HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

Love Inspired

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MAN OF HER DREAMS

PATT MARR

Patt Marr

Man Of Her Dreams

«HarperCollins»

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Meg Talbot had prayed for Mr. Right, but it seemed she was destined to remain manless.Until her childhood crush - and her best friend's brother - sauntered back into her life…. Rebel Ry Brennan preferred being an EMT in NYC to joining the family's practice. His impulsive return to California was one surprise, and the newly converted Christian was in for another: Meg was all grown up…and gorgeous!Their relationship soon blossomed. But when she learned Ry planned to become a doctor, Meg was stunned and disappointed - she'd dreamed of a husband who was always around, unlike her own father. Could Ry convince her that despite long hours of residency their love could flourish?

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Содержание

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“A year ago tonight, I made a deal with God. I promised God I would stop obsessing about finding Mr. Right and trust Him to do the finding. I thought God would drop the guy right on my doorstep, but I must have prayed wrong or something. The year’s over and there’s no Mr. Right,” Meg explained.

Beth held her watch up to the light and said, “Thirty minutes to midnight. It could happen yet.”

Behind them came a familiar voice. “Hey, you two are missing the party.”

They turned to see Beth’s brother Ry strolling toward them with a killer smile and such easygoing confidence that Meg caught her breath. Ry was better looking than ever, and that was saying a lot.

Beth looked at her sharply, then at Ry and back again. A slow grin spread across her face. “Well, there you go,” she murmured so softly that only Meg could hear. “Talk about an answer to a prayer….”

PATT MARR

has a friend who says she reminds him of a car that's either zooming along in the fast lane or sitting on the shoulder, out of gas. Her family says he's dead right.

At age twenty, she had a B.S. in business education, a handsome, good-hearted husband and a sweet baby girl. Since then, Patt has had a precious baby boy, earned an M.A. in counseling, worked a lifetime as a high school educator, cooked big meals for friends, attended a zillion basketball games where her husband coached and her son played and enjoyed many years of church music, children's ministries, drama and television production—often working with her grown-up daughter.

During downtime, Patt reads romance, eats too many carbs, watches too many movies and sleeps way too little. She's been blessed with terrific children-in-law, two darling granddaughters, two loving grandsons, many wonderful friends, a great church and a chance to write love stories about people who love God as much as she does.

Man of Her Dreams
Patt Marr

I dedicate this book to the man of my dreams, the man
who has loved me for decades, my husband, Dave Marr.
Faith is the confidence that what we hope for
is going to happen. It is the evidence of
things we cannot see.
—Hebrews 11:1

Dear Reader,

This book is dedicated to the man of my dreams. He is my rock, my strength and the greatest blessing of my life. When we fell in love, he said we would have fights, but I couldn't even imagine it. I thought we would share everything, but it turned out that I didn't want to fish any more than he wanted to shop. When he wasn't interested in my every thought and feeling, I felt lonely. When our values and wants did not match, I wondered if I'd made a mistake. The man was not my best friend, and he didn't need me to be his.

Are you nodding your head in understanding or shaking your head at my stupidity? Either is fine. I have shared my youthful misunderstanding for two reasons:

One—if your marriage is not what you thought it would be and you're praying for an answer, maybe it's to appreciate what you have and find a new best friend, maybe someone from church. Live each day with love and laughter.

Two—if you're looking for Mr. Right, he may be closer than you think, but not as perfect as you dreamed. If he's a good man, it may be your joy to love him forever.

My husband just came into the room. I said, "Listen to what I just wrote." He was glad to and sat down, looking outside at a foursome on the golf course. I had just read, "He is my rock, my strength and the greatest blessing of my life," when he jumped up and exclaimed, "Nice shot!"

That's the way we are. I want to talk about life. My guy wants to live it. What do we have in common? Only our family, our friends, our church…and our best friend… Jesus. It is more than enough. So much more.

Please visit my Web site, www.pattmarr.com, and e-mail me from there or write to me at P.O. Box 13, Silvis, IL 61282. Hearing from you is such an encouragement.

In Him,

Patt Marr

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Chapter One

Paramedic Ry Brennan and his partner pushed an empty gurney toward the ambulance bay of Manhattan General, both of them eager to reach their rig and finish their shift. Ry had a plane to catch, and his partner, a cranky, competent woman named "Doc," had a secret life she wouldn't discuss.

When his two favorite ER nurses stepped squarely in their path, ready to tease, his partner muttered, "Not again! Brennan, you mess around, and I'll make you sorry."

He laughed, enjoying this part of their daily routine. "The ladies just want to wish us a happy New Year, Doc," he said, keeping her pace. Why irritate her more than usual? Hopefully, the nurses would move before Doc ran them down.

And they did. Parting, they walked beside the gurney. The taller one, Tonya, tossed a toffee-colored curl over her shoulder and said, "Look at him, Rachel. With that laid-back air and easygoin' smile, doesn't Ry Brennan just take your breath away?"

"Oh, brother," Doc muttered with a long-suffering sigh.

"You gotta love a guy who's all that and doesn't seem to know it," Rachel agreed, her dark eyes full of fun.

"Doc, how long do you think a man has to work out to get muscles like that?" Tonya asked, joking.

"Less time than you spend curling that pretty hair."

Ry had to laugh. That was Doc, in for a zinger every chance she got. It was just silly talk, a balance for the misery and pain they saw in their work every day.

"Doc, you know this man better than most. Do you think there's the slightest possibility that our guy Ry doesn't have a New Year's Eve date tonight?"

The silly way Tonya rhymed his name put a ghost of a smile on his partner's face. Way to go, Tonya. She deserved a gold star. Doc could use a whole load of smiles. It bothered him how she seemed to hate life.

"Yeah, Doc, help us out here," Rachel said earnestly. "Don't you think Ry would like the company of a pair of love goddesses to ring in the new year?"

"Don't know. Don't care." Doc shoved the gurney on, not breaking pace.

He grinned at the nurses. They'd asked for that. Doc cared about her patients, but not much else. He and Doc had an unspoken rule. He didn't talk about his love life—the quantity and quality of which was greatly exaggerated—and she didn't talk about her life at all.

"Ladies, I'd love to celebrate with you," he said, "but I'm catching a flight home to be with my family."

"Aw, that's nice," Tonya cooed.

For once, Doc looked at him with approval.

"Where's home?" Rachel asked.

"California." No way would they get more than that. He was as secretive about his past as Doc was about her present.

"California!" Tonya said, a big grin on her face. "Why am I not surprised? I thought you looked like a surfer."

Actually, he looked like a guy who'd played quarterback in college, though he was leaner these days. "That's me, all right, hangin' ten," he said, making them laugh.

He would leave it at that. When he'd lived in California, he'd been too busy to surf even if the beach was close by. He'd loved his job as a pool boy, both for the money he earned to buy a forbidden motorcycle and for the endless embarrassment it caused his country club parents.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do," he called back, exiting the wide double doors. That advice left them plenty of room—or it would have until recently. Accepting the Lord as his Savior had already changed a lot in his life.

He shut the rear doors of the ambulance as Doc, without comment, took the driver's seat. The woman had a control issue about driving, but Ry didn't mind. Doc was a good driver, and he'd rather be in the back with the patients anyway.

"You're really going to California?" she asked, pulling away from the hospital.

"Do you think I'd make that up to get out of a date?"

"I never know what you'll do."

"Aw, Doc. I never lie."

She snorted skeptically but didn't argue. How could she? Even before he'd become a Christian, he'd been a stickler for the truth. There were times when patients might think he was more optimistic about their condition than he actually was, but that was for their benefit. It made them easier to treat when they were calm.

"When are you coming back?" she asked, scowling.

"How sweet of you to ask. I knew you cared," he teased. That's the way it was between them. He let her be as grumpy as she wanted. She gave him room to have fun. It made the shift pass.

She sighed heavily. "If I'm going to have to break in a new partner, I'd like some time to get used to the idea."

He smiled to himself. That was Doc's way of saying she'd miss him. Well, not him, but the change in her routine. "No need to fret, Doc. I'll be back after our forty-eight hours off. I couldn't live without you."

"Yeah, right. You've got time coming. Take it."

He'd thought about it. The trip was a lot of money and travel for a couple of nights, yet even that might be too long. His fuse could be pretty short when it came to his family. If he didn't feel so strongly about starting the new year off right, he wouldn't be going home. Unless this visit went as he prayed it would, he would never go back.

Meg Maguire slid the clothes hangers from one end of her closet to the other, searching for something that would do for the Brennans' New Year's Eve party. There were plenty of bridesmaid dresses, but nobody wore those, no matter what the bride said about choosing a dress that would work for other occasions.

