

*#1 NEW YORK TIMES & USA TODAY  
BESTSELLING AUTHOR*

# NORA ROBERTS

*TAMING NATASHA*

THE  
STANISLASKIS

# Taming Natasha

*The Stanislaskis*  
*Book One*  
**Nora Roberts**



*Silhouette Books*

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America's Publisher of Contemporary Romance

**The Stanislaskis: an unforgettable family saga by  
#1 *New York Times* bestselling author Nora  
Roberts**

The first time single-father Spence Kimball set eyes on Natasha Stanislaski, he was floored by her exotic beauty. But the former ballet dancer turned toy shop owner had a fiery temperament that kept men safely at bay. Sensing a hidden wound, Spence and his little girl joined forces to find a way into her closely guarded heart. For Spence realized he'd do anything to tame Natasha's fears...and show her how to love.

For Gayle Link  
Welcome to the fold

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## CHAPTER ONE

“**W**hy is it that all the really great-looking men are married?”

“Is that a trick question?” Natasha arranged a velvet-gowned doll in a child-sized bentwood rocker before she turned to her assistant. “Okay, Annie, what great-looking man are we talking about in particular?”

“The tall, blond and gorgeous one who’s standing outside the shop window with his nifty-looking wife and beautiful little girl.” Annie tucked a wad of gum into her cheek and heaved a gusty sigh. “They look like an ad for *Perfect Family Digest*.”

“Then perhaps they’ll come in and buy the perfect toy.”

Natasha stepped back from her grouping of Victorian dolls and accessories with a nod of approval. It looked exactly as she wanted—appealing, elegant and old-fashioned. She checked everything down to the tasseled fan in a tiny, china hand.

The toy store wasn’t just her business, it was her greatest pleasure. Everything from the smallest rattle to the biggest stuffed bear was chosen by her with the same eye for detail and quality. She insisted on the best for her shop and her customers, whether it was a five-hundred-dollar doll with its own fur wrap or a two-dollar, palm-sized race car. When the match was right, she was pleased to ring up either sale.

In the three years since she had opened her jingling front door, Natasha had made The Fun House one of the most thriving concerns in the small college town on the West Virginia border. It had taken drive and persistence, but her success was more a direct

result of her innate understanding of children. She didn't want her clients to walk out with a toy. She wanted them to walk out with the right toy.

Deciding to make a few adjustments, Natasha moved over to a display of miniature cars.

"I think they're going to come in," Annie was saying as she smoothed down her short crop of auburn hair. "The little girl's practically bouncing out of her Mary Janes. Want me to open up?"

Always precise, Natasha glanced at the grinning clown clock overhead. "We have five minutes yet."

"What's five minutes? Tash, I'm telling you this guy is incredible." Wanting a closer look, Annie edged down an aisle to restack board games. "Oh, yes. Six foot two, a hundred and sixty pounds. The best shoulders I've ever seen fill out a suit jacket. Oh Lord, it's tweed. I didn't know a guy in tweed could make me salivate."

"A man in cardboard can make you salivate."

"Most of the guys I know *are* cardboard." A dimple winked at the corner of Annie's mouth. She peeked around the counter of wooden toys to see if he was still at the window. "He must have spent some time at the beach this summer. His hair's sun-streaked and he's got a fabulous tan. Oh, God, he smiled at the little girl. I think I'm in love."

Choreographing a scaled-down traffic jam, Natasha smiled. "You always think you're in love."

"I know." Annie sighed. "I wish I could see the color of his eyes. He's got one of those wonderfully lean and bony faces. I'm sure he's incredibly intelligent and has suffered horribly."

Natasha shot a quick, amused look over her shoulder. Annie, with her tall, skinny build had a heart as soft as marshmallow cream. "I'm sure his wife would be fascinated with your fantasy."

"It's a woman's privilege—no, her obligation—to weave fantasies over men like that."

Though she couldn't have disagreed more, Natasha let Annie have her way. "All right then. Go ahead and open up."

"One doll," Spence said, giving his daughter's ear a tug. "I might have thought twice about moving into that house, if I'd realized there was a toy store a half mile away."

“You’d buy her the bloody toy store if you had your way.”

He spared one glance for the woman beside him. “Don’t start, Nina.”

The slender blonde shrugged her shoulders, rippling the trim, rose linen jacket of her suit, then looked at the little girl. “I just meant your daddy tends to spoil you because he loves you so much. Besides, you deserve a present for being so good about the move.”

Little Frederica Kimball’s bottom lip pouted. “I like my new house.” She slipped her hand into her father’s, automatically aligning herself with him and against the world. “I have a yard and a swing set all of my own.”

Nina looked them over, the tall, rangy man and the fairy-sized young girl. They had identical stubborn chins. As far as she could remember, she’d never won an argument with either one.

“I suppose I’m the only one who doesn’t see that as an advantage over living in New York.” Nina’s tone warmed slightly as she stroked the girl’s hair. “I can’t help worrying about you a little bit. I really only want you to be happy, darling. You and your daddy.”

“We are.” To break the tension, Spence swung Freddie into his arms. “Aren’t we, funny face?”

“She’s about to be that much happier.” Relenting, Nina gave Spence’s hand a squeeze. “They’re opening.”

“Good morning.” They were gray, Annie noted, biting back a long, dreamy, “Ahh.” A glorious gray. She tucked her little fantasy into the back of her mind and ushered in the first customers of the day. “May I help you?”

“My daughter’s interested in a doll.” Spence set Freddie on her feet again.

“Well, you’ve come to the right place.” Annie dutifully switched her attention to the child. She really was a cute little thing, with her father’s gray eyes and pale, flyaway blond hair. “What kind of doll would you like?”

“A pretty one,” Freddie answered immediately. “A pretty one with red hair and blue eyes.”

“I’m sure we have just what you want.” She offered a hand. “Would you like to look around?”



After a glance at her father for approval, Freddie linked hands with Annie and wandered off.

“Damn it.” Spence found himself wincing.

Nina squeezed his hand for the second time. “Spence—”

“I delude myself thinking that it doesn’t matter, that she doesn’t even remember.”

“Just because she wanted a doll with red hair and blue eyes doesn’t mean anything.”

“Red hair and blue eyes,” he repeated; the frustration welled up once more. “Just like Angela’s. She remembers, Nina. And it does matter.” Stuffing his hands into his pockets he walked away.

Three years, he thought. It had been nearly three years now. Freddie had still been in diapers. But she remembered Angela—beautiful, careless Angela. Not even the most liberal critic would have considered Angela a mother. She had never cuddled or crooned, never rocked or soothed.

He studied a small, porcelain-faced doll dressed in pale, angelic blue. Tiny, tapering fingers, huge, dreamy eyes. Angela had been like that, he remembered. Ethereally beautiful. And cold as glass.

He had loved her as a man might love a piece of art—distantly admiring the perfection of form, and constantly searching for the meaning beneath it. Between them they had somehow created a warm, gorgeous child who had managed to find her way through the first years of her life almost without help from her parents.

But he would make it up to her. Spence shut his eyes for a moment. He intended to do everything in his power to give his daughter the love, the structure and the security she deserved. The realness. The word seemed trite, but it was the only one he could find that described what he wanted for his daughter—the real, the solid bond of family.

She loved him. He felt some of the tension ease from his shoulders as he thought of the way Freddie’s big eyes would shine when he tucked her in at night, at the way her arms would wrap tightly around him when he held her. Perhaps he would never fully forgive himself for being so involved with his own problems, his own life during her infancy, but things had changed. Even this move had been made with her welfare in mind.

He heard her laugh, and the rest of the tension dissolved on a wave of pure pleasure. There was no sweeter music than his little girl's laugh. An entire symphony could be written around it. He wouldn't disturb her yet, Spence thought. Let her indulge herself with the bright and beautiful dolls, before he had to remind her that only one could be hers.

Relaxed again, he began to pay attention to the shop. Like the dolls he'd imagined for his daughter, it was bright and beautiful. Though small, it was packed from wall to wall with everything a child might covet. A big golden giraffe and a sad-eyed purple dog hung from the ceiling. Wooden trains, cars and planes, all painted in bold colors, jockeyed for position on a long display table with elegant miniature furniture. An old-fashioned jack-in-the-box sat beside an intricate scale model of a futuristic space station. There were dolls, some beautiful, some charmingly homely, erector sets and tea sets.

The lack of studied arrangement made the result all the more appealing. This was a place to pretend and to wish, a crowded Aladdin's cave designed to make children's eyes light in wonder. To make them laugh, as his daughter was laughing now. He could already foresee that he'd be hard-pressed to keep Freddie from making regular visits.

That was one of the reasons he'd made the move to a small town. He wanted his daughter to be able to reap the pleasures of local shops, where the merchants would know her name. She would be able to walk from one end of town to the other without those big-city worries about muggings, abductions and drugs. There would be no need for dead bolts and security systems, for "white noise" machines to block out the surge and grind of traffic. Even a girl as little as his Freddie wouldn't be swallowed up here.

And perhaps, without the pace and the pressure, he would make peace with himself.

Idly he picked up a music box. It was of delicately crafted porcelain, graced with a figure of a raven-haired Gypsy woman in a flounced red dress. In her ears were tiny gold loops, and in her hands a tambourine with colored streamers. He was certain he wouldn't have found anything more skillfully made on Fifth Avenue.

He wondered how the owner could leave it out where small, curious fingers might reach and break. Intrigued, he turned the key and watched the figure revolve around the tiny, china camp fire.

Tchaikovsky. He recognized the movement instantly, and his skilled ear approved the quality of tone. A moody, even passionate piece, he thought, finding it strange to come across such exquisite workmanship in a toy store. Then he glanced up and saw Natasha.

He stared. He couldn't help it. She was standing a few feet away, her head up, slightly tilted as she watched him. Her hair was as dark as the dancer's and corkscrewed around her face in a wild disarray that flowed beyond her shoulders. Her skin was a dark, rich gold that was set off by the simple red dress she wore.

But this woman was not fragile, he thought. Though she was small, he got the impression of power. Perhaps it was her face, with its full, unpainted mouth and high, slashing cheekbones. Her eyes were almost as dark as her hair, heavy-lidded and thickly lashed. Even from a distance of ten feet he sensed it. Strong, undiluted sex. It surrounded her as other women surrounded themselves with perfumes.

For the first time in years he felt the muscle-numbing heat of pure desire.

Natasha saw it, then recognized and resented it. What kind of man, she wondered, walked into a room with his wife and daughter, then looked at another woman with naked hunger in his eyes?

Not her kind.

Determined to ignore the look as she had ignored it from others in the past, she crossed to him. "Do you need some help?"

Help? Spence thought blankly. He needed oxygen. He hadn't known it was literally possible for a woman to take a man's breath away. "Who are you?"

"Natasha Stanislaski." She offered her coolest smile. "I own the store."

Her voice seemed to hang in the air, husky, vital, with a trace of her Slavic origins adding eroticism as truly as the music still playing behind him. She smelled of soap, nothing more, yet the fragrance completely seduced him.

When he didn't speak, she lifted a brow. It might have been amusing to knock a man off his feet, but she was busy at the moment, and the man was married. "Your daughter has her selection down to three dolls. Perhaps you'd like to help her with her final choice."

"In a minute. Your accent—is it Russian?"

"Yes." She wondered if she should tell him his wife was standing near the front door, bored and impatient.

"How long have you been in America?"

"Since I was six." She aimed a deliberately cold glance. "About the same age as your little girl. Excuse me—"

He had his hand on her arm before he could stop himself. Even though he knew the move was a bad one, the venom in her eyes surprised him. "Sorry. I was going to ask you about this music box."

Natasha shifted her gaze to it as the music began to wind down. "It's one of our best, handcrafted here in the States. Are you interested in buying it?"

"I haven't decided, but I thought you might not have realized it was sitting out on that shelf."

"Why?"

"It's not the kind of merchandise one expects to find in a toy store. It could easily be broken."

Natasha took it and placed it farther back on the shelf. "And it can be mended." She made a quick, clearly habitual movement with her shoulders. It spoke of arrogance rather than carelessness. "I believe children should be allowed the pleasures of music, don't you?"

"Yes." For the first time a smile flickered over his face. It was, as Annie had noted, a particularly effective one, Natasha had to admit. Through her annoyance she felt the trickle of attraction, and strangely, kinship. Then he said, "As a matter of fact, I believe that quite strongly. Perhaps we could discuss it over dinner."

Holding herself rigid, Natasha battled back fury. It was difficult for one with her hot, often turbulent nature, but she reminded herself that the man had not only his wife, but his young daughter in the store.

The angry insults that rose to her throat were swallowed, but not before Spence saw them reflected in her eyes.

“No,” was all she said as she turned.

“Miss—” Spence began, then Freddie whirled down the aisle, carrying a big, floppy Raggedy Ann.

“Daddy, isn’t she nice?” Eyes shining, she held out the doll for his approval.

It was redheaded, Spence thought. But it was anything but beautiful. Nor, to his relief, was it a symbol of Angela. Because he knew Freddie expected it, he took his time examining her choice. “This is,” he said after a moment, “the very best doll I’ve seen today.”

“Really?”

He crouched until he was eye to eye with his daughter. “Absolutely. You have excellent taste, funny face.”

Freddie reached out, crushing the doll between them as she hugged her father. “I can have her?”

“I thought she was for me.” As Freddie giggled, he picked up the pair of them.

“I’ll be happy to wrap her for you.” Natasha’s tone was warmer, she knew. He might be a jerk, but he loved his daughter.

“I can carry her.” Freddie squeezed her new friend close.

“All right. Then I’ll just give you a ribbon for her hair. Would you like that?”

“A blue one.”

“A blue one it is.” Natasha led the way to the cash register.

Nina took one look at the doll and rolled her eyes. “Darling, is that the best you could do?”

“Daddy likes her,” Freddie murmured, ducking her head.

“Yes, I do. Very much,” he added with a telling look for Nina. Setting Freddie on her feet again, he fished out his wallet.

The mother was certainly no prize, Natasha decided. Though that didn’t give the man a right to come on to a clerk in a toy store. She made change and handed over the receipt, then took out a length of blue ribbon.

“Thank you,” she said to Freddie. “I think she’s going to like her new home with you very much.”

“I’ll take good care of her,” Freddie promised, while she struggled to tie the ribbon through the yarn mop of hair. “Can people come in to look at the toys, or do they have to buy one?”

Natasha smiled, then taking another ribbon, tied a quick, sassy bow in the child’s hair. “You can come in and look anytime you like.”

“Spence, we really must be going.” Nina stood holding the door open.

“Right.” He hesitated. It was a small town, he reminded himself. And if Freddie could come in and look, so could he. “It was nice meeting you, Miss Stanislaski.”

“Goodbye.” She waited until the door jingled and closed, then let out a muttered stream of curses.

Annie peeked around a tower of building blocks. “Excuse me?”

“That man.”

“Yes.” With a little sigh, Annie waltzed down the aisle. “That man.”

“He brings his wife and child into a place like this, then looks at me as if he wants to nibble on my toes.”

“Tash.” Her expression pained, Annie pressed a hand to her heart. “Please don’t excite me.”

“I find it insulting.” She skirted around the checkout counter and swung a fist at a punching bag. “He asked me to dinner.”

“He *what*?” Delight showed in Annie’s eyes, before a look from Natasha dampened it. “You’re right. It is insulting, seeing as he’s a married man—even though his wife seemed like a cold fish.”

“His marital problems are no concern of mine.”

“No....” Practicality warred with fantasy. “I guess you turned him down.”

A choked sound caught in Natasha’s throat as she turned. “Of course I turned him down.”

“I mean, of course,” Annie put in quickly.

“The man has a nerve,” Natasha said; her fingers itched to hit something. “Coming into my place of business and propositioning me.”

“He didn’t!” Scandalized and thrilled, Annie grabbed Natasha’s arm. “Tash, he didn’t really proposition you? Right here?”

“With his eyes he did. The message was clear.” It infuriated her how often men looked at her and only saw the physical. Only wanted to see the physical, she thought in disgust. She had tolerated suggestions, propositions and proposals since before she had fully understood what they meant. But she understood now and tolerated nothing.

“If he hadn’t had that sweet little girl with him, I would have slapped his face.” Because the image pleased her so much, she let loose on the hapless punching bag again.

Annie had seen her employer’s temper fly often enough to know how to cool it. “She was sweet, wasn’t she? Her name’s Freddie. Isn’t that cute?”

Natasha took a long, steadying breath even as she rubbed her fisted hand in her other palm. “Yes.”

“She told me they had just moved to Shepherdstown from New York. The doll was going to be her first new friend.”

“Poor little thing.” Natasha knew too well the fears and anxieties of being a child in a strange place. Forget the father, she told herself with a toss of her head. “She looks to be about the same age as JoBeth Riley.” Annoyance forgotten, Natasha went behind the counter again and picked up the phone. It wouldn’t hurt to give Mrs. Riley a call.

Spence stood at the music-room window and stared out at a bed of summer flowers. Having flowers outside the window and a bumpy slope of lawn that would need tending was a new experience. He’d never cut grass in his life. Smiling to himself, he wondered how soon he could try his hand at it.

There was a big, spreading maple, its leaves a dark, dark green. In a few weeks, he imagined they would grow red and vibrant before they tumbled from the branches. He had enjoyed the view from his condo on Central Park West, watching the seasons come and go with the changing trees. But not like this, he realized.

Here the grass, the trees, the flowers he saw belonged to him. They were for him to enjoy and to care for. Here he could let Freddie take out her dolls for an afternoon tea party and not have to worry every second she was out of his sight. They would make a good life

here, a solid life for both of them. He'd felt it when he'd flown down to discuss his position with the dean—and again when he'd walked through this big, rambling house with the anxious real-estate agent dogging his heels.

She hadn't had to sell it, Spence thought. He'd been sold the moment he'd walked in the front door.

As he watched, a hummingbird swooped to hover at the cup of a bright red petunia. In that instant he was more convinced than ever that his decision to leave the city had been the right one.

*Having a brief fling with rural living.* Nina's words rolled through his mind as he watched the sun flash on the bird's iridescent wings. It was difficult to blame her for saying it, for believing it when he had always chosen to live in the middle of things. He couldn't deny he had enjoyed those glittery parties that had lasted until dawn, or the elegant midnight suppers after a symphony or ballet.

He had been born into a world of glamour and wealth and prestige. He had lived all of his life in a place where only the best was acceptable. And he had relished it, Spence admitted. Summering in Monte Carlo, wintering in Nice or Cannes. Weekends in Aruba or Cancun.

He wouldn't wish those experiences away, but he could wish, and did, that he had accepted the responsibilities of his life sooner.

He accepted them now. Spence watched the hummingbird streak away like a sapphire bullet. And as much to his own surprise as to that of people who knew him, he was enjoying those responsibilities. Freddie made the difference. All the difference.

He thought of her and she came running across the back lawn, her new rag doll tucked under her arm. She made a beeline, as he expected, to the swing set. It was so new that the blue and white paint gleamed in the sunlight, and the hard plastic seats were shiny as leather. With the doll in her lap, she pushed off, her face lifted skyward, her tiny mouth moving to some private song.

Love rammed into him with a velvet fist, solid and painful. In all of his life he had never known anything as consuming or as basic as the emotion she brought to him simply by being.

As she glided back and forth, she cuddled the doll, bringing her close to whisper secrets into her ear. It pleased him to see Freddie



so taken with the cloth and cotton doll. She could have chosen china or velvet, but had picked something that looked as though it needed love.

She'd spoken of the toy store throughout the morning, and was wishing, Spence knew, for a return trip. Oh, she wouldn't ask for anything, he thought. Not directly. She would use her eyes. It both amused and baffled him that at five, his little girl had already mastered that peculiar and effective feminine trick.

He'd thought of the toy store himself, and its owner. No feminine tricks there, just pure womanly disdain. It made him wince again to remember how clumsy he'd been. Out of practice, he reminded himself with a self-deprecating smile and rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. What was more, he couldn't remember ever experiencing that strong a sexual punch. It was like being hit by lightning, he decided. A man was entitled to fumble a bit after being electrified.

But her reaction... Frowning, Spence replayed the scene in his mind. She'd been furious. She'd damn near been quivering with fury before he'd opened his mouth—and put his foot in it.

She hadn't even attempted to be polite in her refusal. Just no—a single hard syllable crusted with frost at the edges. It wasn't as if he'd asked her to go to bed with him.

But he'd wanted to. From the first instant he had been able to imagine carrying her off to some dark, remote spot in the woods, where the ground was springy with moss and the trees blocked out the sky. There he could take the heat of those full, sulky lips. There he could indulge in the wild passion her face promised. Wild, mindless sex, heedless of time or place, of right or wrong.

Good God. Amazed, he pulled himself back. He was thinking like a teenager. No, Spence admitted, thrusting his hands into his pockets again. He was thinking like a man—one who had gone four years without a woman. He wasn't certain if he wanted to thank Natasha Stanislaski for unlocking all those needs again, or throttle her.

But he was certain he was going to see her again.

"I'm all packed." Nina paused in the doorway. She gave a little sigh; Spence was clearly absorbed in his own thoughts again.

“Spencer,” she said, raising her voice as she crossed the room. “I said I’m all packed.”

“What? Oh.” He managed a distracted smile and forced his shoulders to relax. “We’ll miss you, Nina.”

“You’ll be glad to see the back of me,” she corrected, then gave him a quick peck on the cheek.

“No.” His smile came easier now, she saw, dutifully wiping the faint trace of lipstick from his skin. “I appreciate all you’ve done to help us settle in. I know how tight your schedule is.”

“I could hardly let my brother tackle the wilds of West Virginia alone.” She took his hand in a rare show of genuine agitation. “Oh, Spence, are you sure? Forget everything I’ve said before and think, really think it through. It’s such a big change, for both of you. What will you possibly do here in your free time?”

“Cut the grass.” Now he grinned at her expression. “Sit on the porch. Maybe I’ll even write music again.”

“You could write in New York.”

“I haven’t written two bars in almost four years,” he reminded her.

“All right.” She walked to the piano and waved a hand. “But if you wanted a change, you could have found a place on Long Island or even in Connecticut.”

“I like it here, Nina. Believe me, this is the best thing I could do for Freddie, and myself.”

“I hope you’re right.” Because she loved him, she smiled again. “I still say you’ll be back in New York within six months. In the meantime, as that child’s only aunt, I expect to be kept apprised of her progress.” She glanced down, annoyed to see a chip in her nail polish. “The idea of her attending public school—”

“Nina.”

“Never mind.” She held up a hand. “There’s no use starting this argument when I have a plane to catch. And I’m quite aware she’s your child.”

“Yes, she is.”

Nina tapped a finger on the glossy surface of the baby grand. “Spence, I know you’re still carrying around guilt because of Angela. I don’t like to see it.”

His easy smile vanished. "Some mistakes take along time to be erased."

"She made you miserable," Nina said flatly. "There were problems within the first year of your marriage. Oh, you weren't forthcoming with information," she added when he didn't respond. "But there were others all too eager to pass it along to me or anyone else who would listen. It was no secret that she didn't want the child."

"And how much better was I, wanting the baby only because I thought it would fill the gaps in my marriage? That's a large burden to hand a child."

"You made mistakes. You recognized them and you rectified them. Angela never suffered a pang of guilt in her life. If she hadn't died, you would have divorced her and taken custody of Freddie. The result's the same. I know that sounds cold. The truth often is. I don't like to think that you're making this move, changing your life this dramatically because you're trying to make up for something that's long over."

"Maybe that's part of it. But there's more." He held out a hand, waiting until Nina came to him. "Look at her." He pointed out the window to where Freddie continued to swing high, free as the hummingbird. "She's happy. And so am I."

## CHAPTER TWO

“I’m not scared.”

“Of course you’re not.” Spence looked at his daughter’s brave reflection in the mirror while he carefully braided her hair. He didn’t need the quaver in her voice to tell him she was terrified. There was a rock in the pit of his own stomach the size of a fist.

“Some of the kids might cry.” Her big eyes were already misted. “But I won’t.”

“You’re going to have fun.” He wasn’t any more certain of that than his nervous daughter. The trouble with being a parent, he thought, was that you were supposed to sound sure of everything. “The first day of school’s always a little scary, but once you get there and meet everyone, you’ll have a great time.”

She fixed him with a steady, owlish stare. “Really?”

“You liked kindergarten, didn’t you?” It was evasive, he admitted to himself, but he couldn’t make promises he might not be able to keep.

“Mostly.” She lowered her eyes, poking at the yellow, sea horse-shaped comb on her dresser. “But Amy and Pam won’t be there.”

“You’ll make new friends. You’ve already met JoBeth.” He thought of the pixieish brunette who had strolled by the house with her mother a couple of days before.

“I guess, and JoBeth is nice, but...” How could she explain that JoBeth already knew all of the other girls? “Maybe I should wait till tomorrow.”

Their eyes met in the mirror again; he rested his chin on her shoulder. She smelled of the pale green soap she loved because it was shaped like a dinosaur. Her face was so much like his own, yet softer, finer, and to him infinitely beautiful.

“You could, but then tomorrow would be your first day of school. You’d still have butterflies.”

“Butterflies?”

“Right here.” He patted her tummy. “Doesn’t it feel like butterflies dancing in there?”

That made her giggle. “Kind of.”

“I’ve got them, too.”

“Really?” Her eyes opened wide.

“Really. I’ve got to go to school this morning, just like you.”

She fiddled with the pink ribbons he’d tied on the ends of her pigtails. She knew it wasn’t the same for him, but didn’t say so because she was afraid he’d get that worried look. Freddie had heard him talking to Aunt Nina once, and remembered how impatient he had sounded when she’d complained that he was uprooting *her niece* during her formative years.

Freddie wasn’t sure exactly what formative years were, but she knew her daddy had been upset, and that even when Aunt Nina had gone again, he’d still had that worried look. She didn’t want to make him worried, or to make him think Aunt Nina was right. If they went back to New York, the only swing sets were in the park.

Besides, she liked the big house and her new room. Even better, her father’s new job was so close, he would be home every night long before dinner. Remembering not to pout, Freddie decided that since she wanted to stay, she’d have to go to school.

“Will you be here when I get home?”

“I think so. But if I’m not, Vera will be,” he said, thinking of their longtime housekeeper. “You can tell me everything that happened.” After kissing the top of her head, he set her on her feet. She looked achingly small in her pink and white playsuit. Her gray eyes were solemn, her bottom lip trembling. He fought back the urge to gather her up and promise that she’d never have to go to school or anywhere else that frightened her. “Let’s go see what Vera packed in your new lunch box.”

Twenty minutes later he was standing on the curb, holding Freddie's hand in his own. With almost as much dread as his daughter he saw the big yellow school bus lumbering over the hill.

He should have driven her to school, he thought in sudden panic—at least for the first few days. He should take her himself, instead of putting her onto that bus with strangers. Yet it had seemed better to make the whole event normal, to let her ease into the group and become one of them from the outset.

How could he let her go? She was just a baby. *His baby*. What if he was wrong? This wasn't just a matter of picking out the wrong color dress for her. Simply because it was the designated day and time, he was going to tell his daughter to get onto that bus, then walk away.

What if the driver was careless and drove off a cliff? How could he be sure someone would make certain Freddie got back onto the right bus that afternoon?

The bus rumbled to a halt and his fingers tightened instinctively on hers. When the door clattered open, he was almost ready to make a run for it.

"Hi, there." The driver, a large woman with a wide smile, nodded at him. Behind her, children were yelling and bouncing on the seats. "You must be Professor Kimball."

"Yes." He had excuses for not putting Freddie on the bus on the tip of his tongue.

"I'm Dorothy Mansfield. The kids just call me Miss D. And you must be Frederica."

"Yes, ma'am." She bit her bottom lip to keep from turning away and hiding her face against her father's side. "It's Freddie."

"Whew." Miss D gave another big grin. "I'm glad to hear that. Frederica sure is a mouthful. Well, hop aboard, Freddie girl. This is the big day. John Harman, you give that book back to Mikey, less'n you want to sit behind me in the hot seat the rest of the week."

Eyes swimming, Freddie put one foot onto the first step. Swallowing, she climbed the second.

"Why don't you take a seat with JoBeth and Lisa there?" Miss D suggested kindly. She turned back to Spence with a wink and a

wave. "Don't worry about a thing, Professor. We'll take good care of her."

The door closed on a puff of air, then the bus rumbled ahead. Spence could only stand on the curb and watch it take his little girl away.

He wasn't exactly idle. Spence's time was eaten up almost from the moment he walked into the college. He had his own schedule to study, associates to meet, instruments and sheet music to pore over. There was a faculty meeting, a hurried lunch in the lounge, and there were papers, dozens of papers to read and digest. It was a familiar routine, one that he had begun three years before when he'd taken a post at the Juilliard School. But like Freddie, he was the new kid in town, and it was up to him to make the adjustments.

He worried about her. At lunchtime he imagined her sitting in the school cafeteria, a room that smelled of peanut butter and waxy cartons of milk. She would be huddled at the end of a table scattered with crumbs, alone, miserable, while other children laughed and joked with their friends. He could see her at recess, standing apart and looking on longingly, while the others raced and shouted and climbed like spiders on jungle gyms. The trauma would leave her insecure and unhappy for the rest of her life.

All because he'd put her onto that damn yellow bus.

By the end of the day he was feeling as guilty as a child abuser, certain his little girl would come home in tears, devastated by the rigors of the first day of school. More than once he asked himself if Nina had been right all along. Perhaps he should have left well enough alone and stayed in New York, where at least Freddie had had friends and the familiar.

With his briefcase in one hand and his jacket slung over his shoulder, he started for home. It was hardly more than a mile, and the weather remained unseasonably warm. Until winter hit, he would take advantage of it and walk to and from campus.

He had already fallen in love with the town. There were pretty shops and rambling old houses all along the tree-lined main street. It was a college town and proud of it, but it was equally proud of its age and dignity. The street climbed, and here and there the sidewalk

showed cracks where tree roots had undermined it. Though there were cars passing, it was quiet enough to hear the bark of a dog or the music from a radio. A woman weeding marigolds along her walkway looked up and waved at him. Cheered, Spence waved back.

She didn't even know him, he thought. But she had waved. He looked forward to seeing her again, planting bulbs perhaps, or sweeping snow from her porch. He could smell chrysanthemums. For some reason that alone gave him a shot of pleasure.

No, he hadn't made a mistake. He and Freddie belonged here. In less than a week it had become home.

He stopped on the curb to wait for a laboring sedan to pass, and glancing across the street saw the sign for The Fun House. It was perfect, Spence thought. The perfect name. It conjured up laughter and surprises, just as the window display with its building blocks, chubby-cheeked dolls and shiny red cars promised a childhood treasure trove. At the moment he could think of nothing he wanted more than to find something that would bring a smile to his daughter's face.

*You spoil her.*

He could hear Nina's voice clearly in his ears.

So what? Glancing quickly up and down the street, he crossed to the opposite curb. His little girl had walked onto the school bus as bravely as any soldier marching into battle. There was no harm in buying her a small medal.

The door jingled as he entered. There was a scent, as cheerful as the sound of the bells. Peppermint, he thought and smiled. It delighted him to hear the tinny strains of "The Merry-Go-Round Broke Down," coming from the rear of the shop.

"I'll be right with you."

He had forgotten, Spence realized, how that voice could cruise along the air.

He wouldn't make a fool of himself again. This time he was prepared for what she looked like, sounded like, smelled like. He had come in to buy a present for his daughter, not to flirt with the proprietor. Then he grinned into the face of a forlorn panda. There didn't seem to be any law against doing both.



“I’m sure Bonnie will love it,” Natasha said as she carried the miniature carousel for her customer. “It’s a beautiful birthday present.”

“She saw it in here a few weeks ago and hasn’t been able to talk about anything else.” Bonnie’s grandmother tried not to grimace at the price. “I guess she’s old enough to take care of it.”

“Bonnie’s a very responsible girl,” Natasha went on, then spotted Spence at the counter. “I’ll be right with you.” The temperature of her voice dropped a cool twenty degrees.

“Take your time.” It annoyed him that his reaction to her should be so strong, while hers played tug-of-war at the opposite end of the spectrum. It was obvious she’d decided to dislike him. It might be interesting, Spence thought, while he watched her slender, capable hands wrap the carousel, to find out her reasons.

And change her mind.

“That’s 55.27, Mrs. Mortimer.”

“Oh no, dear, the price tag said 67.”

Natasha, who knew Mrs. Mortimer juggled expenses on a fixed income, only smiled. “I’m sorry. Didn’t I tell you it was on sale?”

“No.” Mrs. Mortimer let out a little breath of relief as she counted out bills. “Well, this must be my lucky day.”

“And Bonnie’s.” Natasha topped the gift with a pretty, celebratory pink bow, remembering it was Bonnie’s favorite color. “Be sure to tell her happy birthday.”

“I will.” The proud grandmother lifted her package. “I can’t wait to see her face when she opens this. Bye, Natasha.”

Natasha waited until the door closed. “May I help you with something?”

“That was a very nice thing to do.”

She lifted a brow. “What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean.” He had the absurd urge to take her hand and kiss it. It was incredible, he thought. He was almost thirty-five and tumbling into puppy love with a woman he barely knew. “I’d meant to come in before.”

“Oh? Was your daughter dissatisfied with her doll?”

“No, she loves it. It was just that I...” Good God, he was nearly stuttering. Five minutes with her, and he felt as awkward as a

teenager at his first dance. He steadied himself with an effort. "I felt we'd gotten off on the wrong foot before. Should I apologize?"

"If you like." Just because he looked appealing and a little awkward was no reason to go easy on him. "Did you come in only for that?"

"No." His eyes darkened, just slightly. Noting it, Natasha wondered if she'd erred in her initial impression. Perhaps he wasn't harmless, after all. There was something deeper in those eyes, stronger and more dangerous. What surprised her further was that she found it exciting.

Disgusted with herself, she gave him a polite smile. "Was there something else?"

"I wanted something for my daughter." The hell with the gorgeous Russian princess, he thought. He had more important things to tend to.

"What was it you wanted for her?"

"I don't know." That was true enough. Setting down his briefcase, he glanced around the shop.

Unbending a little, Natasha came around the counter. "Is it her birthday?"

"No." Feeling foolish, he shrugged. "It's the first day of school, and she looked so...brave getting on the bus this morning."

This time Natasha's smile was spontaneous and full of warmth. It nearly stopped his heart. "You shouldn't worry. When she comes home, she'll be full of stories about everything and everyone. The first day is much harder, I think, on the parent than on the child."

"It's been the longest day of my life."

She laughed, a rich smoky sound that seemed impossibly erotic in a room full of clowns and stuffed bears. "It sounds like you both deserve a present. You were looking at a music box before. I have another you might like."

So saying, she led the way to the back of the shop. Spence did his best to ignore the subtle sway of her hips and the soft, fresh-scrubbed flavor of her scent. The box she chose was carved of wood, its pedestal topped with a cat and a fiddle, a cow and a quarter moon. As it turned to "Stardust," he saw the laughing dog and the dish with the spoon.

“It’s charming.”

“It’s one of my favorites.” She’d decided that any man who adored his daughter so blatantly couldn’t be all bad. So she smiled again. “I think it would be a lovely memento, something she could play on her first day of college and remember her father was thinking of her.”

“If he survives first grade.” He shifted slightly to look at her. “Thank you. It’s perfect.”

It was the oddest thing—his body had hardly brushed hers, but she’d felt a jolt. For an instant she forgot he was a customer, a father, a husband, and thought of him only as a man. His eyes were the color of the river at dusk. His lips, as they formed the barest hint of a smile, were impossibly attractive, alluring. Involuntarily she wondered what it would be like to feel them against her own—to watch his face as mouth met mouth, and see herself reflected in his eyes.

