

MILLS & BOON



## **Vintage** *Cherish*

# **Only Bachelors Need Apply**

**CHARLOTTE MACLAY**

Charlotte Maclay

**Only Bachelors Need Apply**

«HarperCollins»

## **Maclay C.**

Only Bachelors Need Apply / C. Maclay — «HarperCollins»,

HUSBAND IN A MILLIONSingle mom Joanna Greer knew all the "mommy" tricks: kiss boo-boos, fix three squares a day...fuss, fuss, fuss. But when it came to acting as a father figure to her young son, she was desperately at a loss....Then little Tyler staked his claim on the handsome bachelor next door.Kris Slavik didn't know the first thing about fatherhood. His upbringing had been short on hugs, but long on expectations. Well, he'd earned his millions...several times over. Problem was, he had no one to share it with. Until a rambunctious kid and his beautiful mom had him tossing around footballs—and sizing very big diamond rings....

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***“I’m a man, Joanna. A guy who’d someday like to have a wife and family of his own.”***

His lips brushed hers in a heated caress, as if to emphasize his point.

She leaned into his kiss. Dimly she realized she shouldn’t be doing this. They had no future together. To encourage him was wrong.

For the past ten years she’d tried to remain resolute in accepting the cards fate had dealt her. Now was not the time to weaken.

“I’ve got to go,” she whispered against his lips.

“Sure. I understand.”

He released her slowly, and she ached with the futile desire that he never would do so...

[Dear Reader,](#)

This month, Silhouette Romance has six irresistible, emotional and heartwarming love stories for you, starting with our FABULOUS FATHERS title, *Wanted: One Son* by Laurie Paige. Deputy sheriff Nick Dorelli had watched the woman he loved marry another and have that man’s child. But now, mother and child need Nick. Next is *The Bride Price* by bestselling author Suzanne Carey. Kyra Martin has fuzzy memories of having just married her Navajo ex-fiancé in a traditional wedding ceremony. And when she discovers she’s expecting his child, she knows her dream was not only real...but had mysteriously come true! We also have two not-to-be missed new miniseries starting this month, beginning with *Miss Prim’s Untamable Cowboy*, book I of THE BRUBAKER BRIDES by Carolyn Zane. A prim image consultant tries to tame a very masculine working-class wrangler into the true Texas millionaire tycoon he really is. Good luck, Miss Prim!

In *Only Bachelors Need Apply* by Charlotte Maclay, a manshy woman’s handsome new neighbor has some secrets that will make her the happiest woman in the world, and in *The Tycoon and the Townie* by Elizabeth Lane, a struggling waitress from the wrong side of the tracks is romanced by a handsome, wealthy bachelor. Finally, our other new miniseries, ROYAL WEDDINGS by Lisa Kaye Laurel. The lovely caretaker of a royal castle finds herself a prince’s bride-to-be during a ball...with high hopes for happily ever after in *The Prince’s Bride*.

I hope you enjoy all six of Silhouette Romance’s terrific novels this month...and every month.

Regards,

Melissa Senate,

Senior Editor

Please address questions and book requests to:

Silhouette Reader Service

U.S.: 3010 Walden Ave., P.O. Box 1325, Buffalo, NY 14269

Canadian: P.O. Box 609, Fort Erie, Ont. L2A 5X3

## Only Bachelors Need Apply Charlotte Maclay



[www.millsandboon.co.uk](http://www.millsandboon.co.uk)

Special thanks to Tom, for his mountain biking expertise, and to Chuck, as always, for his technical advice.

### **CHARLOTTE MACLAY**

has always enjoyed putting words on paper. Until recently, most of these words have been nonfiction, including a weekly newspaper column, which has recruited nearly twenty thousand volunteers in the past twenty years for some four hundred different local nonprofit organizations.

When she is not urging people to get involved in their community, Charlotte divides her time among writing, volunteering for her favorite organizations (including Orange County Chapter of Romance Writers of America), trying *not* to mother two married daughters and sharing her life in Southern California with her own special hero, Chuck.



## Chapter One

“He had the *nerve*, the absolute gall, to tell me I need a husband!” With a sense of utter frustration, Joanna Greer tossed her purse onto the kitchen table.

Turning from her task of watering the jungle of plants on the windowsill, Agnes Greer asked her daughter, “Who told you that, dear?” She smiled benignly as the water continued to pour out of the copper watering can...onto the floor.

Joanna lifted the spout. “The bank manager when he turned down my loan request, that’s who.”

“Oh, my, that is too bad.”

Tearing off a string of paper towels, Joanna knelt to mop up the spilled water. Given her mother’s tendency to be easily distracted, this was a minor accident. “Too bad? It’s disastrous. It’s already the middle of September. The rains will start in November, and the rental property I thought would turn Dad’s insurance money into a decent income for us has got roof rot. The first good storm and it’s likely to fall in.” Leaving her with a huge mortgage on a small office building that she wouldn’t be able to rent.

“Maybe if you talk with the bank again, they’ll change their mind. Wally Petersen has always seemed like such a nice man.”

“The bank manager you’re so fond of is a leftover from the eighteenth century. They can’t make marriage a criteria for getting a bank loan. It’s got to be against the law.”

Agnes brightened considerably. “But marriage would be a lovely idea, don’t you think?”

“Mother, I don’t need a husband. And certainly not a husband for the sole reason of qualifying for a loan.”

“Husbands are nice for other reasons, dear. You really should find yourself a good man who could be a father to Tyler—”

“It seems to me we’ve had this conversation before, Mother. Tyler is getting along just fine, thank you. And so am I.” Joanna certainly didn’t want to saddle any man with the responsibility for her admittedly eccentric mother, or with the burden of raising a ten-year-old son he hadn’t fathered.

Not that there were many eligible men in the small Sierra-foothills town of Twain Harte. And most of those who were unmarried wore big belt buckles, hadn’t read a book or newspaper since they dropped out of high school and drove pickups with gun racks across the back window. Hardly Joanna’s idea of the perfect companion. She’d worked too hard getting her teaching credentials to ignore the importance of an education.