What other occasions? Meg's job required jeans and pants in the basic colors, some tops and a few jackets. For social occasions, she added shorts. That was it. If there was a pair of panty hose in her chest of drawers, it would be a miracle, and any dressy shoes in those boxes on the top shelf would have partnered one of the bridesmaid dresses.

She should have gone shopping, but she would rather clean the grout in her shower than shop. It wasn't that she was so hard to please. Just the opposite, she liked a lot of colors and styles. There were plenty of size fours that fit. It was the multitude of choices that made her crazy. As often as not, she came home empty-handed.

The Brennans' party was definitely a dress-up affair, or it used to be in the days when she'd been best friends with Beth and Ry. When they were little, they'd spied on the guests, laughed at them in their party hats and had more fun than anyone.

She glanced at the bedside picture of the three of them taken at Disneyland when she and Beth had been toothless six-year-olds and Ry was only a couple of years older. There was such pure joy in their young faces that she loved that photo.

She'd been so lucky to have them as her unofficial sister and brother. Adopted into her heart, she'd loved them as surely as she loved her older brother, Pete, who had been their faithful rescuer, while their older brother, Trey, had been their worst enemy. A born tattletale, he'd practically forced Beth and Ry to hang out at the Maguires'.

Down the hill from the Brennans', the Maguire family had a big yard where kids gathered to play. Inside the house was a filled cookie jar and a refrigerator stocked with cold drinks. Meg's mom was always home, though usually busy in her studio, sculpting the art pieces that made her famous. Meg's dad sometimes stopped by during the day and was home every night from his job as a general contractor. He joked with the kids, often played with them and treated the Brennans as if they were his.

At the Brennans' house, it was a totally different atmosphere. Meg hated to go there. Their professionally landscaped grounds won Garden Club prizes, but they weren't designed for kids to enjoy. The whole house was kid-unfriendly. TV and electronic games were not allowed, and the maid had to enforce Mrs. Brennan's no-snacks rule if she wanted to keep her job. If she gave the kids a break, Trey invariably told.

Trey—Dr. James Thomas Brennan III. Just the thought of him made Meg's stomach churn. He'd been a snooty, bratty kid, and he'd become an arrogant, unlikeable man with an arrogant, unlikeable wife.

Maybe she was wrong, but Meg still blamed Trey for Ry leaving the way he did, though Deborah Brennan might be more to blame. The pressure his mother put on Ry would have turned any good kid into a rebel who chose to go his own way, no matter the cost.

Meg hated the idea of having to be civil to that woman and to the other Brennan men—Trey, his dad, his granddad and his uncles—all of them medical doctors who looked down on Ry for breaking free. She was glad he had, and sad for Beth who hadn't escaped. Sure, Beth said she liked being a doctor, but Meg had to wonder. Apart from her work, Beth had no life.

Meg plopped down on her bed and stared at the ceiling, wishing she hadn't promised Beth that she would show up tonight. For Beth, who would soon occupy an office at Brennan Medical Clinic, the party was a command performance. If Meg weren't so lonely for Beth's company, she would rather stay right here, just as she had last year, and party with a liter of diet cola, a bag of microwaved popcorn and a six-pack of Snickers.

She'd had offers for group parties as well as single dates, just none from anyone who mattered. At midnight, if she couldn't be in the arms of a man who put stars in her eyes and a forever feeling in her heart, she'd rather be alone. Like Valentine's Day, New Year's Eve was for lovers, only better because it was all about hope for tomorrow.

She glanced again at the little bedside photo of Beth, Ry and herself—three happy little kids. Where would Ry be tonight? Of course he would be with a great-looking woman. That was a given, but Meg prayed that woman would love him enough to make up for the love he'd missed, growing up.

Leave it to her to think of that. When she made her living, helping couples find each other on Dream Date, she naturally thought that everyone was longing for love. Ry might not be ready to settle down. On the other hand, she was so ready, it hurt.

It was a year ago tonight that she'd asked God to help her find her guy. Believing He would, she'd begun every day, fully expecting to meet Mr. Right. A year was a long time to wait. Had her prayer gone amiss, or had she missed her guy?

She checked her watch. There were still a few hours to shop. It wasn't likely that the man of her dreams would be among the Brennans' guests, but the Word said to pray and to believe. If she were going to meet Mr. Right tonight, she ought to be wearing something better than an old bridesmaid dress.

Ry eyed the lighted seat belt sign and wondered how many times the plane would circle LAX before the pilot received permission to land. His initial enthusiasm for the trip had worn off someplace over Wichita. What had seemed a great idea earlier in the day lost its appeal by the minute.

He'd done many impulsive things in his life, but the urge to make this trip could be his worst. What would he really accomplish by going home tonight?

Home. Most people seemed to think of that place with such reverence. They wouldn't if they'd been told, "You don't belong here." If there was one phrase that ought to be stricken from the English language, that was it. Deadly, powerful, hurtful to the bone, it could break a person's spirit if he stayed around.

But he'd been a kid back then, and just possibly, he'd been as wrong in his insights as his young patient this morning. The kid had been more scared of what his dad would say about the car being totaled than he was of his own injuries, and the kid had been very wrong. Ry had seen the boy's father, bent over with grief at the loss of his son.

How had the two of them got it so tangled up? Was it that way with him and his family? Had he seen things from a kid's point of view and misunderstood?

Unlike the kid, Ry had the chance to find out. For once, he would love to admit he was wrong. Make that twice. He'd been wrong to exclude God from his life. The sooner he made things right with his family, the better.

His gut instinct said he was hoping for the impossible, that he was crazy to fly straight back into trouble. For years, words like, "Why can't you be like your brother?" "As long as you live under my roof," and "You don't belong" had bounced off the walls of his mind like echoes in a deep, dark well. It had to end, and that began with forgiveness.

Tonight, as the new year began, was the perfect time to show Christ's love and prove that he wasn't the rebel his family remembered.

Ry shifted in his seat, uncomfortable at being sandwiched in the center seat for so long. When he'd started the trip, he'd had an aisle seat, but a couple came aboard wearing Bride and Groom T-shirts and discovered they were both in center seats—one beside him. A couple ought to start their honeymoon together. Before selfishness could set it, Ry was on his feet, offering his seat to the groom.

His new seatmate on the aisle was a heavyset lady who was clearly exhausted and had napped most of the way, though she wouldn't be rested, not with the apneas she'd had. He'd kept an uneasy vigil, ready to wake the poor woman if she didn't start breathing again on her own.

She stirred now and sleepily said, "Are we there?"

"Just about."

"I hope I didn't snore. My husband says I do."

Her husband was right, but why embarrass the lady? "Who would notice with the engine noise so loud?" he said.

The little guy in the window seat squirmed and said, "Ry, could we play some more?"

Early in the flight, he'd felt sorry for the bored little guy and asked what was in his backpack. If Ry had known it would lead to endless action-figure fantasies, he might not have been such a pal. But one more time, he sent a plastic hero rocketing to a new mission.

The lady beside him beamed. "You're wonderful with children," she said. "Do you have some of your own?"

He shook his head. "I'm not married." That, of course, did not preclude parenthood, but it did for him.

"You'll be a wonderful father," she claimed. It was strange how women of all ages got misty-eyed over the sight of a big guy playing with a little kid, but if there were any more Brennans, it would be up to his brother.

The youngest flight attendant, a very pretty redhead who'd stopped by a couple of extra times, stopped now to say to his little buddy, "Honey, you need to put away your toys. Stow that bag under the seat."

Ry gave her a grateful look. She returned it with a wink and slipped him a bit of paper. He'd bet their safe landing it was her phone number. Wow! She must need a New Year's Eve date pretty bad to spend it with a superhero junkie.

Unfortunately, even he had his standards. A guy ought to know the name of his New Year's Eve date without having to read it off her ID badge.

Yet it did make him smile to think of how disgusted his brother, Trey, would be if Ry brought her along on his first visit home in a decade. That made it almost worth doing.

The hum of the plane's engines changed, signaling their descent. If all went well, he would get to his parents' house before midnight and give the first New Year kiss to the woman least likely to want it. Would his mother tell him to get out again?

The metallic threads in Meg's new strapless dress chafed the tender skin of her underarms every time she moved, no matter how careful she was. She would never wear the scratchy thing again. It should have stayed on the sales rack, and she should have purchased that soft, silky thing with the high neck. No wonder she hated to shop.

But she did look good. Her image in the huge gilt mirror on the Brennans' marble foyer wall gave her a nice boost of confidence. She had taken the time with her hair, and it fell in dark curls to her bare shoulders, contrasting nicely with her silvery-white dress.

