevue hadn't been very big, but she remembered looking out from her bedroom window seat because she heard her father's voice out there and seeing him and Mark throwing a football. In her memory, it was bright blue—probably a Nerf ball. But there'd been some connection between them, a closeness that had made her feel jealous for a moment, before she'd heard footsteps on the stairs and her mother's voice calling her. She'd jumped off the window seat and run to her bedroom door—

She shook her head, jolted out of the dream remembrance. Had she heard her mother calling? But the house was silent. And when she looked out again, standing to one side of her window, she saw that her mother sat on the back porch steps, arms wrapped around her knees, watching Mark and that guy. Why would she bother calling her, Nicole?

Nicole yanked the ugly curtains closed and threw herself facedown on her bed. She told herself she was crying because she missed her father. Sometimes it was hard even to picture him. But she'd just now seen him so vividly, as though it was Dad down there right now, not that redneck logger. She remembered stuff they'd done together, like the time he'd taught her ballroom dancing. Sometimes while Mom was cooking dinner, her father would put on a CD, a waltz, maybe, and bow to her. He was a really good dancer. She could almost forget he was her father. They'd twirl and twirl and twirl, perfectly in time. She guessed that was his way of throwing a ball with her. Maybe that was why she loved to dance so much.

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