Appalled, she stepped back and her voice grew colder. “I’ll box it for you.”

Intrigued by the sudden change in tone, he took his time following her back to the counter. Hadn’t he seen something in those fabulous eyes of hers? Or was it wishful thinking? It had gone quickly enough, heat smothered in frost. For the life of him he could find no reason for either.

“Natasha.” He laid a hand on hers as she began to pack the music box.

Slowly she lifted her eyes. She was already hating herself for noticing that his hands were beautiful, wide-palmed, long-fingered. There was also a note of patience in his voice that stretched her already frayed nerves. “Yes?”

“Why do I keep getting the feeling you’d like to boil me in oil?”

“You’re mistaken,” she said evenly. “I don’t think I’d like that.”

“You don’t sound convinced.” He felt her hand flex under his, soft and strong. The image of steel-lined velvet seemed particularly apt. “I’m having some trouble figuring out exactly what I’ve done to annoy you.”

“Then you’ll have to think about it. Cash or charge?”

He'd had little practice with rejection. Like a wasp it stung the ego. No matter how beautiful she was, he had no desire to continue to ram his head against the same brick wall.

"Cash." The door jangled open behind them and he released her hand. Three children, fresh from school, came in giggling. A young boy with red hair and a face bursting with freckles stood on his toes in front of the counter.

"I have three dollars," he announced.

Natasha fought back a grin. "You're very rich today, Mr. Jensen."

He flashed her a smile that revealed his latest missing tooth. "I've been saving up. I want the race car."

Natasha only lifted a brow as she counted out Spence's change. "Does your mother know you're here spending your life savings?" Her new customer remained silent. "Scott?"

He shifted from one foot to the other. "She didn't say I couldn't."

"And she didn't say you could," Natasha surmised. She leaned over to tug at his cowlick. "Go and ask her, then you come back. The race car will still be here."

"But, Tash—"

"You wouldn't want your mother to be mad at me, would you?"

Scott looked thoughtful for a moment, and Natasha could tell it was a tough choice. "I guess not."

"Then go ask her, and I'll hold one for you."

Hope blossomed. "Promise?"

Natasha put a hand on her heart. "Solemnly." She looked back at Spence, and the amusement faded from her eyes. "I hope Freddie enjoys her present."

"I'm sure she will." He walked out, annoyed with himself for wishing he were a ten-year-old boy with a missing tooth.

Natasha locked the shop at six. The sun was still bright, the air still steamy. It made her think of picnics under a shady tree. A nicer fantasy than the microwave meal on her agenda, she mused, but at the moment impractical.

As she walked home, she watched a couple stroll hand in hand into the restaurant across the street. Someone hailed her from a passing car, and she waved in response. She could have stopped in

the local pub and whiled away an hour over a glass of wine with any number of people she knew. Finding a dinner companion was as simple as sticking her head through one of a dozen doors and making the suggestion.

She wasn't in the mood for company. Not even her own.

It was the heat, she told herself as she turned the corner, the heat that had hung mercilessly in the air throughout the summer and showed no sign of yielding to autumn. It made her restless. It made her remember.

It had been summer when her life had changed so irrevocably.

Even now, years later, sometimes when she saw the roses in full bloom or heard the drunken buzz of bees she would ache. And wonder what might have happened. What would her life be like now, if...? She detested herself for playing those wishing games.

There were roses now, fragile pink ones that thrived despite the heat and lack of rain. She had planted them herself in the little patch of grass outside her apartment. Tending them brought her pleasure *and* pain. And what was life, she asked herself as she ran a fingertip over a petal, without them both? The warm scent of the roses followed her up the walkway.

Her rooms were quiet. She had thought about getting a kitten or a pup, so that there would be something there to greet her in the evening, something that loved and depended on her. But then she realized how unfair it would be to leave it alone while she was at the shop.

So she turned to music, flicking on the stereo as she stepped out of her shoes. Even that was a test. Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet*. She could see herself dancing to those haunting, romantic strains, the hot lights surrounding her, the music beating like her blood, her movements fluid, controlled without looking it. A triple pirouette, showing grace without effort.

That was past, Natasha reminded herself. Regrets were for the weak.

She moved out of habit, changing her work clothes for a loose, sleeveless jumpsuit, hanging up her skirt and blouse neatly as she had been taught. It was habit again rather than necessity that had her checking the cotton skirt for wear.

There was iced tea in the refrigerator and one of those packaged meals for the microwave that she both depended on and detested. She laughed at herself as she pushed the buttons to heat it.

She was getting like an old woman, Natasha decided, cranky and cross from the heat. Sighing, she rubbed the cold glass over her forehead.

That man had started her off, she thought. For a few moments in the shop today she had actually started to like him. He'd been so sweet, worrying about his little girl, wanting to reward her for being brave enough to face that momentous first day in school. She'd liked the way his voice had sounded, the way his eyes had smiled. For those few moments he had seemed like someone she could laugh with, talk with.

Then that had changed. A part of it was surely her fault, she admitted. But that didn't diminish his blame. She had felt something she hadn't felt, hadn't chosen to feel in a long, long time. That frisson of excitement. That tug of need. It made her angry and ashamed of herself. It made her furious with him.

The nerve, she thought, as she yanked her dish out of the microwave. Flirting with her as if she were some naive fool, before he went home to his wife and daughter.

Have dinner with him, indeed. She jammed her fork into the steaming seafood pasta. That kind of man expected payment in full for a meal. The candlelight and wine type, she thought with a sneer. Soft voice, patient eyes, clever hands. And no heart.

Just like Anthony. Impatient, she set the dish aside and picked up the glass that was already dripping with moisture. But she was wiser now than she had been at eighteen. Much wiser. Much stronger. She was no longer a woman who could be lured by charm and smooth words. Not that this man was smooth, she remembered with a quick smile. He— Lord, she didn't even know his name and she already detested him—he was a little clumsy, a little awkward. That was a charm of its own.

But he was, she thought, very much like Anthony. Tall and blond with those oh, so American good looks. Looks that concealed a lack of morals and a carelessly deceitful heart.

What Anthony had cost her could never be tallied. Since that time, Natasha had made very, very certain no man would ever cost her so dearly again.

But she had survived. She lifted her glass in a self-toast. Not only had she survived, but except for times when memories crowded in on her, she was happy. She loved the shop, and the chance it gave her to be around children and make them happy. In her three years there she had watched them grow. She had a wonderful, funny friend in Annie, books that stayed in the black and a home that suited her.

She heard a thump over her head and smiled. The Jorgensons were getting ready for the evening meal. She imagined Don was fussing around Marilyn, who was carrying their first child. Natasha liked knowing they were there, just above her, happy, in love and full of hope.

That was family to her, what she had had in her youth, what she had expected as an adult. She could still see Papa fretting over Mama when she neared her time. Every time, Natasha remembered, thinking of her three younger siblings. How he had wept with happiness when his wife and babies were safe and well. He adored his Nadia. Even now Natasha knew he still brought flowers home to the little house in Brooklyn. When he came home after a day's work, he kissed his wife, not with an absent peck on the cheek, but robustly, joyfully. A man wildly in love after almost thirty years.

It was her father who had kept her from shoveling all men into the pit Anthony had dug for her. Seeing her father and mother together had kept that small, secret hope alight that someday she would find someone who would love her as much and as honestly.

Someday, she thought with a shrug. But for now she had her own business, her own home and her own life. No man, no matter how beautiful his hands or how clear his eyes, was going to rock her boat. Secretly she hoped her newest customer's wife gave him nothing but grief.

"One more story. Please, Daddy." Freddie, her eyes heavy, her face shiny from her bath, used her most persuasive smile. She was nestled against Spence in her big, white canopy bed.

“You’re already asleep.”

“No, I’m not.” She peeked up at him, fighting to keep her eyes open. It had been the very best day of her life, and she didn’t want it to end. “Did I tell you that JoBeth’s cat had kittens? Six of them.”

“Twice.” Spence flicked a finger down her nose. He knew a hint when he heard one, and fell back on the parent’s standard. “We’ll see.”

Sleepy, Freddie smiled. She knew from his tone that her father was already weakening. “Mrs. Patterson’s real nice. She’s going to let us have Show and Tell every Friday.”

“So you said.” And he’d been worried, Spence thought. “I get the feeling you like school.”

“It’s neat.” She yawned hugely. “Did you fill out all the forms?”

“They’ll be ready for you to take in tomorrow.” All five hundred of them, he thought with a sigh. “Time to unplug the batteries, funny face.”

“One more story. The made-up kind.” She yawned again, comforted by the soft cotton of his shirt beneath her cheek and the familiar scent of his after-shave.

He gave in, knowing she would sleep long before he got to the happy ever after. He wove a story around a beautiful, dark-haired princess from a foreign land, and the knight who tried to rescue her from her ivory tower.

Foolishness, Spence thought even as he added a sorcerer and a two-headed dragon. He knew his thoughts were drifting toward Natasha again. She was certainly beautiful, but he didn’t think he’d ever met a woman less in need of rescuing.

It was just his bad luck that he had to pass her shop every day to and from campus.

He’d ignore her. If anything, he should be grateful to her. She’d made him want, made him feel things he hadn’t thought he could anymore. Maybe now that he and Freddie were settled, he’d start socializing again. There were plenty of attractive, single women at the college. But the idea of dating didn’t fill him with delight.

Socializing, Spence corrected. Dating was for teenagers and conjured up visions of drive-in movies, pizza and sweaty palms. He was a grown man, and it was certainly time he started enjoying



female companionship again. Over the age of five, he thought, looking at Freddie's small hand balled in his palm.

Just what would you think, he asked silently, if I brought a woman home to dinner? It made him remember how big and hurt her eyes had been when he and Angela had swept out of the condo for evenings at the theater or the opera.

It won't ever be like that again, he promised as he shifted her from his chest to the pillow. He settled the grinning Raggedy Ann beside her, then tucked the covers under her chin. Resting a hand on the bedpost, he glanced around the room.

It already had Freddie's stamp on it. The dolls lining the shelves with books jumbled beneath them, the fuzzy, pink elephant slippers beside her oldest and most favored sneakers. The room had that little-girl scent of shampoo and crayons. A night-light in the shape of a unicorn assured that she wouldn't wake up in the dark and be afraid.

He stayed a moment longer, finding himself as soothed by the light as she. Quietly he stepped out, leaving her door open a few inches.

Downstairs he found Vera carrying a tray of coffee. The Mexican housekeeper was wide from shoulders to hips, and gave the impression of a small, compact freight train when she moved from room to room. Since Freddie's birth, she had proven not only efficient but indispensable. Spence knew it was often possible to insure an employee's loyalty with a paycheck, but not her love. From the moment Freddie had come home in her silk-trimmed blanket, Vera had been in love.

She cast an eye up the stairs now, and her lined face folded into a smile. "She had one big day, huh?"

"Yes, and one she fought ending to the last gasp. Vera, you didn't have to bother."

She shrugged her shoulders while she carried the coffee into his office. "You said you have to work tonight."

"Yes, for a little while."

"So I make you coffee before I go in and put my feet up to watch TV." She arranged the tray on his desk, fussing a bit while she talked. "My baby, she's happy with school and her new friends." She

didn't add that she had wept into her apron when Freddie had stepped onto the bus. "With the house empty all day, I have plenty of time to get my work done. You don't stay up too late, Dr. Kimball."

"No." It was a polite lie. He knew he was too restless for sleep. "Thank you, Vera."

"*¡De nada!*" She patted her iron-gray hair. "I wanted to tell you that I like this place very much. I was afraid to leave New York, but now I'm happy."

"We couldn't manage without you."

"*Sí.*" She took this as her due. For seven years she had worked for the *señor*, and basked in the prestige of being housekeeper for an important man—a respected musician, a doctor of music and a college professor. Since the birth of his daughter she had been so in love with *her baby* that she would have worked for Spence, whatever his station.

She had grumbled about moving from the beautiful high-rise in New York, to the rambling house in the small town, but Vera was shrewd enough to know that the *señor* had been thinking of Freddie. Freddie had come home from school only hours before, laughing, excited, with the names of new best friends tumbling from her lips. So Vera was content.

"You are a good father, Dr. Kimball."

Spence glanced over before he sat down behind his desk. He was well aware that there had been a time Vera had considered him a very poor one.

"I'm learning."

"*Sí.*" Casually she adjusted a book on the shelf. "In this big house you won't have to worry about disturbing Freddie's sleep if you play your piano at night."

He looked over again, knowing she was encouraging him in her way to concentrate on his music. "No, it shouldn't disturb her. Good night, Vera."

After a quick glance around to be certain there was nothing more for her to tidy, she left him.

Alone, Spence poured the coffee, then studied the papers on his desk. Freddie's school forms were stacked next to his own work. He

had a great deal of preparation ahead of him, before his classes began the following week.

He looked forward to it, even as he tried not to regret that the music that had once played so effortlessly inside his head was still silent.

## CHAPTER THREE

Natasha scooped the barrette through the hair above her ear and hoped it would stay fixed for more than five minutes. She studied her reflection in the narrow mirror over the sink in the back of the shop before she decided to add a touch of lipstick. It didn't matter that it had been a long and hectic day or that her feet were all but crying with fatigue. Tonight was her treat to herself, her reward for a job well done.

Every semester she signed up for one course at the college. She chose whatever seemed most fun, most intriguing or most unusual. Renaissance Poetry one year, Automotive Maintenance another. This term, two evenings a week, she would be taking Music History. Tonight she would begin an exploration of a new topic. Everything she learned she would store for her own pleasure, as other women stored diamonds and emeralds. It didn't have to be useful. In Natasha's opinion a glittery necklace wasn't particularly useful, either. It was simply exciting to own.

She had her notebook, her pens and pencils and a flood of enthusiasm. To prepare herself, she had raided the library and pored over related books for the last two weeks. Pride wouldn't allow her to go into class ignorant. Curiosity made her wonder if her instructor could take the dry, distant facts and add excitement.

There was little doubt that this particular instructor was adding dashes of excitement in other quarters. Annie had teased her just that morning about the new professor everyone was talking about. Dr. Spencer B. Kimball.

The name sounded very distinguished to Natasha, quite unlike the description of a hunk that Annie had passed along. Annie's information came from her cousin's daughter, who was majoring in Elementary Education with a minor in Music. A sun-god, Annie had relayed and made Natasha laugh.

A very gifted sun-god, Natasha mused while she turned off lights in the shop. She knew Kimball's work well, or the work he had composed before he had suddenly and inexplicably stopped writing music. Why, she had even danced to his Prelude in D Minor when she had been with the corps de ballet in New York.

A million years ago, she thought as she stepped onto the street. Now she would be able to meet the genius, listen to his views and perhaps find new meanings in many of the classics she already loved.

He was probably the temperamental artiste type, she decided, pleased with the way the evening breeze lifted her hair and cooled her neck. Or a pale eccentric with one earring. It didn't matter. She intended to work hard. Each course she took was a matter of pride to her. It still stung to remember how little she had known when she'd been eighteen. How little she had cared to know, Natasha admitted, other than dance. She had of her own choice closed herself off from so many worlds in order to focus everything on one. When that had been taken away, she had been as lost as a child set adrift on the Atlantic.

She had found her way to shore, just as her family had once found its way across the wilds of the Ukraine to the jungles of Manhattan. She liked herself better—the independent, ambitious American woman she had become. As she was now, she could walk into the big, beautiful old building on campus with as much pride as any freshman student.

There were footsteps echoing in the corridors, distant, dislocated. There was a hushed reverence that Natasha always associated with churches and universities. In a way there was religion here—the belief in learning.

She felt somewhat reverent herself as she made her way to her class. As a child of five in her small farming village, she had never even imagined such a building, or the books and beauty it contained.

Several students were already waiting. A mixed bag, she noted, ranging from college to middle age. All of them seemed to buzz with that excitement of beginning. She saw by the clock that it was two minutes shy of eight. She'd expected Kimball to be there, busily shuffling his papers, peering at them behind glasses, his hair a little wild and streaming to his shoulders.

Absently she smiled at a young man in horn-rims, who was staring at her as if he'd just woken from a dream. Ready to begin, she sat down, then looked up when the same man clumsily maneuvered himself into the desk beside her.

"Hello."

He looked as though she'd struck him with a bat rather than offered a casual greeting. He pushed his glasses nervously up his nose. "Hello. I'm—I'm...Terry Maynard," he finished on a burst as his name apparently came to him at last.

"Natasha." She smiled again. He was on the sunny side of twenty-five and harmless as a puppy.

"I haven't, ah, seen you on campus before."

"No." Though at twenty-seven it amused her to be taken for a coed, she kept her voice sober. "I'm only taking this one class. For fun."

"For fun?" Terry appeared to take music very seriously. "Do you know who Dr. Kimball is?" His obvious awe made him almost whisper the name.

"I've heard of him. You're a Music major?"

"Yes. I hope to, well one day, I hope to play with the New York Symphony." His blunt fingers reached nervously to adjust his glasses. "I'm a violinist."

She smiled again and made his Adam's apple bob. "That's wonderful. I'm sure you're very good."

"What do you play?"

"Five card draw." Then she laughed and settled back in her chair. "I'm sorry. I don't play an instrument. But I love to listen to music and thought I'd enjoy the class." She glanced at the clock on the wall. "If it ever starts, that is. Apparently our esteemed professor is late."

At that moment the esteemed professor was rushing down the corridors, cursing himself for ever agreeing to take on this night class. By the time he had helped Freddie with her homework—how many animals can you find in this picture?—convinced her that brussels sprouts were cute instead of yucky, and changed his shirt because her affectionate hug had transferred some mysterious, sticky substance to his sleeve, he had wanted nothing more than a good book and a warm brandy.

Instead he was going to have to face a roomful of eager faces, all waiting to learn what Beethoven had worn when he'd composed his Ninth Symphony.

In the foulest of moods, he walked into class. "Good evening. I'm Dr. Kimball." The murmurs and rattles quieted. "I must apologize for being late. If you'll all take a seat, we'll dive right in."

As he spoke he scanned the room. And found himself staring into Natasha's astonished face.

"No." She wasn't aware she'd spoken the word aloud, and wouldn't have cared. It was some sort of joke, she thought, and a particularly bad one. This—this *man* in the casually elegant jacket was Spencer Kimball, a musician whose songs she had admired and danced to. The man who, while barely into his twenties had been performing at Carnegie Hall being hailed as a genius. This man who had tried to pick her up in a toy store was the illustrious Dr. Kimball?

It was ludicrous, it was infuriating, it was—

Wonderful, Spence thought as he stared at her. Absolutely wonderful. In fact, it was perfect, as long as he could control the laugh that was bubbling in his throat. So the czarina was one of his students. It was better, much better than a warm brandy and an evening of quiet.

"I'm sure," he said after a long pause, "we'll all find the next few months fascinating."

She should have signed up for Astronomy, Natasha told herself. She could have learned all kinds of interesting things about the planets and stars. Asteroids. She'd have been much better off learning about—what was it?—gravitational pull and inertia. Whatever that was. Surely it was much more important for her to find

out how many moons revolved around Jupiter than to study Burgundian composers of the fifteenth century.

She would transfer, Natasha decided. First thing in the morning she would make the arrangements. In fact, she would get up and walk out right now if she wasn't certain Dr. Spencer Kimball would smirk.

Running her pencil between her fingers, she crossed her legs and determined not to listen.

It was a pity his voice was so attractive.

Impatient, Natasha looked at the clock. Nearly an hour to go. She would do what she did when she waited at the dentist's office. Pretend she was someplace else. Struggling to block Spence's voice from her mind she began to swing her foot and doodle on her pad.

She didn't notice when her doodles became notes, or when she began to hang on every word. He made fifteenth-century musicians seem alive and vital—and their music as real as flesh and blood. Rondeaux, vialais, ballades. She could almost hear the three-part chansons of the dawning Renaissance, the reverent, soaring Kyries and Glorias of the masses.

She was caught up, involved in that ancient rivalry between church and state and music's part in the politics. She could see huge banqueting halls filled with elegantly dressed aristocrats, feasting on music as well as food.

"Next time we'll be discussing the Franco-Flemish school and rhythmic developments." Spence gave his class an easy smile. "And I'll try to be on time."

Was it over? Natasha glanced at the clock again and was shocked to see it was indeed after nine.

"Incredible, isn't he?"

She looked at Terry. His eyes were gleaming behind his lenses. "Yes." It cost her to admit it, but truth was truth.

"You should hear him in theory class." He noticed with envy that several students were grouped around his idol. As yet, Terry hadn't worked up the nerve to approach him. "I'll—see you Thursday."

"What? Oh. Good night, Terry."

"I could, ah, give you a ride home if you want." The fact that he was nearly out of gas and his muffler was currently held on by a coat



hanger didn't enter his mind.

She favored him with an absent smile that had his heart doing a cha-cha. "That's nice of you, but I don't live far."

She hoped to breeze out of the classroom while Spence was still occupied. She should have known better.

He simply put a hand on her arm and stopped her. "I'd like to speak with you a moment, Natasha."

"I'm in a hurry."

"It won't take long." He nodded to the last of his departing students, then eased back against his desk and grinned at her. "I should have paid more attention to my roster, but then again, it's nice to know there are still surprises in the world."

"That depends on your point of view, Dr. Kimball."

"Spence." He continued to grin. "Class is over."

"So it is." Her regal nod made him think again of Russian royalty. "Excuse me."

"Natasha." He waited, almost seeing impatience shimmer around her as she turned. "I can't imagine that someone with your heritage doesn't believe in destiny."

"Destiny?"

"Of all the classrooms in all the universities in all the world, she walks into mine."

She wouldn't laugh. She'd be damned if she would. But her mouth quirked up at the corners before she controlled it. "And here I was thinking it was just bad luck."

"Why Music History?"

She balanced her notebook on her hip. "It was a toss-up between that and Astronomy."

"That sounds like a fascinating story. Why don't we go down the street for a cup of coffee? You can tell me about it." Now he saw it—molten fury that turned her eyes from rich velvet to sharp jet. "Now why does that infuriate you?" he inquired, almost to himself. "Is an offer of a cup of coffee in this town similar to an illicit proposition?"

"You should know, Dr. Kimball." She turned, but he reached the door before her, slamming it with enough force to make her step back. He was every bit as angry as herself, she noted. Not that it mattered. It was only that he had seemed a mild sort of man.

Detestable, but mild. There was nothing mild about him now. Those fascinating bones and angles in his face might have been carved of stone.

“Clarify.”

“Open the door.”

“Gladly. After you answer my question.” He was angry. Spence realized he hadn’t felt this kind of hot, blood-pumping rage in years. It felt wonderful. “I realize that just because I’m attracted to you doesn’t mean you have to return the favor.”

She threw up her chin, hating herself for finding the storm-cloud-gray eyes so hypnotic. “I don’t.”

“Fine.” He couldn’t strangle her for that, however much he’d like to. “But, damn it, I want to know why you aim and fire every time I’m around you.”

“Because men like you deserve to be shot.”

“Men like me,” he repeated, measuring out the words. “What exactly does that mean?”

He was standing close, all but looming over her. As in the shop when he had brushed up against her, she felt those bubble bursts of excitement, attraction, confusion. It was more than enough to push her over the edge.

“Do you think because you have a nice face and a pretty smile you can do whatever you like? Yes,” she answered before he could speak and slapped her notebook against his chest. “You think you have only to snap your fingers.” She demonstrated dramatically. “And a woman will fall into your arms. Not this woman.”

Her accent thickened when she was on a roll, he noted, somewhat baffled by her claim. “I don’t recall snapping my fingers.”

She let loose one short, explicit Ukrainian oath and grabbed the knob. “You want to have a cup of coffee with me? Good. We’ll have your coffee—and we’ll call your wife and ask her to join us.”

“My what?” He closed his hand over hers so that the door was jerked open, then slammed shut again. “I don’t have a wife.”

“Really?” The single word dripped with scorn; her eyes flashed at him. “And I suppose the woman who came with you to the shop is your sister.”

It should have been funny. But he couldn't quite get the joke. "Nina? As a matter of fact, she is."

Natasha yanked open the door with a sound of disgust. "That is pathetic."

Filled with righteous indignation, she stormed down the corridor and out the main door. In a staccato rhythm that matched her mood, her heels beat on the concrete as she started down the steps. When she was abruptly whirled around, she nearly took the last two in a tumble.

"You've got a hell of a nerve."

"I?" she managed. "I have a nerve?"

"You think you've got it all figured out, don't you?" Having the advantage of height, Spence could stare down at her. Natasha saw shadows move over his face as temper colored his voice. He didn't appear awkward now, but every bit in control. "Or I should say you think you've got me figured."

"It takes very little." The fingers on her arm were very firm. She hated knowing that mixed with her own anger was basic sexual attraction. Fighting it off, she tossed back her hair. "You're really very typical."

"I wonder, can your opinion of me get any lower?" Now fury ground edge to edge with desire.

"Doubtful."

"In that case, I might as well satisfy myself."

The notebook flew out of her hand when he dragged her close. She managed a single, startled sound in her throat before his mouth covered hers. Covered, crushed, then conquered.

Natasha would have fought him. Over and over she told herself she *would* fight him. But it was shock—at least, she prayed it was shock—that had her arms falling limply to her sides.

It was wrong. It was unforgivable. And, oh God, it was wonderful. Instinctively he'd found the key to unlock the passion that had lain dormant in her for so long. Her blood swam hot with it. Her mind hazed. Dimly she heard someone laugh as they strolled down the sidewalk below. A beep of a car horn, a shout of greeting, then silence once more.

She murmured, a pitiful protest that shamed her and was easily ignored as his tongue glided over her own. His taste was a banquet after a long fast. Though she kept her hands balled at her sides, she leaned into the kiss.

Kissing her was like walking through a mine field. Any moment he expected the bomb to go off and blow him to pieces. He should have stopped after the first shock, but danger had a thrill of its own.

And she was dangerous. As his fingers dived into her hair, he could feel the ground quiver and quake. It was her—the promise, the threat of titanic passion. He could taste it on her lips, even as she fought to hold it back. He could feel it in her taut, terrified stance. If she released it, she could make him a slave.

Needs such as he'd never known battered his system with heavy fists. Images, all fire and smoke, danced in his brain. Something struggled to break free, like a bird beating at the bars of a cage. He could feel it straining. Then Natasha was pulling away from him, standing apart and staring at him with wide, eloquent eyes.

She couldn't breathe. For an instant she was genuinely afraid she would die on the spot with this unwanted, shameful desire on her conscience. In defiance she took a huge gulp of air.

"I could never hate anyone as much as I hate you."

He shook his head to clear it. She had left him dizzy, dazed and utterly defenseless. For his own sake he waited until he was sure he could speak. "That's a lofty position you put me in, Natasha." He stepped down until they were at eye level. There were tears on her lashes, but they were offset by the condemnation in her eyes. "Let's just be sure you've put me there for the right reasons. Is it because I kissed you, or because you liked it?"

She swung her hand out. He could have avoided the blow easily enough, but thought she deserved a hit. As the crack of the slap echoed, he decided they were even.

"Don't come near me again," she said, breathing hard. "I warn you, if you do, I won't care what I say or who hears me. If it wasn't for your little girl—" She broke off and bent to gather her things. Her pride was shattered, along with her self-esteem. "You don't deserve such a beautiful child."

He caught her arm again, but this time the expression on his face made her blood go cold. “You’re right. I never have and probably never will deserve Freddie, but I’m all she has. Her mother—my wife—died three years ago.”

He strode off, was caught in the beam of a street lamp, then disappeared into the dark beyond. Her notebook pressed against her chest, Natasha sank weakly onto the bottom step.

What in hell was she going to do now?

There was no choice. No matter how much she hated it, there was really only one course to take. Natasha rubbed the palms of her hands on the thighs of her khakis, then started up the freshly painted wooden steps.

It was a nice house, she thought, stalling. Of course she’d seen it so often that she rarely noticed it anymore. It was one of those sturdy old brick places tucked back from the street and shielded by trees and box hedges.

The summer flowers had yet to fade, but the fall blooms were already staking their claim. Showy delphiniums vied with spicy scented mums, vivid dahlias with starry asters. Someone was caring for them. She could see fresh mulch on the flower beds, damp with watering.

Wanting a little more time, she studied the house. There were curtains at the windows, thin ivory sheers that would let in the light. Higher up she caught a glimpse of a fanciful pattern of unicorns that identified a little girl’s room.

She gathered her courage and crossed the porch to the front door. It would be quick, she promised herself. Not painless, but quick. She rapped, released her breath and waited.

The woman who answered was short and wide with a face as brown and wrinkled as a raisin. Natasha found herself fixed by a pair of small, dark eyes while the housekeeper dried her hands on the skirt of a stained apron.

“May I help you?”

“I’d like to see Dr. Kimball if he’s in.” She smiled, pretending she didn’t feel as though she were stepping into the pillory. “I’m Natasha

Stanislaski.” She saw the housekeeper’s little eyes narrow, so that they nearly disappeared into the folds of her face.

Vera had at first taken Natasha for one of the *señor*’s students, and had been prepared to nudge her on her way. “You own the toy store in town.”

“That’s right.”

“Ah.” With a nod, she opened the door wider to let Natasha in. “Freddie says you are a very nice lady, who gave her a blue ribbon for her doll. I promised to take her back, but just to look.” She gestured for Natasha to follow.

As they made their way down the hall, Natasha caught the hesitant notes of a piano. When she saw her reflection in an old oval mirror, it surprised her that she was smiling.

He was sitting at the piano with the child on his lap, looking over her head while she slowly tapped out “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” The sun streamed in through the windows behind them. At that moment she wished she could paint. How else could it be captured?

It was perfect. The light, the shadows, the pale pastels of the room all combined to make the perfect backdrop. The alignment of their heads, their bodies, was too natural and eloquent ever to be posed. The girl was in pink and white, the laces of one sneaker untied. He had taken off his jacket and tie, then rolled up the sleeves of the pale dress shirt to the elbows like a workman.

There was the fragile shine of the child’s hair, the deeper glow of his. The child leaned back against her father, her head resting just under his collarbone; the faintest smile of pleasure lighted her face. Over it all was the simple nursery rhyme music she was playing.

He had his hands on the knees of her jeans, his long, beautiful fingers tapping the time in tandem with the tick of the antique metronome. She could see it all, the love, the patience, the pride.

“No, please,” Natasha whispered, holding out a hand to Vera. “Don’t disturb them.”

“You play now, Daddy.” Freddie tilted her head toward his. Her hair wisped around her face where it had escaped from its clips. “Play something pretty.”

“*Für Elise.*” Natasha recognized it instantly, that soft, romantic, somehow lonely music. It went straight to her heart as she watched

his fingers stroke, caress, seduce the keys.

What was he thinking? She could see that his thoughts had turned inward—to the music, to himself. There was an effortlessness in the way his fingers flowed over the keys, and yet she knew that kind of beauty was never achieved without the greatest effort.

The song swelled, note after note, unbearably sad, impossibly beautiful, like the vase of waxy calla lilies that rested on the glossy surface of the piano.

Too much emotion, Natasha thought. Too much pain, though the sun was still shining through the gauzy curtains and the child on his lap continued to smile. The urge to go to him, to put a comforting hand onto his shoulder, to hold them both against her heart, was so strong that she had to curl her fingers into her palms.

Then the music drifted away, the last note lingering like a sigh.

“I like that one,” Freddie told him. “Did you make it up?”

“No.” He looked at his fingers, spreading them, flexing them, then letting them rest on hers. “Beethoven did.” Then he was smiling again, pressing his lips to the soft curve of his daughter’s neck. “Had enough for today, funny face?”

“Can I play outside until dinner?”

“Well... What’ll you give me?”

It was an old game and a favorite one. Giggling, she swiveled on his lap and gave him a hard, smacking kiss. Still squealing from the bear hug, she spotted Natasha. “Hi!”

“Miss Stanislaski would like to see you, Dr. Kimball.” At his nod, Vera walked back to the kitchen.

“Hello.” Natasha managed to smile, even when Spence lifted his daughter and turned. She wasn’t over the music yet. It was still pouring through her like tears. “I hope I haven’t come at a bad time.”

“No.” After a last squeeze, he set Freddie down, and she immediately bounded to Natasha.

“We’re all finished with my lesson. Did you come to play?”

“No, not this time.” Unable to resist, Natasha bent to stroke Freddie’s cheek. “Actually I came to talk to your father.” But she was a coward, Natasha thought in disgust. Rather than look at him, she continued to address Freddie. “How do you like school? You have Mrs. Patterson, don’t you?”

“She’s nice. She didn’t even yell when Mikey Towers’s icky bug collection got loose in the classroom. And I can read all of *Go, Dog, Go.*”

Natasha crouched so that they were eye to eye. “Do you like my hat?”

Freddie laughed, recognizing the line from the Dr. Seuss classic. “I like the dog party part the best.”

“So do I.” Automatically she tied Freddie’s loose laces. “Will you come to the store and visit me soon?”

“Okay.” Delighted with herself, Freddie raced for the door. “Bye Miss Stanof—Stanif—”

“Tash.” She sent Freddie a wink. “All the kids call me Tash.”

“Tash.” Freddie grinned at the sound of the name, then streaked away.

She listened to Freddie’s sneakers squeak down the hall, then took a long breath. “I’m sorry to disturb you at home, but I felt it would be more...” What was the word? Appropriate, comfortable? “It would be better.”

“All right.” His eyes were very cool, not like those of the man who had played such sad and passionate music. “Would you like to sit down?”

“No.” She said it too quickly, then reminded herself that it was better if they were both stiffly polite. “It won’t take long. I only want to apologize.”

“Oh? For something specific?”

Fire blazed in her eyes. He enjoyed seeing it, particularly since he’d spent most of the night cursing her. “When I make a mistake, I make a point of admitting it. But since you behaved so—” Oh, why did she always lose her English when she was angry?

“Unconscionably?” he suggested.

Her brow shot up into her fall of hair. “So you admit it.”

“I thought you were the one who was here to admit something.” Enjoying himself, he sat on the arm of a wing chair in pale blue damask. “Don’t let me interrupt.”

She was tempted, very tempted, to turn on her heel and stalk out. Pride was equally as strong as temper. She would do what she had come to do, then forget it.



“What I said about you—about you and your daughter was unfair and untrue. Even when I was...mistaken about other things, I knew it was untrue. And I’m very sorry I said it.”

“I can see that.” Out of the corner of his eye he caught a movement. He turned his head in time to see Freddie make her sprinter’s rush for the swings. “We’ll forget it.”

Natasha followed his gaze and softened. “She really is a beautiful child. I hope you let her come into the shop from time to time.”

The tone of her voice had him studying Natasha more carefully. Was it longing, sorrow? “I doubt I could keep her away. You’re very fond of children.”

Natasha brought her emotions under control with a quick jerk. “Yes, of course. In my business it’s a requirement. I won’t keep you, Dr. Kimball.”

He rose to accept the hand she had formally held out. “Spence,” he corrected, gently tightening his fingers on hers. “What else was it you were mistaken about?”

So it wasn’t going to be easy. Then again, Natasha thought she deserved a dose of humiliation. “I thought you were married, and was very angry and insulted when you asked me out.”

“You’re taking my word now that I’m not married.”

“No. I looked it up in the library in *Who’s Who*.”

He stared at her for a moment longer, then threw back his head and laughed. “God, what a trusting soul. Find anything else that interested you?”

“Only things that would fill your ego. You still have my hand.”

“I know. Tell me, Natasha, did you dislike me on general principles, or only because you thought I was a married man and had no business flirting with you?”

“Flirting?” She nearly choked on the word. “There was nothing so innocent in the way you looked at me. As if...”

“As if—?” he prompted.

As if we were already lovers, she thought, and felt her skin heat. “I didn’t like it,” she said shortly.

“Because you thought I was married?”