On the hanger, the dress had looked like a skirt with a stretchy band that should have gone at the waist instead of across her breasts where the clerk said it belonged. The scratchy, miserable thing did look gorgeous, skimming her body to her bare knees. She'd decided against the nuisance of panty hose, but accepted the torture of silvery sandal stilettos. Pain was worth it when shoes were this pretty.

Unfortunately, she'd gone to this trouble for nothing. Mr. Right was not here. She'd made a thorough search. Most of the guests were Beth's parents' age, and the few eligibles weren't meant for her. She wished she'd stayed home, though the Brennans' caterers had done much better than popcorn and Snickers.

She was on her second plate, tasting everything. At first it had been a problem, getting the food to her mouth without her inner arm contacting her scratchy dress, but she'd discovered a technique that worked. Holding her arm out awkwardly, she probably looked a little weird, but there was nobody here to impress, and why go home with abrasions?

It was a lovely party with the rooms aglow with candles and still-beautiful Christmas decorations. There wasn't a drop of alcohol, not even in the punch, but the party had a silliness that most people got out of a bottle.

No doubt, it was the hats. The guests circulated, wearing the most silly, elaborate party hats imaginable. The Brennans spared no expense, and everyone wore them, even Beth's dad, the great Dr. James T. Brennan, Jr. In the medical community, the man walked on water, but tonight he wore a satin sailor hat, cocked to the side, with the number of the new year flashing in gold lights on the brim.

Beth wore a red satin beret with a coiled wire toy on top. It slid from side to side as if it had a life of its own.

Meg's hat, chosen for her by Beth, was worthy of a showgirl. Tall blue plumes sprouted from a silver crown, jiggling and waving with every turn of her head.

Trey, on host duty at the front door, wore a cowboy hat with a long, spiky feather that made him look like he might be a nice guy. It was too bad he wasn't.

"What are you doing over here in the corner?"

Beth had found her. Meg wasn't surprised. Keeping tabs on each other—that's what best friends did. Or they used to before Beth went to medical school.

"Just enjoying the feel of my feathers," she said, swaying to the music, letting the plumes dance.

"If I know you," Beth said, "you're putting pairs together, just like you do at work."

Beth was right. "Call it an occupational hazard," Meg joked.

Beth stepped beside her and scanned the crowd from Meg's point of view. "Okay, who goes with who?"

"Sorry, I'm off duty," Meg said, swirling sauce onto a shrimp.

"You're never 'off duty.'"

"Well, I ought to be. I drive people crazy."

"You do not!" Beth said loyally. "You have a gift. Why not use it? So, tell me, who's a match?"

Anything to make Beth happy. Meg handed her plate to a passing waiter and nodded to a short middle-aged man with glasses. "See the guy pretending he's admiring the painting over the mantel?"

"That's the new cardiologist at Brennan Medical. Let me guess." Beth looked over the crowd, a big grin on her face, enjoying the game. "Got it! He gets the cute little nurse in Uncle Charlie's office."

"Dr. Cardiology isn't into 'cute.' He likes the statuesque blonde who's pretending not to notice him."

"No way!" Beth laughed. "The blonde's a foot taller!"

"But Dr. Cardiology likes the way she looks, and I'm pretty sure that she's looking for a doctor to like."

"A match made in heaven," Beth said, giggling like the girl she used to be. Meg loved the happy sound. She nudged Beth's shoulder, and Beth nudged her back, just like old times.

"You just watch," Meg insisted. "They'll get together before the night's over."

"Well, then, who gets the cute little nurse?"

"Sadly, I don't have the pool to work with that I have on Dream Date. I'm afraid she's unmatchable tonight."

"Like me." Beth shrugged with defeat.

"Actually, I have someone for you," Meg said, happy that she had.

"Who?" Beth scanned the crowd.

"You're missing him. Check out the Marine."

"Captain Cutie-Pie?" Beth's lip curled.

"But he's perfect for you, Beth. Tall, a genuine hunk, a great sense of humor and he speaks in complete sentences. What more could you want?"

"How about a guy less impressed with himself? You know we don't go for guys who think they're all that."

Meg frowned. "I didn't catch that."

"Why would a guy wear a uniform to a party like this if he didn't want to show off that chestful of ribbons?"

"Wrong diagnosis, Dr. Brennan. If you'll talk to the guy, you'll discover that he didn't want to wear the uniform. His mom, your dad's nurse, asked him to wear it because she's so proud of him."

"Aww, that's sweet." Beth's face softened.

"You know we go for guys who are good to their moms."

"That's true. But how come I get him and you don't?"

"Because his eyes have followed you for the past hour."

"Really?" Beth perked up, her brown eyes sparkling.

"But I ought to warn you. While he's been watching you, the cute little nurse has been watching him. I think she's about to make her move."

"Then I'd better stake my claim!" Beth squared her shoulders and moved into action.

Meg laughed, glad that at least one of them would have someone younger than their parents to kiss at midnight.

"Wait!" Beth said, pivoting. "Who's here for you?"

That was just like Beth. Generous, always thinking of others instead of herself.

"Nobody, but that's okay," Meg said, faking a smile. "I'm devoting myself to your uncle Charlie tonight."

Beth's eyes narrowed. "Okay, what's wrong, Meg?"

"Nothing's wrong," she protested, laughing, hoping she would make it through Beth's radar.

But Beth took her firmly by the arm and marched her through the French doors to the torch-lit deck where they were alone. "When are you going to learn you can't keep things from me?"

"It's cold out here," Meg complained, wrapping her hands around her body to ward off the chill.

"It's sixty degrees. We'll survive. What's going on?"

Confess or freeze—those were her options? "Maybe I'm just a little depressed," she admitted reluctantly.

When they were kids, Beth would have joked with her until they were both laughing, but tonight, Dr. Beth gave Meg an assessing look. "How can I help? I can listen, or I can prescribe something. What do you need?"

She tucked her arm through Meg's, maybe for warmth, but definitely because they were closer than sisters. The love behind the offer put a lump in Meg's throat. She'd really missed Beth, but they would both miss the party if she spilled her guts now.

"Let me tell you later. We have all night to talk."

"That's true, but sum it up now," Beth demanded.

"Sum it up?" If her pushy friend wanted a short answer, Meg could provide it, though Beth wouldn't like it. "Fine. A year ago tonight, I made a deal with God."

Beth rolled her eyes.

"I know you don't believe in that, Beth, but I do. I promised God that I would stop obsessing about finding Mr. Right and trust Him to do the finding. I thought God would drop the guy right on my doorstep, but I must have prayed wrong or something. The year's over, and there's no Mr. Right."

Beth held her watch up to the light and said, "Thirty minutes to midnight. It could happen yet."

Lovely. Meg wished she'd kept her mouth shut. "Beth, I do believe God has the right guy for me."

"Good for you, hon," Beth said with an annoying edge of pity. "I know your faith is important to you."

Behind them came a familiar voice. "Hey, you two are missing the party."

They turned to see Beth's brother Ry strolling toward them with a killer smile and such easygoing confidence that Meg caught her breath. Dressed in a black leather jacket, black pants and a sweater the color of his dark blond hair, Ry was better looking than ever, and that was saying a lot.

Surprising tingles zipped through Meg's body, tingles that weren't exactly the welcome-home variety for a guy she loved like a brother. Ry Brennan was a fun-loving womanizer who'd broken hearts for as long as Meg could remember. Flirting came as naturally to him as breathing. Pure rebel, he was a terrible choice to get all tingly about.

Unfortunately, sheer reflex made her gasp.

Beth looked at her sharply, then at Ry and back again. A slow grin spread across her face. "Well, there you go," she said so softly that only Meg could hear. "Talk about an answer to prayer. My brother and my best friend. Now that's got to be a match made in heaven."

"You've got to be kidding," Meg whispered. When she fell in love, it would be with a guy she could count on, not a risk-taker who lived for the moment and left when he liked.

Beth laughed softly and whispered back, "It's almost enough to make me a believer. And you thought Mr. Right wasn't going to show up this year."

Chapter Two

It felt exactly as Meg had imagined love at first sight would feel. Thrilling beyond words, it was lightning-bolt dramatic and heart-pounding real and heady. She could hardly believe it was happening to her. For an instant her soul sang.

It was a very short song.

All these years, she had been so sure that she would look into the eyes of Mr. Right, feel the welcoming sting of Cupid's arrow and know her search was over. Never had it crossed her mind that the object of her attraction could be Mr. Totally Wrong.

Ry Brennan was lovable, good-looking, smart and fun to be with, but she wouldn't wish Ry on her worst enemy. Beth and she had pitied the girls who'd fallen for him. Once they'd even formed a support group for the ones he'd left behind—girls who didn't understand his idea of a long-term relationship was getting to know the girl's last name.