She dropped the soggy paper towels into a plastic wastebasket under the sink. “I was going to run an ad for the rental space this weekend but I’ve got to go to a teachers-training session in Sacramento on Monday and Tuesday. I’d hate not being here if we get any calls.”

“I could take care of them, dear.”

Joanna gauged her mother’s lucidity. Today was one of her purple days—she wore a purple blouse, purple flowered skirt and a matching purple turban. The gray hair peeking out from beneath the turban had a distinctly purple tinge. Joanna sighed. Her mother seemed quite within her normal range.

“If you’re sure,” Joanna agreed hesitantly. In order to have any bargaining power at all with the bank, she needed to get the three empty offices and oversize garage rented and producing income. Then she would have another talk with Wally Petersen in the hope of getting the loan she so desperately needed.

Placing the watering can on the counter, Agnes said reassuringly, “Leave it to me, dear. Of course I’ll let you handle the final negotiations when the time comes. Meanwhile, I can answer their questions over the phone and tell them what a fine building it is. Right on the highway. A prime business location.”

Handy to the landlord, too, since it was only a half block from Joanna's house.

She glanced at her watch. As usual, she was running late to pick up Tyler from Pop Warner football practice. "Okay, if you're sure." From her purse she retrieved a piece of paper. "Here's the ad I want to run. Could you call the paper for me?"

"I'd be happy to, dear. I may even add a few words of my own—a little something to encourage more interest in the property."

"No, Mother. Please don't. Just the way I've written it will be fine."

Joanna didn't at all care for the Cheshire-cat grin that stole over her mother's face. But Tyler was waiting. The husband and wife co-coaching her son's team got very upset with parents who weren't prompt, and they took their irritation out on the boys. Or maybe it was just another excuse for the couple to argue. Too bad no other parents had volunteered to help out the team.

Wrapping the ornate pen-and-pencil set he'd never used in a sheet of the Sunday-morning paper, Kris. topher Slavik placed it in a cardboard box. If the set hadn't been personally engraved, he wouldn't have bothered taking it with him. There was little in the office he was vacating that he would need.

Picking up his empty coffee mug from the desk, he smiled. The product of the complicated mathematical formula decorating the cup, when laboriously computed, equaled zero. It was an in-house joke among the hackers at NCC—Nanosoft Computerware Corporation.

Chad Harris, his business partner and friend, stormed into the office and marched across the plush carpeting. Though he was normally impeccably dressed, his silk paisley tie was now askew and the collar of his button-down shirt was open.

"I can't believe you're actually going through with this farcem," he complained.

"I've been putting all the plans together for a year so the transition would go smoothly. I don't know why it's such a surprise to everyone now."

"I swear, Kris, I think you've developed a brain virus. You're too young to retire."

"Thirty-one strikes me as the perfect age." Though it was a year later than he had wanted. On his thirtieth birthday, Kris had realized he'd missed a lot of things in his life. It had been a startling revelation, so shocking it was only because of loyalty to his partner and their employees that he hadn't simply walked away from the business.

"But look at the future of NCC," Chad argued, as he had for the last several months. "Our stock has nearly doubled in the last five years, and with this new operating system we just introduced, it's going to skyrocket."

Kris smiled smugly. "All the more reason why I feel free to leave. I have complete confidence my shares of stock are doubly secure with you managing the company. Besides, we've both got more money than we'll ever be able to spend."

"That's not the point. We've got software concepts on the drawing board that will turn the whole industry on its ear in the next fifteen years. Don't you want to be a part of that?"

Kris considered his partner's question for a moment. The possibility was tempting. But no, that effort wouldn't fill the void he'd sensed was troubling him. "I think there are some other things I'd like to try."

"Like what?"

"I'm not sure."

Chad threw up his arms in frustration. "You're crazy, man, but I guess it's your life. Just try not to forget your going-away lunch this afternoon."

"I won't."

Eyeing him critically, Chad said, "It might have been nice if you'd managed to wear something respectable today."

Kris checked his old jeans and T-shirt. They were both clean, which struck him as respectable enough. "Look at it this way, Muddy. If I'd dressed up, the staff wouldn't be able to tell us apart."

Chad grimaced, fully aware his dark hair and naturally bronzed skin were in stark contrast to Kris's fairer complexion. Muttering something about ignorant white eyes, he retreated from the office.

Chuckling to himself, Kris resumed his packing.

As he wrapped the mug he'd been holding in a sheet of newspaper, a want ad in the Office Space for Rent section caught his eye. Studying the advertisement, he sat down in his leather chair and tipped back until the springs creaked. He placed his feet on top of the desk, his old running shoes looking markedly decrepit against the dark, rich mahogany. The ad certainly posed an interesting marketing concept, with an unusual opportunity.

He had been wondering what an unemployed thirty-one-year-old should do with all of his spare time. The ad had provided him with an intriguing answer, one he was surprisingly eager to pursue.

In spite of heavy traffic, Joanna made it back to Twain Harte late Tuesday afternoon before dinnertime.

She found Tyler sprawled on the couch in the living room and gave him a big hug. His face was streaked with dirt, his blond hair—a shade lighter than her own—was matted to his head and he smelled of little-boy sweat.

"I missed you, tiger," she said, her heart swelling with so much love for her son she could barely contain it as she kissed him.

"Gee, Mom, you don't have to get so mushy about it," he complained, even as a smile dimpled his boyish cheeks.

"It's okay, none of your friends saw me kiss you," she said in a stage whisper. She snatched the omnipresent football from his hands, twirled it around and handed it back to him with a loving smile. "Where's your grandma?"

"Here I am, dear." Agnes appeared from the kitchen and kissed her daughter. It was an apricot day—lightweight summer slacks, blouse and turban. Her hair remained an unsettling shade of purple. "I have good news for you."

"What's that?"

"I've already rented one of the offices to a charming gentleman, and he's taken the garage, too."

"Mother, I thought you were going to wait—"

Tyler straddled the arm of the couch. "Grandma's been going crazy. The phone's been totally ringing off the hook about the ad in the paper."