“Yes. No,” she said, correcting herself when she realized where that could lead. “I just didn’t like it.” He brought her hand to his lips. “Don’t,” she managed.

“How would you like me to look at you?”

“It isn’t necessary for you to look at all.”

“But it is.” He could feel it again, that high-strung passion, just waiting to burst free from whatever cell she had locked it in. “You’ll be sitting right in front of me tomorrow night in class.”

“I’m going to transfer.”

“No, you won’t.” He brushed a finger over the small gold hoop in her ear. “You enjoyed it too much. I could see the wheels turning in that fabulous head of yours. And if you did,” he continued before she could sputter out a response, “I’d just make a nuisance of myself in your shop.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re the first woman I’ve wanted in longer than I can remember.”

Excitement rippled up her spine like chain lightning. Before she could prevent it, the memory of that stormy kiss curved back to weaken her. Yes, that had been a man who had wanted. And had, no matter how she had resisted, made her want, too.

But that had only been one kiss, fueled by lust despite the moonlight and soft air. She knew heartbreakingly well where such desires could lead.

“That’s nonsense.”

“Simple honesty,” he murmured, fascinated by the emotions that came and went in her dark eyes. “I thought it best, since we’d gotten off to such a shaky beginning. Since you’ve determined for yourself that I’m not married, knowing I’m attracted to you shouldn’t insult you.”

“I’m not insulted,” she said carefully. “I’m just not interested.”

“Do you always kiss men you’re not interested in?”

“I didn’t kiss you.” She jerked her hand free. “You kissed me.”

“We can fix that.” He gathered her close. “This time kiss me back.”

She could have pulled away. His arms weren’t banding her as they had before, but were wrapped loosely, coaxingly around her.

His lips were soft this time, soft, persuasive, patient. She could feel the warmth seep into her bloodstream like a drug. With a little moan, she slipped her hands up his back and held on.

It was like holding a candle and feeling the wax slowly melt as the fire burned at its center. He could feel her yield degree by degree until her lips parted for his own, accepting, inviting. But even as she gave, he could sense some strong, hard core that resisted, held back. She didn't want to feel whatever he was making her feel.

Impatient, he dragged her closer. Though her body molded itself to his and her head fell back in erotic surrender, there was still a part of her standing just out of his reach. What she gave him only stirred his appetite for more.

She was breathless when he released her. It took an effort, too much of an effort, Natasha thought, to level herself. But once she had, her voice was steady.

"I don't want to be involved."

"With me, or with anyone?"

"With anyone."

"Good." He brushed a hand over her hair. "It'll be simpler to change your mind."

"I'm very stubborn," she muttered.

"Yes, I've noticed. Why don't you stay for dinner?"

"No."

"All right. I'll take you to dinner Saturday night."

"No."

"Seven-thirty. I'll pick you up."

"No."

"You wouldn't want me to come by the shop Saturday afternoon and embarrass you."

Out of patience, she stalked to the door. "I can't understand how a man that could play music with such sensitivity could be such a clod."

Just lucky, I guess, he thought when the door slammed. Alone again, he caught himself whistling.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Saturdays in a toy store were noisy, crowded and chaotic. They were supposed to be. To a child even the word Saturday was magic—it meant a magic twenty-four hours when school was too faraway to be a problem. There were bikes to be ridden, games to be played, races to be won. For as long as Natasha had been running The Fun House, she had enjoyed Saturdays as much as her pint-size clientele.

It was one more black mark against Spence that he was the reason she couldn't enjoy this one.

She'd told him no, she reminded herself as she rang up sales on a set of jacks, three plastic dinosaurs and a pint of blowing bubbles. And she'd meant no.

The man didn't seem to understand plain English.

Why else would he have sent her the single red rose? And to the shop, of all places? she thought now, trying to scowl at it. Annie's romantic enthusiasm had been impossible to hold off. Even when Natasha had ignored the flower, Annie had rescued it, running across the street to buy a plastic bud vase so that it could have a place of honor on the checkout counter.

Natasha did her best not to look at it, not to stroke the tightly closed petals, but it wasn't as easy to ignore the fragile scent that wafted toward her every time she rang up a sale.

Why did men think they could soften up a woman with a flower?

Because they could, Natasha admitted, biting off a sigh as she glanced toward it.

That didn't mean she was going out to dinner with him. Tossing back her hair, Natasha counted out the pile of sweaty pennies and nickels the young Hampston boy passed her for his monthly comic-book purchase. Life should be so simple, she thought as the boy rushed out with the latest adventures of Commander Zark. Damn it, it was that simple. On a deep breath she steeled her determination. Her life was exactly that simple, no matter how Spence tried to complicate it. To prove it, she intended to go home, soak in a hot tub, then spend the rest of her evening stretched out on the sofa, watching an old movie and eating popcorn.

He'd been clever. She left the counter to go into the next aisle to referee a huffy disagreement between the Freedmont brothers about how they should spend their pooled resources. She wondered if the esteemed professor looked at their relationship—their nonrelationship, she corrected—as a chess match. She'd always been too reckless to succeed at that particular game, but she had a feeling Spence would play it patiently and well. All the same, if he thought she would be easily checkmated, he had a surprise coming.

Spence had led her second class brilliantly, never looking at her any longer than he had looked at any of his other students, answering her questions in the same tone he used with others. Yes, a very patient player.

Then, just when she'd relaxed, he'd passed her that first red rose as she walked out of class. A very smart move to endanger her queen.

If she'd had any spine at all, Natasha thought now, she would have dropped it onto the floor and ground it under her heel. But she hadn't, and now had to scramble to keep one play ahead of him. Because it had caught her off guard, Natasha told herself. Just like the one that had been delivered to the shop this morning.

If he kept it up, people were going to begin to talk. In a town this size, news items like red roses bounced from shop to pub, from pub to front stoop and from front stoop to backyard gossip sessions. She needed to find a way to stop it. At the moment, she couldn't come up with anything better than ignoring it. Ignoring Spence, she added. How she wished she could.

Bringing herself back to the problem at hand, Natasha hooked an arm around each of the squabbling Freedmont boys in a mock headlock.

“Enough. If you keep calling each other names like nerd and... what was the other?”

“Dork,” the taller of the boys told her with relish.

“Yes, dork.” She couldn’t resist committing it to memory. “That’s a good one. If you keep it up, I’ll tell your mother not to let you come in for two weeks.”

“Aw, Tash.”

“That means everyone else will see all the creepy things I get in for Halloween before either of you.” She let that threat hang, giving the two little necks a quick squeeze. “So, I’ll make a suggestion. Flip a coin and decide whether to buy the football or the magic set. Whatever you don’t get now, you ask for for Christmas. Good idea?”

The boys grimaced at each other from either side of her. “Pretty good.”

“No, you have to say it’s very good, or I’ll knock your heads together.”

She left them arguing over which coin to use for the fatal flip.

“You missed your calling,” Annie commented when the brothers raced off with the football.

“How’s that?”

“You should be working for the UN.” She nodded out the front window; the boys were practicing passing on their way down the street. “There aren’t many tougher nuts than the Freedmont brothers.”

“I make them afraid of me first, then offer them a dignified way out.”

“See? Definitely UN material.”

With a laugh, Natasha shook her head. “Other people’s problems are the easiest to solve.” Weakening, she glanced toward the rose again. If she had one wish at the moment, it would be for someone to come along and solve her own.

An hour later she felt a tug on the hem of her skirt.

“Hi.”

“Freddie, hello.” She flicked her finger over a bow that was trying to hold back Freddie’s flyaway hair. It was tied from the blue ribbon Natasha had given her on her first visit. “Don’t you look pretty today.”

Freddie beamed, female to female. “Do you like my outfit?”

Natasha surveyed the obviously new blue denim overalls, parade stiff with sizing. “I like it very much. I have a pair just like them.”

“You do?” Nothing, since Freddie had decided to make Natasha her newest heroine, could have pleased her more. “My daddy got them for me.”

“That’s nice.” Despite her better judgment, Natasha scanned the shop for him. “Did he, ah, bring you in today?”

“No, Vera did. You said it was all right just to look.”

“Sure it is. I’m glad you came in.” And she was, Natasha realized. Just as she was stupidly disappointed that Freddie hadn’t brought her daddy.

“I’m not supposed to touch anything.” Freddie tucked her itchy fingers into her pockets. “Vera said I should look with my eyes and not with my hands.”

“That’s very good advice.” And some Natasha wouldn’t have minded others passing along to nimble-fingered children. “But some things are okay to touch. You just ask me.”

“Okay. I’m going to join the Brownies and get a uniform and everything.”

“That’s wonderful. You’ll come in and show it to me?”

Delight nearly split Freddie’s face in two. “Okay. It has a hat, and I’m going to learn how to make pillows and candle holders and all kinds of things. I’ll make you something.”

“I’d like that.” She tidied Freddie’s lopsided bow.

“Daddy said you were going to eat dinner with him in a restaurant tonight.”

“Well, I—”

“I don’t like restaurants very much, except for pizza, so I’m going to stay home, and Vera’s going to fix tortillas for me and JoBeth. We get to eat in the kitchen.”

“That sounds nice.”

“If you don’t like the restaurant, you can come back and have some. Vera always makes a lot.”

Uttering a helpless little sigh, Natasha bent to tie Freddie’s left shoelace. “Thank you.”

“Your hair smells pretty.”

Half in love, Natasha leaned closer to sniff Freddie’s. “So does yours.”

Fascinated by Natasha’s tangle of curls, Freddie reached out to touch. “I wish my hair was like yours,” she said. “It’s straight as a pin,” she added, quoting her Aunt Nina.

Smiling, Natasha brushed at the fragile wisps over Freddie’s brow. “When I was a little girl, we put an angel on top of the Christmas tree every year. She was very beautiful, and she had hair just like yours.”

Pleasure came flushing into Freddie’s cheeks.

“Ah, there you are.” Vera shuffled down the crowded aisle, straw carryall on one arm, a canvas bag on the other. “Come, come, we must get back home before your father thinks we are lost.” She held out a hand for Freddie and nodded to Natasha. “Good afternoon, miss.”

“Good afternoon.” Curious, Natasha raised a brow. She was being summed up again by the little dark eyes, and definitely being found wanting, Natasha thought. “I hope you’ll bring Freddie back to visit soon.”

“We will see. It is as hard for a child to resist a toy store as it is for a man to resist a beautiful woman.”

Vera led Freddie down the aisle, not looking back when the girl waved and grinned over her shoulder.

“Well,” Annie murmured as she stuck her head around the corner. “What brought that on?”

With a humorless smile, Natasha shoved a pin back into her hair. “At a guess, I would say the woman believes I have designs on her employer.”

Annie gave an unladylike snort. “If anything, the employer has designs on you. I should be so lucky.” Her sigh was only a little envious. “Now that we know the new hunk on the block isn’t married,



all's right with the world. Why didn't you tell me you were going out with him?"

"Because I wasn't."

"But I heard Freddie say—"

"He asked me out," Natasha clarified. "I said no."

"I see." After a brief pause, Annie tilted her head. "When did you have the accident?"

"Accident?"

"Yes, the one where you suffered brain damage."

Natasha's face cleared with a laugh, and she started toward the front of the shop.

"I'm serious," Annie said as soon as they had five free minutes. "Dr. Spencer Kimball is gorgeous, unattached and..." She leaned over the counter to sniff at the rose. "Charming. Why aren't you taking off early to work on real problems, like what to wear tonight?"

"I know what I'm wearing tonight. My bathrobe."

Annie couldn't resist the grin. "Aren't you rushing things just a tad? I don't think you should wear your robe until at least your third date."

"There's not going to be a first one." Natasha smiled at her next customer and rang up a sale.

It took Annie forty minutes to work back to the subject at hand. "Just what are you afraid of?"

"The IRS."

"Tash, I'm serious."

"So am I." When her pins worked loose again, she gave up and yanked them out. "Every American businessperson is afraid of the IRS."

"We're talking about Spence Kimball."

"No," Natasha corrected. "You're talking about Spence Kimball."

"I thought we were friends."

Surprised by Annie's tone, Natasha stopped tidying the racetrack display her Saturday visitors had wrecked. "We are. You know we are."

"Friends talk to each other, Tash, confide in each other, ask advice." Puffing out a breath, Annie stuffed her hands into the pockets of her baggy jeans. "Look, I know that things happened to

you before you came here, things you're still carrying around but never talk about. I figured I was being a better friend by not asking you about it."

Had she been so obvious? Natasha wondered. All this time she'd been certain she had buried the past and all that went with it—deeply. Feeling a little helpless, she reached out to touch Annie's hand. "Thank you."

With a dismissive shrug, Annie turned to flick the lock on the front door. The shop was empty now, the bustle of the afternoon only an echo. "Remember when you let me cry on your shoulder after Don Newman dumped me?"

Natasha pressed her lips in to a thin line. "He wasn't worth crying over."

"I enjoyed crying over him," Annie returned with a quick, amused smile. "I needed to cry and yell and moan and get a little drunk. You were right there for me, saying all those great, nasty things about him."

"That was the easy part," Natasha remembered. "He was a dork." It pleased her tremendously to use the young Freedmont boy's insult.

"Yeah, but he was a terrific-looking dork." Annie allowed herself a brief reminiscence. "Anyway, you helped me over that rough spot until I convinced myself I was better off without him. You've never needed my shoulder, Tash, because you've never let a guy get past this." She lifted a hand, pressing her palm against empty air.

Amused, Natasha leaned back against the counter. "And what is that?"

"The Great Stanislaski Force Field," Annie told her. "Guaranteed to repel all males from the age of twenty-five to fifty."

Natasha lifted a brow, not quite sure if she was amused any longer. "I'm not certain if you're trying to flatter or insult me."

"Neither. Just listen to me a minute, okay?" Annie took a deep breath to keep herself from rushing through something she thought should be taken step-by-step. "Tash, I've seen you brush off guys with less effort than you'd swat away a gnat. And just as automatically," she added when Natasha remained silent. "You're very pleasant about it, and also very definite. I've never seen you

give any man a second's thought once you've politely shown him the door. I've even admired you for it, for being so sure of yourself, so comfortable with yourself that you didn't need a date on Saturday night to keep your ego out of the dirt."

"Not sure of myself," Natasha murmured. "Just apathetic about relationships."

"All right." Annie nodded slowly. "I'll accept that. But this time it's different."

"What is?" Natasha skirted the counter and began to tally the day's sales.

"You see? You know I'm going to mention his name, and you're nervous."

"I'm not nervous," Natasha lied.

"You've been nervous, moody and distracted since Kimball walked into the shop a couple of weeks ago. In over three years, I've never seen you give a man more than five minutes' thought. Until now."

"That's only because this one is more annoying than most." At Annie's shrewd look, Natasha gave up. "All right, there is... something," she admitted. "But I'm not interested."

"You're afraid to be interested."

Natasha didn't like the sound of that, but forced herself to shrug it off. "It's the same thing."

"No, it's not." Annie put a hand over Natasha's and squeezed. "Look, I'm not pushing you toward this guy. For all I know, he could have murdered his wife and buried her in the rose garden. All I'm saying is, you're not going to be comfortable with yourself until you stop being afraid."

Annie was right, Natasha thought later as she sat on her bed with her chin on her hand. She was moody, she was distracted. And she was afraid. Not of Spence, Natasha assured herself. No man would ever frighten her again. But she was afraid of the feelings he stirred up. Forgotten, unwanted feelings.

Did that mean she was no longer in charge of her emotions? No. Did that mean she would act irrationally, impulsively, just because needs and desires had pried their way back into her life?

No. Did that mean she would hide in her room, afraid to face a man? A most definite no.

She was only afraid because she had yet to test herself, Natasha thought, moving toward her closet. So tonight she would have dinner with the persistent Dr. Kimball, prove to herself that she was strong and perfectly capable of resisting a fleeting attraction, then get back to normal.

Natasha frowned at her wardrobe. With a restless move of her shoulders she pulled out a deep blue cocktail dress with a jeweled belt. Not that she was dressing for him. He was really irrelevant. It was one of her favorite dresses, Natasha thought as she stripped off her robe, and she rarely had the opportunity to wear anything but work clothes.

He knocked at precisely seven twenty-eight. Natasha detested herself for anxiously watching the clock. She had reapplied her lipstick twice, checked and rechecked the contents of her purse and fervently wished that she had delayed taking her stand.

She was acting like a teenager, Natasha told herself as she walked to the door. It was only dinner, the first and last dinner she intended to share with him. And he was only a man, she added, pulling the door open.

An outrageously attractive man.

He looked wonderful, was all she could think, with his hair swept back from his face, and that half smile in his eyes. It had never occurred to her that a man could be gut-wrenchingly sexy in a suit and a tie.

“Hi.” He held out another red rose.

Natasha nearly sighed. It was a pity the smoke-gray suit didn't make him seem more professorial. Giving in a little, she tapped the blossom against her cheek. “It wasn't the roses that changed my mind.”

“About what?”

“About having dinner with you.” She stepped back, deciding that she had no choice but to let him in while she put the flower into water.

He smiled then, fully, and exasperated her by looking charming and cocky at the same time. “What did?”

“I’m hungry.” She set her short velvet jacket on the arm of the sofa. “I’ll put this in water. You can sit if you like.”

She wasn’t going to give him an inch, Spence thought as he watched her walk away. Oddly enough, that only made her more interesting. He took a deep breath, shaking his head. Incredible. Just when he was convinced that nothing smelled sexier than soap, she put something on that made him think of midnight and weeping violins.

Deciding that he was safer thinking of something else, he studied the room. She preferred vivid colors, he mused, noting the emerald and teal slashes of the pillows on a sapphire-blue couch. There was a huge brass urn beside it, stuffed with silky peacock feathers. Candles of varying sizes and shades were set around the room so that it smelled, romantically, of vanilla and jasmine and gardenia. A shelf in the corner was crammed with books that ran the gamut from popular fiction to classic literature by way of home improvements for the novice.

The table surfaces were crowded with mementos, framed pictures, dried bouquets, fanciful statuettes inspired by fairy tales. There was a gingerbread house no bigger than his palm, a girl dressed as Red Riding Hood, a pig peeking out of the window of a tiny straw house, a beautiful woman holding a single glass slipper.

Practical tips on plumbing, passionate colors and fairy tales, he mused, touching a fingertip to the tiny crystal slipper. It was as curious and as intriguing a combination as the woman herself.

Hearing her come back into the room, Spence turned. “These are beautiful,” he said, gesturing to one of the figures. “Freddie’s eyes would pop out.”

“Thank you. My brother makes them.”

“Makes them?” Fascinated, Spence picked up the gingerbread house to study it more closely. It was carved from polished wood, then intricately painted so that each licorice whip and lollipop looked good enough to eat. “It’s incredible. You rarely see workmanship like this.”

Whatever her reservations, she warmed toward him and crossed the room to join him. “He’s been carving and sculpting since he was a child. One day his art will be in galleries and museums.”

“It should be already.”

The sincerity in his voice hit her most vulnerable spot, her love of family. “It’s not so easy. He’s young and hardheaded and proud, so he keeps his job, hammering wood, instead of carving it to bring in money for the family. But one day...” She smiled at the collection. “He makes these for me, because I struggled so hard to learn to read English from this book of fairy tales I found in the boxes of things the church gave us when we came to New York. The pictures were so pretty, and I wanted so badly to know the stories that went with them.”

She caught herself, embarrassed to have said anything. “We should go.”

He only nodded, having already decided to pry gently until she told him more. “You should wear your jacket.” He lifted it from the sofa. “It’s getting chilly.”

The restaurant he’d chosen was only a short drive away and sat on one of the wooded hills that overlooked the Potomac. If Natasha had been given a guess, she would have been on target with his preference for a quiet, elegant backdrop and discreetly speedy service. Over her first glass of wine, she told herself to relax and enjoy.

“Freddie was in the shop today.”

“So I heard.” Amused, Spence lifted his own glass. “She wants her hair curled.”

Natasha’s puzzled look became a smile; she lifted a hand to her own. “Oh. That’s sweet.”

“Easy for you to say. I’ve just gotten the hang of pigtails.”

To her surprise, Natasha could easily picture him patiently braiding the soft, flaxen tresses. “She’s beautiful.” The image of him holding the girl on his lap at the piano slipped back into her mind. “She has your eyes.”

“Don’t look now,” Spence murmured, “but I believe you’ve given me a compliment.”

Feeling awkward, Natasha lifted the menu. “To soften the blow,” she told him. “I’m about to make up for skipping lunch this afternoon.”

True to her word, she ordered generously. As long as she was eating, Natasha figured, the interlude would go smoothly. Over appetizers she was careful to steer the conversation toward subjects they had touched on in class. Comfortably they discussed late fifteenth-century music with its four-part harmonies and traveling musicians. Spence appreciated her genuine curiosity and interest, but was equally determined to explore more personal areas.

“Tell me about your family.”

Natasha slipped a hot, butter-drenched morsal of lobster into her mouth, enjoying the delicate, almost decadent flavor. “I’m the oldest of four,” she began, then became abruptly aware that his fingertips were playing casually with hers on the tablecloth. She slid her hand out of reach.

Her maneuver had him lifting his glass to hide a smile. “Are you all spies?”

A flicker of temper joined the lights that the candle brought to her eyes. “Certainly not.”

“I wondered, since you seem so reluctant to talk about them.” His face sober, he leaned toward her. “Say ‘Get moose and squirrel.’”

Her mouth quivered before she gave up and laughed. “No.” She dipped her lobster in melted butter again, coating it slowly, enjoying the scent, then the taste and texture. “I have two brothers and a sister. My parents still live in Brooklyn.”

“Why did you move here, to West Virginia?”

“I wanted a change.” She lifted a shoulder. “Didn’t you?”

“Yes.” A faint line appeared between his brows as he studied her. “You said you were about Freddie’s age when you came to the States. Do you remember much about your life before that?”

“Of course.” For some reason she sensed he was thinking more of his daughter than of her own memories of the Ukraine. “I’ve always believed impressions made on us in those first few years stay the longest. Good or bad, they help form what we are.” Concerned, she leaned closer, smiling. “Tell me, when you think about being five, what do you remember?”

“Sitting at the piano, doing scales.” It came so clearly that he nearly laughed. “Smelling hothouse roses and watching the snow

outside the window. Being torn between finishing my practice and getting to the park to throw snowballs at my nanny.”

“Your nanny,” Natasha repeated, but with a chuckle rather than a sneer he noted. She cupped her chin in her hands, leaning closer, alluring him with the play of light and shadow over her face. “And what did you do?”

“Both.”

“A responsible child.”

He ran a fingertip down her wrist and surprised a shiver out of her. Before she moved her hand away, he felt her pulse scramble. “What do you remember about being five?”

Because her reaction annoyed her, she was determined to show him nothing. She only shrugged. “My father bringing in wood for the fire, his hair and coat all covered with snow. The baby crying—my youngest brother. The smell of the bread my mother had baked. Pretending to be asleep while I listened to Papa talk to her about escape.”

“Were you afraid?”

“Yes.” Her eyes blurred with the memory. She didn’t often look back, didn’t often need to. But when she did, it came not with the watery look of old dreams, but clear as glass. “Oh, yes. Very afraid. More than I will ever be again.”

“Will you tell me?”

“Why?”

His eyes were dark, and fixed on her face. “Because I’d like to understand.”

She started to pass it off, even had the words in her mind. But the memory remained too vivid. “We waited until spring and took only what we could carry. We told no one, no one at all, and set off in the wagon. Papa said we were going to visit my mother’s sister who lived in the west. But I think there were some who knew, who watched us go with tired faces and big eyes. Papa had papers, badly forged, but he had a map and hoped we would avoid the border guards.”

“And you were only five?”

“Nearly six by then.” Thinking, she ran a fingertip around and around the rim of her glass. “Mikhail was between four and five, Alex



just two. At night, if we could risk a fire, we would sit around it and Papa would tell stories. Those were good nights. We would fall asleep listening to his voice and smelling the smoke from the fire. We went over the mountains and into Hungary. It took us ninety-three days.”

He couldn't imagine it, not even when he could see it reflected so clearly in her eyes. Her voice was low, but the emotions were all there, bringing it richness. Thinking of the little girl, he took her hand and waited for her to go on.

“My father had planned for years. Perhaps he had dreamed it all of his life. He had names, people who would help defectors. There was war, the cold one, but I was too young to understand. I understood the fear, in my parents, in the others who helped us. We were smuggled out of Hungary into Austria. The church sponsored us, brought us to America. It was a long time before I stopped waiting for the police to come and take my father away.”

She brought herself back, embarrassed to have spoken of it, surprised to find her hand caught firmly in his.

“That's a lot for a child to deal with.”

“I also remember eating my first hot dog.” She smiled and picked up her wine again. She never spoke of that time, never. Not even with family. Now that she had, with him, she felt a desperate need to change the subject. “And the day my father brought home our first television. No childhood, even one with nannies, is ever completely secure. But we grow up. I'm a businesswoman, and you're a respected composer. Why don't you write?” She felt his fingers tense on hers. “I'm sorry,” she said quickly. “I had no business asking that.”

“It's all right.” His fingers relaxed again. “I don't write because I can't.”

She hesitated, then went on impulse. “I know your music. Something that intense doesn't fade.”

“It hasn't mattered a great deal in the past couple of years. Just lately it's begun to matter again.”

“Don't be patient.”

When he smiled, she shook her head, at once impatient and regal. Her hand was gripping his now, hard and strong.

“No, I mean it. People always say when the time is right, when the mood is right, when the place is right. Years are wasted that way. If my father had waited until we were older, until the trip was safer, we might still be in the Ukraine. There are some things that should be grabbed with both hands and taken. Life can be very, very short.”

He could feel the urgency in the way her hands gripped his. And he could see the shadow of regret in her eyes. The reason for both intrigued him as much as her words.

“You may be right,” he said slowly, then brought the palm of her hand to his lips. “Waiting isn’t always the best answer.”

“It’s getting late.” Natasha pulled her hand free, then balled it into a fist on her lap. But that didn’t stop the heat from spearing her arm. “We should go.”

She was relaxed again when he walked her to her door. During the short drive home he had made her laugh with stories of Freddie’s ploys to interest him in a kitten.

“I think cutting pictures of cats from a magazine to make you a poster was very clever.” She turned to lean back against her front door. “You are going to let her have one?”

“I’m trying not to be a pushover.”

Natasha only smiled. “Big old houses like yours tend to get mice in the winter. In fact, in a house of that size, you’d be wise to take two of JoBeth’s kittens.”

“If Freddie pulls that one on me, I’ll know exactly where she got it.” He twirled one of Natasha’s curls around his fingers. “And you have a quiz coming up next week.”

Natasha lifted both brows. “Blackmail, Dr. Kimball?”

“You bet.”

“I intend to ace your quiz, and I have a strong feeling that Freddie could talk you into taking the entire litter all by herself, if she put her mind to it.”

“Just the little gray one.”

“You’ve already been to see them.”

“A couple of times. You’re not going to ask me in?”

“No.”

“All right.” He slipped his arms around her waist.

“Spence—”

“I’m just taking your advice,” he murmured as he skimmed his lips over her jaw. “Not being patient.” He brought her closer; his mouth brushed her earlobe. “Taking what I want.” His teeth scraped over her bottom lip. “Not wasting time.”

Then he was crushing his mouth against hers. He could taste the faintest tang of wine on her lips and knew he could get drunk on that alone. Her flavors were rich, exotic, intoxicating. Like the hint of autumn in the air, she made him think of smoking fires, drifting fog. And her body was already pressed eagerly against his in an instantaneous acknowledgment.

Passion didn’t bloom, it didn’t whisper. It exploded so that even the air around them seemed to shudder with it.

She made him feel reckless. Unaware of what he murmured to her, he raced his lips over her face, coming back, always coming back to her heated, hungry mouth. In one rough stroke he took his hands over her.

Her head was spinning. If only she could believe it was the wine. But she knew it was he, only he who made her dizzy and dazed and desperate. She wanted to be touched. By him. On a breathless moan, she let her head fall back, and the urgent trail of his lips streaked down her throat.

Feeling this way had to be wrong. Old fears and doubts swirled inside her, leaving empty holes that begged to be filled. And when they were filled, with liquid, shimmering pleasure, the fear only grew.

“Spence.” Her fingers dug into his shoulders; she fought a war between the need to stop him and the impossible desire to go on. “Please.”

He was as shaken as she and took a moment, burying his face in her hair. “Something happens to me every time I’m with you. I can’t explain it.”

She wanted badly to hold him against herself, but forced her arms to drop to her sides. “It can’t continue to happen.”

He drew away, just far enough to be able to take her face into both hands. The chill of the evening and the heat of passion had brought color to her cheeks. “If I wanted to stop it, which I don’t, I couldn’t.”

She kept her eyes level with his and tried not to be moved by the gentle way he cradled her face. “You want to go to bed with me.”

“Yes.” He wasn’t certain if he wanted to laugh or curse her for being so matter-of-fact. “But it’s not quite that simple.”

“Sex is never simple.”

His eyes narrowed. “I’m not interested in having sex with you.”

“You just said—”

“I want to make love with you. There’s a difference.”

“I don’t choose to romanticize it.”

The annoyance in his eyes vanished as quickly as it had appeared. “Then I’m sorry I’ll have to disappoint you. When we make love, whenever, wherever, it’s going to be very romantic.” Before she could evade, he closed his mouth over hers. “That’s a promise I intend to keep.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

**“Natasha! Hey, ah, Natasha!”**

Broken out of thoughts that weren't particularly productive, Natasha glanced over and spied Terry. He was wearing a long yellow-and white-striped scarf in defense against a sudden plunge in temperature that had sprinkled frost on the ground. As he raced after her, it flapped awkwardly behind him. By the time he reached her, his glasses had slipped crookedly down to the tip of his reddening nose.

“Hi, Terry.”

The hundred-yard dash had winded him. He dearly hoped it wouldn't aggravate his asthma. “Hi. I was—I saw you heading in.” He'd been waiting hopefully for her for twenty minutes.

Feeling a bit like a mother with a clumsy child, she straightened his glasses, then wrapped the scarf more securely around his skinny neck. His rapid breathing fogged his lenses. “You should be wearing gloves,” she told him, then patting his chilled hand, led him up the steps.

Overwhelmed, he tried to speak and only made a strangled sound in his throat.

“Are you catching a cold?” Searching through her purse, she found a tissue and offered it.

He cleared his throat loudly. “No.” But he took the tissue and vowed to keep it until the day he died. “I was just wondering if tonight—after class—you know, if you don't have anything to do... You've probably got plans, but if you don't, then maybe...we could have a cup of coffee. Two cups,” he amended desperately. “I mean you

could have your own cup, and I'd have one." So saying, he turned a thin shade of green.

The poor boy was lonely, Natasha thought, giving him an absent smile. "Sure." It wouldn't hurt to keep him company for an hour or so, she decided as she walked into class. And it would help her keep her mind off...

Off the man standing in front of the class, Natasha reflected with a scowl; the man who had kissed the breath out of her two weeks before and who was currently laughing with a sassy little blonde who couldn't have been a day over twenty.

Her mood grim, she plopped down at her desk and poked her nose into a textbook.

Spence knew the moment she walked into the room. He was more than a little gratified to have seen the huffy jealousy on her face before she stuck a book in front of it. Apparently fate hadn't been dealing him such a bad hand when it kept him up to his ears in professional and personal problems for the last couple of weeks. Between leaky plumbing, PTA and Brownie meetings and a faculty conference, he hadn't had an hour free. But now things were running smoothly again. He studied the top of Natasha's head. He intended to make up for lost time.

Sitting on the edge of his desk, he opened a discussion of the distinctions between sacred and secular music during the baroque period.

She didn't want to be interested. Natasha was sure he knew it. Why else would he deliberately call on her for an opinion—twice?

Oh, he was clever, she thought. Not by a flicker, not by the slightest intonation did he reveal a more personal relationship with her. No one in class would possibly suspect that this smooth, even brilliant lecturer had kissed her senseless, not once, not twice, but three times. Now he calmly talked of early seventeenth-century operatic developments.

In his black turtleneck and gray tweed jacket he looked casually elegant and totally in charge. And of course, as always, he had the class in the palms of those beautiful hands he eloquently used to make a point. When he smiled over a student's comment, Natasha

heard the little blonde two seats behind her sigh. Because she'd nearly done so herself, Natasha stiffened her spine.

He probably had a whole string of eager women. A man who looked like him, talked like him, kissed like him was bound to. He was the type that made promises to one woman at midnight and snuggled up to another over breakfast in bed.

Wasn't it fortunate she no longer believed in promises?

Something was going on inside that fabulous head of hers, Spence mused. One moment she was listening to him as if he had the answers to the mysteries of the universe on the tip of his tongue. The next, she was sitting rigidly and staring off into space, as though she wished herself somewhere else. He would swear that she was angry, and that the anger was directed squarely at him. Why was an entirely different matter.

Whenever he'd tried to have a word with her after class over the last couple of weeks, she'd been out of the building like a bullet. Tonight he would have to outmaneuver her.

She stood the moment class was over. Spence watched her smile at the man sitting across from her. Then she bent down to pick up the books and pencils the man scattered as he rose.

What was his name? Spence wondered. Maynard. That was it. Mr. Maynard was in several of his classes, and managed to fade into the background in each one. Yet at the moment the unobtrusive Mr. Maynard was crouched knee to knee with Natasha.

"I think we've got them all." Natasha gave Terry's glasses a friendly shove back up his nose.

"Thanks."

"Don't forget your scarf—" she began, then looked up. A hand closed over her arm and helped her to her feet. "Thank you, Dr. Kimball."

"I'd like to talk to you, Natasha."

"Would you?" She gave the hand on her arm a brief look, then snatched up her coat and books. Feeling as though she were on a chessboard again, she decided to aggressively counter his move. "I'm sorry, it'll have to wait. I have a date."

"A date?" he managed, getting an immediate picture of someone dark, dashing and muscle-bound.

“Yes. Excuse me.” She shook off his hand and stuck an arm into the sleeve of her coat. Since the men on either side of her seemed equally paralyzed, she shifted the books to her other arm and struggled to find the second sleeve. “Are you ready, Terry?”

“Well, yeah, sure. Yeah.” He was staring at Spence with a mixture of awe and trepidation. “But I can wait if you want to talk to Dr. Kimball first.”

“There’s no need.” She scooped up his arm and pulled him to the door.

Women, Spence thought as he sat down at a desk. He’d already accepted the fact that he had never understood them. Apparently he never would.

“Jeez, Tash, don’t you think you should have seen what Dr. Kimball wanted?”

“I know what he wanted,” she said between her teeth as she pushed open the main doors. The rush of autumn air cooled her cheeks. “I wasn’t in the mood to discuss it tonight.” When Terry tripped over the uneven sidewalk, she realized she was still dragging him and slowed her pace. “Besides, I thought we were going to have some coffee.”

“Right.” When she smiled at him, he tugged on his scarf as if to keep from strangling.

They walked into a small lounge where half the little square tables were empty. At the antique bar two men were muttering over their beers. A couple in the corner were all but sitting on each other’s laps and ignoring their drinks.

She’d always liked this room with its dim lighting and old black-and-white posters of James Dean and Marilyn Monroe. It smelled of cigarettes and jug wine. There was a big portable stereo on a shelf above the bar that played an old Chuck Berry number loudly enough to make up for the lack of patrons. Natasha felt the bass vibrate through her chair as she sat down.

“Just coffee, Joe,” she called to the man behind the bar before she leaned her elbows on the table. “So,” she said to Terry, “how’s everything going?”

“Okay.” He couldn’t believe it. He was here, sitting with her. On a date. She’d called it a date herself.



It would take a little prodding. Patient, she shrugged out of her coat. The overheated room had her pushing the sleeves of her sweater past her elbows. “It must be different for you here. Did you ever tell me where you were going to college before?”