She watched him take Beth in his arms for a sweet, brotherly hug and knew her turn would come next. He was just Ry, she told herself, no one to get all tingly about.

He turned to her, swept her up in his arms and murmured, "Hey, Li'l Sis," close to her ear.

Li'l Sis. It had been so long since she'd heard him say that. Like ice cream under hot fudge, she melted and hugged his neck, just like a little sister would do.

"I've missed you," he said, his mouth so close she could feel his breath. Goose bumps rose on her arms.

He lifted her up and spun her around. It was only a bear hug, just a brotherly bear hug like the one he'd given Beth, though Beth surely didn't have to deal with tingles like this.

"Welcome back," she said, barely able to say anything at all, busy as she was with the butterfly troop in her stomach, flitting as if this were their one chance to dance.

"It's good to be back."

He sounded so happy that she hugged him tighter, thrilled deep inside that he was home.

Releasing her, appreciation dawned on his face. "Look who's become a babe! Li'l Sis, you're all grown up."

Well, of course. All three of them had grown up. For such a stupid statement, how could she take it as a compliment and let her heart race as if it were?

"Stay away another ten years," Beth said dryly, "and you'll notice that she's middle-aged."

Ignoring his sister, Ry kissed Meg's forehead and said, "You never call. You never write. It's been too long."

Shoving out of his arms, she wagged a scolding finger at him. "You sneak out of here in the middle of the night, go to college on the other side of the country, come home just once when I happened to be away and have the nerve to say that I never get in touch?"

He flashed that killer smile. "You missed me, right?"

She'd missed that smile. "Well…I am glad to see you." Her heart was pounding so hard, Ry and Beth, both medically trained, might notice.

She glanced at Beth and wished she hadn't. Beth flicked her eyes from Ry to Meg like a fan watching a tennis match. Catching Meg's eyes, Beth had the nerve to fold her hands prayerfully and look heavenward.

Okay, a joke was a joke, but if Beth kept this up, there would be no Happy New Year for her.

"Beth, did you know that Ry was coming home?" Meg asked, prodding Beth to snap out of it.

"No, and why didn't I?" Beth demanded of her brother. "I could have met your plane."

"I didn't even know," he said, his voice deeper now than Meg remembered. His buttery baritone was totally appealing. "I only decided this afternoon."

"And you just hopped on a plane?" Meg asked. Wasn't that just like him? Ry always did exactly what he wanted, when he wanted.

"I had forty-eight hours off. I thought I'd see if there was a party hat for me."

"I think there's another one like mine," Beth said.

"We can be twins," he said, grinning.

"Since your hair is finally as short as mine, I guess we could," Beth said, touching his bare neck and her own. "This is quite a change from your long-haired pool boy days. You were always prettier than me."

"I was never prettier than you," Ry said, hugging his sister again. Meg loved seeing them together like that.

"Have you seen Mom and Dad?" Beth asked.

Ry shifted uncomfortably.

"You haven't." Beth answered her own question. "Ry, you haven't come all this way not to see them."

"No, I'm going to see them, but when I turned my rental car over to the valet parking guy, I caught a glimpse of Trey at the door…"

"And you decided to slip in from back here," Beth finished, knowingly. "Good idea. Trey's still the same. He lives to prove he's the only worthy Brennan off-spring."

Ry's mouth lifted in a wicked half smile. "So that would make Trey the only one of us who hasn't grown up?"

Meg smiled. Good for Ry, taking Trey's arrogance in stride.

Beth raised her hands toward each of them, initiating their old three-way high five.

Allies, that's what they were. Buddies. Partners. Nothing to get all tingly about.

"Nice feathers, Meggy," Ry said, eyeing her headgear.

"Meg," she said, correcting him automatically. "I'm not 'Meggy' anymore."

"Oh, I don't know," he said, his eyes dancing with laughter as he looked her over approvingly. "I think you'll always be Meggy to me."

She swallowed hard, her heart racing though it shouldn't have. Ry could save that charm for someone who knew how little it meant.

"Those feathers are a perfect match to your blue eyes, Meggy."

"Meg," she corrected again, though she might as well save her breath. Ry hadn't changed. He always had to win, though he had this amazing talent for making a person not really care that he had.

He had remembered that her eyes were blue. The deck lights were bright enough for him to tell the color of her tall plumes, but not the color of her eyes. That had to have come from his memory. She shivered, unbelievably pleased at such a small thing.

Beth must have noticed the shiver, for she said, "Meg's freezing. Let's go inside. We'll get you a party hat, Ry."

Ry slid out of his jacket. "Why don't I give Meggy—"

"Meg," she corrected firmly, giving him a look that said he'd better conform or forget about a peaceful evening.

Fitting his jacket around her shoulders, he repeated, "Why don't I give Meg my jacket, and you get the hat, Beth?"

Meg's happy smile rewarded his effort.

"Not ready to face the music yet?" Beth asked, teasing, yet understanding, too.

"Not just yet." Ry hated to admit it, but being here was harder than he thought it would be. On the plane, he'd been prepared. He'd even had his opening speech memorized.

One look at Trey at the front door, like a lion at the gates, had changed that. The old anger flooded his mind, and he'd thought about getting back in the rental car and going back to New York for good. If he had avoided dealing with the family this long, he could do it forever.

But seeing the girls had settled him down. He still wasn't sure he could manage to be the good son he'd flown out here to be, but he would give it his best shot. It was still minutes to midnight. There was no hurry.

"Stay put," his sister said, patting his arm. "I'll get you a hat, and you'll be just like the rest of us."

Was that what he wanted to be?

"Oh, and before I forget," she said, "you're staying at my place while you're here."

Beth made it more of an order than a request, but that was fine with him. He wanted time with his parents, but not the whole time. "How comfortable is your sofa?" He didn't really care. He could sleep on the floor.

"I thought I got the sofa tonight," Meg complained.

The three of them would be together tonight? Ry smiled at the fun they would have.

"Toss a coin or duke it out," Beth said, heading for the house. "It won't matter. We'll stay up all night."

"Say hello to the marine," Meg called after his sister.

Beth tossed a snappy military salute. "Aye, aye, sir."

Meg saluted back. "Be all you can be."

Ry laughed softly, watching his sister march inside. The girls had their military branches mixed up, but who cared? They still knew how to have fun. No matter what else happened, he'd be glad he made the trip.

"You two haven't changed," he said, bringing the lapels of his jacket closer together, the better to keep Meg warm. His Li'l Sis had become one good-looking woman. She looked fantastic in that shimmery dress.

"It feels like Beth and I have changed."

Her beautiful dark hair was still long. It was amazing how happy he was about that. Li'l Sis was adorable. She still stood all of five feet three, but she had definitely grown up.

"This is the first time Beth and I have spent together in ages," she said a bit unevenly, as if she were nervous.

He felt a little nervous himself. But it had been a long time since they'd been alone. Even old friends had to get back in their groove.

"I'll be glad when she's through with her residency."

He drew Meg under his arm. In that little dress, she could probably use the extra warmth from his body. "I only hope Beth has done this for herself. You have to want it, being a doctor and putting up with the life."

"Did you ever want to be a doctor, Ry? Just for yourself, not for the family?"

Had anyone ever asked him that? Everyone seemed to assume he'd chosen to become a paramedic instead of a doctor just to spite the family. He hadn't minded, and it was true that he didn't want to be like them.

"I like helping people," he replied, not really answering the question.

"Which you do as a paramedic."

Darling Meggy, still backing him. "Sometimes I wish I could do more." He could be honest with her. "Much more."

"As a paramedic, you must see some terrible things."

He was here because of one of those terrible things, so terrible that it finally got through to him. Pretty soon, he'd have to go inside and do what he'd come to do.

"This isn't exactly party talk, is it?" he said, not wanting to burden her with his troubles.

"I always loved our serious talks," she said softly, looking up at him so sweetly his heart skipped a beat. If she were just another pretty woman, he'd be thinking about stealing a kiss.

"If I recall, those serious talks mainly focused on your love life," he teased, getting back into their groove.

"It was never all about me!" she protested.

"Li'l Sis, life was always all about you," he said, laughing. It wasn't, but he loved to tease.

"How can you say that?" She stepped away, a move that set the feathery plumes of her crown waving madly.

"I take it back," he said, pulling her back.

She let him, but she shook a finger at him. "Ry Brennan, I spent half of my life listening to you talk about your girls. It was endless."

He feigned innocence. "You didn't want to listen?"

"Well, sure I did. I was a kid who knew nothing about dating. You taught me everything I know about boys."

"It was an awesome responsibility," he said gravely, laughing inside.