"It has?" Joanna had assumed it would take some weeks to rent the offices, and she hadn't been entirely confident the oversize garage and storage shed would rent at all. If only the Forest Service hadn't decided to vacate the property in an effort to consolidate their facilities and save money, she wouldn't be in such a difficult financial bind.

"I have several more gentlemen coming to see the property later this week, and one is coming up from the valley this evening after work. They all wanted to wait until you were home. But this gentleman—Kristopher Slavik is his name—was anxious to move right in."

"I hope you got his references?"

"I didn't think that was necessary, dear. He and I hit it off right away. I'm sure he'll be a fine tenant."

Joanna mentally groaned. Relying on her mother's judgment, particularly since Joanna's father had died nearly two years ago, was like walking through a heavy fog. It was easy to lose your sense of direction.

"Maybe I'd better meet him," Joanna said. "Did he sign a lease?"

"Yes, and he paid cash, too. First and last month, just like you said they should."

Tyler added, "Man, he pulled out a wad of money so fat I nearly choked. He's got to be loaded, Mom! Totally fat city!"

"A roll of one-dollar bills can look like a lot of money and not amount to a great deal," Joanna reminded her son. Some smart operators also tried to con elderly women with scams that made them

appear wealthy when they were nothing more than bums set on separating innocent victims from their money. “Do you think this Mr. Slavik would still be there now?” And if so, would he be easily evicted if he turned out to be a con artist?

“Oh, yes, dear. In fact, he said he’d be camping out in the office until he can find a house to buy nearby. I’m sure he’s anxious to meet you.”

He might not be so thrilled when Joanna called his bluff. She wasn’t about to have an aging Lothario trying to take advantage of her mother. From now on Mr. Slavik would have to deal with her.

After leaving her suitcase in the middle of the living room, Joanna headed out the front door. The heat of summer still hung in the air and dust coated the pines and oaks that formed a canopy above the street. It would be another month before cool weather arrived and the leaves on the black oaks began to turn a bright yellow. The change of season would also bring the possibility of rain, she recalled grimly.

She reached the end of the block and checked traffic on the two-lane blacktop road that led into Twain Harte, then hurried across the street. Her sensible low-heel shoes clicked on the asphalt.

A single vehicle was parked beside the one-story building, an aging Oldsmobile Cutlass with one crumpled fender and a trunk so full the lid wouldn’t close. A mountain bike was tied precariously to a bike rack on the roof.

Protruding from beneath the car was a very masculine pair of denim-clad legs, the man’s running shoes as old and worn as the vehicle. Apparently the “charming” gentleman had only found one sock to wear that morning, a white athletic sock that lacked any remaining elasticity and drooped accordingly.

Joanna cleared her throat. “Mr. Slavik?”

“Be right with you. I’m checking a bearing seal that’s leaking.”

Her mother had been right about one thing. The clear baritone voice of the stranger had a warm, mellow charm to it. Or maybe all men naturally projected a certain added sense of masculinity when they worked under a car.

Slowly, Mr. Slavik edged toward her, revealing his long legs an inch or two at a time. There was a tear in one knee of his faded jeans, the denim fabric pulled tautly across his pelvis and the material covering his zipper looked worn from many uses. When a flat belly appeared, washboard muscles visible where his white T-shirt hiked up, Joanna concluded that Kristopher Slavik, Lothario or not, was in great shape. And maybe considerably younger than she had thought.

She stepped back a foot or two to give him room.

Completing his exit from under the car in an agile movement, he stood and smiled at her. A streak of grease marked the exact spot where his cheek creased into a dimple.

*Definitely* too young for her mother, Joanna thought, her heart suddenly doing a staccato beat. The guy was about thirty, closer to her age than her mother’s.

“Hi. You must be Joanna.” Intelligent gray eyes swept over her in an interested perusal that left her slightly breathless.

“Yes, ah...”

“Your mother told me all about you.”

Rarely speechless, Joanna tried to gather her wits. “She omitted a few details about you.” Important ones, such as that his height topped out at about six foot two and his rumpled sandy-blond hair made a woman instinctively want to smooth it.

“Really? Like what?” He pulled a rag from his back pocket and wiped his hands. His fingers were long and tapered, lean like the rest of his body.

Setting her wayward thoughts aside, she said, “Mother didn’t happen to mention what business you’re in.” His examination of her grew more intense, and Joanna suddenly wished she was wearing a gunnysack instead of a low-cut, summery blouse and a formfitting skirt—professional attire appropriate for a teachers’ meeting but somehow more revealing given the way he looked at her.

“Guess you could call me an inventor,” he drawled.

“Oh? What is it you invent?”

“Whatever comes to mind.”

“That doesn’t sound very lucrative.”

“It can be if you invent the right thing.”

“Yes, well...Mr. Slavik—”

“Please call me Kris.”

She ignored his request. “You’ve signed a lease that says you’ll pay the rent the fifteenth of every month. My mother neglected to get your bank reference, names of former landlords, that sort of thing. If you don’t mind—”

“I think I’ll invent a dual mountain bike.”

She blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“You know, a bike two people can ride at the same time.”

“Hasn’t someone already invented that? It’s called a tandem bike.”

“This will be different. A two seater to ride on mountain trails—side by side.” His lips slid into another grin. “Maybe you’ll come for a test ride with me. After I get it invented, of course.”

She struggled with the unsettling feeling he was flirting with her, a rare occurrence in her rather humdrum life. “Is there a big market for that sort of bike?”

He gave an unconcerned shrug. “Guess I won’t know until I invent it.”

That struck Joanna as a dicey way to run a business. But as long as the man could pay his rent, she supposed it was none of her concern.

“Perhaps if you’d give me the name of your bank,” she suggested. “Wherever you have your checking account?”

Two nicely arched brows lowered into a frown. “I’m sort of in between accounts right now.”

Suspiciously, she wondered if that was because he was overdrawn. Given his appearance, that was a likely possibility. Waves of sun-striped hair curled at his nape, looking less like a cultural statement than a result of simply forgetting to show up at the barber shop. Or not having the money to spend on personal grooming.

“Then the name of your most recent landlord would be helpful,” she persisted.