“I graduated from Michigan State.” Because his lenses were fogged again, Natasha seemed to be shrouded by a thin, mysterious mist. “When I, ah, heard that Dr. Kimball would be teaching here, I decided to take a couple years of graduate study.”

“You came here because of Spence—Dr. Kimball?”

“I didn’t want to miss the opportunity. I went to New York last year to hear him lecture.” Terry lifted a hand and nearly knocked over a bowl of sugar. “He’s incredible.”

“I suppose,” she murmured as their coffee was served.

“Where you been hiding?” the bartender asked, giving her shoulder a casual squeeze. “I haven’t seen you in here all month.”

“Business is good. How’s Darla?”

“History.” Joe gave her a quick, friendly wink. “I’m all yours, Tash.”

“I’ll keep it in mind.” With a laugh, she turned back to Terry. “Is something wrong?” she asked when she saw him dragging at his collar.

“Yes. No. That is... Is he your boyfriend?”

“My...” To keep herself from laughing in Terry’s face, she took a sip of coffee. “You mean Joe? No.” She cleared her throat and sipped again. “No, he’s not. We’re just...” She searched for a word. “Pals.”

“Oh.” Relief and in security warred. “I just thought, since he... Well.”

“He was only joking.” Wanting to put Terry at ease again, she squeezed his hand. “What about you? Do you have a girl back in Michigan?”

“No. There’s nobody. Nobody at all.” He turned his hand over, gripping hers.

Oh, my God. As realization hit, Natasha felt her mouth drop open. Only a fool would have missed it, she thought as she stared into Terry’s adoring, myopic eyes. A fool, she added, who was so tied up with her own problems that she missed what was happening

under her nose. She was going to have to be careful, Natasha decided. Very careful.

“Terry,” she began. “You’re very sweet—”

That was all it took to make his hand shake. Coffee spilled down his shirt. Moving quickly, Natasha shifted chairs so that she was beside him. Snatching paper napkins from the dispenser, she began to blot the stain.

“It’s a good thing they never serve it hot in this place. If you soak this in cold water right away, you should be all right.”

Overcome, Terry grabbed both of her hands. Her head was bent close, and the scent of her hair was making him dizzy. “I love you,” he blurted, and took aim with his mouth; his glasses slid down his nose.

Natasha felt his lips hit her cheekbone, cold and trembly. Because her heart went out to him, she decided that being careful wasn’t the right approach. Firmness was called for, quickly.

“No, you don’t.” Her voice was brisk, she pulled back far enough to dab at the spill on the table.

“I don’t?” Her response threw him off. It was nothing like any of the fantasies he’d woven. There was the one where he’d saved her from a runaway truck. And another where he’d played the song he was writing for her and she had collapsed in a passionate, weeping puddle into his arms. His imagination hadn’t stretched far enough to see her wiping up coffee and calmly telling him he wasn’t in love at all.

“Yes, I do.” He snatched at her hand again.

“That’s ridiculous,” she said, and smiled to take the sting out of the words. “You like me, and I like you, too.”

“No, it’s more than that. I—”

“All right. Why do you love me?”

“Because you’re beautiful,” he managed, losing his grip as he stared into her face again. “You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

“And that’s enough?” Disengaging her hand from his, she linked her fingers to rest her chin on them. “What if I told you I was a thief—or that I liked to run down small, furry animals with my car? Maybe

I've been married three times and have murdered all my husbands in their sleep."

"Tash—"

She laughed, but resisted the temptation to pet his cheek. "I mean, you don't know me enough to love me. If you did, what I looked like wouldn't matter."

"But—but I think about you all the time."

"Because you've told yourself it would be nice to be in love with me." He looked so forlorn that she took a chance and laid one hand upon his. "I'm very flattered."

"Does this mean you won't go out with me?"

"I'm out with you now." She pushed her cup of coffee in front of him. "As friends," she said before the light could dawn again in his eyes. "I'm too old to be anything but your friend."

"No, you're not."

"Oh, yes." Suddenly she felt a hundred. "Yes, I am."

"You think I'm stupid," he muttered. In place of confused excitement came a crushing wave of humiliation. He could feel his cheeks sting with it.

"No, I don't." Her voice softened, and she reached once more for his hands. "Terry, listen—"

Before she could stop him, he pushed back his chair. "I've got to go."

Cursing herself, Natasha picked up his striped scarf. There was no use in following him now. He needed time, she decided. And she needed air.

The leaves were beginning to turn, and a few that had fallen early scraped along the sidewalk ahead of the wind. It was the kind of evening Natasha liked best, but now she barely noticed it. She'd left her coffee untouched to take a long, circular walk through town.

Heading home, she thought of a dozen ways she could have handled Terry's infatuation better. Through her clumsiness she had wounded a sensitive, vulnerable boy. It could have been avoided, all of it, if she had been paying attention to what was happening in front of her face.

Instead she'd been blinded by her own unwelcome feelings for someone else.

She knew too well what it was to believe yourself in love, desperately, hopelessly in love. And she knew how it hurt to discover that the one you loved didn't return those feelings. Cruel or kind, the rejection of love left the heart bruised.

Uttering a sigh, she ran a hand over the scarf in her pocket. Had she ever been so trusting and defenseless? Yes, she answered herself. That and much, much more.

It was about damn time, Spence thought as he watched her start up the walk. Obviously her mind was a million miles away. On her date, he decided and tried not to grind his teeth. Well, he was going to see to it that she had a lot more to think about in very short order.

"Didn't he walk you home?"

Natasha stopped dead with an involuntary gasp. In the beam of her porch light she saw Spence sitting on her stoop. That was all she needed, she thought while she dragged a hand through her hair. With Terry she'd felt as though she'd kicked a puppy. Now she was going to have to face down a large, hungry wolf.

"What are you doing here?"

"Freezing."

She nearly laughed. His breath was puffing out in white steam. With the wind chill, she imagined that the effective temperature was hovering around twenty-five degrees Fahrenheit. After a moment, Natasha decided she must be a very poor sport to be amused at the thought of Spence sitting on cold concrete for the past hour.

He rose as she continued down the walk. How could she have forgotten how tall he was? "Didn't you invite your friend back for a drink?"

"No." She reached out and twisted the knob. Like most of the doors in town, it was unlocked. "If I had, you'd be very embarrassed."

"That's not the word for it."

"I'm suppose I'm lucky I didn't find you waiting up for me inside."

"You would have," he muttered, "if it had occurred to me to try the door."

"Good night."

“Wait a damn minute.” He slapped his palm on the door before she could close it in his face. “I didn’t sit out here in the cold for my health. I want to talk to you.”

There was something satisfying in the brief, fruitless push-push they played with the door. “It’s late.”

“And getting later by the second. If you close the door, I’m just going to beat on it until all your neighbors poke their heads out their windows.”

“Five minutes,” she said graciously, because she had planned to grant him that in any case. “I’ll give you a brandy, then you’ll go.”

“You’re all heart, Natasha.”

“No.” She laid her coat over the back of the couch. “I’m not.”

She disappeared into the kitchen without another word. When she returned with two snifters of brandy, he was standing in the center of the room, running Terry’s scarf through his fingers.

“What kind of game are you playing?”

She set down his brandy, then sipped calmly at her own. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“What are you doing, going out on dates with some college kid who’s still wet behind the ears?”

Both her back and her voice stiffened. “It’s none of your business whom I go out with.”

“It is now,” Spence replied, realizing it now mattered to him.

“No, it’s not. And Terry’s a very nice young man.”

“Young’s the operative word.” Spence tossed the scarf aside. “He’s certainly too young for you.”

“Is that so?” It was one thing for her to say it, and quite another to have Spence throw it at her like an accusation. “I believe that’s for me to decide.”

“Hit a nerve that time,” Spence muttered to himself. There had been a time—hadn’t there?—when he had been considered fairly smooth with women. “Maybe I should have said you’re too old for him.”

“Oh, yes.” Despite herself, she began to see the humor of it. “That’s a great deal better. Would you like to drink this brandy or wear it?”

“I’ll drink it, thanks.” He lifted the glass, but instead of bringing it to his lips, took another turn around the room. He was jealous, Spence realized. It was rather pathetic, but he was jealous of an awkward, tongue-tied grad student. And while he was about it, he was making a very big fool of himself. “Listen, maybe I should start over.”

“I don’t know why you would want to start something over you should never have begun.”

But like a dog with a bone, he couldn’t stop gnawing. “It’s just that he’s obviously not your type.”

Fire blazed again. “Oh, and you’d know about my type?”

Spence held up his free hand. “All right, one straight question before my foot is permanently lodged in my mouth. Are you interested in him?”

“Of course I am.” Then she cursed herself; it was impossible to use Terry and his feelings as a barricade against Spence. “He’s a very nice boy.”

Spence almost relaxed, then spotted the scarf again, still spread over the back of her couch. “What are you doing with that?”

“I picked it up for him.” The sight of it, bright and a little foolish on the jewel colors of her couch, made her feel like the most vicious kind of femme fatale. “He left it behind after I broke his heart. He thinks he’s in love with me.” Miserable, she dropped into a chair. “Oh, go away. I don’t know why I’m talking to you.”

The look on her face made him want to smile and stroke her hair. He thought better of it and kept his tone brisk. “Because you’re upset, and I’m the only one here.”

“I guess that’ll do.” She didn’t object when Spence sat down across from her. “He was very sweet and nervous, and I had no idea what he was feeling—or what he thought he was feeling. I should have realized, but I didn’t until he spilled his coffee all over his shirt, and... Don’t laugh at him.”

Spence continued to smile as he shook his head. “I’m not. Believe me, I know exactly how he must have felt. There are some women who make you clumsy.”

Their eyes met and held. “Don’t flirt with me.”

“I’m past flirting with you, Natasha.”

Restless, she rose to pace the room. “You’re changing the subject.”

“Am I?”

She waved an impatient hand as she paced. “I hurt his feelings. If I had known what was happening, I might have stopped it. There is nothing,” she said passionately, “nothing worse than loving someone and being turned away.”

“No.” He understood that. And he could see by the shadows haunting her eyes that she did, too. “But you don’t really believe he’s in love with you.”

“He believes it. I ask him why he thinks it, and do you know what he says?” She whirled back, her hair swirling around her shoulders with the movement. “He says because he thinks I’m beautiful. That’s it.” She threw up her hands and started to pace again. Spence only watched, caught up in her movements and by the musical cadence that agitation brought to her voice. “When he says it, I want to slap him and say—what’s wrong with you? A face is nothing but a face. You don’t know my mind or my heart. But he has big, sad eyes, so I can’t yell at him.”

“You never had a problem yelling at me.”

“You don’t have big, sad eyes, and you’re not a boy who thinks he’s in love.”

“I’m not a boy,” he agreed, catching her by the shoulders from behind. Even as she stiffened, he turned her around. “And I like more than your face, Natasha. Though I like that very much.”

“You don’t know anything about me, either.”

“Yes, I do. I know you lived through experiences I can hardly imagine. I know you love and miss your family, that you understand children and have a natural affection for them. You’re organized, stubborn and passionate.” He ran his hands down her arms, then back to her shoulders. “I know you’ve been in love before.” He tightened his grip before she could pull away. “And you’re not ready to talk about it. You have a sharp, curious mind and caring heart, and you wish you weren’t attracted to me. But you are.”

She lowered her lashes briefly to veil her eyes. “Then it would seem you know more of me than I of you.”

“That’s easy to fix.”

“I don’t know if I want to. Or why I should.”

His lips brushed hers, then retreated before she could respond or reject. “There’s something there,” he murmured. “That’s reason enough.”

“Maybe there is,” she began. “No.” She drew back when he would have kissed her again. “Don’t. I’m not very strong tonight.”

“A good way to make me feel guilty if I press my advantage.”

She felt twin rushes of disappointment and relief when he released her. “I’ll make you dinner,” she said on impulse.

“Now?”

“Tomorrow. Just dinner,” she added, wondering if she should already be regretting the invitation. “If you bring Freddie.”

“She’d like that. So would I.”

“Good. Seven o’clock.” Natasha picked up his coat and held it out. “Now you have to go.”

“You should learn to say what’s on your mind.” With a half laugh, Spence took the coat from her. “One more thing.”

“Only one?”

“Yeah.” He swung her back into his arms for one long, hard, mind-numbing kiss. He had the satisfaction of seeing her sink weakly onto the arm of the sofa when he released her.

“Good night,” he said, then stepping outside, gulped in a deep breath of cold air.

It was the first time Freddie had been asked out to a grown-up dinner, and she waited impatiently while her father shaved. Usually she enjoyed watching him slide the razor through the white foam on his face. There were even times when she secretly wished she were a boy, so that she could look forward to the ritual. But tonight she thought her father was awfully slow.

“Can we go now?”

Standing in his bathrobe, Spence rinsed off the traces of lather. “It might be a better idea if I put some pants on.”

Freddie only rolled her eyes. “When are you going to?”

Spence scooped her up to bite gently at her neck. “As soon as you beat it.”



Taking him at his word, she raced downstairs to prowl the foyer and count to sixty. Around the fifth round, she sat on the bottom step to play with the buckle of her left shoe.

Freddie had it all figured out. Her father was going to marry either Tash or Mrs. Patterson, because they were both pretty and had nice smiles. Afterward, the one he married would come and live in their new house. Soon she would have a new baby sister. A baby brother would do in a pinch, but it was definitely a second choice. Everybody would be happy, because everybody would like each other a lot. And her daddy would play his music late at night again.

When she heard Spence start down, Freddie jumped up and whirled around to face him. "Daddy, I counted to sixty a jillion times."

"I bet you left out the thirties again." He took her coat from the hall closet and helped bundle her into it.

"No, I didn't." At least she didn't think she had. "You took forever." With a sigh, she pulled him to the door.

"We're still going to be early."

"She won't mind."

At that moment, Natasha was pulling a sweater over her head and wondering why she had invited anyone to dinner, particularly a man every instinct told her to avoid. She'd been distracted all day, worrying if the food would be right, if she'd chosen the most complimentary wine. And now she was changing for the third time.

Totally out of character, she told herself as she frowned at her reflection in the mirror. The casual blue sweater and leggings calmed her. If she looked at ease, Natasha decided she would be at ease. She fastened long silver columns at her ears, gave her hair a quick toss, then hurried back to the kitchen. She had hardly checked her sauce when she heard the knock.

They were early, she thought, allowing herself one mild oath before going to the door.

They looked wonderful. Agitation vanished in a smile. The sight of the little girl with her hand caught firmly in her father's went straight to her heart. Because it came naturally, she bent to kiss Freddie on both cheeks. "Hello."

"Thank you for asking me to dinner." Freddie recited the sentence, then looked at her father for approval.

“You’re welcome.”

“Aren’t you going to kiss Daddy, too?”

Natasha hesitated, then caught Spence’s quick, challenging grin. “Of course.” She brushed her lips formally against his cheeks. “That is a traditional Ukrainian greeting.”

“I’m very grateful for *glasnost*.” Still smiling, he took her hand and brought it to his lips.

“Are we going to have borscht?” Freddie wanted to know.

“Borscht?” Natasha lifted a brow as she helped Freddie out of her coat.

“When I told Mrs. Patterson that me and Daddy were going to have dinner at your house, she said that borscht was Russian for beet soup.” Freddie managed not to say she thought it sounded gross, but Natasha got the idea.

“I’m sorry I didn’t make any,” she said, straight faced. “I made another traditional dish instead. Spaghetti and meatballs.”

It was easy, surprisingly so. They ate at the old gateleg table by the window, and their talk ranged from Freddie’s struggles with arithmetic to Neapolitan opera. It took only a little prodding for Natasha to talk of her family. Freddie wanted to know everything there was about being a big sister.

“We didn’t fight very much,” Natasha reflected as she drank after-dinner coffee and balanced Freddie on her knee. “But when we did, I won, because I was the oldest. And the meanest.”

“You’re not mean.”

“Sometimes when I’m angry I am.” She looked at Spence, remembering—and regretting—telling him he didn’t deserve Freddie. “Then I’m sorry.”

“When people fight, it doesn’t always mean they don’t like each other,” Spence murmured. He was doing his best not to think how perfect, how perfectly right his daughter looked cuddled on Natasha’s lap. Too far, too fast, he warned himself. For everyone involved.

Freddie wasn’t sure she understood, but she was only five. Then she remembered happily that she would soon be six. “I’m going to have a birthday.”

“Are you?” Natasha looked appropriately impressed. “When?”

“In two weeks. Will you come to my party?”

“I’d love to.” Natasha looked at Spence as Freddie recited all the wonderful treats that were in store.

It wasn’t wise to get so involved with the little girl, she warned herself. Not when the little girl was attached so securely to a man who made Natasha long for things she had put behind her. Spence smiled at her. No, it wasn’t wise, she thought again. But it was irresistible.

## CHAPTER SIX

“Chicken pox.” Spence said the two words again. He stood in the doorway and watched his little girl sleep. “It’s a hell of a birthday present, sweetie.”

In two days his daughter would be six, and by then, according to the doctor, she’d be covered with the itchy rash that was now confined to her belly and chest.

It was going around, the pediatrician had said. It would run its course. Easy for him to say, Spence thought. It wasn’t his daughter whose eyes were teary. It wasn’t his baby with a hundred-and-one-degree temperature.

She’d never been sick before, Spence realized as he rubbed his tired eyes. Oh, the sniffles now and again, but nothing a little TLC and baby aspirin hadn’t put right. He dragged a hand through his hair; Freddie moaned in her sleep and tried to find a cool spot on her pillow.

The call from Nina hadn’t helped. He’d had to come down hard to prevent her from catching the shuttle and arriving on his doorstep. That hadn’t stopped her telling him that Freddie had undoubtedly caught chicken pox because she was attending public school. That was nonsense, of course, but when he looked at his little girl, tossing in her bed, her face flushed with fever, the guilt was almost unbearable.

Logic told him that chicken pox was a normal part of childhood. His heart told him that he should be able to find a way to make it go away.

For the first time he realized how much he wanted someone beside him. Not to take things over, not to smooth over the downside of parenting. Just to be there. To understand what it felt like when your child was sick or hurt or unhappy. Someone to talk to in the middle of the night, when worries or pleasures kept you awake.

When he thought of that someone, he thought only of Natasha.

A big leap, he reminded himself and walked back to the bedside. One he wasn't sure he could make again and land on both feet.

He cooled Freddie's forehead with the damp cloth Vera had brought in. Her eyes opened.

"Daddy."

"Yes, funny face. I'm right here."

Her lower lip trembled. "I'm thirsty."

"I'll go get you a cold drink."

Sick or not, she knew how to maneuver. "Can I have Kool Aid?"

He pressed a kiss on her cheek. "Sure. What kind?"

"The blue kind."

"The blue kind." He kissed her again. "I'll be right back." He was halfway down the stairs when the phone rang simultaneously with a knock on the door. "Damn it. Vera, get the phone, will you?" Out of patience, he yanked open the front door.

The smile Natasha had practiced all evening faded. "I'm sorry. I've come at a bad time."

"Yeah." But he reached out to pull her inside. "Hang on a minute. Vera—oh good," he added when he saw the housekeeper hovering. "Freddie wants some Kool Aid, the blue kind."

"I will make it." Vera folded her hands in front of her apron. "Mrs. Barklay is on the phone."

"Tell her—" Spence broke off, swearing as Vera's mouth pruned. She didn't like to tell Nina anything. "All right, I'll get it."

"I should go," Natasha put in, feeling foolish. "I only came by because you weren't at class tonight, and I wondered if you were well."

"It's Freddie." Spence glanced at the phone and wondered if he could strangle his sister over it. "She has the chicken pox."

“Oh. Poor thing.” She had to smother the automatic urge to go up and look in on the child herself. Not your child, Natasha reminded herself. Not your place. “I’ll get out of your way.”

“I’m sorry. Things are a little confused.”

“Don’t be. I hope she’s well soon. Let me know if I can do anything.”

At that moment Freddie called for her father in a voice that was half snuffle and half croak.

It was Spence’s quick helpless glance up the stairs that had Natasha ignoring what she thought was her better judgment. “Would you like me to go up for a minute? I could sit with her until you have things under control again.”

“No. Yes.” Spence blew out a long breath. If he didn’t deal with Nina now, she’d only call back. “I’d appreciate it.” Reaching the end of his rope, he yanked up the phone receiver. “Nina.”

Natasha followed the glow of the night-light into Freddie’s room. She found her sitting up in bed, surrounded by dolls. Two big tears were sliding down her cheeks. “I want my daddy,” she said obviously miserable.

“He’ll be right here.” Her heart lost, Natasha sat down on the bed and drew Freddie into her arms.

“I don’t feel good.”

“I know. Here, blow your nose.”

Freddie complied, then settled her head on Natasha’s breast. She sighed, finding it pleasantly different from her father’s hard chest or Vera’s cushy one. “I went to the doctor and got medicine, so I can’t go to my Brownie meeting tomorrow.”

“There’ll be other meetings, as soon as the medicine makes you well.”

“I have chicken pox,” Freddie announced, torn between discomfort and pride. “And I’m hot and itchy.”

“It’s a silly thing, the chicken pox,” Natasha said soothingly. She tucked Freddie’s tousled hair behind one ear. “I don’t think chickens get it at all.”

Freddie’s lips turned up, just a little. “JoBeth had it last week, and so did Mikey. Now I can’t have a birthday party.”

“You’ll have a party later, when everyone’s well again.”

“That’s what Daddy said.” A fresh tear trailed down her cheek. “It’s not the same.”

“No, but sometimes not the same is even better.”

Curious, Freddie watched the light glint off the gold hoop in Natasha’s ear. “How?”

“It gives you more time to think about how much fun you’ll have. Would you like to rock?”

“I’m too big to rock.”

“I’m not.” Wrapping Freddie in a blanket, Natasha carried her to the white wicker rocker. She cleared it of stuffed animals, then tucked one particularly worn rabbit in Freddie’s arms. “When I was a little girl and I was sick, my mother would always rock me in this big, squeaky chair we had by the window. She would sing me songs. No matter how bad I felt, when she rocked me I felt better.”

“My mother didn’t rock me.” Freddie’s head was aching, and she wanted badly to pop a comforting thumb into her mouth. She knew she was too old for that. “She didn’t like me.”

“That’s not true.” Natasha instinctively tightened her arms around the child. “I’m sure she loved you very much.”

“She wanted my daddy to send me away.”

At a loss, Natasha lowered her cheek to the top of Freddie’s head. What could she say now? Freddie’s words had been too matter-of-fact to dismiss as a fantasy. “People sometimes say things they don’t mean, and that they regret very much. Did your daddy send you away?”

“No.”

“There, you see?”

“Do you like me?”

“Of course I do.” She rocked gently, to and fro. “I like you very much.”

The movement, the soft female scent and voice lulled Freddie. “Why don’t you have a little girl?”

The pain was there, deep and dull. Natasha closed her eyes against it. “Perhaps one day I will.”

Freddie tangled her fingers in Natasha’s hair, comforted. “Will you sing, like your mother did?”

“Yes. And you try to sleep.”

“Don’t go.”

“No, I’ll stay awhile.”

Spence watched them from the doorway. In the shadowed light they looked achingly beautiful, the tiny, flaxen-haired child in the arms of the dark, golden-skinned woman. The rocker whispered as it moved back and forth while Natasha sang some old Ukrainian folk song from her own childhood.

It moved him as completely, as uniquely as holding the woman in his own arms had moved him. And yet so differently, so quietly that he wanted to stand just as he was, watching through the night.

Natasha looked up and saw him. He looked so frazzled that she had to smile.

“She’s sleeping now.”

If his legs were weak, he hoped it was because he’d climbed up and down the stairs countless times in the last twenty-four hours. Giving in to them, he sat down on the edge of the bed.

He studied his daughter’s flushed face, nestled peacefully in the crook of Natasha’s arm. “It’s supposed to get worse before it gets better.”

“Yes, it does.” She stroked a hand down Freddie’s hair. “We all had it when we were children. Amazingly, we all survived.”

He blew out a long breath. “I guess I’m being an idiot.”

“No, you’re very sweet.” She watched him as she continued to rock, wondering how difficult it had been for him to raise a baby without a mother’s love. Difficult enough, she decided, that he deserved credit for seeing that his daughter was happy, secure and unafraid to love. She smiled again.

“Whenever one of us was sick as children, and still today, my father would badger the doctor, then he would go to church to light candles. After that he would say this old gypsy chant he’d learned from his grandmother. It’s covering all the bases.”

“So far I’ve badgered the doctor.” Spence managed a smile of his own. “You wouldn’t happen to remember that chant?”

“I’ll say it for you.” Carefully she rose, lifting Freddie in her arms. “Should I lay her down?”

“Thanks.” Together they tucked in the blankets. “I mean it.”



“You’re welcome.” She looked over the sleeping child, and though her smile was easy, she was beginning to feel awkward. “I should go. Parents of sick children need their rest.”

“At least I can offer you a drink.” He held up the glass. “How about some Kool Aid? It’s the blue kind.”

“I think I’ll pass.” She moved around the bed toward the door. “When the fever breaks, she’ll be bored. Then you’ll really have your work cut out for you.”

“How about some pointers?” He took Natasha’s hand as they started down the steps.

“Crayons. New ones. The best is usually the simplest.”

“How is it someone like you doesn’t have a horde of children of her own?” He didn’t have to feel her stiffen to know he’d said the wrong thing. He could see the sorrow come and go in her eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“No need.” Recovered, she picked up her coat from where she’d laid it on the newel post. “I’d like to come and see Freddie again, if it’s all right.”

He took her coat and set it down again. “If you won’t take the blue stuff, how about some tea? I could use the company.”

“All right.”

“I’ll just—” He turned and nearly collided with Vera.

“I will fix the tea,” she said after a last look at Natasha.

“Your housekeeper thinks I have designs on you.”

“I hope you won’t disappoint her,” Spence said as he led Natasha into the music room.

“I’m afraid I must disappoint both of you.” Then she laughed and wandered to the piano. “But you should be very busy. All the young women in college talk about Dr. Kimball.” She tucked her tongue into her cheek. “You’re a hunk, Spence. Popular opinion is equally divided between you and the captain of the football team.”

“Very funny.”

“I’m not joking. But it’s fun to embarrass you.” She sat and ran her fingers over the keys. “Do you compose here?”

“I did once.”

“It’s wrong of you not to write.” She played a series of chords. “Art’s more than a privilege. It’s a responsibility.” She searched for

the melody, then with a sound of impatience shook her head. "I can't play. I was too old when I tried to learn."

He liked the way she looked sitting there, her hair falling over her shoulders, half curtaining her face, her fingers resting lightly on the keys of the piano he had played since childhood.

"If you want to learn, I'll teach you."

"I'd rather you write a song." It was more than impulse, she thought. Tonight he looked as though he needed a friend. She smiled and held out a hand. "Here, with me."

He glanced up as Vera carried in a tray. "Just set it there, Vera. Thank you."

"You will want something else?"

He looked back at Natasha. Yes, he would want something else. He wanted it very much. "No. Good night." He listened to the housekeeper's shuffling steps. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because you need to laugh. Come, write a song for me. It doesn't have to be good."

He did laugh. "You want me to write a bad song for you?"

"It can be a terrible song. When you play it for Freddie, she'll hold her ears and giggle."

"A bad song's about all I can do these days." But he was amused enough to sit down beside her. "If I do this, I have to have your solemn oath that it won't be repeated for any of my students."

"Cross my heart."

He began to noodle with the keys, Natasha breaking in now and then to add her inspiration. It wasn't as bad as it might have been, Spence considered as he ran through some chords. No one would call it brilliant, but it had a certain primitive charm.

"Let me try." Tossing back her hair, Natasha struggled to repeat the notes.

"Here." As he sometimes did with his daughter, he put his hands over Natasha's to guide them. The feeling, he realized, was entirely different. "Relax." His murmur whispered beside her ear.

She only wished she could. "I hate to do poorly at anything," she managed. With his palms firmly over her hands, she struggled to concentrate on the music.

“You’re doing fine.” Her hair, soft and fragrant, brushed his cheek.

As they bent over the keys, it didn’t occur to him that he hadn’t played with the piano in years. Oh, he had played—Beethoven, Gershwin, Mozart and Bernstein, but hardly for fun.... It had been much too long since he had sat before the keys for entertainment.

“No, no, an A minor maybe.”

Natasha stubbornly hit a B major again. “I like this better.”

“It throws it off.”

“That’s the point.”

He grinned at her. “Want to collaborate?”

“You do better without me.”

“I don’t think so.” His grin faded; he cupped her face in one hand. “I really don’t think so.”

This wasn’t what she had intended. She had wanted to lighten his mood, to be his friend. She hadn’t wanted to stir these feelings in both of them, feelings they would be wiser to ignore. But they were there, pulsing. No matter how strong her will, she couldn’t deny them. Even the light touch of his fingers on her face made her ache, made her yearn, made her remember.

“The tea’s getting cold.” But she didn’t pull away, didn’t try to stand. When he leaned over to touch his mouth to hers, she only shut her eyes. “This can’t go anywhere,” she murmured.

“It already has.” His hand moved up her back, strong, possessive, in contrast with the light play of his lips. “I think about you all the time, about being with you, touching you. I’ve never wanted anyone the way I want you.” Slowly he ran a hand down her throat, over her shoulder, along her arm until their fingers linked over the piano keys. “It’s like a thirst, Natasha, a constant thirst. And when I’m with you like this, I know it’s the same for you.”

She wanted to deny it, but his mouth was roaming hungrily over her face, taunting hers to tremble with need. And she did need, to be held like this, wanted like this. It had been easy in the past to pretend that being desired wasn’t necessary. No, she hadn’t had to pretend. Until now, until him, it had been true.

Now, suddenly, like a door opening, like a light being switched on, everything had changed. She yearned for him, and her blood

swam faster, just knowing he wanted her. Even for a moment, she told herself as her hands clutched at his hair to pull his mouth to hers. Even for this moment.

It was there again, that whirlwind of sensation that erupted the instant they came together. Too fast, too hot, too real to be borne. Too stunning to be resisted.

It was as though he were the first, though he was not. It was as though he were the only one, though that could never be. As she poured herself into the kiss, she wished desperately that her life could begin again in that moment, with him.

There was more than passion here. The emotions that swirled inside her nearly swallowed him. There was desperation, fear and a bottomless generosity that left him dazed. Nothing would ever be simple again. Knowing it, a part of him tried to pull back, to think, to reason. But the taste of her, hot, potent, only drew him closer to the flame.

“Wait.” For the first time she admitted her own weakness and let her head rest against his shoulder. “This is too fast.”

“No.” He combed his fingers through her hair. “It’s taken years already.”

“Spence.” Struggling for balance, she straightened. “I don’t know what to do,” she said slowly, watching him. “It’s important for me to know what to do.”

“I think we can figure it out.” But when he reached for her again, she rose quickly and stepped away.

“This isn’t simple for me.” Unnerved, she pushed back her hair with both hands. “I know it might seem so, because of the way I respond to you. I know that it’s easier for men, less personal somehow.”

He rose very carefully, very deliberately. “Why don’t you explain that?”

“I only mean that I know that men find things like this less difficult to justify.”

“Justify,” he repeated, rocking back on his heels. How could he be angry so quickly, after being so bewitched? “You make this sound like some kind of crime.”

“I don’t always find the right words,” she snapped. “I’m not a college professor. I didn’t speak English until I was eight, couldn’t read it for longer than that.”

He checked his temper as he studied her. Her eyes were dark with something more than anger. She was standing stiffly, head up, but he couldn’t tell if her stand was one of pride or self-defense. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Nothing. And everything.” Frustrated, she whirled back into the hallway to snatch up her coat. “I hate feeling stupid—hate being stupid. I don’t belong here. I shouldn’t have come.”

“But you did.” He grabbed her by her shoulders, so that her coat flew out to fall onto the bottom step. “Why did you?”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t matter why.”

He gave her an impatient squeeze. “Why do I feel as if I’m having two conversations at the same time? What’s going on in that head of yours, Natasha?”

“I want you,” she said passionately. “And I don’t want to.”

“You want me.” Before she could jerk away, he pulled her against himself. There was no patience in this kiss, no persuasion. It took and took, until she was certain she could have nothing left to give. “Why does that bother you?” he murmured against her lips.

Unable to resist, she ran her hands over his face, memorizing the shape. “There are reasons.”

“Tell me about them.”

She shook her head, and this time when she pulled back, he released her. “I don’t want my life to change. If something happened between us, yours would not, but mine might. I want to be sure it doesn’t.”

“Does this lead back to that business about men and women thinking differently?”

“Yes.”

That made him wonder who had broken her heart, and he didn’t smile. “You look more intelligent than that. What I feel for you has already changed my life.”

That frightened her, because it made her want to believe it. “Feelings come and go.”

“Yes, they do. Some of them. What if I told you I was falling in love with you?”

“I wouldn’t believe you.” Her voice shook, and she bent to pick up her coat. “And I would be angry with you for saying it.”

Maybe it was best to wait until he could make her believe. “And if I told you that until I met you, I didn’t know I was lonely?”

She lowered her eyes, much more moved by this than she would have been by any words of love. “I would have to think.”

He touched her again, just a hand to her hair. “Do you think everything through?”

Her eyes were eloquent when she looked at him. “Yes.”

“Then think about this. It wasn’t my intention to seduce you—not that I haven’t given that a great deal of thought on my own, but I didn’t see it happening with my daughter sick upstairs.”

“You didn’t seduce me.”

“Now she’s taking potshots at my ego.”

That made her smile. “There was no seduction. That implies planned persuasion. I don’t want to be seduced.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. All the same, I don’t think I want to dissect all this like a Music major with a Beethoven concerto. It ruins the romance in much the same way.”

She smiled again. “I don’t want romance.”

“That’s a pity.” And a lie, he thought, remembering the way she’d looked when he’d given her a rose. “Since chicken pox is going to be keeping me busy for the next week or two, you’ll have some time. Will you come back?”

“To see Freddie.” She shrugged into her coat, then relented. “And to see you.”

She did. What began as just a quick call to bring Freddie a get-well present turned into the better part of an evening, soothing a miserable, rash-ridden child and an exhausted, frantic father. Surprisingly she enjoyed it, and made a habit over the next ten days of dropping in over her lunch break to spell a still-suspicious Vera, or after work to give Spence a much-needed hour of peace and quiet.

As far as romance went, bathing an itchy girl in corn starch left a lot to be desired. Despite it, Natasha found herself only more

attracted to Spence and more in love with his daughter.

She watched him do his best to cheer the miserably uncomfortable patient on her birthday, then helped him deal with the pair of kittens that were Freddie's favored birthday gift. As the rash faded and boredom set in, Natasha pumped up Spence's rapidly fading imagination with stories of her own.

"Just one more story."

Natasha smoothed Freddie's covers under her chin. "That's what you said three stories ago."

"You tell good ones."

"Flattery will get you nowhere. It's past my bedtime." Natasha lifted a brow at the big red alarm clock. "And yours."

"The doctor said I could go back to school on Monday. I'm not 'fectious."

"Infectious," Natasha corrected. "You'll be glad to see your friends again."

"Mostly." Stalling, Freddie played with the edge of her blanket. "Will you come and see me when I'm not sick?"

"I think I might." She leaned over to make a grab and came up with a mewling kitten. "And to see Lucy and Desi."

"And Daddy."

Cautious, Natasha scratched the kitten's ears. "Yes, I suppose."

"You like him, don't you?"

"Yes. He's a very good teacher."

"He likes you, too." Freddie didn't add that she had seen her father kiss Natasha at the foot of her bed just the night before, when they'd thought she was asleep. Watching them had given her a funny feeling in her stomach. But after a minute it had been a good funny feeling. "Will you marry him and come and live with us?"