"You didn't do that great a job. What I learned was that boys can be real jerks. You'd say one girl was cute, but too sensitive. Another had great eyes, but was too flighty. Another one, you liked her big…chest, but she wasn't—"

"Enough!" He stopped her with a finger to her pretty lips. "Thanks for the trip down memory lane."

That would be Jani, Joanie and Sue, in that order. He never forgot a pretty face, but it would be best not to mention that at the moment. It was sufficiently embarrassing that he'd ever talked about girls that way.

"Okay, then, let's talk about the present," she said, as if she were throwing down the gauntlet. "Are you alone on this trip or do you have a babe stashed away in your car? I heard that you brought a girl to your grandmother's funeral—a girl you barely knew."

Ouch. Meg still knew how to target a weak spot. "I just brought her along for Trey's benefit."

A wicked smile of approval slid across her pretty face. "Good idea. Tattletale Trey, judge and jury for all indiscretions. He must have loved that."

He grinned back. "No more than Mom."

Meg's laugh surrounded his heart. Their old camaraderie and special connection was still there.

"I'm ba-ck," Beth sang out, carrying a red satin beret like her own, complete with the springy toy on top.

"Did you check on the marine?" Meg asked, stepping away, leaving his arm empty. That was okay. He needed both hands to position his beret so the toy on top wouldn't fall off.

Beth waved a hand, dismissing the marine. "He was talking to the cute little nurse. I can wait to find true love. I'd rather be with you two."

"Beth! He was perfect for you," Meg insisted.

His sister shrugged and said directly to him, "She's usually right. Meg has a real gift for matchmaking. The marine and I could have been a match made in heaven."

"Will you get off of that?" Meg gave Beth a warning glare.

Ry chuckled to himself. He had no idea what they were talking about, but with those two, it was always something.

"Meg's in denial," his sister said, ignoring Meg's glare. "She's mad because I know her guy is perfect for her even if she won't admit it."

Meg had a boyfriend? Well, good for her. And sympathy for the guy. That dude's hope of peace and tranquillity were behind him. "Who's the lucky guy?" he said, vaguely aware that he didn't really want to know.

Meg jutted one hip to the side and planted a defiant fist on it. "There is no 'guy'! And your sister would be wise to stick to pediatrics, which we hope she knows something about."

"No guy? Or nobody inside?" He nodded toward the house, setting the toy on his hat bobbing, which made Beth smile even if Meg still had fire in her eyes. Her very pretty eyes. Gorgeous, really.

"I mean nobody anywhere," she said emphatically, her feathers bouncing.

He didn't know what she was so upset about, but egging her on was his idea of fun. "No date for New Year's Eve? Aw, that's too bad," he drawled, playing the pity card as a payback for the trip she'd taken him on down memory lane. He cocked his head sympathetically, feeling the springy toy slide.

Beth mimicked the move, setting her hat in action.

Meg caught their act and laughed. "So, where's your date, Big Talker?" she sassed.

"Who needs a date?" he said, enjoying himself more than he would have imagined. "I'm out here talking to my two favorite girls and playing with my hat."

"Ry, don't let her change the subject," Beth said, laughing. "Make her tell you about her guy."

Meg glared at Beth, her lips sealed.

"Meg, are you holding out on me?" he challenged. "We've never had secrets. Tell me about your fella."

"There is no 'guy'!" She threw up her hands. "What part of that do you not understand?"

"Oh, no," he said in mock worry. "Please tell me you're not in some secret relationship?" He knew better. Meg couldn't keep a secret if her life depended on it. "He's probably married. Never agree to a secret relationship with a man, Meggy."

"Meg! And it's nothing like that!"

He didn't believe it was. "Let me meet the guy. I'll get the truth."

She headed for the house, her feathers bouncing. "I'm leaving. Happy New Year to you both."

Beth caught up with her, took her arm and said, "That was a fast half hour, wasn't it? At thirty minutes to midnight, we thought we'd spend the rest of the year alone."

Meggy made a little choking sound.

"Are you okay?" he asked, catching up to them. It was second nature for him to check out anything that didn't sound healthy.

"I'm fine," she said, practically spitting her answer as she rushed to the house, leaving them behind.

"Ready to face the music?" his sister asked, suddenly serious.

"Ready as I'll ever be."

"Don't expect too much from Mom, Ry."

"Don't worry, sis. She can throw me out, but I'll still be glad I came."

"I'll be close by," she promised.

It was good, having her here to shore up his courage.

Inside the house, the sight of his uptight family decked out in their headgear made him laugh out loud. Most of the guests were his parents' colleagues, people who held lives in their hands every day. No one would know it to see them choosing noisemakers and trying their blow-out horns. He'd come inside at just the right moment. Amid this pandemonium, he went unnoticed.

He spotted his brother, Trey, with his arm around a woman who was probably his new wife. The two of them looked as if they could barely tolerate the bedlam. If Ry knew Trey, his brother would rather be in surgery—or having it.

There was a drumroll going, and the trumpet guy tooted a fancy fanfare. Everyone started yelling the countdown to midnight. "Five-four-three-two-one," and the band struck up "Auld Lang Syne."

And then, as if a neon sign blinked "Hug now," everyone was embracing. Why his undemonstrative family needed the license of this one moment a year to express feelings, Ry would never understand. It was enough to enjoy it.

He headed first for his mother. The way they'd left it, her greeting would gauge whether he was welcome here.

"Happy New Year, Mom," he said, taking her in his arms. She felt too thin, but that wasn't new. What was new was the startled look of love in her eyes. Whatever he'd done to merit that, he'd like to know so he could do it again.

"Ry," she said, patting his face delightedly. "You've come home! I'm so happy."

All the love he'd felt as a little boy for his mother filled his heart. "I'm happy to see you, too, Mom," he said, wishing this moment could last.

She pulled his head down for a kiss on his forehead, and his knees almost buckled. When had she ever done that?

"Thank you, Mom," he managed to say. And then she was opening her arms to a guest he didn't know.

He went through the motions, hugging people he knew and people he didn't, more aware of the intense emotion he still felt than anything else. He hugged Aunt Jackie who didn't seem to recognize him, but gave him a juicy kiss on the cheek. Uncle Al shouted, "Happy New Year!" in his ear as if he were deaf, and a flamboyant blonde kissed him as if they were lovers.

Rubbing his lips to remove the blonde's lipstick, he spotted Meg making the rounds as he was and instantly felt much better. She was easy to keep track of, with the blue plumes of her party hat waving in the air. Man, she looked pretty. Her silvery-white dress showed off a figure just right for her size.

"Give us a kiss, Ry," Aunt Claire commanded, pulling him down to her level.

At least she recognized him. He aimed a kiss at her cheek, but she turned her head and planted a wet one on his lips. Oh, man! Aunt Claire was a sweetheart, but did she have to do that?

She moved on to another victim, and he looked for a non-relative babe. Now that Aunt Claire had shown him how to kiss, he ought to practice.

He felt a touch on his arm. Behind him, Meg stood with a Happy New Year smile.

"Happy New Year, Li'l Sis." He took her in his arms for a regulation New Year's kiss, just a little smooch like he'd given to Aunt Jackie and Aunt Claire.

But the touch of Meg's soft lips on his sent awareness shooting to his brain. Again, he kissed her softly, tentatively, the way a guy did in a first kiss.

And that's what it was, not a New Year's kiss, but a genuine first kiss, the kind that had to be soft and slow and enjoyed in heart-racing pleasure. Her arms crept around his neck, and the feel of Meggy in his arms…

Whoa! Meggy in his arms? Shame on him. He broke the kiss, wondering how he could explain this away.

But he might not have to bother. She looked up at him with an expression that just about knocked him out. Big, blue and confused, her eyes said she'd felt the same jolt he had and didn't know what to do with it, either.

He owed it to both of them to find out. He lowered his head, eager to touch her lips again, to feel that same sweet awakening. On an unimportant level, he noticed that her dress sure was scratchy.

He heard the sound of fireworks outside and knew that people passed by them on their way to the deck. From the sound of it, there was a happy celebration with exploding Roman candles and crackling sound. But right here was all the celebration his heart could stand. This was exactly where he wanted to be and what he wanted to do, getting to know Meggy in a brand-new way…her lips and his, adjusting to this new touch, these new feelings.

"Hey, kids!" Uncle Charlie yelled, tapping Ry's shoulder. "You're missing the fireworks."

Not really. Not from Ry's point of view.

Meg slid her hands down his arms and pulled away, her eyes filled with awe. "Whoa!" She shook her head as if she needed the world to stop spinning.

He knew exactly how she felt. That was the best kiss of his life, which made it absolutely terrific. He could still feel the buzz.