He gave that request more thought than it should warrant under normal circumstances. “Actually, I don’t recall I’ve ever had a landlord. Until now. I think I’m going to like it.”

“Look, Mr. Slavik—”

“Kris, with a K.”

“I have a substantial mortgage on this property and I depend on the rents to make my payments. I really must insist—”

“How about I give you a year’s worth of rent? Then you won’t have to worry about all that paperwork.” He dug into his pocket, retrieving the roll of bills Tyler had seen.

“You’re going to pay me in cash?”

“Sure. It’s not counterfeit.”

Maybe not, but the only people she had heard about who dealt in that much cash were drug dealers. Or bank robbers.

Joanna’s eyes widened as he flipped open the roll and began counting out hundred-dollar bills. Good grief, Tyler had been right. The man was totally loaded!

He handed the money to her. “How’s that?” he asked pleasantly.

“Ah, fine, I guess.” It didn’t make any sense to turn down a bird-in-hand worth several thousand dollars in the hope of finding some other tenant with more traditional banking arrangements.

“Good. I’m glad that’s all settled. So how would you like to go out to dinner tonight?”

Joanna did a double take. That was the fastest move any man had ever made on her. “I think not, Mr. Slavik. We’ll just keep our relationship a business one, if you don’t mind.”

“Funny, that’s not the idea I got from your ad.”

“What ad?”

“The one you ran to rent this place.”

An odd feeling of uneasiness prickled along her spine. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“It was a real interesting ad. One hundred percent accurate, too.” Sliding two fingers into his pocket, he pulled out a bit of paper torn from a newspaper. “I really appreciate truth in advertising.”

Curiosity warred with apprehension as he handed her the scrap of paper, still warm from the heat of his body. With dawning understanding, she read the advertisement, which listed her telephone number as the contact:

Attractive, intelligent, marriageable woman with adorable 10-year-old son has office and garage space available to rent. Reasonable rates. Only bachelors need apply.

Her head snapped up; color heated her cheeks. “I didn’t do this. I mean, that’s not the ad...” Joanna lost all sense of composure. Her professional persona crumbled and she babbled, “My mother—she must have... Sometimes she’s—I told her...”

Kristopher Slavik simply grinned at her, that soft, seductive smile that creased his cheek and brought a devilish sparkle to his eyes, doing something wild and impossible to her insides. “So what do you say? How about dinner?”

“No!” In lieu of eating anything, Joanna Greer was going to string up her mother by her conniving, matchmaking thumbs.

## *Chapter Two*

He judged that the natural sway of Joanna's long hair would be the equivalent of a fifteen-degree pendulum swinging across her slender shoulders. But she was embarrassed now, and in her hurried retreat across the street, her silken curls bounced as if they were spring-loaded.

Leaning back against the car, Kris smiled to himself. His new landlady was a very attractive package. Each individual module—eyes that looked to be a light blue, a pert nose, full lips and determined chin—combined as though a skilled artist had had a hand in the design phase. He could see Joanna's resemblance to her mother and her son, but she was put together with gentler, youthfully feminine curves that were quite appealing.

Odd he'd never before taken such special note of a woman. But then he was the sort of man who usually concentrated on one task at a time, often to the exclusion of all others. Until now he'd never had the inclination to find a wife and start a family of his own. It seemed like an appropriate challenge for a man who had achieved just about everything else he'd set his mind to.

The problem was, though he had learned the intricacies of computer programming by the age of twelve, he had rarely delved into the techniques required for courtship. Except for a torrid affair with a college professor, who had been more brilliant than beautiful—and considerably more experienced than he had been—his contacts with women had typically been either professional or very brief.

From the spark of independence in Joanna's eyes and the determined lift of her chin, Kris sensed he would need a good deal of skill in a game where he barely knew the rules and had never learned to speak the language. He might not even have an aptitude, he thought with a frown. Although by age twenty he had mastered certain pleasant sexual techniques, courtesy of the professor, neither she or his parents had taught him much about love or affection.

That might leave him at a decided disadvantage with Joanna Greer.

His impulsive announcement that he was an inventor wasn't likely to have earned him a whole lot of points, either. Although he was looking forward to their first ride together.

At the sound of tires crunching on the gravel parking lot, Kris shifted his attention to the arriving car. A sleek Porsche convertible slid to a stop beside him.

"I'm looking for Joanna Greer," the man said as he got out of the car. Tall and well built, he looked as if he had just stepped off the pages of an upscale mens wear catalog. Not a single wrinkle marred his silk shirt, and though he drove a convertible with the top down not a hair on his head was out of place. His toothy smile was equally unbelievable.

Kris felt a sharp and unfamiliar surge of aggressiveness and instantly wanted to eliminate the competition. "She's not around right now," he said, feigning ignorance.

"You come here about that ad, too?"

"Could be," he acknowledged, already plotting ways to discourage the intruder.

"Is she a real dog, or what?"

"Dog?"

"Yeah, you know. Women who run ads in newspapers to get a date are usually desperate. At least this one owns a little property. If she isn't too bad, I figure I'll let her support me for a while." He shrugged as if he'd run this scam before and cared nothing about the women he had undoubtedly hurt. "Till I get bored, anyway."

Kris's hands clenched into fists. Normally he wasn't a violent man, but he had to consciously suppress the urge to punch this guy's lights out. Given the surprising amount of adrenaline surging through his veins, he didn't think it would be all that hard to do. "Then it looks like you're barking up the wrong tree. You wouldn't want to hang around for more than five minutes with Ms. Greer." Kris would see to it he didn't last even that long.

The stranger eyed him suspiciously. “You sure you’re not trying to run me off so you can have her all to yourself?”

“Not me,” Kris lied, knowing full well the way to douse a man’s overactive testosterone was to avoid being perceived as a rival. No doubt the masculine urge to compete for a woman was an instinctive throwback to caveman days, one he had sublimated until now. “I’ve already seen her. Soon as I get an oil leak fixed under this old clunker, I’m outta here. You’re welcome to the lady, if you think she’s worth the effort.”