"Well, is that a proposal?" Natasha managed to smile. "I think it's nice that you'd want me to, but I'm only friends with your daddy. Like I'm friends with you."

"If you came to live with us, we'd still be friends."

The child, Natasha reflected, was as clever as her father. "Won't we be friends if I live in my own house?"

"I guess." The pouty lower lip poked out. "But I'd like it better if you lived here, like JoBeth's mom does. She makes cookies."

Natasha leaned toward her, nose to nose. "So, you want me for my cookies."

"I love you." Freddie threw her arms around Natasha's neck and clung. "I'd be a good girl if you came."

Stunned, Natasha hugged the girl tight and rocked. "Oh, baby, I love you, too."

"So you'll marry us."

Put like that, Natasha wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry. "I don't think getting married right now is the answer for any of us. But I'll still be your friend, and come visit and tell you stories."

Freddie gave a long sigh. She knew when an adult was evading, and realized that it would be smart to retreat a step. Particularly when she had already made up her mind. Natasha was exactly what she wanted for a mother. And there was the added bonus that Natasha made her daddy laugh. Freddie decided then and there that her most secret and solemn Christmas wish would be for Natasha to marry her father and bring home a baby sister.

"Promise?" Freddie demanded.

"Cross my heart." Natasha gave her a kiss on each cheek. "Now you go to sleep. I'll find your daddy so he can come up and kiss you good-night."

Freddie closed her eyes, her lips curved with her own secret smile.

Carrying the kitten, Natasha made her way downstairs. She'd put off her monthly books and an inventory to visit tonight. More than a little midnight oil would be burned, she decided, rubbing the kitten against her cheek.

She would have to be careful with Freddie now, and with herself. It was one thing for her to have fallen in love with the youngster, but quite another for the girl to love her enough to want her for a mother. How could she expect a child of six to understand that adults often had problems and fears that made it impossible for them to take the simple route?

The house was quiet, but a light was shining from the music room. She set down the kitten, knowing he would unerringly race to the kitchen.



She found Spence in the music room, spread on the two-cushion sofa so that his legs hung over one end. In sloppy sweats and bare feet he looked very little like the brilliant composer and full professor of music. Nor had he shaved. Natasha was forced to admit that the shadow of stubble only made him more attractive, especially when combined with tousled hair a week or two late for the barber.

He was sleeping deeply, a throw pillow crunched under his head. Natasha knew, because Vera had unbent long enough to tell her that Spence had stayed up throughout two nights during the worst of his daughter's fever and discomfort.

She was aware, too, that he had juggled his schedule at the college with trips home during the day. More than once during her visits she'd found him up to his ears in paperwork.

Once she had thought him pampered, a man who'd come by his talents and his position almost by birth. Perhaps he had been born with his talent, she thought now, but he worked hard, for himself and for his child. There was nothing she could admire more in a man.

I'm falling in love with him, she admitted. With his smile and his temper, his devotion and his drive. Perhaps, just perhaps they could give something to each other. Cautiously, carefully, with no promises between them.

She wanted to be his lover. She had never wanted such a thing before. With Anthony it had just happened, overwhelming her, sweeping her up and away, then leaving her shattered. It wouldn't be that way with Spence. Nothing would ever hurt her that deeply again. And with him there was a chance, just a chance of happiness.

Shouldn't she take it? Moving quietly, she unfolded the throw of soft blue wool that was draped along the back of the couch to spread it over him. It had been a long time since she'd taken a risk. Perhaps the time was here. She bent to brush her lips over his brow. And the man.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

The black cat screeched a warning. A rushing gust of wind blew open the door with an echoing slam and maniacal laughter rolled in. What sounded like ooze dripped down the walls, plunking dully onto the bare concrete floor as the prisoners rattled their chains. There was a piercing scream followed by a long, desperate moan.

“Great tunes,” Annie commented and popped a gum ball into her mouth.

“I should have ordered more of those records.” Natasha took an orange fright wig and turned a harmless stuffed bear into a Halloween ghoul. “That’s the last one.”

“After tonight you’ll have to start thinking Christmas, anyway.” Annie pushed back her pointed black hat, then grinned, showing blackened teeth. “Here come the Freedmont boys.” She rubbed her hands together and tried out a cackle. “If this costume’s worth anything, I should be able to turn them into frogs.”

She didn’t quite manage that, but sold them fake blood and latex scars.

“I wonder what those little dears have in store for the neighborhood tonight,” Natasha mused.

“Nothing good.” Annie ducked under a hanging bat. “Shouldn’t you get going?”

“Yes, in a minute.” Stalling, Natasha fiddled with her dwindling supply of masks and fake noses. “The pig snouts sold better than I’d imagined. I didn’t realize so many people would want to dress up as

livestock.” She picked one up to hold it over her nose. “Maybe we should keep them out year round.”

Recognizing her friend’s tactics, Annie ran her tongue over her teeth to keep from grinning. “It was awfully nice of you to volunteer to help decorate for Freddie’s party tonight.”

“It’s a little thing,” Natasha said and hated herself for being nervous. She replaced the snout, then ran her finger over a wrinkled elephant trunk attached to oversize glasses. “Since I suggested the idea of her having a Halloween party to make up for her missed birthday, I thought I should help.”

“Uh-huh. I wonder if her daddy’s going to come as Prince Charming.”

“He is not Prince Charming.”

“The Big Bad Wolf?” On a laugh, Annie held up her hands in a gesture of peace. “Sorry. It’s just such a kick to see you unnerved.”

“I’m not unnerved.” That was a big lie, Natasha admitted while she packed up some of her contributions to the party. “You know, you’re welcome to come.”

“And I appreciate it. I’d rather stay home and guard my house from preadolescent felons. And don’t worry,” she added before Natasha could speak again. “I’ll lock up.”

“All right. Maybe I’ll just—” Natasha broke off as the door jingled open. Another customer, she thought, would give her a little more time. When she spotted Terry, there was no way of saying who was more surprised. “Hello.”

He swallowed over the huge lump in his throat and tried to look beyond her costume. “Tash?”

“Yes.” Hoping he’d forgiven her by now, she smiled and held out a hand. He’d changed his seat in class, and every time she had tried to approach him, he’d darted off. Now he stood trapped, embarrassed and uncertain. He touched her outstretched hand, then stuck his own into his pocket.

“I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“No?” She tilted her head. “This is my shop.” She wondered if it would strike him that she had been right when she’d said how little he knew her, and her voice softened. “I own it.”

“You own it?” He looked around, unable to hide the impression it made on him. “Wow. That’s something.”

“Thank you. Did you come to buy something or just to look?”

Instantly he colored. It was one thing to go into a store, and another to go into one where the owner was a woman he’d professed to love. “I just...ah...”

“Something for Halloween?” she prompted. “They have parties at the college.”

“Yeah, well, I kind of thought I might slip into a couple. I guess it’s silly really, but...”

“Halloween is very serious business here at The Fun House,” Natasha told him solemnly. As she spoke, another scream ripped from the speakers. “You see?”

Embarrassed that he’d jumped, Terry managed a weak smile. “Yeah. Well, I was thinking, maybe a mask or something. You know.” His big, bony hands waved in space, then retreated to his pockets.

“Would you like to be scary or funny?”

“I don’t, ah, I haven’t thought about it.”

Understanding, Natasha resisted the urge to pat his cheek. “You might get some ideas when you look at what we have left. Annie, this is my friend, Terry Maynard. He’s a violinist.”

“Hi.” Annie watched his glasses slide down his nose after his nervous nod of greeting and thought him adorable. “We’re running low, but we’ve still got some pretty good stuff. Why don’t you come over and take a look? I’ll help you pick one out.”

“I have to run.” Natasha began gathering up her two shopping bags, hoping that the visit had put them back on more solid ground. “Have a good time at your party, Terry.”

“Thanks.”

“Annie, I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Right. Don’t bob for too many apples.” Pushing her pointed hat out of her eyes again, Annie grinned at Terry. “So, you’re a violinist.”

“Yeah.” He gave Natasha’s retreating back one last look. When the door closed behind her he felt a pang, but only a small one. “I’m taking some graduate classes at the college.”

“Great. Hey, can you play ‘Turkey in the Straw’?”

Outside Natasha debated running home to get her car. The cool, clear air changed her mind. The trees had turned. The patchwork glory of a week before, with its scarlets and vivid oranges and yellows, had blended into a dull russet. Dry, curling leaves spun from the branches to crowd against the curbs and scatter on the sidewalks. They crackled under her feet as she began the short walk.

The hardiest flowers remained, adding a spicy scent so different from the heavy fragrances of summer. Cooler, cleaner, crisper, Natasha thought as she drew it in.

She turned off the main street to where hedges and big trees shielded the houses. Jack-o'-lanterns sat on stoops and porches, grinning as they waited to be lighted at dusk. Here and there effigies in flannel shirts and torn jeans hung from denuded branches. Witches and ghosts stuffed with straw sat on steps, waiting to scare and delight the wandering trick-or-treaters.

If anyone had asked her why she had chosen a small town in which to settle, this would have been one of her answers. People here took the time—the time to carve a pumpkin, the time to take a bundle of old clothes and fashion it into a headless horseman. Tonight, before the moon rose, children could race along the streets, dressed as fairies or goblins. Their goody bags would swell with store-bought candy and homemade cookies, while adults pretended not to recognize the miniature hoboes, clowns and demons. The only thing the children would have to fear was make-believe.

Her child would have been seven.

Natasha paused for a moment, pressing a hand to her stomach until the grief and the memory could be blocked. How many times had she told herself the past was past? And how many times would that past sneak up and slice at her?

True, it came less often now, but still so sharply and always unexpectedly. Days could go by, even months, then it surfaced, crashing over her, leaving her a little dazed, a little tender, like a woman who had walked into a wall.

A car engine was gunned. A horn blasted. "Hey, Tash."

She blinked and managed to lift a hand in passing salute, though she couldn't identify the driver, who continued on his way.

This was now, she told herself, blinking to focus again on the swirl of leaves. This was here. There was never any going back. Years before she had convinced herself that the only direction was forward. Deliberately she took a long, deep breath, relieved when she felt her system level. Tonight wasn't the time for sorrows. She had promised another child a party, and she intended to deliver.

She had to smile when she started up the steps of Spence's home. He had already been working, she noted. Two enormous jack-o'-lanterns flanked the porch. Like Comedy and Tragedy, one grinned and the other scowled. Across the railing a white sheet had been shaped and spread so that the ghost it became seemed to be in full flight. Cardboard bats with red eyes swooped down from the eaves. In an old rocker beside the door sat a hideous monster who held his laughing head in his hand. On the door was a full-size cutout of a witch stirring a steaming cauldron.

Natasha knocked under the hag's warty nose. She was laughing when Spence opened the door. "Trick or treat," she said.

He couldn't speak at all. For a moment he thought he was imagining things, had to be. The music-box gypsy was standing before him, gold dripping from her ears and her wrists. Her wild mane of hair was banded by a sapphire scarf that flowed almost to her waist with the corkscrew curls. More gold hung around her neck, thick, ornate chains that only accented her slenderness. The red dress was snug, scooped at the bodice and full in the skirt, with richly colored scarfs tied at the waist.

Her eyes were huge and dark, made mysterious by some womanly art. Her lips were full and red, turned up now as she spun in a saucy circle. It took him only seconds to see it all, down to the hints of black lace at the hem. He felt as though he'd been standing in the doorway for hours.

"I have a crystal ball," she told him, reaching into her pocket to pull out a small, clear orb. "If you cross my palm with silver, I'll gaze into it for you."

"My God," he managed. "You're beautiful."

She only laughed and stepped inside. "Illusions. Tonight is meant for them." With a quick glance around, she slipped the crystal

back into her pocket. But the image of the gypsy and the mystery remained. "Where's Freddie?"

His hand had gone damp on the knob. "She's..." It took a moment for his brain to kick back into gear. "She's at JoBeth's. I wanted to put things together when she wasn't around."

"A good idea." She studied his gray sweats and dusty sneakers. "Is this your costume?"

"No. I've been hanging cobwebs."

"I'll give you a hand." Smiling, she held up her bags. "I have some tricks and I have some treats. Which would you like first?"

"You have to ask?" he said quietly, then hooking an arm around her waist, brought her up hard against himself. She threw her head back, words of anger and defiance in her eyes and on the tip of her tongue. Then his mouth found hers. The bags slipped out of her hands. Freed, her fingers dived into his hair.

This wasn't what she wanted. But it was what she needed. Without hesitation her lips parted, inviting intimacy. She heard his quiet moan of pleasure merge with her own. It seemed right, somehow it seemed perfectly right to be holding him like this, just inside his front door, with the scents of fall flowers and fresh polish in the air, and the sharp-edged breeze of autumn rushing over them.

It was right. He could taste and feel the rightness with her body pressed against his own, her lips warm and agile. No illusion this. No fantasy was she, despite the colorful scarfs and glittering gold. She was real, she was here, and she was his. Before the night was over, he would prove it to both of them.

"I hear violins," he murmured as he trailed his lips down her throat.

"Spence." She could only hear her heartbeat, like thunder in her head. Struggling for sanity, she pushed away. "You make me do things I tell myself I won't." After a deep breath she gave him a steady look. "I came to help you with Freddie's party."

"And I appreciate it." Quietly he closed the door. "Just like I appreciate the way you look, the way you taste, the way you feel."

She shouldn't have been so aroused by only a look. Couldn't be, not when the look told her that whatever the crystal in her pocket

promised, he already knew their destiny. “This is a very inappropriate time.”

He loved the way her voice could take on that regal tone, czarina to peasant. “Then we’ll find a better one.”

Exasperated, she hefted the bags again. “I’ll help you hang your cobwebs, if you promise to be Freddie’s father—and only Freddie’s father while we do.”

“Okay.” He didn’t see any other way he’d survive an evening with twenty costumed first-graders. And the party, he thought, wouldn’t last forever. “We’ll be pals for the duration.”

She liked the sound of it. Choosing a bag, she reached inside. She held up a rubber mask of a bruised, bloodied and scarred face. Competently she slipped it over Spence’s head. “There. You look wonderful.”

He adjusted it until he could see her through both eyeholes, and had a foolish and irresistible urge to look at himself in the hall mirror. Behind the mask he grinned. “I’ll suffocate.”

“Not for a couple of hours yet.” She handed him the second bag. “Come on. It takes time to build a haunted house.”

It took them two hours to transform Spence’s elegantly decorated living room into a spooky dungeon, fit for rats and screams of torture. Black and orange crepe paper hung on the walls and ceiling. Angel-hair cobwebs draped the corners. A mummy, arms folded across its chest leaned in a corner. A black-caped witch hung in the air, suspended on her broom. Thirsty and waiting for dusk, an evil-eyed Dracula lurked in the shadows, ready to pounce.

“You don’t think it’s too scary?” Spence asked as he hung up a Pin-the-Nose-on-the-Pumpkin game. “They’re first-graders.”

Natasha flicked a finger over a rubber spider that hung by a thread and sent him spinning. “Very mild. My brothers made a haunted house once. They blindfolded Rachel and me to take us through. Mikhail put my hand in a bowl of grapes and told me it was eyes.”

“Now that’s disgusting,” Spence decided.

“Yes.” It delighted her to remember it. “Then there was this spaghetti—”



“Never mind,” he interrupted. “I get the idea.”

She laughed, adjusting her earring. “In any case, I had a wonderful time and have always wished I’d thought of it first. The children tonight would be very disappointed if we didn’t have some monsters waiting for them. After they’ve been spooked, which they desperately want to be, you turn on the lights, so they see it’s all pretend.”

“Too bad we’re out of grapes.”

“It’s all right. When Freddie’s older, I’ll show you how to make a bloodied severed hand out of a rubber glove.”

“I can’t wait.”

“What about food?”

“Vera’s been a Trojan.” With his mask on top of his head, Spence stood back to study the whole room. It felt good, really good to look at the results, and to know that he and Natasha had produced them together. “She’s made everything from deviled eggs to witch’s brew punch. You know what would have been great? A fog machine.”

“That’s the spirit.” His grin made her laugh and long to kiss him. “Next year.”

He liked the sound of that, he realized. Next year, and the year after. A little dazed at the speed with which his thoughts were racing, he only studied her.

“Is something wrong?”

“No.” He smiled. “Everything’s just fine.”

“I have the prizes here.” Wanting to rest her legs, Natasha sat on the arm of a chair beside a lounging ghoul. “For the games and costumes.”

“You didn’t have to do that.”

“I told you I wanted to. This is my favorite.” She pulled out a skull, then flicking a switch, set it on the floor where it skimmed along, disembodied, its empty eyes blinking.

“Your favorite.” Tongue in cheek, Spence picked it up where it vibrated in his hand.

“Yes. Very gruesome.” She tilted her head. “Say ‘Alas, poor Yorick!’”

He only laughed and switched it off. Then he pulled down his mask. “O, that this too, too solid flesh would melt.” She was chuckling when he came over and lifted her to her feet. “Give us a kiss.”

“No,” she decided after a moment. “You’re ugly.”

“Okay.” Obliging he pushed the mask up again. “How about it?”

“Much worse.” Solemnly she slid the mask down again.

“Very funny.”

“No, but it seemed necessary.” Linking her arm with his, she studied the room. “I think you’ll have a hit.”

“We’ll have a hit,” he corrected. “You know Freddie’s crazy about you.”

“Yes.” Natasha gave him an easy smile. “It’s mutual.”

They heard the front door slam and a shout. “Speaking of Freddie.”

Children arrived first in trickles, then in a flood. When the clock struck six, the room was full of ballerinas and pirates, monsters and superheroes. The haunted house brought gasps and shrieks and shudders. No one was brave enough to make the tour alone, though many made it twice, then a third time. Occasionally a stalwart soul was courageous enough to poke a finger into the mummy or touch the vampire’s cape.

When the lights were switched on there were moans of disappointment and a few relieved sighs. Freddie, a life-size Raggedy Ann, tore open her belated birthday presents with abandon.

“You’re a very good father,” Natasha murmured.

“Thanks.” He linked his fingers with hers, no longer questioning why it should be so right for them to stand together and watch over his daughter’s party. “Why?”

“Because you haven’t once retreated for aspirin, and you hardly winced when Mikey spilled punch on your rug.”

“That’s because I have to save my strength for when Vera sees it.” Spence dodged, in time to avoid collision with a fairy princess being chased by a goblin. There were squeals from every corner of

the room, punctuated by the crashing and moaning of the novelty record on the stereo. “As for the aspirin... How long can they keep this up?”

“Oh, a lot longer than we can.”

“You’re such a comfort.”

“We’ll have them play games now. You’ll be surprised how quickly two hours can pass.”

She was right. By the time the numbered noses had all been stuck in the vicinity of the pumpkin head, when musical chairs was only a fond memory, after the costume parade and judging, when the last apple bobbed alone and the final clothespin had clunked into a mason jar, parents began to trail in to gather up their reluctant Frankensteins and ghoulies. But the fun wasn’t over.

In groups and clutches, trick-or-treaters canvassed the neighborhood for candy bars and caramel apples. The wind-rushed night and crackling leaves were things they would remember long after the last chocolate drop had been consumed.

It was nearly ten before Spence managed to tuck an exhausted and thrilled Freddie into bed. “It was the best birthday I ever had,” she told him. “I’m glad I got the chicken pox.”

Spence rubbed a finger over a smeared orange freckle the cold cream had missed. “I don’t know if I’d go that far, but I’m glad you had fun.”

“Can I have—?”

“No.” He kissed her nose. “If you eat one more piece of candy you’ll blow up.”

She giggled, and because she was too tired to try any strategy, snuggled into her pillow. Memories were already swirling in her head. “Next year I want to be a gypsy like Tash. Okay?”

“Sure. Go to sleep now. I’m going to take Natasha home, but Vera’s here.”

“Are you going to marry Tash soon, so she can stay with us?”

Spence opened his mouth, then closed it again as Freddie yawned hugely. “Where do you get these ideas?” he muttered.

“How long does it take to get a baby sister?” she asked as she drifted off.

Spence rubbed a hand over his face, grateful that she had fallen asleep and saved him from answering.

Downstairs he found Natasha cleaning up the worst of the mess. She flicked back her hair as he came in. "When it looks as bad as this, you know you've had a successful party." Something in his expression had her narrowing her eyes. "Is something wrong?"

"No. No, it's Freddie."

"She has a tummy ache," Natasha said, instantly sympathetic.

"Not yet." He shrugged it off with a half laugh. "She always manages to surprise me. Don't," he said and took the trash bag from her. "You've done enough."

"I don't mind."

"I know."

Before he could take her hand, she linked her own. "I should be going. Tomorrow's Saturday—our busiest day."

He wondered what it would be like if they could simply walk upstairs together, into his bedroom. Into his bed. "I'll take you home."

"That's all right. You don't have to."

"I'd like to." The tension was back. Their eyes met, and he understood that she felt it as well. "Are you tired?"

"No." It was time for some truths, she knew. He had done what she'd asked and been only Freddie's father during the party. Now the party was over. But not the night.

"Would you like to walk?"

The corners of her lips turned up, then she put her hand into his. "Yes. I would."

It was colder now, with a bite in the air warning of winter. Above, the moon was full and chillingly white. Clouds danced over it, sending shadows shifting. Over the rustle of leaves they heard the echoing shouts and laughter of lingering trick-or-treaters. Inevitably the big oak on the corner had been wrapped in bathroom tissue by teenagers.

"I love this time," Natasha murmured. "Especially at night when there's a little wind. You can smell smoke from the chimneys."

On the main street, older children and college students still stalked in fright masks and painted faces. A poor imitation of a wolf howl bounced along the storefronts, followed by a feminine squeal

and laughter. A car full of ghouls paused long enough for them to lean out the windows and screech.

Spence watched the car turn a corner, its passengers still howling. "I can't remember being anywhere that Halloween was taken so seriously."

"Wait until you see what happens at Christmas."

Natasha's own pumpkin was glowing on her stoop beside a bowl half-filled with candy bars. There was a sign on her door. Take Only One. Or Else.

Spence shook his head at it. "That really does it?"

Natasha merely glanced at the sign. "They know me."

Leaning over, Spence plucked one. "Can I have a brandy to go with it?"

She hesitated. If she let him come in, it was inevitable that they would pick up where the earlier kiss had left off. It had been two months, she thought, two months of wondering, of stalling, of pretending. They both knew it had to stop sooner or later.

"Of course." She opened the door and let him in.

Wound tight, she went into the kitchen to pour drinks. It was yes or it was no, she told herself. She had known the answer long before this night, even prepared for it. But what would it be like with him? What would she be like? And how, when she had shared herself with him in that most private way, would she be able to pretend she didn't need more?

Couldn't need more, Natasha reminded herself. Whatever her feelings for him, and they were deeper, much deeper than she dared admit, life had to continue as it was. No promises, no vows. No broken hearts.

He turned when she came back into the room, but didn't speak. His own thoughts were mixed and confused. What did he want? Her, certainly. But how much, how little could he accept? He'd been sure he'd never feel this way again. More than sure that he would never want to. Yet it seemed so easy to feel, every time he looked at her.

"Thanks." He took the brandy, watching her as he sipped. "You know, the first time I lectured, I stood at the podium and my mind went completely blank. For one terrible moment I couldn't think of

anything I'd planned to say. I'm having exactly the same problem now."

"You don't have to say anything."

"It's not as easy as I thought it would be." He took her hand, surprised to find it cold and unsteady. Instinctively he lifted it to press his lips to the palm. It helped, knowing she was as nervous as he. "I don't want to frighten you."

"This frightens me." She could feel sensation spear her. "Sometimes people say I think too much. Maybe it's true. If it is, it's because I feel too much. There was a time...." She took her hand from his, wanting to be strong on her own. "There was a time," she repeated, "when I let what I felt decide for me. There are some mistakes that you pay for until you die."

"This isn't a mistake." He set down the brandy to take her face between his hands.

Her fingers curled around his wrists. "I don't want it to be. There can't be any promises, Spence, because I'd rather not have them than have them broken. I don't need or want pretty words. They're too easily said." Her grip tightened. "I want to be your lover, but I need respect, not poetry."

"Are you finished?"

"I need for you to understand," she insisted.

"I'm beginning to. You must have loved him a great deal."

She dropped her hands, but steadied herself before she answered. "Yes."

It hurt, surprising him. He could hardly be threatened by someone from her past. He had a past, as well. But he *was* threatened, and he *was* hurt. "I don't care who he was, and I don't give a damn what happened." That was a lie, he realized, and one he'd have to deal with sooner or later. "But I don't want you thinking of him when you're with me."

"I don't, not the way you mean."

"Not in any way."

She raised a brow. "You can't control my thoughts or anything else about me."

"You're wrong." Fueled by impotent jealousy, he pulled her into his arms. The kiss was angry, demanding, possessive. And

tempting. Tempting her so close to submission that she struggled away.

“I won’t be taken.” Her voice was only more defiant because she was afraid she was wrong.

“Your rules, Natasha?”

“Yes. If they’re fair.”

“To whom?”

“Both of us.” She pressed her fingers against her temples for a moment. “We shouldn’t be angry,” she said more quietly. “I’m sorry.” She offered a shrug and a quick smile. “I’m afraid. It’s been a long time since I’ve been with anyone—since I’ve wanted to be.”

He picked up his brandy, staring into it as it swirled. “You make it hard for me to stay mad.”

“I’d like to think we were friends. I’ve never been friends with a lover.”

And he’d never been in love with a friend. It was a huge and frightening admission, and one he was certain he couldn’t make out loud. Perhaps, if he stopped being clumsy, he could show her.

“We are friends.” He held out a hand, then curled his fingers around hers. “Friends trust each other, Natasha.”

“Yes.”

He looked at their joined hands. “Why don’t we—?” A noise at the window had him breaking off and glancing over. Before he could move, Natasha tightened her hold. It took only a moment to see that she wasn’t frightened, but amused. She brought a finger from her free hand to her lips.

“I think it’s a good idea to be friends with my professor,” she said, lifting her voice and making a go-ahead gesture to Spence.

“I, ah, I’m glad Freddie and I have found so many nice people since we’ve moved.” Puzzled, he watched Natasha root through a drawer.

“It’s a nice town. Of course, sometimes there are problems. You haven’t heard about the woman who escaped from the asylum.”

“What asylum?” At her impatient glance, he covered himself. “No, I guess not.”

“The police are keeping very quiet about it. They know she’s in the area and don’t want people to panic.” Natasha flicked on the

flashlight she'd uncovered and nodded in approval as the batteries proved strong. "She's quite insane, you know, and likes to kidnap small children. Especially young boys. Then she tortures them, hideously. On a night with a full moon she creeps up on them, so silently, so evilly. Then before they can scream, she grabs them around the throat."

So saying, she whipped up the shade on the window. With the flashlight held under her chin, she pressed her face against the glass and grinned.

Twin screams echoed. There was a crash, a shout, then the scramble of feet.

Weak from laughter, Natasha leaned against the windowsill. "The Freedmont boys," she explained when she'd caught her breath. "Last year they hung a dead rat outside Annie's door." She pressed a hand to her heart as Spence came over to peer out the window. All he could see was two shadows racing across the lawn.

"I think the tables are well-turned."

"Oh, you should have seen their faces." She dabbed a tear from her lashes. "I don't think their hearts will start beating again until they pull the covers over their heads."

"This should be a Halloween they don't forget."

"Every child should have one goods care they remember always." Still smiling, she stuck the light under her chin again. "What do you think?"

"It's too late to scare me away." He took the flashlight and set it aside. Closing his hand over hers, he drew her to her feet. "It's time to find out how much is illusion, how much is reality." Slowly he pulled the shade down.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

It was very real. Painfully real. The feel of his mouth against hers left no doubt that she was alive and needy. The time, the place, meant nothing. Those could have been illusions. But he was not. Desire was not. She felt it spring crazily inside her at only a meeting of lips.

No, it wasn't simple. She had known since she had first tasted him, since she had first allowed herself to touch him that whatever happened between them would never be simple. Yet that was what she had been so certain she'd wanted. Simplicity, a smooth road, an easy path.

Not with him. And not ever again.

Accepting, she twined her arms around him. Tonight there would be no past, no future. Only one moment taken in both hands, gripped hard and enjoyed.

Answer for answer, need for need, they clung together. The low light near the door cast their silhouettes onto the wall, one shadow. It shifted when they did, then stilled.

When he swept her into his arms, she murmured a protest. She had said she wouldn't be taken and had meant it. Yet cradled there she didn't feel weak. She felt loved. In gratitude and in acceptance she pressed her lips to his throat. As he carried her toward the bedroom, she allowed herself to yield.

Then there was only moonlight. It crept through the thin curtain, softly, quietly, as a lover might creep through the window to find his

woman. Her lover said nothing as he set her on her feet by the bed. His silence told her everything.

He'd imagined her like this. It seemed impossible, yet he had. The image had been clear and vivid. He had seen her with her hair in wild tangles around her face, with her eyes dark and steady, her skin gleaming like the gold she wore. And in his imaginings, he'd seen much, much more.

Slowly he reached up to slip the scarf from her hair, to let it float soundlessly to the floor. She waited. With his eyes on hers he loosened another and another of the slashes of color—sapphire, emerald, amber—until they lay like jewels at her feet. She smiled. With his fingertips he drew the dress off her shoulders, then pressed his lips to the skin he'd bared.

A sigh and a shudder. Then she reached for him, struggling to breathe while she pulled his shirt over his head. His skin was taut and smooth under her palms. She could feel the quiver of muscle at the passage of her hands. As her eyes stayed on his, she could see the flash and fury of passion that darkened them.

He had to fight every instinct to prevent himself from tearing the dress from her, ripping aside the barriers and taking what she was offering. She wouldn't stop him. He could see it in her eyes, part challenge, part acknowledgment and all desire.

But he had promised her something. Though she claimed she wanted no promises, he intended to keep it. She would have romance, as much as he was capable of giving her.

Fighting for patience, he undid the range of buttons down her back. Her lips were curved when she pressed them to his chest. Her hands were smooth when she slipped his pants over his hips. As the dress slid to the floor, he brought her close for a long, luxurious kiss.

She swayed. It seemed foolish to her, but she was dizzy. Colors seemed to dance in her head to some frantic symphony she couldn't place. Her bracelets jingled when he lifted her hand to press a small circle of kisses upon her wrist. Material rustled, more notes to the song, when he slipped petticoat after colorful petticoat over her hips.

He hadn't believed she could be so beautiful. But now, standing before him in only a thin red chemise and the glitter of gold, she was almost more than a man could bear. Her eyes were nearly closed,

but her head was up—a habit of pride that suited her well. Moonlight swam around her.

Slowly she lifted her arms, crossing them in front of her to push the slender straps from her shoulders. The material trembled over her breasts, then clung for a fleeting instant before it slithered to the floor at their feet. Now there was only the glitter of gold against her skin. Exciting, erotic, exotic. She waited, then lifted her arms again—to him.

“I want you,” she said.

Flesh met flesh, drawing twin moans from each of them. Mouth met mouth, sending shock waves of pleasure and pain through both. Desire met desire, driving out reason.

Inevitable. It was the only thought that filtered through the chaos in her mind as her hands raced over him. No force this strong, no need this deep could be anything but inevitable. So she met that force, met that need, with all of her heart.

Patience was forgotten. She was a hunger in him already too long denied. He wanted all, everything she was, everything she had. Before he could demand, she was giving. When they tumbled onto the bed, his hands were already greedily searching to give and to take pleasure.

Could he have known it would be so huge, so consuming? Everything about her was vivid and honed sharp. Her taste an intoxicating mix of honey and whiskey, both heated. Her skin as lush as a rose petal drenched in evening dew. Her scent as dark as his own passion. Her need as sharp as a freshly whetted blade.

She arched against him, offering, challenging, crying out when he sought and found each secret. Pleasure arrowed into him as her small, agile body pressed against his. Strong, willful, she rolled over him to exploit and explore until his breath was a fire in his lungs and his body a mass of sensation. Half-mad, he tumbled with her over the bed and spread a tangle of sheets around them. When he lifted himself over her, he could see the wild curtain of her hair like a dark cloud, the deep, rich glow of her eyes as they clung to his. Her breathing was as hurried as his own, her body as willing.

Never before, he realized, and never again would he find anyone who matched him so perfectly. Whatever he needed, she

needed, whatever he wanted, she wanted. Before he could ask, she was answering. For the first time in his life, he knew what it was to make love with mind and heart and soul as well as body.

She thought of no one and of nothing but him. When he touched her, it was as though she'd never been touched before. When he said her name, it was the first time she'd heard it. When his mouth sought hers, it was a first kiss, the one she'd been waiting for, wishing for all of her life.

Palm to palm their hands met, fingers gripping hard like one soul grasping another. They watched each other as he filled her. And there was a promise, felt by both. In a moment of panic she shook her head. Then he was moving in her, and she with him.

“Again,” was all he said as he pulled her against him.

“Spence.”

“Again.” His mouth covered hers, waking her out of a half dream and into fresh passion.

He wanted her just as much, now that he knew what they could make between them, but with a fire that held steady on slow burn. This time, though desire was still keen, the madness was less intense. He could appreciate the subtle curves, the soft angles, the lazy sighs he could draw out of her with only a touch. It was like making love to some primitive goddess, naked but for the gold draped over her skin. After so long a thirst he quenched himself slowly, leisurely after that first, greedy gulp.

How had she ever imagined she had known what it was to love a man, or to be loved by one? There were pleasures here that as a woman she knew she had never tasted before. This was what it was to be steeped, to be drowned, to be sated. She ran her hands over him, absorbing the erotic sensations of the flick of his tongue, the scrape of his teeth, the play of those clever fingertips. No, these were new pleasures, very new. And their taste was freedom.

As the moon soared high into the night, so did she.

“I thought I had imagined what it would be like to be with you.” Her head resting on his shoulder, Spence trailed his fingers up and down her arm. “I didn’t even come close.”

“I thought I would never be here with you.” She smiled into the dark. “I was very wrong.”

“Thank God. Natasha—”

With a quick shake of her head, she put a finger to his lips. “Don’t say too much. It’s easy to say too much in the moonlight.” And easy to believe it, she added silently.

Though impatient, he bit back the words he wanted to say. He had made a mistake once before by wanting too much, too quickly. He was determined not to make mistakes with Natasha. “Can I tell you that I’ll never look at gold chains in quite the same way again?”

With a little chuckle she pressed a kiss to his shoulder. “Yes, you can tell me that.”

He toyed with her bracelets. “Can I tell you I’m happy?”

“Yes.”

“Are you?”

She tilted her head to look at him. “Yes. Happier than I thought I could be. You make me feel...” She smiled, making a quick movement with her shoulders. “Like magic.”

“Tonight was magic.”

“I was afraid,” she murmured. “Of you, of this. Of myself,” she admitted. “It’s been a very long time for me.”

“It’s been a long time for me, too.” At her restless movement, he caught her chin in his hand. “I haven’t been with anyone since before my wife died.”

“Did you love her very much? I’m sorry,” she said quickly and closed her eyes tight. “I have no business asking that.”

“Yes, you do.” He kept his fingers firm. “I loved her once, or I loved the idea of her. That idea was gone long before she died.”

“Please. Tonight isn’t the time to talk about things that were.”

When she sat up, he went with her, cupping her forearms in his hands. “Maybe not. But there are things I need to tell you, things we will talk about.”

“Is what happened before so important?”

He heard the trace of desperation in her voice and wished he could find the reason. “I think it could be.”

“This is now.” She closed her hands over his. It was as close to a promise as she dared make. “Now I want to be your friend and

your lover.”

“Then be both.”

She calmed herself with a deliberate effort.

“Perhaps I don’t want to talk about other women while I’m in bed with you.”