"I can't believe it," she said softly.

Neither could he. His first resolution of the new year was to stop calling her Li'l Sis. She would never be that or Meggy again.

"Ry, you weren't kidding. You always said you were 'the greatest kisser in the world.'"

He couldn't have said that.

"'Practice makes perfect.' That's what you said, and, boy, were you right."

Wait a minute. This was not the reaction of a woman who'd felt the earth move the way he had. The feeling couldn't have been all that one-sided. It didn't happen that way, not in his experience.

"I've always wondered about your technique," she said, her eyes laughing at him.

Laughing at him! Another zap in the heart. Maintain, he told himself. He couldn't let her see that she'd put a knot in his ego and a bruise on his heart.

"I am truly impressed," she said, her eyes big. "You weren't exaggerating a bit when you said you were the greatest."

No way would he let her get by with this. "You know, of all my students, you've achieved what no other has."

"What's that?" Her eyes sparkled as if she enjoyed this more than the kiss.

Shame on her for that. He had to scramble if he were going to save his pride. What could he say? The truth— that's what a guy used when he came up with nothing.

"Your kissing was so good," he said, making it sound as if he were congratulating a little girl for coloring within the lines, "that you deserve a medal, or maybe one of those certificates of accomplishment."

Horror filled her eyes.

Man, he just couldn't catch a break. "Or we can forget the certificate," he said. Anything to change that look…that went right past him. Ry turned and found his brother standing behind him.

"You think she wants a medal?" Trey let there be no mistake that he'd been eavesdropping.

Hot resentment coursed through Ry's body. Trey was still the sniveling snot he'd been as a kid. That hadn't changed. Was this what Ry had come home for?

Chapter Three

"Don't you have anything better to do than listen in on a private conversation?" Ry asked, forcing himself to relax and smile when he'd rather gut-punch his brother than breathe.

"Sorry, little brother," Trey said, his sickening, self-righteous grin showing he wasn't sorry at all. "I was just waiting my turn to introduce my beautiful bride."

The petite brunette standing by Trey's side was pretty in a classy, uptight way. With her dark hair pulled back in a severe bun, she had prissy girl written all over her. Ry wouldn't have given her a second look, but she was probably perfect for Trey.

She wore a tiny black hat with a tiny mesh veil that made her look like a mobster's sexy mourner. Her dress, pulled snug over her belly, proclaimed her to be in her last trimester. Ry hoped she wouldn't mind raising the kids alone. Trey couldn't stand little kids.

"Izzie," his brother said, "this is the prodigal son— my brother, Rylander Hamilton Brennan."

Ry didn't mind the prodigal bit, but he hated being called Rylander Hamilton. That name belonged to Mom's coldhearted father.

"Just 'Ry' will do. It's good to meet you, Izzie," he said, stepping forward to greet his new sister-in-law with a brotherly hug. Any woman named Izzie had to be cool.

But she checked his move, extending her hand for a handshake. "I prefer 'Isabel,'" she said, glancing uneasily at Trey. "Only Trey calls me 'Izzie.'"

"'Isabel' it is." The name thing again. He supposed he could understand that, even though he did wonder what she seemed so nervous about. The way Trey held her close to his side suggested Trey's old nasty jealousy, but surely Trey wouldn't think Ry would hit on his wife—or any man's wife.

"We missed you at our wedding," she said, glancing at her husband, as if she sought approval. "You should have been there, Ry."

Was there anything more endearing than a good scolding? "You write a great thank-you note, Isabel," he said to remind her that he wasn't totally bad.

The sterling silver coffee service had cost him a month's salary, not something he could afford on his paramedic pay. It had been worth dipping into his trust fund to do something right, which he could, thanks to Beth's suggestion that they wanted something as useless as a silver coffee service.

"Ry, I hope you won't mind that we exchanged your gift for the service Izzie really wanted," Trey said, as only he could. "I didn't mind making up the difference in cost."

By reflex, Ry slid into the laid-back mode he'd perfected as a child when he wanted to take his brother out. "Mind? Me? I'd have returned it myself. But then, I'd have used the money on something useful, like a down payment on a matching motorcycle for my bride."

Trey made that particular sound of disgust that used to make Ry's day. It still did.

"Tell me that you don't still ride a motorcycle," his long-suffering brother implored.

Excellent. It felt just as good as ever to make his brother crazy.

"As a paramedic," Trey continued, "you've surely had to scrape motorcyclists off the pavement enough times to know better."

Of course he had. They didn't call them "donor-cycles" in the ER for nothing. Ry hadn't ridden one in years. "But there's nothing like the freedom you feel, weaving in and out of traffic, on two wheels."

"Ry?" His father's voice. Ry turned at the sound.

"Happy New Year, Dad." He reached out to shake his father's hand. It was show time. This is what he'd come home for. God willing, he planned to be a good son.

If his father were surprised to see Ry, he didn't show it. He took Ry's hand, holding the grip seconds longer than politeness required. That was a good sign.

"You're looking well, Dad," Ry said in good-manner mode, though his father didn't look well at all. Ry wasn't a doctor like half of the crowd here at the party, but he recognized a stressed-out man when he saw one.

"Have you seen your mother?" his father said, his eyes sweeping the room as if he were looking for her.

"Yes, I got my first New Year's hug from her."

The relief on his father's face was pitifully real. "Good, that's good," he said, patting Ry on the shoulder.

His father's touch was so unexpectedly moving that emotion tightened Ry's chest. "I don't want to take you away from your guests, Dad. Maybe we can get together tomorrow and talk?"

"Would that suit your schedule better, Ry?" Trey asked sarcastically. "Personally, I don't think the prodigal son should expect a big welcome here."

Ry clenched his teeth so tight his jaw hurt. This was a nightmare.

"Let's take this to the study," his father said firmly, giving Trey a silencing glance and leading the way.

"Fine with me," Trey said, taking Isabel's arm and quickly stepping to be next in line.

Beth grabbed Meg's hand. "C'mon, we're not going to miss this."

Meg pulled back. "I don't belong."

"You belong as much as I do," Ry muttered, shoving her in front of him. He could use their support. He looked around for his mother. Shouldn't she be here, too, especially when she'd been so glad to see him?

Closing the study door, his father motioned for them to be seated. "How long are you here for, Ry?"

"I fly back the day after tomorrow."

"How long have you been here?" Trey asked, as if Ry might have squeezed in a mere obligatory visit just now.

Ry checked his watch. "Less than an hour." It was a shame that he felt he had to justify anything to his family, but trust wouldn't be easy to win back. If he had to account for his time, that was an easy price to pay.

"You started the celebration without me?" his mother said as she swept into the room, her party tiara sparkling as if it might be real jewels.

Ry felt his heart accelerate as it used to when he was a child, knowing Mom had arrived and was now the one in charge.

When had Ry ever seen her so happy? Glancing around the room, all of them seemed to be asking the same question.

"Ry's home! You know what this means," she told them, as if they were collectively dense. Smiling at him, she sat down on the arm of his chair, wrapped her arms around his neck and locked her adoring gaze on him. "Tell them, Ry."

He would if he could. He could barely breathe with his mother's full affection squarely on him. Had it ever happened before? What would make his mother this happy, this full of joy?

Slow realization crept through his mind. "I'm not sure what you want me to say," he said, stretching the truth, dreading the explosive moment that was sure to come if he didn't come up with what his mother wanted to hear.

She stiffened in his arms. "Don't quibble, Ry. There's no in-between. You're either here to follow your destiny, or you're not."

His heart sank. It was as bad as he'd feared. He could feel the tension in the room, as if they all held their breaths, and he felt terrible about it. He'd come home to make things right, not worse.

"Mom, I don't want to disappoint you, but—"

"No!" She stood and whirled away from him, her eyes hot with anger. "Not another word. Not if you're going to disappoint me."

But wasn't that his role in this family? He'd learned that before he'd learned to read.

"Why are you here?" she demanded, her tone so unwelcome it stung.

He dropped his eyes and prayed, not sentences, not even words. Just the name of his Lord, silently, fervently.

"Deborah, why don't we go back to our guests?" his father said, taking her arm.

She shook off his hand and went to Trey, sitting on the arm of his chair as she'd sat by Ry. Trey put his arm around her protectively, gloating in her preference.

"I'm not leaving until I hear what Ry has to say." His mother leaned against her elder son.

His dad had tried. Ry had to give him that. It was more than Ry could remember his dad doing before.

"Mom, the reason I came home was to wish you and Dad Happy New Year. And I want to say that I'm sorry for—"

"Sorry?" his mother interrupted. "Sorry! That's it?"

Ry froze, speechless, staring at his mother's angry, quivering lips.