“Naw, I’ll take your word for it.” The stranger slid back into the car. “Maybe I’ll head on down to Bakersfield. There’s always a lot of action in the singles’ bars. I’ll find somebody to hit on.”

“Good luck.” The sleek engine purred to life and Kris waved the driver off, knowing it was the women this jerk planned to hit on who he’d rather be wishing good luck.

“Don’t you realize you have put me in an absolutely untenable position?” Face still flaming with mortification, Joanna railed at her mother, who appeared frustratingly unconcerned as she fried chicken for dinner. Sometimes Agnes carried her bizarre behavior too far. *Much* too far, and at Joanna’s expense.

“It seems to me the important thing is to get the property rented. I’m sure that’s what Alexander would have wanted.”

“My father would not have wanted me portrayed as a lonely old maid who has to *advertise* in order to meet a man.” Joanna didn’t know how she would ever be able to face Kris Slavik again, much less the next prospective renter who showed up at the property.

“Well, you certainly haven’t met very many interesting men in the usual way.” Agnes made a disparaging snort, ignoring the potatoes boiling away on the stove and in jeopardy of burning. “The last young man who asked you out seemed quite strange. Didn’t he believe in shaving?”

Joanna switched off the burner and moved the pot to a cooler spot on the stove. That episode had occurred five years ago and wasn’t worth comment. She’d dated a fellow teacher’s brother as a favor, nothing more. And Joanna had been more than happy to see the end of an incredibly boring evening spent in his company.

“Hey, Mom, you gonna go out with that new guy?” Tyler slipped a couple of cookies from the cookie jar and stuffed one in his mouth. “Bet he could afford to take you to the City Hotel over at Columbia for dinner. That’s where Pete’s mom always makes his dad take her for anniversaries ’n stuff like that.”

“I’m not planning to go anywhere with Mr. Slavik. Or with any other man who rents the property because of that ridiculous ad your grandmother wrote.”

“Tyler, dear, don’t spoil your supper,” Agnes said, ignoring Joanna’s distress along with the potatoes. “It’s almost ready.”

“But, Grandma, I’m starved. All I had after football practice was a sandwich.”

Agnes smiled benignly and turned the chicken one more time. “It won’t be long now, dear.”

They weren’t paying any attention to her. Both Joanna’s mother and son were far more interested in dinner than in how on earth she was going to handle a man who expected her to be *available* for who knew what kind of a relationship.

Her mother had pulled some dumb stunts in her life—like the time she’d tied Tyler’s sack lunch to his belt so tightly for a third-grade field trip that he couldn’t get it off and had to beg his friends for handouts so he wouldn’t go hungry. But *this* stunt took the cake!

First thing in the morning Joanna was going to cancel that damn ad!

But before that, right after dinner, she was going to make her position quite clear to Mr. Slavik. If he decided to stick around, he’d do so as a tenant. If that didn’t suit him, she’d be more than happy to refund his money.

As night stole the blue from the sky, the sharp taste of embarrassment still filled Joanna’s throat. She swallowed the unpleasant flavor and headed across the road to face Kris Slavik again. It wasn’t



her fault her mother had rewritten the ad. Joanna simply had to make clear to her would-be tenant that she was not available for the marriage mart. She'd refund his money, and that would be that.

She sighed. Except she would still have an empty office building to rent and no prospects in sight—including the guy who had promised to show up that evening.

From inside one of the offices a rectangle of light spilled through the open door onto the parking lot. On the porch, a silhouetted figure sat on a redwood bench in the shadows beside the door.

"Mr. Slavik?"

"I'm here." He unfolded himself, and she was struck again by his tall, lean figure as he stood.

"I've come to apologize."

"There's no need. Assuming you'll start calling me Kris. I always get the feeling someone is looking for my father when they call me Mr. Slavik."

She smiled. He did have a nice voice, one that made her think of quiet winter evenings in front of a fire. Or soft pillow talk.

Mentally, she pushed the thought aside. "My mother did something nearly unforgivable by changing the ad I'd written for the newspaper. I'm truly sorry if she misled you, and I'd be happy to refund all of your money and tear up the lease you've signed."

As Joanna spoke, he strolled lazily off the porch and stood close to her. There was a clean, masculine scent about him. Not artificial, like a shaving lotion, but natural, with a slight touch of musk. In the warm September air it seemed to hover about her in a tempting caress.

"Your eyes are blue, aren't they?" he asked, his voice a low murmur that didn't disturb the soft sounds of the night.

"Yes." It was too dark for him to see that now. With a good deal of pleasure, she realized he must have remembered her eye color from their earlier meeting.

"Did you know your eyes each have about a hundred and thirty million light-sensitive cells in them?"

She blinked at the unexpected comment. "No, I guess that piece of information hasn't ever come my way before."

"I'm afraid I'm addicted to bits of trivia that are not necessarily useful."

"Not everything we learn has to have a practical application," she assured him.

"Hmm, I'm not sure my parents would agree with you."

"There are the great poets—Wordsworth, Shakespeare, Longfellow, to mention just a few. Knowing their words isn't exactly useful, but our lives are richer for them. The same thing is true for great works of art."

The way he looked at her was very intense, as though he wanted to identify every single cell he'd talked about, as well as hear her words with exceptional clarity. "I can see the reflection of the stars in your eyes, like diamonds sparkling in deep pools. Did you know that the light I see has to travel hundreds of thousands of miles before it can reflect back to me?"

She swallowed thickly. "I've never thought about it before." Nor had the knowledge seemed quite so important.

"Neither had I."

She felt herself leaning toward him, impossibly closer, when she knew she should be running as fast as her feet could take her in the opposite direction. She was mesmerized by the compelling note in his voice, the insistent timbre that vibrated not only in her ears but also in a heart that had been lonely for a good many years.

Calling upon a wealth of willpower, she said, "About the rental—"

"I'd like to stay. If you don't mind."

She minded, all right. Instinctively she knew this man, who couldn't seem to find a matching pair of socks and who paid his bills in cash, was a threat to her comfortable status quo. She didn't want him disrupting her life. But that was exactly what he was going to do.