He could feel that she was braced and ready to argue. In a move that threw her off, he leaned closer to touch his lips to her brow. “We’ll let you use that one for now.”

“Thank you.” She brushed a hand through his hair. “I’d like to spend this night with you, all night.” With a half smile, she shook her head. “You can’t stay.”

“I know.” He caught her hand to bring it to his lips. “Freddie would have some very awkward questions for me if I wasn’t around for breakfast in the morning.”

“She’s a very lucky girl.”

“I don’t like leaving this way.”

She smiled and kissed him. “I understand, as long as the other woman is only six.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow.” Bending closer, he deepened the kiss.

“Yes.” On a sigh she wrapped her arms around him. “Once more,” she murmured, drawing him down to the bed. “Just once more.”

In her cramped office at the back of the shop, Natasha sat at her desk. She had come in early to catch up on the practical side of business. Her ledger was up-to-date, her invoices had been filled. With Christmas less than two months away, she had completed her orders. Early merchandise was already stacked wherever room could be found. It made her feel good to be surrounded by the wishes of children, and to know that on Christmas morning what was now stored in boxes would cause cries of delight and wonder.

But there were practicalities as well. She had only begun to think of displays, decorations and discounts. She would have to decide soon whether she wanted to hire part-time help for the seasonal rush.

Now, at midmorning, with Annie in charge of the shop, she had textbooks and notes spread out. Before business there were studies,

and she took both very seriously.

There was to be a test on the baroque era, and she intended to show her teacher—her lover—that she could hold her own.

Perhaps it shouldn't have been so important to prove she could learn and retain. But there had been times in her life, times she was certain Spence could never understand, when she had been made to feel inadequate, even stupid. The little girl with broken English, the thin teenager who'd thought more about dance than schoolbooks, the dancer who'd fought so hard to make her body bear the insults of training, the young woman who had listened to her heart, not her head.

She was none of those people any longer, and yet she was all of them. She needed Spence to respect her intelligence, to see her as an equal, not just as the woman he desired.

She was being foolish. On a sigh, Natasha leaned back in her chair to toy with the petals of the red rose that stood at her elbow. Even more than foolish, she was wrong. Spence was nothing like Anthony. Except for the vaguest of physical similarities, those two men were almost opposites. True, one was a brilliant dancer, the other a brilliant musician, but Anthony had been selfish, dishonest, and in the end cowardly.

She had never known a man more generous, a man kinder than Spence. He was compassionate and honest. Or was that her heart talking? To be sure. But the heart, she thought, didn't come with a guarantee like a mechanical toy. Every day she was with him, she fell deeper and deeper in love. So much in love, she thought, that there were moments, terrifying moments, when she wanted to toss aside everything and tell him.

She had offered her heart to a man before, a heart pure and fragile. When it had been given back to her, it had been scarred.

No, there were no guarantees.

How could she dare risk that again? Even knowing that what was happening to her now was different, very different from what had happened to the young girl of seventeen, how could she possibly take the chance of leaving herself open again to that kind of pain and humiliation?

Things were better as they were, she assured herself. They were two adults, enjoying each other. And they were friends.

Taking the rose out of its vase, she stroked it along her cheek. It was a pity that she and her friend could only find a few scattered hours to be alone. There was a child to consider, then there were schedules and responsibilities. But in those hours when her friend became her lover, she knew the true meaning of bliss.

Bringing herself back, she slipped the flower into the vase and shifted her concentration to her studies. Within five minutes the phone rang.

“Good morning, Fun House.”

“Good morning, businessperson.”

“Mama!”

“So, you are busy or you have a moment to talk to your mother?”

Natasha cradled the phone in both hands, loving the sound of her mother’s voice. “Of course I have a moment. All the moments you like.”

“I wondered, since you have not called me in two weeks.”

“I’m sorry.” For two weeks a man had been the center of her life. But she could hardly tell that to her mother. “How are you and Papa and everyone?”

“Papa and me and everyone are good. Papa gets a raise.”

“Wonderful.”

“Mikhail doesn’t see the Italian girl anymore.” Nadia gave thanks in Ukrainian and made Natasha laugh. “Alex, he sees all the girls. Smart boy, my Alex. And Rachel has time for nothing but her studies. What of Natasha?”

“Natasha is fine. I’m eating well and getting plenty of sleep,” she added before Nadia could ask.

“Good. And your store?”

“We’re about to get ready for Christmas, and I expect a better year than last.”

“I want you to stop sending your money.”

“I want you to stop worrying about your children.”

Nadia’s sigh made Natasha smile. It was an old argument. “You are a very stubborn woman.”



“Like my mama.”

That was true enough, and Nadia clearly didn't intend to concede. “We will talk about this when you come for Thanksgiving.”

Thanksgiving, Natasha thought. How could she have forgotten? Clamping the receiver between ear and shoulder, she flipped through her calendar. It was less than two weeks away. “I can't argue with my mother on Thanksgiving.” Natasha made a note for herself to call the train station. “I'll be up late Wednesday evening. I'll bring the wine.”

“You bring yourself.”

“Myself and the wine.” Natasha scribbled another note to herself. It was a difficult time to take off, but she had never missed—and would never miss—a holiday at home. “I'll be so glad to see all of you again.”

“Maybe you bring a friend.”

It was another old routine, but this time, for the first time, Natasha hesitated. No, she told herself with a shake of her head. Why would Spence want to spend Thanksgiving in Brooklyn?

“Natasha?” Nadia's well-honed instincts had obviously picked up her daughter's mental debate. “You have friend?”

“Of course. I have a lot of friends.”

“Don't be smart with your mama. Who is he?”

“He's no one.” Then she rolled her eyes as Nadia began tossing out questions. “All right, all right. He's a professor at the college, a widower,” she added. “With a little girl. I was just thinking they might like company for the holiday, that's all.”

“Ah.”

“Don't give me that significant ah, Mama. He's a friend, and I'm very fond of the little girl.”

“How long you know him?”

“They just moved here late this summer. I'm taking one of his courses, and the little girl comes in the shop sometimes.” It was all true, she thought. Not all the truth, but all true. She hoped her tone was careless. “If I get around to it, I might ask him if he'd like to come up.”

“The little girl, she can sleep with you and Rachel.”

“Yes, if—”

“The professor, he can take Alex’s room. Alex can sleep on the couch.”

“He may already have plans.”

“You ask.”

“All right. If it comes up.”

“You ask,” Nadia repeated. “Now go back to work.”

“Yes, Mama. I love you.”

Now she’d done it, Natasha thought as she hung up. She could almost see her mother standing beside the rickety telephone table and rubbing her hands together.

What would he think of her family, and they of him? Would he enjoy a big, rowdy meal? She thought of the first dinner they had shared, the elegant table, the quiet, discreet service. He probably has plans anyway, Natasha decided. It just wasn’t something she was going to worry about.

Twenty minutes later the phone rang again. It was probably her mother, Natasha thought, calling with a dozen questions about this “friend.” Braced, Natasha picked up the receiver. “Good morning, Fun House.”

“Natasha.”

“Spence?” Automatically she checked her watch. “Why aren’t you at the university? Are you sick?”

“No. No. I came home between classes. I’ve got about an hour. I need you to come.”

“To your house?” There was an urgency in his voice, but it had nothing to do with disaster and everything to do with excitement. “Why? What is it?”

“Just come, will you? It’s nothing I can explain. I have to show you. Please.”

“Yes, all right. Are you sure you’re not sick?”

“No.” She heard his laugh and relaxed. “No, I’m not sick. I’ve never felt better. Hurry up, will you?”

“Ten minutes.” Natasha snatched up her coat. He’d sounded different. Happy? No, elated, ecstatic. What did a man have to be ecstatic about in the middle of the morning? Perhaps he was sick. Pulling on her gloves, she dashed into the shop.

“Annie, I have to—” She stopped, blinked, then stared at the image of Annie being kissed, soundly, by Terry Maynard. “I...excuse me.”

“Oh, Tash, Terry just... Well, he...” Annie blew the hair out of her eyes and grinned foolishly. “Are you going out?”

“Yes, I have to see someone.” She bit her lip to keep from grinning back. “I won’t be more than an hour. Can you manage?”

“Sure.” Annie smoothed down her hair, while Terry stood beside her, turning various shades of red. “It has been a quiet morning. Take your time.”

Perhaps the world had decided to go crazy today, Natasha thought as she rushed down the street. First her mother calling, already preparing to kick Alex out of his bed for a stranger. Spence demanding she come to his house and see...something in the middle of the day. And now Annie and Terry, kissing each other beside the cash register. Well, she could only deal with one at a time. It looked as though Spence was first on the list.

She took his steps two at time, convinced he was suffering from some sort of fever. When he pulled open the door before she reached it, she was certain of it. His eyes were bright, his color up. His sweater was rumpled and his tie unknotted.

“Spence, are you—?”

Before she could get the words out, he was snatching her up, crushing his mouth to hers as he swung her around and around. “I thought you’d never get here.”

“I came as quickly as I could.” Instinctively she put a hand to his cheek. Then the look in his eyes had her narrowing her own. No, it wasn’t a fever, she decided. At least it wasn’t the kind that required medical attention. “If you had me run all the way over here for that, I’m going to hit you very hard.”

“For—no,” he answered on a laugh. “Though it’s a wonderful idea. A really wonderful idea.” He kissed her again until she thoroughly agreed with him. “I feel like I could make love with you for hours, days, weeks.”

“They might miss you in class,” she murmured. Steadying herself, she stepped back. “You sounded excited. Did you win the lottery?”

“Better. Come here.” Remembering the door, he slammed it shut, then pulled her into the music room. “Don’t say anything. Just sit.”

She obliged, but when he went to the piano, she started to stand again. “Spence, I’d enjoy a concert, but—”

“Don’t talk,” he said impatiently. “Just listen.”

And he began to play.

It took only moments for her to realize it was nothing she’d heard before. Nothing that had been written before. A tremor ran through her body. She clasped her hands tightly in her lap.

Passion. Each note swelled with it, soared with it, wept with it. She could only stare, seeing the intensity in his eyes and the fluid grace of his fingers on the keys. The beauty of it ripped at her, digging deep into heart and into soul. How could it be that her feelings, her most intimate feelings could be put to music?

As the tempo built, her pulse beat thickly. She couldn’t have spoken, could hardly breathe. Then the music flowed into something sad and strong. And alive. She closed her eyes as it crashed over her, unaware that tears had begun to spill onto her cheeks.

When it ended, she sat very still.

“I don’t have to ask you what you think,” Spence murmured. “I can see it.”

She only shook her head. She didn’t have the words to tell him. There were no words. “When?”

“Over the last few days.” The emotion the song had wrenched from him came flooding back. Rising, he went to her to take her hands and pulled her to her feet. As their fingers met, she could feel the intensity he’d poured into his music. “It came back.” He pressed her hands to his lips. “At first it was terrifying. I could hear it in my head, the way I used to. It’s like being plugged into heaven, Natasha. I can’t explain it.”

“No. You don’t have to. I heard it.”

She understood, he thought. Somehow he’d been sure she would. “I thought it was just wishful thinking, or that when I sat down there...” He looked back at the piano. “That it would vanish. But it didn’t. It flowed. God, it’s like being given back your hands or your eyes.”

“It was always there.” She lifted her hands to his face. “It was just resting.”

“No, *you* brought it back. I told you once, my life had changed when I met you. I didn’t know how much. It’s for you, Natasha.”

“No, it’s for you. Very much for you.” Wrapping her arms around him, she pressed her mouth to his. “It’s just the beginning.”

“Yes.” He dragged his hands through her hair so that her face was tilted to his. “It is.” His grip only tightened when she would have pulled away. “If you heard that, if you understood that, you know what I mean. And you know what I feel.”

“Spence, it would be wrong for you to say anything now. Your emotions are all on the surface. What you feel about your music is easily confused with other things.”

“That’s nonsense. You don’t want to hear me tell you that I love you.”

“No.” Panic skidded up her spine. “No, I don’t. If you care for me at all, you won’t.”

“It’s a hell of a position you put me in.”

“I’m sorry. I want you to be happy. As long as things go on as they are—”

“And how long can things go on as they are?”

“I don’t know. I can’t give you back the words you want to give to me. Even feeling them, I can’t.” Her eyes lifted again to meet his. “I wish I could.”

“Am I still competing against someone else?”

“No.” Quickly she reached out to take his hands. “No. What I felt for—before,” she corrected, “was a fantasy. A girl’s make-believe. This is real. I’m just not strong enough to hold onto it.”

Or too strong to give in to it, he thought. And it was hurting her. Perhaps because he wanted her so badly, his impatience was adding pressure that would break them apart instead of bring them together.

“Then I won’t tell you that I love you.” He kissed her brow. “And that I need you in my life.” He kissed her lips, lightly. “Not yet.” His fingers curled tightly over hers. “But there’ll come a time, Natasha, when I will tell you. When you’ll listen. When you’ll answer me.”

“You make it sound like a threat.”

“No, it’s one of those promises you don’t want to hear.” He kissed her on both cheeks, casually enough to confuse her. “I have to get back.”

“Yes, so do I.” She picked up her gloves, only to run them restlessly through her hands. “Spence, it meant a very great deal that you wanted to share this with me. I know what it’s like to lose part of yourself. I’m very proud of you and for you. And I’m glad that you celebrated this with me.”

“Come back, have dinner with me. I haven’t begun to celebrate.” She smiled again. “I’d like that.”

She didn’t often buy champagne, but it seemed appropriate. Even necessary. A bottle of wine was little enough to offer for what he had given her that morning. The music itself was a gift she would always treasure. With it, he’d given her time and a glimpse of hope.

Perhaps he did love her. If she believed it, she could allow herself time to let it strengthen. If she believed it, she would have to tell him everything. It was that, even more than her own fears that still held her back.

She needed time for that, as he did.

But tonight was for celebrating.

She knocked and tried a sober smile for Vera. “Good evening.”

“Miss.” With this noncommittal greeting, Vera opened the door wider. She kept her thoughts on Natasha very much to herself. True, the woman made the *señor* happy and seemed very fond of Freddie. But after more than three years of having them to herself, Vera was very cautious of sharing. “Dr. Kimball is in the music room with Freddie.”

“Thank you. I brought some wine.”

“I will take it.”

With only a little sigh, Natasha watched Vera walk away. The more the housekeeper held firm, the more determined Natasha was to win her over.

She heard Freddie’s giggles as she approached the music room. And others, she realized. When she reached the door, she spotted Freddie and JoBeth clinging to each other and squealing.

And why not? Natasha thought with a grin. Spence was wearing a ridiculous helmet and aiming a cardboard spool like a weapon.

“Stowaways aboard my ship are fed to the Beta Monster,” he warned them. “He has six-foot teeth and bad breath.”

“No!” Eyes wide, heart pounding with delight and dread, Freddie scrambled for cover. “Not the Beta Monster.”

“He likes little girls best.” With an evil laugh, he scooped the squealing JoBeth under one arm. “He swallows little boys whole, but he chews and chews and chews when I feed him girls.”

“That’s gross.” JoBeth covered her mouth with both hands.

“You bet.” So saying, Spence made a dive and came up with a squirming Freddie. “Say your prayers, you’re about to be the main course.” Then with a muffled “Oomph,” he tumbled onto the couch with both of them.

“We vanquished you!” Freddie announced, climbing over him. “The Wonder Sisters vanquished you.”

“This time, but next time it’s the Beta Monster.” As he blew the hair out of his eyes, he spotted Natasha in the doorway. “Hi.” She thought his smile was adorably sheepish. “I’m a space pirate.”

“Oh. Well, that explains it.” Before she could step into the room, both girls deserted the space pirate to launch themselves at her.

“We always beat him,” Freddie told her. “Always, always.”

“I’m glad to hear it. I wouldn’t want anyone I know to be eaten by the Beta Monster.”

“He just made it up,” JoBeth said wisely. “Dr. Kimball makes things up real good.”

“Yes, I know.”

“JoBeth’s going to stay for dinner, too. You’re going to be Daddy’s guest and she’s going to be mine. You get to have seconds first.”

“That’s very polite.” She bent to kiss Freddie’s cheeks, then JoBeth’s. “How is your mama?”

“She’s going to have a baby.” JoBeth screwed up her face and shrugged her shoulders.

“I heard.” Natasha smoothed JoBeth’s hair. “Are you taking care of her?”

“She doesn’t get sick in the mornings anymore, but Daddy says she’ll be fat soon.”

Miserably envious, Freddie shifted from one foot to the other. “Let’s go up to my room,” she told JoBeth. “We can play with the kittens.”

“You will wash your hands and faces,” Vera told them as she came in with the ice bucket and glasses. “Then you will come down to dinner, walking like ladies, not running like elephants.” She nodded to Spence. “Miss Stanislaski brought champagne.”

“Thank you, Vera.” Belatedly he remembered to remove his helmet.

“Dinner in fifteen minutes,” she stated, then went out.

“Now she knows I have designs on you,” Natasha muttered. “And is certain I’m after your great wealth.”

With a laugh, he pried the cork free. “That’s all right, I know you’re only after my body.” Wine frothed to the lip of the glasses, then receded.

“I like it very much. Your body.” With a smile she accepted the flute of champagne.

“Then maybe you’d like to enjoy it later.” He touched the rim of his glass to hers. “Freddie twisted my arm and got me to agree to a sleep-over at the Rileys’. So I don’t feel left out, maybe I can stay with you tonight. All night.”

Natasha took her first sip of wine, letting the taste explode on her tongue. “Yes,” she said, and smiled at him.



## CHAPTER NINE

Natasha watched the shadows dancing from the lights the candles tossed around the room. Soothing, they played over the curtains, the top rung of the old ladder-back chair in the corner, over the coxcomb she had impulsively slipped into an empty milk bottle and set on her dresser. Her room, she thought. It had always been very much hers. Until...

With a half sigh she let her hand rest on Spence's heart.

It was no longer quiet; the wind had risen to toss a late, cold rain against the panes. Outside it was a chilled, gusty night that promised a chilled, frosty morning. Winter often came early to the little town snuggled in the foothills of the Blue Ridge. But she was warm, beautifully warm, in Spence's arms.

The silence between them was easy, as the loving had been. Curled close, they lay still, content to let the hours pass, one lazy second at a time. Each of them quietly celebrated the knowledge that in the morning they wouldn't wake alone. His hand skimmed over her thigh, her hip, until it linked with hers.

There was music playing inside her head—the song he had given her that morning. She knew she would remember each note, each chord, for the rest of her life. And it was only the beginning for him, or a new beginning. The idea of that delighted her. In the years to come she would hear his music and remember the time they had had together. On hearing it she would celebrate again, even if his music took him away.

Still, she had to ask.

“Will you go back to New York?”

He brushed his lips through her hair. “Why?”

“You’re composing again.” She could imagine him there, in evening dress, attending the opening of his own symphony.

“I don’t need to be in New York to compose. And if I did, there are more reasons to stay here.”

“Freddie.”

“Yes, there’s Freddie. And there’s you.”

Her restless movement rustled the sheets. She could see him after the symphony at some small intimate party, the Rainbow Room perhaps, or a private club. He would be dancing with a beautiful woman.

“The New York you lived in is different from mine.”

“I imagine.” He wondered why that should matter to her. “Do you ever think of going back?”

“To live, no. But to visit.” It was silly, she thought, to be nervous about asking such a simple thing. “My mother called me today.”

“Is everything all right?”

“Yes. She only called to remind me about Thanksgiving. I’d almost forgotten. Every year we have a big dinner and eat too much. Do you go home for the holiday?”

“I am home.”

“I mean to your family.” She shifted to watch his face.

“I only have Freddie. And Nina,” he added. “She always goes out to the Waldorf.”

“Your parents. I’ve never asked you if you still have them, or where they live.”

“They’re in Cannes.” Or was it Monte Carlo? It occurred to him suddenly that he didn’t know for certain. The ties there were loose, comfortably so for everyone involved.

“Won’t they come back for the holidays?”

“They never come to New York in the winter.”

“Oh.” Try as she might, she couldn’t picture the holidays without family.

“We never ate at home on Thanksgiving. We always went out, were usually traveling.” His memories of his childhood were more of places than people, more of music than words. “When I was married

to Angela, we usually met friends at a restaurant and went to the theater.”

“But—” She caught herself and fell silent.

“But what?”

“Once you had Freddie.”

“Nothing changed.” He shifted onto his back to stare at the ceiling. He’d wanted to tell her about his marriage, about himself—the man he had been—but had put it off. For too long, he reflected. How could he expect to build, when he had yet to clear away the emotional rubble of his past? “I’ve never explained to you about Angela.”

“It’s not necessary.” She took his hand again. She’d wanted to invite him to a meal, not dredge up old ghosts.

“It is for me.” Sitting up, he reached for the bottle of champagne they had brought back with them. Filling both glasses, he handed her one.

“I don’t need explanations, Spence.”

“But you’ll listen?”

“Yes, if it’s important to you.”

He took a moment to gather his thoughts. “I was twenty-five when I met her. On top of the world as far as my music went, and to be honest, at twenty-five, very little else mattered to me. I had spent my life traveling, doing exactly what I pleased and being successful in what was most important to me. I don’t believe anyone had ever told me, ‘No, you can’t have that. No, you can’t do that.’ When I saw her, I wanted her.”

He paused to sip, to look back. Beside him Natasha stared into her glass, watching bubbles rise. “And she wanted you.”

“In her way. The pity was that her attraction for me was as shallow as mine for her. And in the end just as destructive. I loved beautiful things.” With a half laugh he tilted his glass again. “And I was used to having them. She was exquisite, like a delicate porcelain doll. We moved in the same circles, attended the same parties, preferred the same literature and music.”

Natasha shifted her glass from one hand to the other, wishing his words didn’t make her feel so miserable. “It’s important to have things in common.”

“Oh, we had plenty in common. She was as spoiled and as pampered as I, as self-absorbed and as ambitious. I don’t think we shared any particularly admirable qualities.”

“You’re too hard on yourself.”

“You didn’t know me then.” He found himself profoundly grateful for that. “I was a very rich young man who took everything I had for granted, because I had always had it. Things change,” he murmured.

“Only people who are born with money can consider it a disadvantage.”

He glanced over to see her sitting cross-legged, the glass cupped in both hands. Her eyes were solemn and direct, and made him smile at himself. “Yes, you’re right. I wonder what might have happened if I had met you when I was twenty-five.” He touched her hair, but didn’t dwell on the point. “In any case, Angela and I were married within a year and bored with each other only months after the ink had dried on the marriage certificate.”

“Why?”

“Because at that time we were so much alike. When it started to fall apart, I wanted badly to fix it. I’d never failed at anything. The worst of it was, I wanted the marriage to work more for my own ego than because of my feelings for her. I was in love with the image of her and the image we made together.”

“Yes.” She thought of herself and her feelings for Anthony. “I understand.”

“Do you?” The question was only a murmur. “It took me years to understand it. In any case, once I did, there were other considerations.”

“Freddie,” Natasha said again.

“Yes, Freddie. Though we still lived together and went through the motions of marriage, Angela and I had drifted apart. But in public and in private we were...civilized. I can’t tell you how demeaning and destructive a civilized marriage can be. It’s a cheat, Natasha, to both parties. And we were equally to blame. Then one day she came home furious, livid. I remember how she stalked over to the bar, tossing her mink aside so that it fell on the floor. She poured a drink, drank it down, then threw the glass against the wall. And told me she was pregnant.”

Her throat dry, Natasha drank. "How did you feel?"

"Stunned. Rocked. We'd never planned on having children. We were much too much children, spoiled children ourselves. Angela had had a little more time to think it all through and had her answer. She wanted to go to Europe to a private clinic and have an abortion."

Something tightened inside Natasha. "Is that what you wanted?"

He wished, how he wished he could have answered unequivocally no. "At first I didn't know. My marriage was falling apart, I'd never given a thought to having children. It seemed sensible. And then, I'm not sure why, but I was furious. I guess it was because it was the easy way again, the easy way out for both of us. She wanted me to snap my fingers and get rid of this... inconvenience."

Natasha stared down at her own balled fist. His words were hitting much too close to home. "What did you do?"

"I made a bargain with her. She would have the baby, and we would give the marriage another shot. She would have the abortion and I would divorce her, and make certain that she didn't get what she considered her share of the Kimball money."

"Because you wanted the child."

"No." It was a painful admission, one that still cost him. "Because I wanted my life to run the way I'd imagined it would. I knew if she had an abortion, we would never put the pieces back. I thought perhaps if we shared this, we'd pull it all together again."

Natasha remained silent for a moment, absorbing his words and seeing them reflected in her own memories. "People sometimes think a baby will fix what's broken."

"And it doesn't," he finished. "Nor should it have to. By the time Freddie was born, I was already losing my grip on my music. I couldn't write. Angela had delivered Freddie, then passed her over to Vera, as though she were no more than a litter of kittens. I was little better."

"No." She reached out to take his wrist. "I've seen you with her. I know how you love her."

"Now. What you said to me that night on the steps of the college, about not deserving her. It hurt because it was true." He saw Natasha shake her head but went on. "I'd made a bargain with

Angela, and for more than a year I kept it. I barely saw the child, because I was so busy escorting Angela to the ballet or the theater. I'd stopped working completely. I did nothing. I never fed her or bathed her or cuddled her at night. Sometimes I'd hear her crying in the other room and wonder—what is that noise? Then I'd remember.”

He picked up the bottle to top off his glass. “Sometime before Freddie was two I stepped back and looked at what I'd done with my life. And what I hadn't done. It made me sick. I had a child. It took more than a year for it to sink in. I had no marriage, no wife, no music, but I had a child. I decided I had an obligation, a responsibility, and it was time to pull myself up and deal with it. That's how I thought of Freddie at first, when I finally began to think of her. An obligation.” He drank again, then shook his head. “That was little better than ignoring her. Finally I looked, really looked at that beautiful little girl and fell in love. I picked her up out of her crib, scared to death, and just held her. She screamed for Vera.”

He laughed at that, then stared once more into his wine. “It took months before she was comfortable around me. By that time I'd asked Angela for a divorce. She'd snapped up my offer without a blink. When I told her I was keeping the child, she wished me luck and walked out. She never came back to see Freddie, not once in all the months the lawyers were battling over a settlement. Then I heard that she'd been killed. A boating accident in the Mediterranean. Sometimes I'm afraid Freddie remembers what her mother was like. More, I'm afraid she'll remember what I was like.”

Natasha remembered how Freddie had spoken of her mother when they had rocked. Setting aside her glass, she took Spence's face in her hand. “Children forgive,” she told him. “Forgiveness is easy when you're loved. It's harder, so much harder to forgive yourself. But you must.”

“I think I've begun to.”

Natasha took his glass and set it aside. “Let me love you,” she said simply, and enfolded him.

It was different now that passion had mellowed. Slower, smoother, richer. As they knelt on the bed, their mouths met dreamily—a long, lazy exploration of tastes that had become hauntingly

familiar. She wanted to show him what he meant to her, and that what they had together, tonight, was worlds apart from what had been. She wanted to comfort, excite and cleanse.

A sigh, then a murmur, then a low, liquid moan. The sounds were followed by a light, breezy touch. Fingertips trailing on flesh. She knew his body now as well as her own, every angle, every plane, every vulnerability. When his breath caught on a tremble, her laughter came quietly. Watching him in the shifting candlelight, she brushed kisses at his temple, his cheek, the corner of his mouth, his throat. There a pulse beat for her, heavy and fast.

She was as erotic as any fantasy, her body swaying first to, then away from his. Her eyes stayed on him, glowing, aware, and her hair fell in a torrent of dark silk over her naked shoulders.

When he touched her, skimming his hands up and over, her head fell back. But there was nothing of submission in the gesture. It was a demand. Pleasure me.

On a groan he lowered his mouth to her throat and felt the need punch like a fist through his gut. His open mouth growing greedy, he trailed down her, pausing to linger at the firm swell of her breast. He could feel her heart, almost taste it, as its beat grew fast and hard against his lips. Her hands came to his hair, gripping tight while she arched like a bow.

Before he could think he reached for her and sent her spiraling over the first crest.

Breathless, shuddering, she clung, managing only a confused murmur as he laid her back on the bed. She struggled for inner balance, but he was already destroying will and mind and control.

This was seduction. She hadn't asked for it, hadn't wanted it. Now she welcomed it. She couldn't move, couldn't object. Helpless, drowning in her own pleasure, she let him take her where he willed. His mouth roamed freely over her damp skin. His hands played her as skillfully as they might a fine-tuned instrument. Her muscles went lax.

Her breath began to rush through her lips. She heard music. Symphonies, cantatas, preludes. Weakness became strength and she reached for him, wanting only to feel his body fit against her own.

Slowly, tormentingly, he slid up her, leaving trails of heat and ice, of pleasure and pain. His own body throbbed as she moved under him. He found her mouth, diving deep, holding back even when her fingers dug into his hips.

Again and again he brought them both shivering to the edge, only to retreat, prolonging dozens of smaller pleasures. Her throat was a long white column he could feast on as she rose to him. Her arms wrapped themselves fast around him like taut silk. Her breath rushed along his cheek, then into his mouth, where it formed his own name like a prayer against his lips.

When he slipped into her, even pleasure was shattered.

Natasha awoke to the scent of coffee and soap, and the enjoyable sensation of having her neck nuzzled.

"If you don't wake up," Spence murmured into her ear, "I'm going to have to crawl back into bed with you."

"All right," she said on a sigh and snuggled closer.

Spence took along, reluctant look at her shoulders, which the shifting sheets had bared. "It's tempting, but I should be home in an hour."

"Why?" Her eyes still closed, she reached out. "It's early."

"It's nearly nine."

"Nine? In the morning?" Her eyes flew open. She shot up in bed, and he wisely moved the cup of coffee out of harm's way. "How can it be nine?"

"It comes after eight."

"But I never sleep so late." She pushed back her hair with both hands, then managed to focus. "You're dressed."

"Unfortunately," he agreed, even more reluctantly when the sheets pooled around her waist. "Freddie's due home at ten. I had a shower." Reaching out, he began to toy with her hair. "I was going to wake you, see if you wanted to join me, but you looked so terrific sleeping I didn't have the heart." He leaned over to nip at her bottom lip. "I've never watched you sleep before."

The very idea of it had the blood rushing warm under her skin. "You should have gotten me up."



“Yes.” With a half smile he offered her the coffee. “I can see I made a mistake. Easy with the coffee,” he warned. “It’s really terrible. I’ve never made it before.”

Eyeing him, she took a sip, then grimaced. “You really should have wakened me.” But she valiantly took another sip, thinking how sweet it was of him to bring it to her. “Do you have time for breakfast? I’ll make you some.”

“I’d like that. I was going to grab a doughnut from the bakery down the street.”

“I can’t make pastries like Ye Old Sweet Shoppe, but I can fix you eggs.” Laughing, she set the cup aside. “And coffee.”

In ten minutes she was wrapped in a short red robe, frying thin slices of ham. He liked watching her like this, her hair tousled, eyes still heavy with sleep. She moved competently from stove to counter, like a woman who had grown up doing such chores as a matter of course.

Outside a thin November rain was falling from a pewter sky. He heard the muffled sound of footsteps from the apartment above, then the faint sound of music. Jazz from the neighbor’s radio. And there was the sizzle of meat grilling, the hum of the baseboard heater under the window. Morning music, Spence thought.

“I could get used to this,” he said, thinking aloud.

“To what?” Natasha popped two slices of bread into the toaster.

“To waking up with you, having breakfast with you.”

Her hands fluttered once, as if her thoughts had suddenly taken a sharp turn. Then, very deliberately they began to work again. And she said nothing at all.

“That’s the wrong thing to say again, isn’t it?”

“It isn’t right or wrong.” Her movements brisk, she brought him a cup of coffee. She would have turned away once more, but he caught her wrist. When she forced herself to look at him, she saw that the expression in his eyes was very intense. “You don’t want me to fall in love with you, Natasha, but neither one of us have a choice about it.”

“There’s always a choice,” she said carefully. “It’s sometimes hard to make the right one, or to know the right one.”

“Then it’s already been made. I am in love with you.”

He saw the change in her face, a softening, a yielding, and something in her eyes, something deep and shadowed and incredibly beautiful. Then it was gone. “The eggs are going to burn.”

His hand balled into a fist as she walked back to the stove. Slowly, carefully he flexed his fingers. “I said I love you, and you’re worried about eggs burning.”

“I’m a practical woman, Spence. I’ve had to be.” But it was hard to think, very hard, when her mind and heart were dragging her in opposing directions. She fixed the plates with the care she might have given to a state dinner. Going over and over the words in her head, she set the plates on the table, then sat down across from him.

“We’ve only known each other a short time.”

“Long enough.”

She moistened her lips. What she heard in his voice was more hurt than anger. She wanted nothing less than to hurt him. “There are things about me you don’t know. Things I’m not ready to tell you.”

“They don’t matter.”

“They do.” She took a deep breath. “We have something. It would be ridiculous to try to deny it. But love—there is no bigger word in the world. If we share that word, things will change.”

“Yes.”

“I can’t let them. From the beginning I told you there could be no promises, no plans. I don’t want to move my life beyond what I have now.”

“Is it because I have a child?”

“Yes, and no.” For the first time since he’d met her, nerves showed in the way she linked and unlinked her fingers. “I would love Freddie even if I hated you. For herself. Because I care for you, I only love her more. But for you and me to take what we have and make something more from this would change even that. I’m not ready to take on the responsibilities of a child.” Under the table she pressed her hand hard against her stomach. “But with or without Freddie, I don’t want to take the next step with you. I’m sorry, and I understand if you don’t want to see me again.”

Torn between frustration and fury, he rose to pace to the window. The rain was still falling thinly, coldly upon the dying flowers

outside. She was leaving something out, something big and vital. She didn't trust him yet, Spence realized. After everything they'd shared, she didn't yet trust him. Not enough.

"You know I can't stop seeing you, any more than I can stop loving you."

You could stop being in love, she thought, but found herself afraid to tell him. It was selfish, hideously so, but she wanted him to love her. "Spence, three months ago I didn't even know you."

"So I'm rushing things."

She moved her shoulder and began to poke at her eggs.

He studied her from behind, the way she held herself, how her fingers moved restlessly from her fork to her cup, then back again. He wasn't rushing a damn thing, and they both knew it. She was afraid. He leaned against the window, thinking it through. Some jerk had broken her heart, and she was afraid to have it broken again.

All right, he thought. He could get around that. A little time and the most subtle kind of pressure. He would get around it, he promised himself. For the first part of his life, he'd thought nothing would ever be as important to him as his music. In the last few years he'd learned differently. A child was infinitely more important, more precious and more beautiful. Now he'd been taught in a matter of weeks that a woman could be as important, in a different way, but just as important.

Freddie had waited for him, bless her. He would wait for Natasha.

"Want to go to a matinee?"

She'd been braced for anger, so only looked blankly over her shoulder. "What?"

"I said would you like to go to a matinee? The movies." Casually he walked back to the table to join her. "I promised Freddie I'd take her to the movies this afternoon."

"I—yes." A cautious smile bloomed. "I'd like to go with you. You're not angry with me?"

"Yes, I am." But he returned her smile as he began to eat. "I figured if you came along, you'd buy the popcorn."

"Okay."

"The jumbo size."

“Ah, now I begin to see the strategy. You make me feel guilty, so I spend all my money.”

“That’s right, and when you’re broke, you’ll have to marry me. Great eggs,” he added when her mouth dropped open. “You should eat yours before they get cold.”

“Yes.” She cleared her throat. “Since you’ve offered me an invitation, I have one for you. I was going to mention it last night, but you kept distracting me.”

“I remember.” He rubbed his foot over hers. “You’re easily distracted, Natasha.”