"My father would turn over in his grave if he could see the lack of dedication you have in your life." Her voice shook with emotion. "With the advantages you've had and the opportunities you've thrown away, you're a disgrace to his name! Rylander Hamilton was a healer, not a glorified taxi driver. You could have been like him. You still can!"

The injustice of her words sent adrenaline pumping through Ry's body. He wanted to rush out of the room, slam the door behind him and never come back.

But he sat, rooted in place, feeling sorrow creep through his mind, replacing that first flood of anger. In his work, he had seen sick people who couldn't distinguish reality from fantasy. His mother —with her crazy highs and lows, her swings from utter devotion to utmost derision—had to be sick. He wasn't trained to identify the problem, but the doctors sitting in this room ought to know.

One look at his dad said he did…and was helpless to do anything about it. What about the rest of them? Yes, Trey knew. And Beth? The sympathy in her eyes about broke his heart. Only Meg was as much in the dark as he was, but she looked as if she were ready to do battle if he gave her the nod.

He couldn't leave it like this. He'd come all this way. Maybe by tomorrow his mother's mood would improve.

Searching for words that wouldn't ignite another outburst, he said, "You have guests. I don't want to keep you from them. Mom, I told Dad that I'd like to come back tomorrow if that would be okay." He hadn't talked this way in years. Hat-in-hand polite, fearful of rejection.

"You're not spending the night here?"

Another swing? She wanted him here?

"I've already invited Ry to stay with me, Mom," his sister said, coming to his rescue.

"You only have one bedroom," his mother argued.

"Ry can sleep on the sofa."

"The sofa?" It was Beth's turn to receive the maternal glare.

"It pulls out, queen-size," Beth said, grinning in spite of the glare. Nothing ruffled Beth.

"Nonsense. Ry, you have a real bed upstairs."

This was unbelievable. Now his mother was in a tug-of-war over where he slept?

"Not your old bed, of course," Trey said, plainly delighted to enter the fray. "Mom redecorated soon after you left. The same summer, in fact."

Ry almost laughed. Did Trey think that tidbit was important? His room had been right for a boy, with its sports theme and trophies that no one cared about except the guy who earned them, and he'd left them behind.

"So, would tomorrow be okay?" he asked again, trying to keep them focused on the real deal instead of where he would sleep and the decor of his room.

"That will be fine," his father said. "Come for brunch. All of you." His gaze included Meg.

"I'm sorry," his mother said, cold as ice. "That won't do." She picked a bit of confetti off of her sleeve. "I won't be here. I'm driving Aunt Jackie back to Palm Springs. Isabel and Trey are going along."

It looked as if that were news to Isabel and Trey, but they didn't contradict her. Ry didn't blame them. They'd had enough fireworks in here.

"Why don't you wait a day to do that?" his father suggested. "Ry has come all this way, and Jackie would love to see him."

Ry's mouth almost dropped in surprise. First, that his dad seemed to care. Second, that Dad thought he could influence a decision made by Mom. That didn't happen.

"No," his mother said, moving toward the door, clearly through with the conversation. "We've made our plans. We'll stick to them. And we should get back to our guests."

She shut the door behind her, and his dad swallowed hard. Had it always been like this and he'd been too young to notice? Beth and Meg looked at each other, sharing a silent communication that he wished he were in on. He hadn't known what to expect, but he'd hoped for a lot better than this.

"Ry, let's still get together," his dad suggested as if there had been no unpleasantness. In truth, the tension in the room did seem to leave with his mother. "How about meeting me tomorrow morning after I make rounds?"

"Think you can get up that early, Ry?" Trey snickered.

"Oh, I think so," he answered, letting his drawl counter his brother's rudeness. "I'm still on New York time. When I meet Dad, it will be about the time my shift is half over."

"It must be nice that paramedics have regular hours," Isabel said.

Ry loved the way she said "paramedics," grouping them with some lower form of life.

Trey gave his wife a little hug, beaming approval. Poor Izzie, if that's what she lived for.

"I'm never sure when I'll see Trey," she added. "He works so hard, just like his father."

If Trey was like his dad, Izzie would be raising the kiddies alone.

"Well, then, Ry, I'll meet you at the hospital," his dad said, heading for the door.

"I'll look forward to it," he said, following.

Beth and Meg did, as well, but Isabel stopped them, saying, "Wait a minute. Trey, I think Ry should see our beautiful home. Why don't all of you come over for breakfast in a little while?"

"It really is beautiful," Beth said, mischief in her eyes. "Isabel was an interior decorator before she was married. She has wonderful taste. You'll want to see for yourself."

"I'm still an interior decorator, Beth," Isabel claimed.

"Sure, you are, baby," Trey said, shepherding her toward the door. "But we won't trouble Ry with a visit."

Isabel pouted. "I don't see why not."

"Yeah, well, Ry's like magic. Now you see him, now you don't. Don't count on your dear brother-in-law, Izzie. If he couldn't come to our wedding, he won't be coming for breakfast."

Meg cranked up the volume of the music playing in her car, praying she'd catch its soothing mood of worship. Anger still roiled in her stomach, thinking of Mrs. Brennan's explosive behavior.

When they'd been younger, she'd known Mrs. Brennan wasn't a loving mom like her own, but she hadn't seemed icicle cold or dirt mean. Tonight Mrs. Brennan's rudeness had caught Meg completely off guard.

Meg's eyes focused on the taillights of Ry's rental SUV, making sure that he didn't lose sight of Beth's Jeep on the freeway. The three of them caravanned to Beth's condo where they planned to put the awfulness behind them and have a good time.

Her first New Year's resolution was to make the rest of Ry's visit fabulously happy. She would tease him, play along when he teased back and keep the mood full of fun, just the way he liked. A short-term resolution, she knew she could keep it, especially if she kept her head and remembered he was her old buddy and pal.

For a minute there, when they'd kissed at midnight, she'd turned into mush. What a joke on her! His soft kisses brought back the old longings she'd had as a kid when her crush on him was too big a secret to share with anyone, not even Beth.

But, not to be too hard on herself, they were very good kisses. When she had more time, she should analyze them thoroughly. Mr. Right ought to kiss like that. Maybe Ry could give him lessons.

She grinned, laughing to herself. Maybe she should tell Ry. In the old days, that would have tickled him. It wouldn't make up for the memory of that awful scene in the Brennans' study, but she wished something could.

It had just killed her, seeing his mom treat him like that. How had he taken her abuse without fighting back? Beth was a fighter, and she was herself. But not Ry. He seldom had to be. As a kid, he'd charmed his way through life.

Ry had been their peacemaker, mediating the back-and-forth between Beth and herself, calming their storms, and so secretive about his own feelings that she sometimes wondered if she really knew him.

One thing she did know. Ry hated conflict enough to walk away from it. Look at the way he'd done that tonight. A lesser man could not have kept his cool, but Ry had. She'd always wondered what happened to cross the line of his tolerance and make him leave all those years ago. She had blamed his dad, Trey, Uncle Charlie, Uncle Al and Ry's grandfather. Tonight it seemed that it must have been his mother all along, shoving the great Rylander Hamilton in her son's face.

It was amazing how Mrs. Brennan had come up with that plan to drive Aunt Jackie to Palm Springs rather than spend time with an unfavored son. She'd made that trip up on the spot. Trey and Isabel's surprise gave that away.

Poor Isabel. What a life she would have. That flare of Trey's jealousy was amazing. Ry was an outrageous flirt, but he wouldn't be interested in Isabel. Anything that appealed to Trey was an automatic turnoff for Ry. Beth and she used to make a game of noticing that if Trey wanted a purple lollipop, Ry chose red. If Trey switched to red, Ry switched to green. It was always like that.

She'd hated how Trey still put Ry down. Trey had such a lot going for him. Why did he have to do that?

Trey was almost as good-looking—when he wasn't looking down his nose at a person. Ry had been the standout athlete, but Trey had done okay, playing tennis and golf. Ry had tons more charm and charisma, but Trey had a good career, a beautiful home and a trophy wife. Shouldn't that be enough?

A pickup slid in between Beth's car and Ry's as their exit came up, blocking his vision of the lead car. Meg turned on her signal indicator, hoping that Ry would notice. He did and moved into the exit lane. Ry wouldn't get lost. He was too smart for that.

The three of them pulled into the spacious lot by Beth's condo, a place Beth couldn't afford on her resident's pay, but Grandma Hamilton had left trust funds to see that her grandchildren could live well.

Beth parked and waited for them by the elevator. Ry walked over to open Meg's door, offering his hand to help her out. Just the touch of his hand set off those silly tingles again. It was absurd how her body seemed to be out of touch with her brain.