And because she desperately needed his rent money, she could do nothing to change the fates that were bearing down on her like a high mountain avalanche. In her heart, she knew she'd need more than luck to escape without serious injury. Or heartbreak.

"This is the smaller of the two remaining offices, five hundred square feet," Joanna explained to the prospective tenant. She'd managed to avoid being anywhere near her rental property—and Kris Slavik—for two days. But she couldn't allow the space to remain vacant forever, not with bills to pay and a roof to replace. "You'll notice the office is arranged very nicely, with plenty of storage space in the back and a private rest room."

Percival Carter glanced nervously around the office, as if making a decision caused him a great deal of anxiety. A narrow-faced man in his forties, he combed lank strands of hair over his balding head in a failed effort to disguise his receding hairline. His double-breasted brown suit, which matched his prominent eyes, looked as though it had been purchased in another era. "I'm sure my mother would think this is very nice."

"Your mother? Does she work with you?" Joanna asked.

"Oh, no. At least, not regularly, though she does help me with the filing occasionally. I don't have a large-enough accounting practice to warrant a staff. There isn't that much call for a CPA up here in the mountains. But Mother did, ah, encourage me to rent one of your offices."

"Well, that's very nice of her. I hope you'll be happy here."

"Oh, I think so, Ms. Greer. You see, I'm a bachelor."

Joanna's spirits plummeted. "Mr. Carter, I'm afraid the ad you saw—"

"Oh, it was my mother who—"

"It's very misleading."

The familiar tall figure of a man filled the doorway, and Joanna drew a quick breath.

"Permit me to disagree. As the advertisement promised, the landlady is indeed attractive, marriageable and has a son who is bright, intelligent and inquisitive." A slow, seductive, *smug* smile tugged at the corners of Kris Slavik's mouth.

Joanna wanted to throw something at him. Or crawl into a hole. "Excuse me. I'm trying to conduct some business here."

"That's okay." Kris looped his arm over the older man's shoulders, demonstrating the fact that he was at least six inches taller than the would-be tenant. "Since Percy and I are going to be neighbors, so to speak, I can bring him up to speed on the property. You know, stuff like which trees not to park under. The birds can wipe out your car's finish in fifteen minutes if they've been munching on some of those late-ripening berries."

"Kris! Will you stop—"

"It's all right, Ms. Greer." Percy smiled at her with endearing shyness. "Since I've met you, there's no way he can discourage me from renting the office. Besides, my mother would be apoplectic if she thought I'd missed this chance. She's quite anxious that I marry and produce a grandchild for her before she passes on. Though I doubt I'll provide much competition for this gentleman. The two of you make a very attractive couple."

"Thank you," Kris said. "I quite agree."

Joanna rolled her eyes, then glared daggers at Kris. "We are *not* a couple! He has paid a year's worth of rent in advance, so I'm stuck with him. But we are definitely not a couple."

Glancing up at Kris, Percy said, "I would appreciate it if you'd point out those trees to me. I wouldn't want my vehicle to suffer any irreparable damage."

"You got it, buddy."

"But wait!" Joanna protested as the two men started to go outside. "Are you going to rent the office, Mr. Carter?"

"Of course. If you'll prepare the lease forms, I'll have a check cut and brought around for you first thing in the morning."

Shoulders sagging, Joanna exhaled a long breath. Kris Slavik was definitely trouble. Not only had he acted possessive of her in front of a possible tenant, her heart had leaped into her throat when he'd appeared in the doorway. Normally she was immune to men, even those she found quite attractive, albeit in Kris's case a little rough around the edges. Aware she wasn't a candidate for marriage, much less an affair, she made it a point never to lead men on. They generally got the message without too much effort.

Kris was different. He appeared to have a serious case of selective deafness.

He was doing it again.

Joanna clenched her teeth as she showed another prospective tenant around the premises. A newly licensed real-estate broker, Larry Smythe was tall, dark, handsome and far too smooth a talker.

Kris Slavik shadowed their every move. He had on a different pair of jeans today. Not new, exactly—still faded and with a worn zipper—but ones without any holes in the knees. Joanna couldn't be sure, but she thought he had on one blue sock and one brown. Apparently he put on whichever socks he happened to pick up.

With a critical eye, Larry examined the outside of the building and the window frames. "Of course, I'll have to install an air filter. This close to the highway the fumes could be dangerous."

"Dangerous?" Joanna questioned.

"It hasn't bothered me any," Kris muttered.

Larry's perfect teeth flashed in a smile. "Not everyone understands that even what appears to be clean air needs to be filtered in order to avoid contaminants like pollen and lead. It always pays to be health conscious." He sucked in his stomach and stood a little straighter. "I'll put in my own water purifier, too."

"If that's what you think you need," Joanna agreed.

"Looks to me like a real-estate broker would want to locate right in town," Kris said, kicking at the old concrete on the back step of the remaining unrented unit. A piece crumbled away.

"I plan to catch the eye of folks who are just arriving in town," Larry countered. "Besides, word-of-mouth advertising is the best you can get. And I intend to be the very best."

"Naturally," Kris grumbled. He jammed his fingers in his back pockets. This guy reminded him of all those superjocks in school who had given him such a hard time. Their shoulders were a little too broad, their guts too flat and their brains too small. But the girls went for them. Particularly goodlooking girls like Joanna, who Tyler had told him had been a cheerleader in high school.

Larry was the kind who was hard to discourage, too. He was confident of his sexual appeal as well as his business acumen and wasn't about to give up easily. But everyone had a weakness.

In his own defense, Kris had learned as a kid how to outsmart someone instead of trying to outmuscle him. If he was going to have any chance with Joanna, he'd have to keep several steps ahead of good-ol'-boy Larry Smythe. It might not be an easy task, but Kris was both determined and confident.

### *Chapter Three*

Kris flipped his visor down to protect his eyes and brought the welding rod close to the bicycle frame. With a sharp snap, the electric current arced into a brilliant spot of blue-white light. Carefully he laid down a bead that would join metal to metal. The transformer hummed behind him, pumping electricity through the line, and the air in the garage filled with the biting smell of burning aluminum.