“Perhaps. It was about my mother’s phone call and Thanksgiving. She asked me if I wanted to bring someone along.” She frowned at her eggs. “I imagine you have plans.”

His smile was slow and satisfied. Perhaps the wait wouldn’t be as long as he’d thought. “Are you asking me to Thanksgiving dinner at your mother’s?”

“My mother asked,” Natasha said precisely. “She always makes too much food, and she and Papa enjoy company. When it came up, I thought about you and Freddie.”

“I’m glad to know that you think about us.”

“It’s nothing,” she said, annoyed with herself for stringing out what should have been a simple invitation. “I always take the train up on Wednesday after work and come back Friday evening. Since there is no school, it occurred to me that you both might enjoy the trip.”

“Do we get borscht?”

The corners of her lips curved. “I could ask.” She pushed her plate aside when she saw the gleam in his eyes. He wasn’t laughing, she thought, as much as planning. “I don’t want you to get the wrong idea. It’s simply an invitation from friend to friend.”

“Right.”

She frowned at him. “I think Freddie would enjoy a big family meal.”

“Right again.”

His easy agreement had her blowing out a frustrated breath. “Just because it’s at my parents’ home doesn’t mean I’m taking you

there for..." She waved her hand as she searched for an appropriate phrase. "For approval, or to show you off."

"You mean your father won't take me into the den and ask me my intentions?"

"We don't have a den," she muttered. "And no. I'm a grown woman." Because Spence was grinning, she lifted a brow. "He will, perhaps, study you discreetly."

"I'll be on my best behavior."

"Then you'll come?"

He sat back, sipping his coffee and smiling to himself. "I wouldn't miss it."

## CHAPTER TEN

**F**reddie sat in the back seat with a blanket tucked up to her chin and clutched her Raggedy Ann. Because she wanted to drift with her own daydreams she pretended to sleep, and pretended so well that she actually dozed from time to time. It was a long drive from West Virginia to New York, but she was much too excited to be bored.

There was soft music on the car radio. She was enough of her father's daughter to recognize Mozart, and child enough to wish there were words to sing along to. Vera had already been dropped off at her sister's in Manhattan, where the housekeeper would holiday until Sunday. Now Spence was directing the big, quiet car through the traffic toward Brooklyn.

Freddie was only a little disappointed that they hadn't taken the train, but liked snuggling up and listening to her father and Natasha talk. She didn't pay much attention to what they said. Their voices were enough.

She was almost sick with excitement at the idea of meeting Natasha's family and sharing a big turkey dinner. Though she didn't like turkey very much, Natasha had told her that there would be plenty of cranberry sauce and succotash. Freddie had never eaten succotash, but the name was so funny, she knew it would be good. Even if it wasn't, even if it was disgusting, she was determined to be polite and clean her plate. JoBeth had told her that her grandmother got upset if JoBeth didn't eat all her vegetables, so Freddie wasn't taking any chances.

Lights flickered over her closed lids. Her lips curved a little as she heard Natasha's laugh merging with her father's. In her imaginings they were already a family. Instead of Raggedy Ann, Freddie was carefully tending to her baby sister as they all drove through the night to her grandparents' house. It was just like the song, she thought, but she didn't know if they were going over any rivers. And she didn't think they would pass through the woods.

Her baby sister's name was Katie, and she had black, curly hair like Natasha. Whenever Katie cried, Freddie was the only one who could make her happy again. Katie slept in a white crib in Freddie's room, and Freddie always made sure she was covered with a pink blanket. Babies caught colds, Freddie knew. When they did, you had to give them medicine out of a little dropper. They couldn't blow their noses themselves. Everyone said that Katie took her medicine best from Freddie.

Delighted with herself, Freddie snuggled the doll closer. "We're going to Grandmother's," she whispered, and began to build a whole new fantasy around the visit.

The trouble was, Freddie wasn't sure that the people she was pretending were her grandparents would like her. Not everyone liked kids, she thought. Maybe they wished she wasn't coming to visit. When she got there, they would want her to sit in a chair with her hands folded on her lap. That was the way Aunt Nina told her young ladies sat. Freddie hated being a young lady. But she would have to sit for just hours, not interrupting, not talking too loud, and never, never running in the house.

They would get mad and frown at her if she spilled something on the floor. Maybe they would yell. She'd heard JoBeth's father yell, especially when JoBeth's big brother, who was in third grade already and was supposed to know better, had taken one of his father's golf clubs to hit at rocks in the backyard. One of the rocks had crashed right through the kitchen window.

Maybe she would break a window. Then Natasha wouldn't marry her daddy and come to stay with them. She wouldn't have a mother or a baby sister, and Daddy would stop playing his music at night again.

Almost paralyzed by her thoughts, Freddie shrank against the seat as the car slowed.

“Yes, turn right here.” At the sight of her old neighborhood, Natasha’s spirits rose even higher. “It’s about halfway down, on the left. You might be able to find a space...yes, there.” She spotted a parking space behind her father’s ancient pickup. Obviously the Stanislaskis had put out the word that their daughter and friends were coming, and the neighbors had cooperated.

It was like that here, she thought. The Poffenbergers had lived on one side, the Andersons on the other for as long as Natasha could remember. One family would bring food when there was illness, another would mind a child after school. Joys and sorrows were shared. And gossip abounded.

Mikhail had dated the pretty Anderson girl, then had ended up as best man at her wedding, when she’d married one of his friends. Natasha’s parents had stood as godparents for one of the Poffenberger babies. Perhaps that was why, when Natasha had found she’d needed a new place and a new start, she had picked a town that had reminded her of home. Not in looks, but in ties.

“What are you thinking?” Spence asked her.

“Just remembering.” She turned her head to smile at him. “It’s good to be back.” She stepped onto the curb, shivered once in the frosty air, then opened the back door for Freddie while Spence popped the trunk. “Freddie, are you asleep?”

Freddie kept herself balled tight, but squeezed her eyes open. “No.”

“We’re here. It’s time to get out.”

Freddie swallowed, clutching the doll to her chest. “What if they don’t like me?”

“What’s this?” Crouching, Natasha brushed the hair from Freddie’s cheeks. “Have you been dreaming?”

“They might not like me and wish I wasn’t here. They might think I’m a pest. Lots of people think kids’re pests.”

“Lots of people are stupid then,” Natasha said briskly, buttoning up Freddie’s coat.

“Maybe. But they might not like me, anyway.”

“What if you don’t like them?”



That was something that hadn't occurred to her. Mulling it over, Freddie wiped her nose with the back of her hand before Natasha could come up with a tissue. "Are they nice?"

"I think so. After you meet them, you can decide. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Ladies, maybe you could pick another time to have a conference." Spence stood a few feet away, loaded down with luggage. "What was that all about?" he asked when they joined him on the sidewalk.

"Girl talk," Natasha answered with a wink that made Freddie giggle.

"Great." He started up the worn concrete steps behind Natasha. "Nothing I like better than to stand in the brisk wind holding three hundred pounds of luggage. What did you pack in here? Bricks?"

"Only a few, along with some essentials." Delighted with him, she turned and kissed his cheek—just as Nadia opened the door.

"Well." Pleased, Nadia folded her arms across her chest. "I told Papa you would come before Johnny Carson was over."

"Mama." Natasha rushed up the final steps to be enfolded in Nadia's arms. There was the scent she always remembered. Talc and nutmeg. And, as always, there was the strong, sturdy feel of her mother's body. Nadia's dark and sultry looks were just as strong, more so, perhaps, with the lines etched by worry, laughter and time.

Nadia murmured an endearment, then drew Natasha back to kiss her cheeks. She could see herself as she had been twenty years before. "Come on, you leave our guests standing in the cold."

Natasha's father bounded into the hall to pluck her off the floor and toss her into the air. He wasn't a tall man, but the arms beneath his work shirt were thick as cinder blocks from his years in the construction trade. He gave a robust laugh as he kissed her.

"No manners," Nadia declared as she shut the door. "Yuri, Natasha brings guests."

"Hello." Yuri thrust out a callused hand and pumped Spence's. "Welcome."

"This is Spence and Freddie Kimball." As she made introductions, Natasha noticed Freddie slip her hand into her father's.

“We are happy to meet you.” Because warmth was her way, Nadia greeted them both with kisses. “I will take your coats, and you please come in and sit. You will be tired.”

“We appreciate you having us,” Spence began. Then, sensing that Freddie was nervous, he picked her up and carried her into the living room.

It was small, the wallpaper old and the furniture worn. But there were lace doilies on the arms of the chairs, the woodwork gleamed in the yellow lamplight from vigorous polishing, and here and there were exquisitely worked pillows. Framed family pictures fought for space among the potted plants and knickknacks.

A husky wheeze had Spence glancing down. There was an old gray dog in the corner. His tail began to thump when he saw Natasha. With obvious effort he rose and waddled to her.

“Sasha.” She crouched to bury her face in the dog’s fur. She laughed as he sat down again and leaned against her. “Sasha is a very old man,” she explained to Freddie. “He likes best now to sleep and eat.”

“And drink vodka,” Yuri put in. “We will all have some. Except you,” he added and flicked a finger down Freddie’s nose. “You would have some champagne, huh?”

Freddie giggled, then bit her lip. Natasha’s father didn’t look exactly like she’d imagined a grandfather. He didn’t have snow-white hair and a big belly. Instead his hair was black and white at the same time, and he had no belly at all. He talked funny, with a deep, rumbly kind of voice. But he smelled good, like cherries. And his smile was nice.

“What’s vodka?”

“Russian tradition,” Yuri answered her. “A drink we make from grain.”

Freddie wrinkled her nose. “That sounds yucky,” she said, then immediately bit her lip again. But at Yuri’s burst of laughter she managed a shy smile.

“Natasha will tell you that her papa always teases little girls.” Nadia poked an elbow into Yuri’s ribs. “It’s because he is really just little boy at heart. You would like hot chocolate?”

Freddie was torn between the comfort of her father's hand and one of her favorite treats. And Nadia was smiling at her, not with that goofy look grown-ups sometimes put on when they had to talk to kids. It was a warm smile, just like Natasha's.

"Yes, ma'am."

Nadia gave a nod of approval at the child's manners. "Maybe you would like to come with me. I show you how to make it with big, fat marshmallows."

Forgetting shyness, Freddie took her hand from Spence's and put it into Nadia's. "I have two cats," she told Nadia proudly as they walked into the kitchen. "And I had chicken pox on my birthday."

"Sit, sit," Yuri ordered, gesturing toward the couch. "We have a drink."

"Where are Alex and Rachel?" With a contented sigh, Natasha sank into the worn cushions.

"Alex takes his new girlfriend to the movies. Very pretty," Yuri said, rolling his bright, brown eyes. "Rachel is at lecture. Big-time lawyer from Washington, D.C. comes to college."

"And how is Mikhail?"

"Very busy. They remodel apartment in Soho." He passed out glasses, tapping each before he drank. "So," he said to Spence as he settled in his favorite chair, "you teach music."

"Yes. Natasha's one of my best students in Music History."

"Smart girl, my Natasha." He settled back in his chair and studied Spence. But not, as Natasha had hoped, discreetly. "You are good friends."

"Yes," Natasha put in, uneasy about the gleam in her father's eyes. "We are. Spence just moved into town this summer. He and Freddie used to live in New York."

"So. This is interesting. Like fate."

"I like to think so," Spence agreed, enjoying himself. "It was especially fortunate that I have a little girl and Natasha owns a very tempting toy store. Added to that, she signed up for one of my classes. It made it difficult for her to avoid me when she was being stubborn."

"She is stubborn," Yuri agreed sadly. "Her mother is stubborn. Me, I am very agreeable."

Natasha gave a quick snort.

“Stubborn and disrespectful women run in my family.” Yuri took another healthy drink. “It is my curse.”

“Perhaps one day I’ll be fortunate enough to say the same.” Spence smiled over the rim of his glass. “When I convince Natasha to marry me.”

Natasha sprang up, ignoring her father’s grin. “Since the vodka’s gone to your head so quickly, I’ll see if Mama has any extra hot chocolate.”

Yuri pushed himself out of his chair to reach for the bottle as Natasha disappeared. “We’ll leave the chocolate to the women.”

Natasha awoke at first light with Freddie curled in her arms. She was in the bed of her childhood, in a room where she and her sister had spent countless hours talking, laughing, arguing. The wallpaper was the same. Faded roses. Whenever her mother had threatened to paint it, both she and Rachel had objected. There was something comforting about waking up to the same walls from childhood through adolescence to adulthood.

Turning her head, she could see her sister’s dark hair against the pillow of the next bed. The sheets and blankets were in tangles. Typical, Natasha thought with a smile. Rachel had more energy asleep than most people had fully awake. She had come in the night before after midnight, bursting with enthusiasm over the lecture she had attended, full of hugs and kisses and questions.

Natasha brushed a kiss over Freddie’s hair, then carefully shifted her. The child snuggled into the pillow without making a sound. Quietly Natasha rose. She took a moment to steady herself when the floor tilted. Four hours’ sleep, she decided, was bound to make anyone light-headed. Gathering her clothes, she went off to shower and dress.

Arriving downstairs, she caught the scent of coffee brewing. It didn’t seem to appeal to her, but she followed it into the kitchen.

“Mama.” Nadia was already at the counter, busily rolling out pie-crusts. “It’s too early to cook.”

“On Thanksgiving it’s never too early.” She lifted her cheek for a kiss. “You want coffee?”

Natasha pressed a hand to her uneasy stomach. “No. I don’t think so. I assume that bundle of blankets on the couch is Alex.”

“He gets in very late.” Nadia pursed her lips briefly in disapproval, then shrugged. “He’s not a boy anymore.”

“No. You’ll just have to face it, Mama, you have grown children—and you raised them very well.”

“Not so well that Alex learns to pick up his socks.” But she smiled, hoping her youngest son wouldn’t deprive her of that last vestige of motherhood too soon.

“Did Papa and Spence stay up very late?”

“Papa likes talking to your friend. He’s a nice man.” Nadia laid a circle of dough on a pie plate, then took up another chunk to roll out. “Very handsome.”

“Yes,” Natasha agreed, but cautiously.

“He has good job, is responsible, loves his daughter.”

“Yes,” Natasha said again.

“Why don’t you marry him when he wants you to?”

She’d figured on this. Biting back a sigh, Natasha leaned on the kitchen table. “There are a lot of nice, responsible and handsome men, Mama. Should I marry them all?”

“Not so many as you think.” Smiling to herself, Nadia started on a third crust. “You don’t love him?” When Natasha didn’t answer, Nadia’s smile widened. “Ah.”

“Don’t start. Spence and I have only known each other for a few months. There’s a lot he doesn’t know about me.”

“So tell him.”

“I don’t seem to be able to.”

Nadia put down her rolling pin to cup her daughter’s face in two floury hands. “He is not like the other one.”

“No, he’s not. But—”

Impatient, Nadia shook her head. “Holding on to something that’s gone only makes a sickness inside. You have a good heart, Tash. Trust it.”

“I want to.” She wrapped her arms around her mother and held tight. “I do love him, Mama, but it still scares me. And it still hurts.” On a long breath she drew back. “I want to borrow Papa’s truck.”

Nadia didn't ask where she was going. Didn't need to. "Yes. I can go with you."

Natasha only kissed her mother's cheek and shook her head.

She'd been gone an hour before Spence made his bleary-eyed way downstairs. He and the gray dog exchanged glances of sympathy. Yuri had been generous with the vodka the night before, to guests and pets. At the moment, Spence felt as though a chain gang were chipping rock in his head. Operating on automatic, he found the kitchen, following the scents of baking, and blissfully, coffee.

Nadia took one look, laughed broadly and gestured to the table. "Sit." She poured a cup of coffee, strong and black. "Drink. I fix you breakfast."

Like a dying man, Spence clutched the cup in both hands. "Thanks. I don't want to put you out."

Nadia merely waved a hand as she reached for a cast-iron skillet. "I know a man with a hangover. Yuri poured you too much vodka."

"No. I took care of that all on my own." He opened the aspirin bottle she set on the table. "Bless you, Mrs. Stanislaski."

"Nadia. You call me Nadia when you get drunk in my house."

"I don't remember feeling like this since college." So saying he downed three aspirins. "I can't imagine why I thought it was fun at the time." He managed a weak smile. "Something smells wonderful."

"You will like my pies." She pushed fat sausages around in the skillet. "You met Alex last night."

"Yes." Spence didn't object when she filled his cup a second time. "That was cause enough for one more drink. You have a beautiful family, Nadia."

"They make me proud." She laughed as the sausage sizzled. "They make me worry. You know, you have daughter."

"Yes." He smiled at her, picturing what Natasha would look like in a quarter of a century.

"Natasha is the only one who moves far away. I worry most for her."

"She's very strong."

Nadia only nodded as she added eggs to the pan. "Are you patient, Spence?"

"I think so."

Nadia glanced over her shoulder. "Don't be too patient."

"Funny. Natasha once told me the same thing."

Pleased, Nadia popped bread into the toaster. "Smart girl."

The kitchen door swung open. Alex, dark, rumped and heavy-eyed, grinned. "I smelled breakfast."

The first snow was falling, small, thin flakes that swirled in the wind and vanished before they hit the ground. There were some things, Natasha knew, that were beautiful and very precious, and here for only such a short time.

She stood alone, bundled against the cold she didn't feel. Except inside. The light was pale gray, but not dreary, not with the tiny, dancing snowflakes. She hadn't brought flowers. She never did. They would look much too sad on such a tiny grave.

Lily. Closing her eyes, she let herself remember how it had felt to hold that small, delicate life in her arms. Her baby. *Milaya*. Her little girl. Those beautiful blue eyes, Natasha remembered, those exquisite miniature hands.

Like the flower she had been named for, Lily had been so lovely, and had lived such a brief, brief time. She could see Lily, small and red and wrinkled, her little hands fisted when the nurse had first laid her in Natasha's arms. She could feel even now that sweet ache that tugged when Lily had nursed at her breast. She remembered the feel of that soft, soft skin and the smell of powder and lotion, the comfort of rocking late at night with her own baby girl on her shoulder.

So quickly gone, Natasha thought. A few precious weeks. No amount of time, no amount of prayer would ever make her understand it. Accept, perhaps, but never understand.

"I love you, Lily. Always." She bent to press her palm against the cold grass. Rising again, she turned and walked away through the lightly dancing snow.

Where had she gone? There could be a dozen places, Spence assured himself. It was foolish to be worried. But he couldn't help it.

Some instinct was at work here, heightened by the certainty that Natasha's family knew exactly where she was, but refused to say.

The house was already filled with noise, laughter, and the smells of the celebrational meal to come. He tried to shake off the feeling that wherever Natasha was, she needed him.

There was so much she hadn't told him. That had become crystal clear when he saw the pictures in the living room. Natasha in tights and dance shoes, in ballet skirts and toe shoes. Natasha with her hair streaming behind her, caught at the apex of a grand jeté.

She'd been a dancer, quite obviously a professional, but had never mentioned it.

Why had she given it up? Why had she kept something that had been an important part of her life a secret from him?

Coming out of the kitchen, Rachel saw him with one of the photographs in his hand. She kept silent for a moment, studying him. Like her mother, she approved of what she saw. There was a strength here and a gentleness. Her sister needed and deserved both.

"It's a beautiful picture."

He turned. Rachel was taller than Natasha, more willowy. Her dark hair was cut short in a sleek cap around her face. Her eyes, more gold than brown, dominated. "How old was she?"

Rachel dipped her hands into the pockets of her trousers as she crossed the room. "Sixteen, I think. She was in the corps de ballet then. Very dedicated. I always envied Tash her grace. I was a klutz." She smiled and gently changed the subject. "Always taller and skinnier than the boys, knocking things over with my elbows. Where's Freddie?"

Spence set down the picture. Without saying it, Rachel had told him that if he had questions, they were for Natasha. "She's upstairs, watching the Macy's parade with Yuri."

"He never misses it. Nothing disappointed him more than when we grew too old to want to sit in his lap and watch the floats."

A laughing squeal from the second floor had them both turning toward the stairs. Feet clomped. A pink whirlwind in her jumpsuit, Freddie came dashing down to launch herself at Spence. "Daddy, Papa makes bear noises. *Big* bear noises."



“Did he rub his beard on your cheek?” Rachel wanted to know.

“It’s scratchy.” She giggled, then wriggled down to run upstairs once more, hoping he’d do it again.

“She’s having the time of her life,” Spence decided.

“So’s Papa. How’s your head?”

“Better, thanks.” He heard the sound of the truck pulling up outside, and glanced toward the window.

“Mama needs my help.” Rachel slipped back into the kitchen.

He was at the door waiting for her. Natasha looked very pale, very tired, but she smiled when she saw him. “Good morning.” Because she needed him, she slipped her arms around his waist and held tight.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes.” She was now, she realized, when he was holding her like this. Stronger, she pulled back. “I thought you might sleep late.”

“No, I’ve been up awhile. Where have you been?”

She unwound her scarf. “There was something I needed to do.” After peeling off her coat, she hung it in the narrow closet. “Where is everyone?”

“Your mother and Rachel are in the kitchen. The last time I looked, Alex was on the phone.”

This time the smile came easily. “Sweet-talking a girl.”

“Apparently. Freddie’s up with your father, watching the parade.”

“And putting him in heaven.” She touched her fingertips to Spence’s cheek. “Will you kiss me?”

There was some need here, he thought as he bent toward her. Some deep, private need she still refused to share. Her lips were cold when his met them, but they softened, then warmed. At last they curved.

“You’re very good for me, Spence.”

“I was hoping you’d catch on to that.” He gave her bottom lip a playful nip. “Better?”

“Much. I’m glad you’re here.” She squeezed his hand. “How do you feel about some of Mama’s hot chocolate?”

Before he could answer, Freddie came sprinting down the steps again, one shoelace trailing, to throw her arms around Natasha’s waist. “You’re back!”

“So I am.” Natasha bent to kiss the top of Freddie’s head. “What have you been up to?”

“I’m watching the parade with Papa. He can talk just like Donald Duck, and he lets me sit on his lap.”

“I see.” Leaning closer, Natasha took a sniff. There was the telltale fragrance of gumdrops lingering on Freddie’s breath. “Does he still hog all the yellow ones?”

Freddie giggled, casting a quick, cautious look at her father. Spence had a much different view of gumdrops than Yuri. “It’s okay. I like the red ones best.”

“How many red ones?” Spence asked her.

Freddie lifted her shoulders and let them fall. It was, Spence noted with some amusement, almost a mirror image of Natasha’s habitual gesture. “Not too many. Will you come up and watch with us?” She tugged at Natasha’s hand. “It’s almost time for Santa Claus.”

“In a little while.” Out of habit, Natasha crouched to tie Freddie’s shoelace. “Tell Papa that I won’t mention the gumdrops to Mama. If he saves me some.”

“Okay.” She dashed up the stairs.

“He’s made quite an impression on her,” Spence observed.

“Papa makes impressions on everyone.” She started to rise, and felt the room spin. Before she could sink to the floor again, Spence had her arms.

“What is it?”

“Nothing.” She pressed a hand to her head, waiting for the dizziness to pass. “I stood up too fast, that’s all.”

“You’re pale. Come sit down.” He had an arm hooked around her waist, but she shook her head.

“No, I’m fine, really. Just a little tired.” Relieved that the room had steadied, she smiled at him. “Blame it on Rachel. She would have talked through the night if I hadn’t fallen asleep on her in self-defense.”

“Have you eaten anything?”

“I thought you were a doctor of music.” She smiled again and patted his cheek. “Don’t worry, the minute I go into the kitchen, Mama will start feeding me.”

Just then the front door opened. Spence watched Natasha's face light up. "Mikhail!" With a laugh, she threw herself into the arms of her brother.

He had the dark, blinding good looks that ran in the family. The tallest of the brood, he had to bend to gather Natasha close. His hair curled over his ears and collar. His coat was worn, his boots were scarred. His hands, as they stroked Natasha's hair, were wide-palmed and beautiful.

It took Spence only seconds to see that while Natasha loved all of her family deeply, there was a separate and special bond here.

"I've missed you." She drew back just far enough to kiss his cheeks, then hugged him close again. "I've really missed you."

"Then why don't you come more often?" He pushed her away, wanting a good long look. He didn't care for the pallor in her cheeks, but since her hands were still cold, he realized she'd been out. And he knew where she'd spent that morning. He murmured something in Ukrainian, but she only shook her head and squeezed his hands tight. With a shrug very like her own, he put the subject aside.

"Mikhail, I want you to meet Spence."

As he took off his coat, Mikhail turned to study Spence. Unlike Alex's friendly acceptance or Rachel's subtle measuring, this was an intense and prolonged stare that left Spence in no doubt that if Mikhail didn't approve, he wouldn't hesitate to say so.

"I know your work," he said at length. "It's excellent."

"Thank you." Spence met look for look. "I can say the same about yours." When Mikhail lifted one dark brow, Spence continued. "I've seen the figures you carved for Natasha."

"Ah." A glimmer of a smile curved Mikhail's mouth. "My sister always was fond of fairy tales." There was a squeal from upstairs, followed by rumbling laughter.

"That's Freddie," Natasha explained. "Spence's daughter. She's making Papa's day."

Mikhail slipped a thumb through one belt loop. "You are a widower."

"That's right."

"And now you teach at college."

"Yes."

“Mikhail,” Natasha interrupted. “Don’t play big brother. I’m older than you.”

“But I’m bigger.” Then with a quick, flashing grin, he tossed an arm around her shoulder. “So what’s to eat?”

Too much, Spence decided as the family gathered around the table late that afternoon. The huge turkey in the center of the hand-crocheted tablecloth was only the beginning. Faithful to her adopted country’s holiday, Nadia had prepared a meal that was an American tradition from the chestnut dressing to the pumpkin pies.

Wide-eyed, Freddie gawked, staring at platter after platter. The room was full of noise as everyone talked over and around everyone else. The china was mismatched. Old Sasha lay sprawled under the table near her feet, hoping for a few unobtrusive handouts. She was sitting on a wobbly chair and the New York Yellow Pages. As far as she was concerned, it was the best day of her life.

Alex and Rachel began to argue over some childhood infraction. Mikhail joined in to tell them they were both wrong. When her opinion was sought, Natasha just laughed and shook her head, then turned to Spence and murmured something into his ear that made him chuckle.

Nadia, her cheeks rosy with the pleasure of having her family together, slipped a hand into Yuri’s as he lifted his glass.

“Enough,” he said, and effectively silenced the table. “You can argue later about who let white mice loose in science lab. Now we toast. We are thankful for this food that Nadia and my girls have fixed for us. And more thankful for the friends and family who are here together to enjoy it. We give thanks, as we did on our first Thanksgiving in our country, that we are free.”

“To freedom,” Mikhail said as he lifted his glass.

“To freedom,” Yuri agreed. His eyes misted and he looked around the table. “And to family.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

That evening, with Freddie dozing in his lap, Spence listened to Yuri tell stories of the old country. While the meal had been a noisy competition for conversation, this hour was one of quiet and content. Across the room Rachel and Alex played a trivia game. They argued often, but without heat.

In the corner, Natasha and Mikhail sat close, dark heads together. Spence could hear their murmurs and noted that one often reached to touch the other's hand, to touch a cheek. Nadia sat smiling, interrupting Yuri occasionally to correct or comment as she worked another pillow cover.

"Woman." Yuri pointed at his wife with the stem of his after-dinner pipe. "I remember like yesterday."

"You remember as you like to remember."

"*Tak.*" He stuck the pipe back into his mouth. "And what I remember makes better story."

When Freddie stirred, Spence shifted her. "I'd better put her to bed."

"I will do it." Nadia set her needlework aside and rose. "I would like to." Making soothing noises, she lifted Freddie. Sleepy and agreeable, Freddie snuggled into her neck.

"Will you rock me?"

"Yes." Touched, Nadia kissed her hair as she started toward the steps. "I will rock you in the chair where I rocked all my babies."

"And sing?"

“I will sing you a song my mother sang to me. You would like that?”

Freddie gave a yawn and a drowsy nod.

“You have a beautiful daughter.” Like Spence, Yuri watched them turn up the steps. “You must bring her back often.”

“I think I’ll have a hard time keeping her away.”

“She is always welcome, as you are.” Yuri took a puff on his pipe. “Even if you don’t marry my daughter.”

That statement brought on ten seconds of humming silence until Alex and Rachel bent back over their game, smothering grins. Spence didn’t bother to smother his own as Natasha rose.

“There isn’t enough milk for the morning,” she decided on the spot. “Spence, why don’t you walk with me to get some?”

“Sure.”

A few moments later they stepped outside, wrapped in coats and scarves. The air had a bite that Natasha welcomed. Overhead the sky was clear as black glass and icy with stars.

“He didn’t mean to embarrass you,” Spence began.

“Yes, he did.”

Spence didn’t bother to hold back the chuckle, and draped an arm over her shoulders. “I suppose he did. I like your family.”

“So do I. Most of the time.”

“You’re lucky to have them. Watching Freddie here has made me realize how important family is. I don’t suppose I’ve really tried to get closer to Nina or my parents.”

“They’re still family. Perhaps we’re as close as we are, because when we came here we only had each other.”

“It’s true my family never crossed the mountains into Hungary in a wagon.”

That made her laugh. “Rachel was always jealous that she hadn’t been born yet. When she was little, she would get back by saying she was more American, because she’d been born in New York. Then not long ago, someone said to her that if she wanted to be a lawyer, she should think of changing or shortening her name.” With a new laugh, Natasha looked up at him. “She became very insulted and very Ukrainian.”

“It’s a good name. You could always keep it professionally after you marry me.”

“Don’t start.”

“Must be your father’s influence.” He glanced at the dark shop, where a Closed sign hung on the door. “The store’s closed.”

“I know.” She turned into his arms. “I just wanted to walk. Now that we’re standing here in a dark doorway, alone, I can kiss you.”

“Good point.” Spence lowered his mouth to hers.

Natasha was annoyed with herself for dozing off and on during the drive home. She felt as though she’d spent a week mountain climbing, rather than less than forty-eight hours in her family home. By the time she shook herself awake for the last time, they were crossing the Maryland border into West Virginia.

“Already.” She straightened in her seat and cast an apologetic glance at Spence. “I didn’t help you drive.”

“It’s all right. You looked like you needed the rest.”

“Too much food, too little sleep.” She looked back at Freddie, who was sleeping soundly. “We’ve been poor company for you.”

“You can make up for it. Come home with me for a while.”

“All right.” It was the least she could do, Natasha thought. With Vera away until Sunday, she could help him tuck Freddie into bed and fix him a light meal.

When they pulled up in front of the house, they managed the suitcases and the sleeping child between them. “I’ll take her up,” he murmured. “It won’t take long.”

Natasha waited in the kitchen, brewing tea and making sandwiches. It was ridiculous, she thought. She not only was exhausted but starving. By the time Spence came down again, she had Vera’s worktable set.

“She’s sleeping like a rock.” He scanned the table. “You read my mind.”

“With two unconscious passengers you couldn’t stop and eat.”

“What have we got?”

“Old Ukrainian tradition.” She pulled back her chair. “Tuna fish.”

“Wonderful,” Spence decided after the first bite.

It was more than the sandwich. He liked having her there, sitting across from him in the glare of the kitchen light with the house quiet around them. "I guess you'll open the shop tomorrow."

"Absolutely. It'll be a madhouse from now until Christmas. I've hired a college student part-time, and he starts tomorrow." She lifted her cup and grinned at him over the rim. "Guess who it is."

"Melony Trainor," he said, naming one of his most attractive students and earning a punch on the shoulder.

"No. She's too busy flirting with men to work. Terry Maynard."

"Maynard? Really?"

"Yes. He can use the money to buy a new muffler for his car. And..." She paused dramatically. "He and Annie are an item."

"No kidding?" He was grinning as he sat back. "Well, he certainly got over having his life shattered quickly."

Natasha lifted a brow. "It wasn't shattered, only shaken. They've been seeing each other almost every night for three weeks."

"Sounds serious."

"I think it is. But Annie's worried she's too old for him."

"How much older is she?"

Natasha leaned forward and lowered her voice. "Oh, very much older. Nearly an entire year."

"Cradle robber."

With a laugh she leaned back again. "It's nice to see them together. I only hope they don't forget to wait on customers because they're mooning at each other." She shrugged, and went back to her tea. "I think I'll go in early and start on the decorations."

"You'll be tired at the end of the day. Why don't you come here for dinner?"

Curious, she tilted her head. "You cook?"

"No." He grinned and polished off his sandwich. "But I do great takeout. You can get a whole box of chicken or pizza with the works. I've even been known to come up with oriental seafood."

"I'll leave the menu to you." She rose to clear the table, but he took her hand.

"Natasha." He stood, using his free hand to stroke her hair. "I want to thank you for sharing the last couple of days with me. It meant a lot."



“To me too.”

“Still, I’ve missed being alone with you.” He bent to brush his lips over hers. “Come upstairs with me. I want very much to make love with you in my bed.”

She didn’t answer. Nor did she hesitate. Slipping an arm around his waist, she went with him.

He left the bedside light on low. She could just see the dark, masculine colors he’d chosen for his room. Midnight blue, forest green. An oil painting in a heavy, ornate frame dominated one wall. She could see the silhouettes of exquisite antiques. The bed was big, a generous private space covered by a thick, soft quilt. A special space, Natasha realized, knowing he had never brought another woman to this bed, to this room.

In the mirror over the bureau she caught their reflections as they stood side by side and saw herself smile when he touched a hand to her cheek.

There was time, time to savor. The fatigue she had felt earlier had vanished. Now she felt only the glow that came from loving and being loved. Words were too difficult, but when she kissed him, her heart spoke for her.

Slowly they undressed each other.

She slipped his sweater over his head. He undid the buttons of her cardigan, then pushed it from her shoulders. Keeping her eyes on his, she unfastened his shirt. He slid up the cotton sweater, letting his fingers trail until she was free of it. She unhooked his trousers. He flipped the three snaps that held her slacks at the waist. Keeping his hands light, he drew the teddy down her body as she tugged away the last barrier between them.

Quietly they moved together, her palms pressing against his back, his skimming up her sides. Heads tilting first this way, then that, they experimented with long, lingering kisses. Enjoyment. Their bodies warming, their mouths seeking, it seemed so easy here.

They drew back in unspoken agreement. Spence pulled down the quilt. They slipped under it together.

Intimacy had no rival, Natasha thought. There was nothing to compare with this. Their bodies rubbed against each other, so that the sheets whispered with each movement. Her sigh answered his

murmurs. The flavor and fragrance of his skin was familiar, personal. His touch, gentle, then persuasive, then demanding, was everything she wanted.

She was simply beautiful. Not just her body, not just that exquisite face, but her spirit. When she moved with him, there was a harmony more intense than any he could create with music. She was his music—her laugh, her voice, her gestures. He knew of no way to tell her. Only to show her.

He made love with her as though it were the first and the only time. Never had she felt so elegant, so graceful. Never had she felt so strong or so sure.

When he rose over her, when she rose to meet him, it was perfect.

“I’d like you to stay.”

Natasha turned her face into his throat. “I can’t. Freddie would ask questions in the morning I don’t know how to answer.”

“I have a very simple answer. I’ll tell her the truth. I’m in love with you.”

“That’s not simple.”

“It is the truth.” He shifted so that he could look at her. Her eyes were shadowed in the dim light. “I do love you, Natasha.”

“Spence—”

“No. No logic or excuses. We’re past that. Tell me if you believe me.”

She looked into his eyes and saw what she already knew. “Yes, I believe you.”

“Then tell me what you feel. I need to know.”

He had a right to know, she thought, though she could all but taste the panic on her tongue. “I love you. And I’m afraid.”

He brought her hand to his lips to press a kiss firmly against her fingers. “Why?”

“Because I was in love before, and nothing, nothing could have ended as badly.”