"Cool car," he said, scanning her pride and joy, a white convertible with a tan top and tan leather interior. "Not particularly safe, but very cool."

"Since when were you interested in safety, Motorcycle Man?" she challenged, more aware of his nearness than she ought to be. A soft breeze on her bare shoulders made her shiver.

"You're cold," he said, shrugging out of his leather jacket. "Put this on, and don't give me any back talk."

The jacket, warm from his body, did feel good, though not quite as good as his arm would have felt. She locked and slammed the car door shut, congratulating herself on remembering the keys. That ought to prove that Ry hadn't muddled her mind.

"Did you want to take your purse in?" Ry asked, nodding toward it on the seat inside. "And the bag in the back?"

Of course she did. "Maybe I should," she said, pretending she did have a brain.

She retrieved the purse and bag, locked the car again and tried to breathe in the small space between them. He took the bag and slung the strap over his shoulder.

"Hey, you two," Beth called. "Come on up when you get tired of counting stars. I'll put the coffee on."

Ry glanced at the sky and dropped his free arm around her shoulder. "Stars," he said. "That's a bonus for the trip. You don't notice stars much in a New York winter."

The way he tucked her beside him, so casual and brotherly, was no call for the butterflies in her stomach to act up again or for her heart to race as if she were fourteen, not twice that.

But as long as she had a shoulder to lean on, she rested her head there, all the better to see those stars. "Do you like living in New York City?" she asked, proud that she could make small talk in spite of bodily chaos.

"Sure. It's home."

He snuggled her close, just a buddy thing, her mind insisted, though she shivered again.

He must have thought she was freezing, for he snuggled her closer. His chin nuzzled her forehead, a skin-to-skin move that set the butterflies spiraling.

"Ry, what are you doing?" she teased. Teasing, flirting, playing along—that was her operational mode, making this a fun trip for him to remember.

"What do you mean?" he asked innocently.

She looked up at him, checking his expression. A full grin cancelled the innocent act.

"I'm just keeping my best girl warm," he claimed, flirt that he was.

His best girl? Not likely, but she could be that for tonight. Ry was a "love the one you're with" kind of guy. Day after tomorrow, he would hop on that plane, probably find a new "best girl" among the passengers or have one waiting to drive him home from the airport. Meg would be lucky if she saw him again in another decade.

"Who's your best girl in New York?" she teased, letting him know she didn't take him seriously. "Or is there just one?"

He could get used to the way Meg felt, snuggled next to him, and he loved hearing her sass. It was getting more and more difficult to think of her as his buddy and pal. "You know me," he said, hoping his drawl would disguise the state of his mind. "It's my job to spread love around."

She looked up at him, concern in those big eyes. "But aren't you getting tired of that, Ry? Isn't there someone you'd like to settle down with?"

Him, settle down? No, thank you. He'd had all the family life he ever wanted, but he couldn't get enough of teasing Meg. "You're not applying for the job, are you?"

"Me?" her voice squeaked. "Are you crazy?"

He laughed, chalking up a point for his side. "Why not you? You've become a real babe."

"Wow, thanks," she muttered, pushing out of his arms.

"Think about it, Meg," he said, enjoying the game. "You could be my motorcycle mama, riding behind me on my Harley. What do you think?"

She whipped his jacket off and shoved it at him. "I think you're just as goofy as ever, Ry Brennan."

Maybe, but he still could push her buttons. He watched her swish away. No doubt about it. Meg had turned into a babe. Catching up with her, he said, “What’s the rush?”

She jabbed the elevator button and answered, “Beth will be wondering what’s happened to us.”

“Did anything happen to us?” he asked, baiting her just for fun, though he felt himself hold his breath, wondering what she would say.

The question startled her. He could see that, but she recovered fast. Her blue eyes flashing, she propped one hand on her hip and said, “Ry Brennan, it is not your job to make every female on this planet fall for you. As a person who has known you since you wore my mama’s high heels, I am exempt. Is that clear?”

Loud and clear. He laughed until he could scarcely catch a breath. He’d only done that once, and nobody knew it but her.

Meg congratulated herself on an excellent recovery. For a second, he’d gotten under her skin, but she’d made a good comeback. “Save that charm for silly women who don’t know you like I do. Give me back my bag,” she said, snatching it. “You don’t deserve to carry it.”

Ry laughed as if she were the funniest thing he’d ever seen. Well, great. She’d made him laugh. A New Year’s resolution had never been easier to carry out.

She watched him rock back and forth on his heels, his hands in his pants pockets, looking as happy as a kid on his way to recess. What a change from the way he’d looked in his parents’ study. The difference went straight to her heart.

Even if it was only for tonight, she would be Ry’s “best girl.” And day after tomorrow they would get on with the rest of their lives.

Chapter Four

When she opened the door to her condo, Beth had already changed into jeans and a T-shirt.

"Where's your bag?" she asked. "Or were you planning to wear a pair of my jammies?"

"No, I've got a bag. I just forgot it in the trunk."

"You might have remembered it if you weren't making trouble," Meg claimed, brushing past him.

Beth took her bag. "How can you get in trouble counting stars, Ry?" his sister said as she carried Meg's bag to the bedroom.

"Meg wouldn't help me," he said, wandering through the condo, inspecting the layout. "Nice place, Beth. You must have had Isabel decorate for you."

In unison, both women groaned. He loved the sound. This was family.

"I never know whether to pity Isabel for being Trey's wife or congratulate her for finding exactly what she was looking for," Beth said, going to the kitchen where she measured coffee and set it to brew.

"And that would be a rich doctor who treats her like a child?" Meg said, heading for the bedroom. "I'm changing out of this scratchy dress."

That was a shame. All dressed up, Meg looked like a woman he could fall for, not the girl he used to know. He wandered into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator and scanned the contents.

"Hungry?" Beth asked, pulling out chips and salsa.

"I could eat." Actually, Ry was ravenous. He'd been too nervous to eat during his trip, and he hadn't been at his parents' house long enough to have something there. After that scene in the study, the three of them had turned in their party hats and left. No one from the family seemed to notice.

"There's a pizza in the freezer and muffins in that bakery box," Beth said.

He spotted eggs and cheese. "Mind if I make an omelet?"

"No, but don't you want to get comfy like us?"

"Maybe later. I'd rather eat."

Meg appeared in jeans and a huge pink T-shirt that probably doubled as sleepwear. Had she always looked that pretty in pink?

"Meg, I've put a pot of coffee on," his sister said. "Do you want tea? I have peach tea and that herbal stuff you like."

Scooting onto one of the high stools at the kitchen counter, Meg ran a hand through her long dark hair and said, "If we're staying up all night, I'd better have coffee."

Ry broke eggs into a bowl. "How about an omelet?" he said, enjoying the sight of her slender fingers running through her dark, shiny hair. She scooped it up, lifting it off of her shoulders as if it were a heavy weight.

Beth leaned over his shoulder. "I think you just added some eggshell, pal."

He looked in the bowl and saw for himself what happened when a man got distracted. "You don't like a little crunch in your eggs?" he said, trying to cover his mistake. It was crazy how he couldn't get past how absolutely gorgeous Meggy had become.

Meg. She really wasn't Meggy anymore. Instead of the slightly klutzy girl who used to adore him, this very pretty woman had confidence to spare and seemed immune to the fact that she had his total attention.

He fished out the bits of shell and brought the bowl a little closer to her, the better to show off his whisking technique. Women usually liked his domestic routine.

She lifted one pretty brow. "You're really cooking?"

He was, indeed. "At the fire department, we take turns. Omelets are one of my specialties. Light, fluffy, creamy—this is going to melt in your mouth." She had a beautiful mouth, truly kissable.

"Is your skillet supposed to be smoking?"

He'd forgotten he'd turned the heat on. Usually, he worked in a smooth rhythm, getting the eggs into the pan at just the right moment, but he was definitely off his stride. "I think I'm a little jet-lagged," he said, grabbing the handle of the pan to take it off the burner.

Ow! He silently screamed. That was one hot handle.

"Let me help," his sister said, taking over, using a hot pad. "You'd better run some cold water on that hand."

He knew that. He didn't need a pediatrician telling him what to do with a minor burn.

An hour later, when he'd redeemed his reputation as a cook and hadn't made another dumb mistake, the three of them sat in front of Beth's muted TV. The girls had curled up on the sofa, and he sat in a comfortable chair with one bare foot casually crossed on a knee and one burned hand casually resting on an ice bag. He'd changed into a T-shirt and flannel pajama bottoms and settled in for the night, feeling happier than he'd been in a very long time.

"Ry, that was better than any breakfast Isabel could have made," Beth vowed. "If you ever change professions, you should be a chef."

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