From the corner of his eye Kris caught sight of a pair of slender legs and shapely, feminine ankles. Momentarily distracted, he struggled to keep his hand steady as he finished circling the bar with the bead, then lifted the rod away.

“Hi. School out already?” He raised his visor and smiled at Joanna. He’d been so engrossed in his project he hadn’t been aware of the time. “Always nice to have my landlady drop by for a visit.”

“I heard that humming noise.” She indicated the transformer. “I was afraid something was wrong. The electrical wiring in this building is a little old.”

“I haven’t had any problem so far.”

“Good. With only a volunteer fire department in town, everybody worries about fires.” She eyed his project curiously. “That’s the dual bike you’re inventing?”

“The prototype. I figured I’d start with aluminum, then when I get the kinks worked out I’ll switch to carbon-fiber bikes. They’re a lot lighter.”

“They’re also the most expensive.”

“True,” he conceded.

She gave him an incredulous shake of her head. “Your money, I guess.”

“But remember, if this invention flies,” he teased, pulling off his heavy welding gloves, “I’m likely to be a millionaire. You know, the Alexander Graham Bell of pedal power.”

That brought the tiniest suggestion of a smile to her lips, and he noted how full they were and how perfectly shaped. He wondered idly if they would taste as good as they looked and decided that would be a subject worth pursuing in infinite detail.

“Have you done much mountain-bike riding, Kris?”

“A little. I entered the races at Mammoth this summer.”

Her eyebrows lifted in surprise. “You did?”

“I placed in the top twenty in my age group. If I’d had more time to train, I probably would have done better.”

“I’m impressed.” Her smile told Kris he’d won her approval. “But I have to tell you, if you had a day job I’d recommend you not give it up just yet. I’m having a real problem seeing how this new bike of yours will be any better than a regular tandem bike.”

“If nothing else, it’s a hundred times more romantic. If you’re out with your favorite girl, you’ll be riding side by side and can talk better.”

“An inventor who’s a romantic?” Her smile broadened. “You definitely don’t fit the mold.”

“I never have,” he confessed. In fact, he’d always been the odd man out—far younger than his academic peers, never allowed by his parents to participate in sports with boys his own age and often at a social disadvantage with the women he met. Being different was a burden that had rested uneasily on his shoulders as long as he could remember. At the moment, he’d give every dime he’d ever earned—something over twenty million dollars worth—to have this one particular woman see him as just an ordinary guy. He supposed that was too much to hope for and hated that in the romantic arena he lacked the selfconfidence that had been his mainstay in every other aspect of his life.

Joanna fidgeted self-consciously under his intense scrutiny. Kris had the most unsettling way about him, as though he was determined to slip past her defenses by the sheer power of his intellect. And he was intelligent, she was sure. Beyond that, she was having a great deal of trouble calibrating the

man. That meant he always had her a little off balance. She wasn't at all sure she liked the unfamiliar feeling. Normally, she placed a high value on being in control.

"Well, if the building isn't burning down," she said, "I guess I'd better be on my way and let you get on with your inventing." She turned to leave, only to discover Tyler coming in the wide-open door. She frowned. "What are you doing home so early?"

"Aw, the coaches canceled practice. I think they had another one of their fights. Man, they're always arguing 'n' stuff." He spun the football he perpetually carried up into the air and caught it again. "Mrs. Scala brought me home."

"Thank goodness someone gave you a lift." Imagine the coaches leaving the kids unsupervised, Joanna thought, fuming. Paul and Isabel Currant had become increasingly irresponsible about their volunteer duties. It seemed unlikely the team would make it through the season intact, and football was a sport Tyler dearly loved. She'd hate to see him lose out because of a marital riff between his coaches.

Tyler circled the bike Kris had been working on, touching the newly welded section.

Kris didn't offer any objection, but allowed him free access. The two of them seemed to have developed a comfortable relationship, man-to-man.

"I wish you'd coach us, Mom."

Her gaze whipped toward her son. "Me? What do I know about football?"

"A heck of a lot more than Mrs. Currant does. She doesn't even know what an end around is."

Joanna remembered. Vaguely. Tyler's father had been the star high-school quarterback. She'd helped him memorize the playbook his senior year, no minor accomplishment. "I'm a little rusty these days, tiger. I think it would be best if I left the coaching to someone else."

"What about you, Kris?" Tyler tossed him the football. "You wanna take a shot at coaching?"

He caught the ball awkwardly, then studied it as if it was a foreign object that had fallen into his hands from outer space. "I don't think so, kid. Maybe your coaches will get their act together again and everything will be okay." He returned the pigskin with a wobbly throw.

"Yeah, I suppose. Guess they usually kiss and make up."

A painful knot formed in Joanna's throat. If things had gone as she had dreamed ten years ago, Tyler would have had a father to coach his football team and teach him the finer points of quarterbacking. But as an eighteen-year-old, she'd had no idea how quickly a dream could be shattered. Pregnant, she'd been abandoned by the boy she'd thought she loved. He'd told her in no uncertain terms that a man would be a total lunatic to want to marry into her eccentric family.

Tyler peered down at the weld Kris had just completed. "So what are you doing with these bikes?"

"I'm trying to create an independent suspension system for a smoother ride," Kris replied. "You want to see how it'll work?"

"Sure."

Their blond heads close together, the two males bent over the bikes, talking enthusiastically about things Joanna didn't understand. From a cluttered workbench, Kris picked up one of several books, flipping through the pages as he explained heliarc welding and suspension systems.

She felt like a fifth wheel and slipped out the door without either of them noticing she was gone.

It was better that way. She knew Tyler needed male role models in his life. But she didn't want to get attached to Kris herself. There was no future in it for her, only heartache and ultimate rejection.

As the week progressed, Joanna concentrated on inspiring twenty-eight fourth graders with the rudiments of American history, comparing Indian culture to recent efforts at ecology, thus combining the prescribed science unit with social-studies requirements. A couple of meetings with the principal were thrown into the time-and-stress equation, along with an irate parent who didn't believe in homework, much less the value of regular school attendance.

Joanna barely gave any thought at all to her new tenants until Saturday arrived and Agnes announced the evening's plans.