There was that shadow again, he thought impatiently. The shadow from her past that he could neither fight nor conquer because it was nameless.

“Neither of us have come into this without a few bruises, Natasha. But we have a chance to make something new, something important.”

She knew he was right, felt he was right, yet still held back. “I wish I were so sure. Spence, there are things you don’t know about me.”

“That you were a dancer.”

She shifted then, to gather the sheets to her breast and sit up. “Yes. Once.”

“Why haven’t you mentioned it?”

“Because it was over.”

He drew the hair away from her face. “Why did you stop?”

“I had a choice to make.” The ache came back, but briefly. She turned to him and smiled. “I was not so good. Oh, I was adequate, and perhaps in time I would have been good enough to have been a principal dancer. Perhaps... It was something I wanted very badly once. But wanting something doesn’t always make it happen.”

“Will you tell me about it?”

It was a beginning, one she knew she had to make. “It’s not very exciting.” She lifted her hands, then let them fall on to the sheet. “I started late, after we came here. Through the church my parents met Martina Latovia. Many years ago she was an important Soviet dancer who defected. She became friends with my mother and offered to give me classes. It was good for me, the dance. I didn’t speak English well, so it was hard to make friends. Everything was so different here, you see.”

“Yes, I can imagine.”

“I was nearly eight by that time. It becomes difficult to teach the body, the joints, to move as they weren’t meant to move. But I worked very hard. *Madame* was kind and encouraging. My parents were so proud.” She laughed a little, but warmly. “Papa was sure I would be the next Pavlova. The first time I danced *en pointe*, Mama cried. Dance is obsession and pain and joy. It’s a different world, Spence. I can’t explain. You have to know it, be a part of it.”

“You don’t have to explain.”

She looked over at him. “No, not to you,” she murmured. “Because of the music. I joined the corps de ballet when I was

almost sixteen. It was wonderful. Perhaps I didn't know there were other worlds, but I was happy."

"What happened?"

"There was another dancer." She shut her eyes. It was important to take this slowly, carefully. "You've heard of him, I imagine. Anthony Marshall."

"Yes." Spence had an immediate picture of a tall, blond man with a slender build and incredible grace. "I've seen him dance many times."

"He was magnificent. Is," she corrected. "Though it's been years since I've seen him dance. We became involved. I was young. Too young. And it was a very big mistake."

Now the shadow had a name. "You loved him."

"Oh yes. In a naive and idealistic kind of way. The only way a girl can love at seventeen. More, I thought he loved me. He told me he did, in words, in actions. He was very charming, romantic...and I wanted to believe him. He promised me marriage, a future, a partnership in dance, all the things I wanted to hear. He broke all those promises, and my heart."

"So now you don't want to hear promises from me."

"You're not Anthony," she murmured, then lifted a hand to his cheek. Her eyes were dark and beautiful, her voice only more exotic as emotions crowded. "Believe me, I know that. And I don't compare, not now. I'm not the same woman who built dreams on a few careless words."

"What I've said to you hasn't been careless."

"No." She leaned closer to rest her cheek against his. "Over the past months I've come to see that, and to understand that what I feel for you is different from anything I've felt before." There was more she wanted to tell him, but the words clogged her throat. "Please, let that be enough for now."

"For now. It won't be enough forever."

She turned her mouth to his. "Just for now."

How could it be? Natasha asked herself. How could it be that when she was just beginning to trust herself, to trust her heart, that this should happen? How could she face it again?

It was like a play run backward and started again, when her life had changed so drastically and completely. She sat back on her bed, no longer concerned about dressing for work, about starting a normal day. How could things be normal now? How could she expect them to be normal ever again?

She held the little vial in her hand. She had followed the instructions exactly. Just a precaution, she had told herself. But she'd known in her heart. Since the visit to her parents two weeks before she'd known. And had avoided facing the reality.

It was not the flu that made her queasy in the mornings. It was not overwork or stress that caused her to be so tired, or that brought on the occasional dizzy spells. The simple test that she'd bought over the counter in the drugstore had told her what she'd already known and feared.

She was carrying a child. Once again she was carrying a child. The rush of joy and wonder was totally eclipsed by the bone-deep fear that froze her.

How could it be? She was no longer a foolish girl and had taken precautions. Romance aside, she had been practical enough, responsible enough to visit her doctor and begin taking those tiny little pills, when she had realized where her relationship with Spence was bound to go. Yet she was pregnant. There was no denying it.

How could she tell him? Covering her face with her hands, Natasha rocked back and forth to give herself some small comfort. How could she go through all of it again, when that time years before was still so painfully etched on her memory?

She had known Anthony no longer loved her, if he had ever. But when she'd learned she was carrying his child, she had been thrilled. And so certain that he would share her delight. When she'd gone to him, almost bubbling over, glowing with the joy of it, his cruelty had all but cut her in two.

How grudgingly he'd let her into his apartment, Natasha remembered. How difficult it had been for her to continue to smile when she'd seen his table set for two, the candles lighted, the wine chilling—as he'd so often prepared the stage when he'd loved her. Now he'd set that stage for someone else. But she'd persuaded

herself that it didn't matter. Once she'd told him, everything would change.

Everything had.

"What the hell are you talking about?" She remembered the fury in his eyes as he'd stared at her.

"I went to the doctor this afternoon. I'm pregnant, almost two months." She reached out for him. "Anthony—"

"That's an old game, Tash." He'd said it casually, but perhaps he'd been shaken. He'd stalked to the table to pour a glass of wine.

"It's not a game."

"No? Then how could you be so stupid?" He'd grabbed her arm and given her a quick shake, his magnificent mane of hair flying. "If you've gotten yourself in trouble, don't expect to come running to me to fix it."

Dazed, she'd lifted a hand to rub her arm where his fingers had bit in. It was only that he didn't understand, she'd told herself. "I'm having a child. Your child. The doctor says the baby will come in July."

"Maybe you're pregnant." He'd shrugged as he'd downed the wine. "It doesn't concern me."

"It must."

He'd looked at her then, his glass held aloft, his eyes cool. "How do I know it's mine?"

At that she'd paled. As she'd stood there, she'd remembered how it had felt when she'd almost stepped in front of a bus on her first trip to New York City. "You know. You have to know."

"I don't have to know anything. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm expecting someone."

In desperation she'd reached out for him. "Anthony, don't you understand? I'm carrying our baby."

"Your baby," he corrected. "Your problem. If you want some advice, get rid of it."

"Get—" She hadn't been so young or so naive that she hadn't understood his meaning. "You can't mean it."

"You want to dance, Tash? Try picking classes back up after taking off nine months to give birth to some brat you're going to end up giving away in any case. Grow up."

“I have grown up.” She’d laid a hand on her stomach, in protection and defense. “And I will have this child.”

“Your choice.” He’d gestured with his wineglass. “Don’t expect to pull me into it. I’ve got a career to think of. You’re probably better off,” he decided. “Talk some loser into marrying you and set up housekeeping. You’d never be any better than mediocre at dance anyway.”

So she had had the child and loved it—for a brief, brief time. Now there was another. She couldn’t bear to love it, couldn’t bear to want it. Not when she knew what it was like to lose.

Frantic, she threw the vial across the room and began pulling clothes out of her closet. She had to get away. She had to think. She would get away, Natasha promised herself, then pressed her fingers against her eyes until she calmed. But she had to tell him.

This time she drove to his house, struggling for calm as the car brought her closer. Because it was Saturday, children were playing in yards and on the sidewalk. Some called out to her as she passed, and she managed to lift a hand in a wave. She spotted Freddie wrestling with her kittens on the grass.

“Tash! Tash!” Lucy and Desi darted for cover, but Freddie raced to the car. “Did you come to play?”

“Not today.” Summoning a smile, Natasha kissed her cheeks. “Is your daddy home?”

“He’s playing music. He plays music a lot since we came here. I drew a picture. I’m going to send it to Papa and Nana.”

Natasha struggled to keep the smile in place at Freddie’s names for her parents. “They will like that very much.”

“Come on, I’ll show you.”

“In a little while. I need to speak to your father first. By myself.”

Freddie’s bottom lip threatened. “Are you mad at him?”

“No.” She pressed a finger to Freddie’s nose. “Go find your kittens. I’ll talk to you before I go.”

“Okay.” Reassured, Freddie raced off, sending out whoops that would have the kittens cowering in the bushes, Natasha reflected.

It was better to keep her mind a blank, she decided as she knocked on the front door. Then she would take it slowly, logically, like an adult.

“Miss.” Vera opened the door, her expression less remote than usual. Freddie’s description of the Thanksgiving holiday in Brooklyn had done a great deal to win her over.

“I’d like to see Dr. Kimball if he’s not busy.”

“Come in.” She found herself frowning a bit as she studied Natasha. “Are you all right, miss? You’re very pale.”

“Yes, I’m fine. Thank you.”

“Would you like tea?”

“No—no, I can’t stay long.”

Though Vera privately thought Natasha looked like a cornered rabbit, she nodded. “You’ll find him in the music room. He’s been up half the night working.”

“Thank you.” Clutching her bag, Natasha started down the hall. She could hear the music he was playing, something weepy. Or perhaps it was her own mood, she thought; she blinked back tears.

When she saw him, she remembered the first time she had walked into that room. Perhaps she had started to fall in love with him that day, when he had sat there with a child on his lap, surrounded by sunlight.

She pulled off her gloves, running them through her nervous hands as she watched him. He was lost in it, both captor and captive of the music. Now she would change his life. He hadn’t asked for this, and they both knew that loving wasn’t always enough.

“Spence.” She murmured his name when the music stopped, but he didn’t hear. She could see the intensity was still on him as he scribbled on staff paper. He hadn’t shaved. It made her want to smile, but instead her eyes filled. His shirt was rumpled and open at the collar. His hair was tousled. As she watched, he ran a hand through it. “Spence,” she repeated.

He looked up—annoyed at first. Then he focused and smiled at her. “Hi. I didn’t expect to see you today.”

“Annie’s watching the shop.” She knit her hands. “I needed to see you.”

“I’m glad you did.” He rose, though the music was still filling his head. “What time is it anyway?” Absently he glanced at his watch. “Too early to ask you for lunch. How about some coffee?”



“No.” Even the thought of coffee made her stomach roll. “I don’t want anything. I needed to tell you....” Her fingers knotted. “I don’t know how. I want you to know I never intended—this isn’t intended to put you under obligation....”

The words trailed off again, he shook his head and started toward her. “If something’s wrong, why don’t you tell me?”

“I’m trying to.”

He took her hand to lead her to the couch. “The best way’s often straight out.”

“Yes.” She put her hand to her spinning head. “You see, I...” She saw the concern in his eyes, then everything went black....

She was lying on the sofa, and Spence was kneeling beside her, chafing her wrists. “Take it easy,” he murmured. “Just lie still. I’ll call a doctor.”

“No. There’s no need.” Carefully she pushed herself up. “I’m all right.”

“The hell you are.” Her skin was clammy under his hand. “You’re like ice, and pale as a ghost. Damn it, Natasha, why didn’t you tell me you weren’t well? I’ll take you to the hospital.”

“I don’t need the hospital or the doctor.” Hysteria was bubbling under her heart. She fought it back and forced herself to speak. “I’m not sick, Spence. I’m pregnant.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

“**W**hat?” It was the best he could do; he sank back onto his heels and stared at her. “What did you say?”

She wanted to be strong, had to be. He looked as though she’d hit him with a blunt instrument. “I’m pregnant,” she repeated, then made a helpless gesture. “I’m sorry.”

He only shook his head, waiting for it to sink in. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” It was best to be matter-of-fact, Natasha told herself. He was a civilized man. There would be no accusations, no cruelty. “This morning I took a test. I suspected before, for a couple of weeks, but...”

“Suspected.” His hand curled into a fist on the cushion. She didn’t look furious, as Angela had. She looked destroyed. “And you didn’t mention it.”

“I saw no need until I knew. There was no point in upsetting you.”

“I see. Is that what you are, Natasha? Upset?”

“What I am is pregnant,” she said briskly. “And I felt it was only right to tell you. I’m going away for a few days.” Though she still felt shaky, she managed to stand.

“Away?” Confused, afraid she would faint again, furious, he caught her. “Now just a damn minute. You drop in, tell me you’re pregnant, and now you calmly tell me you’re going away?” He felt something sharp punch into his gut. Its name was fear. “Where?”

“Just away.” She heard her own voice, snappish and rude, and pressed a hand to her head. “I’m sorry, I’m not handling this well. I

need some time. I need to go away.”

“What you need to do is sit down until we talk this out.”

“I can’t talk about it.” She felt the pressure inside her build like floodwaters against a dam. “Not yet—not until I...I only wanted to tell you before I left.”

“You’re not going anywhere.” He grabbed her arm to pull her back. “And you damn well will talk about it. What do you want from me? Am I supposed to say, ‘Well, that’s interesting news, Natasha. See you when you get back’?”

“I don’t want anything.” When her voice rose this time, she couldn’t control it. Passions, griefs, fears, poured out even as the tears began. “I never wanted anything from you. I didn’t want to fall in love with you, I didn’t want to need you in my life. I didn’t want your child inside me.”

“That’s clear enough.” His grip tightened, and he let his own temper free. “That’s crystal clear. But you do have my child inside you, and now we’re going to sit down and talk about what we’re going to do about it.”

“I tell you I need time.”

“I’ve already given you more than enough time, Natasha. Apparently fate’s taken a hand again, and you’re going to have to face it.”

“I can’t go through this again. I won’t.”

“Again? What are you talking about?”

“I had a child.” She jerked away to cover her face with her hands. Her whole body began to quake. “I had a child. Oh, God.”

Stunned, he put a gentle hand upon her shoulder. “You have a child?”

“Had.” The tears seemed to be shooting up, hot and painful, from the center of her body. “She’s gone.”

“Come sit down, Natasha. Talk to me.”

“I can’t. You don’t understand. I lost her. My baby. I can’t bear the thought of going through it all again.” She tore herself away. “You don’t know, you can’t know, how much it hurts.”

“No, but I can see it.” He reached for her again. “I want you to tell me about this, so I can understand.”

“What would that change?”

“We’ll have to see. It isn’t good for you to get so upset now.”

“No.” She swiped a hand over her cheek. “It doesn’t do any good to be upset. I’m sorry I’m behaving like this.”

“Don’t apologize. Sit down. I’ll get you some tea. We’ll talk.” He led her to a chair and she went unresistingly. “I’ll only be a minute.”

He was away for less than that, he was sure, but when he came back, she was gone.

Mikhail carved from a block of cherrywood and listened to the blast of rock and roll through his earphones. It suited the mood he could feel from the wood. Whatever was inside—and he wasn’t sure just what that was yet—was young and full of energy. Whenever he carved, he listened, whether it was to blues or Bach or simply the rush and whoosh of traffic four floors below his window. It left his mind free to explore whatever medium his hands were working in.

Tonight his mind was too cluttered, and he knew he was stalling. He glanced over his worktable and across his cramped and cluttered two-room apartment. Natasha was curled in the overstuffed, badly sprung chair he’d salvaged off the street the previous summer. She had a book in her hands, but Mikhail didn’t think she’d turned a page in more than twenty minutes. She, too, was stalling.

As annoyed with himself as with her, he pulled off the headphones. He only had to turn to be in the kitchen. Saying nothing, he put a pot onto one of the two temperamental gas burners and brewed tea. Natasha made no comment. When he brought over two cups, setting hers on the scarred surface of a nearby table, she glanced up blankly.

“Oh. *Dyakuyu*.”

“It’s time to tell me what’s going on.”

“Mikhail—”

“I mean it.” He dropped onto the mismatched hassock at her feet. “You’ve been here nearly a week, Tash.”

She managed a small smile. “Ready to kick me out?”

“Maybe.” But he put a hand over hers, rubbing lightly. “I haven’t asked any questions, because that was what you wanted. I haven’t told Mama and Papa that you arrived at my door one evening, looking pale and frightened, because you asked me to say nothing.”

“And I appreciate it.”

“Well, stop appreciating it.” He made one of his characteristically abrupt gestures. “Talk to me.”

“I told you I needed to get away for a little while, and I didn’t want Mama and Papa to fuss over me.” She moved her shoulders, then reached for her tea. “You don’t fuss.”

“I’m about to. Tell me what’s wrong.” He leaned over and cupped her chin in one hand. “Tash, tell me.”

“I’m pregnant,” she blurted out, then shakily set the tea down again.

He opened his mouth, but when the words didn’t come, he simply wrapped his arms around her. Taking along, labored breath, she held on.

“You’re all right? You’re well?”

“Yes. I went to the doctor a couple days ago. He says I’m fine. We’re fine.”

He drew back to study her face. “The college professor?”

“Yes. There hasn’t been anyone but Spence.”

Mikhail’s dark eyes kindled. “If the bastard’s treated you badly —”

“No.” She found it odd that she was able to smile and caught Mikhail’s fisted hands in hers. “No, he’s never treated me badly.”

“So he doesn’t want the child.” When Natasha merely looked down at their joined hands, Mikhail narrowed his eyes. “Natasha?”

“I don’t know.” She pulled away to stand and pace through Mikhail’s collection of beat-up furniture and blocks of wood and stone.

“You haven’t told him?”

“Of course I told him.” As she moved, her hands clasped and unclasped. To calm herself, she stopped by Mikhail’s Christmas tree—a one-foot evergreen in a pot that she’d decorated with bits of colored paper. “I just didn’t give him much of a chance to say anything when I did. I was too upset.”

“You don’t want the child.”

She turned at that, her eyes wide. “How can you say that? How could you think that?”

“Because you’re here, instead of working things out with the college professor.”

“I needed time to think.”

“You think too much.”

It wasn’t anything he hadn’t said before. Natasha’s jaw set. “This isn’t a matter of deciding between a blue dress and a red one. I’m having a child.”

“*Tak*. Why don’t you sit down and relax before you give it wrinkles.”

“I don’t want to sit down.” She began to prowl again, shoving a box out of her way with one foot. “I didn’t want to get involved with him in the first place. Even when I did, when he made it impossible for me to do otherwise, I knew it was important to keep some distance. I wanted to make sure I didn’t make the same mistakes again. And now...” She made a helpless gesture.

“He isn’t Anthony. This baby isn’t Lily.” When she turned around, her eyes were so drenched with emotion that he rose to go to her. “I loved her, too.”

“I know.”

“You can’t judge by what’s gone, Tash.” Gently he kissed her cheeks. “It isn’t fair to you, your professor or the child.”

“I don’t know what to do.”

“Do you love him?”

“Yes, I love him.”

“Does he love you?”

“He says—”

He caught her restless hands in his own. “Don’t tell me what he says, tell me what you know.”

“Yes, he loves me.”

“Then stop hiding and go home. You should be having this conversation with him, not with your brother.”

He was slowly going out of his mind. Every day Spence went by Natasha’s apartment, certain that this time she would answer the door. When she didn’t, he stalked over to harass Annie in the shop. He barely noticed the Christmas decorations in shop windows, the

fat, cheerful Santas, the glittery angels, the colored lights strung around the houses. When he did, it was to scowl at them.

It had taken all of his efforts to make a show of holiday spirit for Freddie. He'd taken her to pick out a tree, spent hours decorating it with her and complimenting her crumbling popcorn strings. Dutifully he'd listened to her ever-growing Christmas list, and had taken her to the mall to sit in Santa's lap. But his heart wasn't in it.

It had to stop, he told himself and he stared out the window at the first snowfall. Whatever crisis he was facing, whatever chaos his life was in, he wouldn't see Freddie's Christmas spoiled.

She asked about Natasha every day. It only made it more difficult because he had no answers. He'd watched Freddie play an angel in her school's Christmas pageant and wished Natasha had been with him.

And what of their child? He could hardly think of anything else. Even now Natasha might be carrying the baby sister Freddie so coveted. The baby, Spence had already realized, that he desperately wanted. Unless... He didn't want to think of where she had gone, what she had done. How could he think of anything else?

There had to be a way to find her. When he did, he would beg, plead, browbeat and threaten until she came back to him.

She'd had a child. The fact left him dazed. A child she had lost, Spence remembered. But how, and when? Questions that needed answering crowded his mind. She had said she loved him, and he knew that saying it had been difficult for her. Even so, she had yet to trust him.

"Daddy." Freddie bounced into the room, her mind full of the Christmas that was only six days away. "We're making cookies."

He glanced over his shoulder to see Freddie grinning, her mouth smeared with red and green sugar. Spence swooped her up to hold her close. "I love you, Freddie."

She giggled, then kissed him. "I love you, too. Can you come make cookies with us?"

"In a little while. I have to go out first." He was going to go to the shop, corner Annie and find out where Natasha had gone. No matter what the redhead said, Spence didn't believe that Natasha would

have left her assistant without a number where she could be reached.

Freddie's lip poked out while she fiddled with Spence's top button. "When will you come back?"

"Soon." He kissed her again before he set her down. "When I come back, I'll help you bake cookies. I promise."

Content, Freddie rushed back to Vera. She knew her father always kept his promises.

Natasha stood outside the front door as the snow fell. There were lights strung along the roof and around the posts. She wondered how they would look when they were lighted. There was a full-size Santa on the door, his load of presents making him bend from the waist. She remembered the witch that had stood there on Halloween. On that first night she and Spence had made love. On that night, she was certain, their child had been conceived.

For a moment she almost turned back, telling herself she should go to her apartment, unpack, catch her breath. But that would only be hiding again. She'd hidden long enough. Gathering her courage, she knocked.

The moment Freddie opened the door, the little girl's eyes shone. She let out a squeal and all but jumped into Natasha's arms. "You're back, you're back! I've been waiting for you forever."

Natasha held her close, swaying back and forth. This was what she wanted, needed, she realized as she buried her face in Freddie's hair. How could she have been such a fool? "It's only been a little while."

"It's been days and days. We got a tree and lights, and I already wrapped your present. I bought it myself at the mall. Don't go away again."

"No," Natasha murmured. "I won't." She set Freddie down to step inside and close out the cold and snow.

"You missed my play. I was an angel."

"I'm sorry."

"We made the halos in school and got to keep them, so I can show you how I looked."

"I'd like that."



Certain everything was back to normal, Freddie took her hand. “I tripped once, but I remembered all my lines. Mikey forgot his. I said ‘A child is born in Bethlehem,’ and ‘Peace on Earth,’ and sang ‘Gloria in selfish Deo.’”

Natasha laughed for the first time in days. “I wish I had heard that. You will sing it for me later?”

“Okay. We’re baking cookies.” Still holding Natasha’s hand, she began to drag her toward the kitchen.

“Is your daddy helping you?”

“No, he had to go out. He said he’d come back soon and bake some. He promised.”

Torn between relief and disappointment, Natasha followed Freddie into the kitchen.

“Vera, Tash is back.”

“I see.” Vera pursed her lips. Just when she’d thought Natasha *might* be good enough for the *señor* and her baby, the woman had gone off without a word. Still, she knew her duty. “Would you like some coffee or tea, miss?”

“No, thank you. I don’t want to be in your way.”

“You have to stay.” Freddie tugged at Natasha’s hand again. “Look, I’ve made snowmen and reindeers and Santas.” She plucked what she considered one of her best creations from the counter. “You can have one.”

“It’s beautiful.” Natasha looked down at the snowman with red sugar clumped on his face and the brim of his hat broken off.

“Are you going to cry?” Freddie asked.

“No.” She managed to blink back the mist of tears. “I’m just glad to be home.”

As she spoke, the kitchen door opened. Natasha held her breath when Spence stepped into the room. He didn’t speak. His hand still on the door, he stopped to stare. It was as if he’d conjured her up out of his own chaotic thoughts. There was snow melting in her hair and on the shoulders of her coat. Her eyes were bright, teary.

“Daddy, Tash is home,” Freddie announced, running to him. “She’s going to bake cookies with us.”

Vera briskly untied her apron. Whatever doubts she'd had about Natasha were eclipsed by the look on her face. Vera knew a woman in love when she saw her. "We need more flour. Come, Freddie, we will go buy some."

"But I want to—"

"You want to bake, we need flour to bake. Come, we'll get your coat." Businesslike, Vera hustled Freddie out of the room.

Alone, Spence and Natasha stood where they were; the moment stretched out. The heat in the kitchen was making her dizzy. Natasha stripped off her coat and laid it over the back of a chair. She wanted to talk to him, reasonably. That couldn't be done if she fainted at his feet.

"Spence." The word seemed to echo off the walls, and she took a deep breath. "I was hoping we could talk."

"I see. Now you've decided talking's a good idea."

She started to speak, then changed her mind. When the oven timer went off behind her, she turned automatically to take up the hot mitt and remove the latest batch of cookies from the oven. She took her time setting them on the cooling rack.

"You're right to be angry with me. I behaved very badly toward you. Now I have to ask you to listen to me, and hope you can forgive me."

He studied her for one long, silent moment. "You certainly know how to defuse an argument."

"I didn't come to argue with you. I've had time to think, and I realize that I chose a very poor way to tell you about the baby, then to leave as I did." She looked down at her hands, her tightly laced fingers. "To just run away was inexcusable. I can only tell you that I was afraid and confused and too emotional to think clearly."

"One question," he interjected, then waited until she lifted her head. He needed to see her face. "Is there still a baby?"

"Yes." The blank puzzlement in her eyes became awareness. Awareness became regret. "Oh, Spence, I'm sorry, so sorry to have caused you to think that I might have..." She blinked away tears, knowing her emotions were still too close to the surface. "I'm sorry. I went to Mikhail's to stay with him a few days." She let out a shaky breath. "May I sit?"

He only nodded, then moved to the window as she slid behind the table. Laying his palms upon the counter, he looked out at the snow. "I've been going out of my mind, wondering where you were, how you were. The state you were in when you left, I was terrified you'd do something rash before we could talk it through."

"I could never do what you thought, Spence. This is our baby."

"You said you didn't want it." He turned again. "You said you wouldn't go through it again."

"I was afraid," Natasha admitted. "And it's true I hadn't wanted to get pregnant, not now. Not ever. I'd like to tell you everything."

He wanted badly, much too badly, just to reach out to her, to hold her and tell her that nothing mattered. Because he knew it did matter, he busied himself at the stove. "Do you want some coffee?"

"No. It makes me sick now." She smiled a little when he fumbled with the pot. "Please, would you sit down?"

"All right." He sat down across from her, then spread his hands. "Go ahead."

"I told you that I had been in love with Anthony while I was with the corps de ballet. I was just seventeen when we became lovers. He was the first for me. There's been no one for me until you."

"Why?"

The answer was much easier than she'd believed. "I'd never loved again until you. The love I feel for you is much different from the fantasies I had for Anthony. With you it isn't dreams and knights and princes. With you it's real and solid. Day-to-day. Ordinary—ordinary in the most beautiful way. Can you understand?"

He looked at her. The room was quiet, insulated by the snow. It smelled of warm cookies and cinnamon. "Yes."

"I was afraid to feel this strongly for you, for anyone, because what happened between Anthony and me..." She waited a moment, surprised that there was no pain now, only sadness. "I had believed him, everything he said, everything he promised me. When I discovered he made many of the same promises to other women, I was crushed. We argued, and he sent me away like a child who had displeased him. A few weeks later I discovered I was pregnant. I was thrilled. I could only think that I was carrying Anthony's child and that

when I told him, he would see that we belonged together. Then I told him.”

Spence reached for her hand without a word.

“It was not as I had imagined. He was angry. The things he said.... It doesn’t matter,” she went on. “He didn’t want me, he didn’t want the child. In those few moments I grew up years. He wasn’t the man I had wanted him to be, but I had the child. I wanted that baby.” Her fingers tightened on his. “I so desperately wanted that baby.”

“What did you do?”

“The only thing I could. There could be no dancing now. I left the company and went home. I know it was a burden for my parents, but they stood by me. I got a job in a department store. Selling toys.” She smiled at that.

“It must have been difficult for you.” He tried to imagine her, a teenager, pregnant, deserted by the father of her child, struggling to hold it all together.

“Yes, it was. It was also a wonderful time. My body changed. After the first month or two when I felt so fragile, I began to feel strong. So strong. I would sit in bed at night and read books on babies and birthing. I would ask Mama dozens of questions. I knit—badly,” she said with a quiet laugh. “Papa built a bassinet, and Mama sewed a white skirt with pink and blue ribbons. It was beautiful.” She felt the tears well up and shook her head. “Could I have some water?”

He rose, and filling a glass from the tap, set it beside her. “Take your time, Natasha.” Because he knew they both needed it, he stroked her hair. “You don’t have to tell me everything at once.”

“I need to.” She sipped slowly, waiting for him to sit down again. “I called her Lily,” she murmured. “She was so lovely, so tiny and soft. I had no idea it was possible to love anything, anyone, the way you love a child. I would watch her sleep for hours, so thrilled, so awed that she had come from me.”

The tears were falling now, soundlessly. One fell onto the back of her hand. “It was hot that summer, and I would take her out in this little carriage to get air and sunshine. People would stop to look at her. She hardly cried, and when I nursed her, she would put a hand

on my breast and watch me with those big eyes. You know what it is. You have Freddie.”

“I know. There’s nothing like having a child.”

“Or losing one,” Natasha said softly. “It was so quick. She was only five weeks old. I woke up in the morning, surprised that she had slept through the night. My breasts were full of milk. The bassinet was by my bed. I reached down for her, picked her up. At first I didn’t understand, didn’t believe....” She broke off to press her hands to her eyes. “I remember screaming and screaming—Rachel rushing up out of the next bed, the rest of the family running in—Mama taking her from me.” The silent tears turned to weeping. Her face now covered by her hands, she let go in a way she usually only allowed herself in private.

There was nothing he could say, nothing to be said. Instead of searching for meaningless words, he rose to crouch beside her and gather her into his arms. The passion of her grief held sway. Then on a half sob, she turned and clung to him, accepting comfort.

Her hands were fisted against his back. Gradually they relaxed as he kept her close. The hot tears slowed, and the pain, now shared, eased.

“I’m all right,” she managed at length. Pulling away, she began to fumble in her bag for a tissue. Spence took it from her to dry her cheeks himself. “The doctor called it crib death. No reason,” she said as she closed her eyes once more. “That was somehow worse. Not knowing why, not being sure if I could have stopped it.”

“No.” He took both her hands and she opened her eyes. “Don’t do that. Listen to me. I can only imagine what it would be like to go through what you went through, but I know that when truly horrible things happen, it’s usually out of our control.”

“It took me a long time to accept what I can never understand.” She turned over her hands in his. “A long time to start living again, going back to work, finally moving here, starting my business. I think I would have died without my family.” She gave herself a moment, sipping the water to cool her dry throat. “I didn’t want to love anyone again. Then there was you. And Freddie.”

“We need you, Natasha. And you need us.”

“Yes.” She took his hand to press it to her lips. “I want you to understand. Spence, when I learned I was pregnant, it all came flying back at me. I tell you, I don’t think I could survive going through that again. I’m so afraid to love this child. And I already do.”

“Come here.” He lifted her to her feet, keeping her hands locked tight in his. “I know that you loved Lily, and that you’ll always love her and grieve for her. So will I now. What happened before can’t be changed, but this is a different place, a different time. A different child. I want you to understand that we’re going to go through this pregnancy, the birth and the rearing together. Whether you want me or not.”

“I’m afraid.”

“Then we’ll be afraid together. And when this baby is eight and rides a two-wheeler for the first time, we’ll be afraid together.”

Her lips trembled into a smile. “When you say it, I can almost believe it.”

“Believe it.” He bent to kiss her. “Because it’s a promise.”

“Yes, it’s time for promises.” Her smile grew. “I love you.” It was so easy to say it now. So easy to feel it. “Will you hold me?”

“On one condition.” He rubbed away a drying tear with his thumb. “I want to tell Freddie she’s expecting a baby brother or sister. I think it would make a great Christmas present for her.”

“Yes.” She felt stronger, surer. “I want us to tell her.”

“All right, you’ve got five days.”

“Five days for what?”

“To make whatever plans you want to make, to arrange to have your family come down, buy a dress, whatever you need to do to get ready for the wedding.”

“But—”

“No buts.” He framed her face with his hands and silenced her. “I love you, I want you. You’re the best thing to come into my life since Freddie, and I don’t intend to lose you. We’ve made a child, Natasha.” Watching her, he laid a hand on her stomach, gently possessive. “A child I want. A child I already love.”

In a gesture of trust, she placed her hand on his. “I won’t be afraid if you’re with me.”

“We have a date here Christmas Eve. I’m going to wake up Christmas morning with my wife.”

She steadied herself by putting her hands on his forearms. “Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

With a laugh, she threw her arms around his neck and said one word. “Yes.”

## EPILOGUE

Christmas Eve was the most beautiful day in the year as far as Natasha was concerned. It was a time to celebrate life and love and family.

The house was quiet when she came in. She was drawn to the tree and the light. She sent an angel spinning on one branch, then turned to study the room.

On the table there was a papier-mâché reindeer with only one ear. Compliments of Freddie's second-grade art class. Beside it stood a pudgy snowman holding a lantern. An exquisite porcelain crèche was displayed on the mantel. Beneath it hung four stockings. A fire crackled in the grate.

A year before she had stood before the fire and promised to love, honor and cherish. They had been the easiest promises she had ever had to keep. Now this was her home.

Home. She took a deep breath to draw in the scents of pine and candles. It was so good to be home. Last-minute shoppers had crowded The Fun House until late in the afternoon. Now there was only family.

"Mama." Freddie raced in, trailing a bright red ribbon. "You're home."

"I'm home." Laughing, Natasha scooped her up to spin her around.

"We took Vera to the airport so she can spend Christmas with her sister, then we watched the planes. Daddy said when you got home we'd have dinner, then sing Christmas carols."



“Daddy’s absolutely right.” Natasha draped the ribbon over Freddie’s shoulder. “What’s this?”

“I’m wrapping a present, all by myself. It’s for you.”

“For me? What is it?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Yes, you can. Watch.” She dropped onto the couch to run her fingers along Freddie’s ribs. “It’ll be easy,” she said as Freddie squealed and squirmed.

“Torturing the child again,” Spence commented from the doorway.

“Daddy!” Springing up, Freddie raced to him. “I didn’t tell.”

“I knew I could count on you, funny face. Look who woke up.” He bounced a baby on his hip.

“Here, Brandon.” Madly in love, Freddie passed up the ribbon so that he could play with it. “It’s pretty, just like you.”

At six months, young Brandon Kimball was chubby, rosy-cheeked and delighted with the world in general. He clutched the ribbon in one hand and reached for Freddie’s hair with the other.

Walking over, Natasha held out her arms. “Such a big boy,” she murmured as her son reached for her. Gathering him close, she pressed a kiss to his throat. “So beautiful.”

“He looks just like his mother.” Spence stroked a hand over Brandon’s thick, black curls. As if he approved of the statement, Brandon let out a gurgling laugh. When he wriggled, Natasha set him down to crawl on the rug.

“It’s his first Christmas.” Natasha watched him scoot over to torment one of the cats and saw Lucy dart under the sofa. She’s no fool, Natasha thought happily.

“And our second.” He turned Natasha into his arms. “Happy anniversary.”

Natasha kissed him once, then twice. “Have I told you today that I love you?”

“Not since I called you this afternoon.”

“Much too long ago.” She slipped her arms around his waist. “I love you. Thank you for the most wonderful year of my life.”

“You’re very welcome.” He glanced over her head only long enough to see that Freddie had prevented Brandon from pulling an

ornament from a low branch. "But it's only going to get better."

"Do you promise?"

He smiled and lowered his mouth to hers again. "Absolutely."

Freddie stopped crawling with Brandon to watch them. A baby brother had turned out to be nice, after all, but she was still holding out for that baby sister. She smiled as she saw her parents embrace.

Maybe next Christmas.

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Taming Natasha

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