"I think Kris is totally cool, Mom." Tyler perched on the edge of a kitchen counter and tossed his football from hand to hand. With so much high-voltage energy, he couldn't always sit in a chair.

"That may be so, dear, but your grandmother had no right to invite him to dinner tonight without asking me first." To emphasize the point, Joanna brought her knife down hard on the potatoes she was slicing to cook with the roast that was already in the oven. She had not intended to spend what little free time she had on a Saturday cleaning house and cooking a formal meal.

Of course, she could have refused to participate in this charade. But her mother had become so upset when she threatened not to be at home that Joanna had relented. Agnes's emotional state often seemed on the brink of hysteria, particularly since Joanna's father had died. Grief apparently intensified peculiar behavior.

"Grandma told me she's just trying to be neighborly."

Matchmaking was closer to the truth.

"She invited the other two guys, too. Ol' pinchnose Percy—"

"Don't call him that, Tyler. Percival is a very nice man. He's just a little shy."

"That other guy, Larry, sure isn't bashful. Man, he acts like a big know-it-all. Always talkin' and telling me what a great mom I've got."

Joanna slid her son a questioning look. "Kris doesn't say things like that about me?"

"Naw, we talk about important stuff."

"Oh, thanks, I'm glad to hear that." Joanna was upset at the stab of irritation that shot through her. Kris had no reason to talk to Tyler about her. None at all. She should be grateful they had other topics to discuss. After all, she had managed to avoid seeing her tenant for the last several days. It wasn't important that her gaze always drifted toward his workshop when she drove by the rental property. She really wasn't trying to catch a quick glimpse of him.

Obviously, he wasn't all that interested in her, either. Since that first night, when she'd turned down his dinner invitation, he hadn't asked her out.

Tyler dropped to his feet and snatched a couple of olives from the relish tray. "I'm helping him learn how to throw a spiral pass."

"Football?"

"Yeah. He's not very good. He said he never learned to play when he was a kid."

Considering Kris's athletic physique, and how successful he'd been in a very competitive bike race earlier in the summer, Joanna was surprised. He seemed like he would excel at almost anything, sports included.

Overall, he was the most puzzling man she had ever met. One minute he was flirting with her, ignoring her obvious desire to be left alone, and then he did just the opposite. Ignored *her* for days at a time.

Meanwhile, in spite of her best efforts, she couldn't get him out of her mind.

Kris made it a point to arrive at Joanna's house first, before the competition showed up for dinner.

A concrete path led past flower beds still bright with fall colors, including late-blooming roses on well-tended bushes. The house itself, nestled among the pines, was modest in size and of modern log construction. A long porch and a picture window looked out over the front garden. Behind the house, a treecovered slope rose steeply to the top of a ridge.

Kris had the feeling he was visiting Goldilock's cottage. The house wasn't anything like the sterile, high-rise condos where he had grown up. There was a homey coziness he had never experienced, and he envied Joanna what surely must have been a more idyllic childhood than his own. Even the fresh smell of baked goods wafting out through the open window reminded him of

all he had missed. His mother's cooking talents had been pretty well limited to what she could boil on a Bunsen burner.

Oddly, the roof of the house was festooned with whirligigs—ducks and roosters and other strange wooden characters whose arms spun with the lightest breeze. Interesting aerodynamics, Kris mused, wondering if their combined power could be harnessed into a source of electricity, like miniature wind generators, and pumped into the household wiring.

He was still considering that possibility when Tyler answered his knock on the front door.

"Hey, man, how's it going?" the youngster said in greeting.

They exchanged a high five. "About the same as it was two hours ago when you were over at my place."

"Yeah, right." Tyler's quick smile matched the more reluctant one his mother so-infrequently displayed. "Come on in. Mom's in a tizzy that Grandma invited all you guys to dinner."

In a way, so was Kris. He would have preferred a private invitation. He didn't like the idea of sharing the evening with a couple of other bachelors on the make. But then, he'd learned a long time ago anything worth having was worth working hard for.

"Kris, dear boy," Agnes crooned, sweeping into the living room. Her long skirt nearly reached the floor and the bracelets on her wrists jangled like a gypsy dancer's. With every step she seemed to create a happy song. "So sweet of you to come early."

"Always hungry for a home-cooked meal."

"Of course. And Joanna is a wonderful cook, too. Have I told you that?" Agnes shook her head as though she couldn't remember how much touting of her daughter she'd done. "She'll make someone a fine wife, you know. So talented."

He suppressed a smile. "I'm sure you were a very good teacher, Agnes."

"Grandma makes great cookies, don't you?" Tyler interjected. "Especially when you forget and put two bags of chocolate chips in 'em."

"Go on with your flattery, young man." As she took Kris's arm, she giggled, a high-pitched, girlish sound. "Of course, my dear departed Alexander never once complained about my cooking. Did you know, he and I once served more than a hundred needy families Thanksgiving dinner, almost all on our own? I must have cooked twenty turkeys myself. We kept those big ovens over at the school cafeteria going for days. Mercy, what a time we had."

Agnes rambled on about the event as though it had been yesterday, while Kris suspected it had been many years ago. But he liked knowing Joanna's parents had tried to help others. In contrast, his family had mailed in substantial checks to ease their social conscience, keeping themselves safely ensconced behind the ivory towers of academia.

Maybe this year for Thanksgiving, instead of going home, he'd find someplace where they were feeding the homeless and see if he could help. He wondered if Joanna would be willing to join him.

Joanna's appearance at the kitchen doorway didn't slow the tale Agnes was telling. The older woman simply kept on talking. It didn't seem to matter that no one was listening.

Mentally clicking off Agnes's chatter, Kris took in the sight of her daughter. Joanna's hair was pulled back, and there was a light sheen of perspiration on her perfectly oval face, as though the kitchen was overheated. Her cheeks glistened. She radiated good health and something else Kris couldn't quite identify. He simply knew she was a lovely, intriguing creature worth a great deal of study.

"You're early," she said, searching his face as though questioning his apparent social faux pas.

He met her gaze steadily. "I was hoping you might need some help with taste tests."

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