

ELUSIVE LADY



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BY

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ONE

A small crowd gathered outside the new movie theater in Randall Center, Iowa. Although he was at the end of the line, David Randall there were few others in the line, so he knew he would have no trouble finding a seat at the silent film.

Then he saw her buying a ticket—the woman he'd been admiring since he first saw her two months earlier. It felt like he should know her, but he couldn't quite place her. Maybe she was somebody he had known during his youth in Randall Center. Tonight she appeared to be alone. That was encouraging, because he'd always been too far away to speak with her before this, and by the time he got close enough to where she was, she'd disappeared every time. That night would be his first opportunity—if he could sit close enough.

By the time Dave paid his money and entered the theater, the audience lights were already dimming as the organist played. Still, it was easy to find the woman. She was the only one in town with a pale blonde streak in the front of her bobbed light brown hair. And she was obviously ostracized

by the townsfolk. No one was seated two rows before or behind her, and there were only empty chairs in her row. Curious about what she had done to become such an outcast, he loped to the row where she sat on the aisle and excused himself.

She looked up at him, her mouth dropping open as though she couldn't believe someone would want to sit in her row. Without replying, she moved her legs to the side so he could pass. Dave scrunched down into the seat next to hers as *Robin Hood*, starring Douglas Fairbanks, came onto the screen.

“Good evening, ma’am,” he said pleasantly.

The woman nodded in response but said nothing. When he continued to chat pleasantly, she responded to his questions by nodding each time. The fifth time he spoke, she leaned toward him and whispered, “Please let me watch the film. It’s not often that I get to see one. Maybe we can talk afterward.”

Satisfied that he’d achieved his objective, Dave stared at the screen, often stealing glances at the woman beside him. She was tall; he knew because he’d seen her near men shorter than she was. Taking a few minutes to study her more closely, he realized that she was about the same age as his sister Karen.

The light of the picture brightened, and he noticed that the woman beside him didn’t use a boyish-form brassiere to bind her breasts as most women did. The stylish, tubular dress of beige did little to give her the popular boyish appearance. Without a doubt, she was well-endowed.

Dave sighed again and returned his gaze to the silent film, not really seeing it. Instead, he continued to think of the woman at his side. She must be very independent to dare to be different. Women’s fashions in the mid-1920s were ridiculous. As for himself, he wanted to date a woman like her, not one who insisted on looking like a boy.

As hard as he tried to concentrate on the film, he couldn't keep his eyes on the screen. All he could do was sneak glances at the woman next to him and wonder what they would do when the movie ended. A cup of coffee and a walk home probably, maybe a ride in the country.

How could she extricate herself from this predicament? Jane Cole wondered as she absently watched the action and the interrupting words on the screen. If she'd stopped to think instead of nervously rambling, she never would have voiced her last sentence. She knew who he was, and she needed to stay away from him if he wanted to keep his reputation intact.

Talking with him after the movie was inadvisable. Now that she'd made the suggestion, though, she saw no way to retract it with Dave sitting beside her. She glanced over at him. He certainly did look good—tall, blond, and deeply tanned, probably from helping his father on the farm when he wasn't on duty. Yes, David Randall was quite handsome, a man any woman—including herself—would be thrilled to date.

With a sorrowful sigh, she returned her attention to the screen. If only she could accept a date, even a walk home, from him! But that was impossible. Most of his family members had already warned her to stay away from him.

As the movie ended, she slipped from her seat. With any luck, she could get away before he realized what had happened. But Dave was smart. He could probably find her without any trouble.

To his delight, the house lights brightened. Dave turned toward the woman only to find an empty seat. Hurrying, he made his way through the crowd to catch up with her. When she paused at the door to look over her shoulder, his spirits rose. Apparently, they'd just gotten separated. Waving his

hand, he shouted for her to wait there. With a face clouded by the presence of an unhappy frown, she continued through the door, pushed on by a couple of men. Making his way to the door, he excused himself to all he passed.

Once outside, though, he couldn't see her anywhere. There was no doubt in his mind. She had intentionally disappeared. But why? Was he that terrible of a man to send her away when she didn't even know his name?

"Damn she's an elusive lady," Dave swore. "How will I ever meet her?"

"Take my advice, big brother," Dave heard a woman say from behind him. "Don't try."

Turning around he saw the lone redhead in his family, his sister Linda, and her husband.

"How did you like the movie?" Linda asked.

"The cat's meow," Dave answered. "How did you like it?"

"Frankly, I saw about as much of it as you did. From what I saw, you were too smitten by the person sitting beside you."

"I've never known you to spy on me."

"I didn't spy. You were sitting two rows directly in front of us. We couldn't help but see you ogling her, and *you* couldn't have seen half of the movie."

A slow grin spread across Dave's lips. "Can I help it if I have good taste?"

"If she's your idea of good taste, you were corrupted during the war. Maybe you should have gone somewhere other than France to fight."

"What's wrong with her? She's very attractive."

"That she is," Linda's husband inserted.

Linda shot him an angry glare. "Shut up, Mel. She's a hussy, and you know it."

"Even a hussy can be attractive, dear. I think Dave has good taste in judging a woman's appearance. Besides,

there's nothing wrong with a single man looking."

"Melvin, stop that. You'll only encourage him."

"I don't need encouragement, Linda," Dave said lightly. "Except from that elusive lady."

"*Lady*? She's been with practically every man in town. Everybody knows that. And if you have any common sense, you'll stay away from her."

"I don't understand. What in the world has she done that's so bad?"

"I just told you. She's worse than a flapper, a tramp."

"Nonsense. She was very proper tonight, didn't want anything to do with me. I'm surprised you didn't see that."

"But are you smart enough to realize there's a reason for her behavior?"

Dave only partially succeeded in keeping his voice from rising in anger. "I spent years away from Randall Center and the people I love. I'd think they'd want to see me happy. Now tell me her name and where I can find her. I'll handle my life from there."

"Forget it. Ma would really be upset if you dated her. And Pa would have my head on a platter if he found out that I was the one who told you who she is. He'll have *your* head, too, if he ever finds out you purposely sat next to her in the theater tonight."

"Damn it all, anyway!" Dave exclaimed in irritation. "It's *my* life, and I'll live it *my* way. Good night. I'm going home."

Concerned that Dave would use his skills as a policeman to learn her identity, Jane shuddered. Things were much worse than she had anticipated if he had shouted at Linda, because the Randall siblings were all very close. One problem none of the Randalls seemed to have considered in talking with her before he came home was Dave's determination. Eventually, it would win out over their desires. Sooner

or later he would learn her identity, but until that time, she was equally determined to keep her distance.

From the shadows of a nearby alley, she watched Dave take about a dozen long strides to his car, get in, and drive away. Only then did she come into the late-evening sunlight to approach Linda and Mel as they stared after him, obviously stunned by his response.

“What do you want?” Linda demanded from nearby.

“I’m sorry about what happened,” she replied as a tear slid down her cheek. “I always avoid him, but it wasn’t possible tonight. The best I could do was leave before he could stop me.”

“Make sure you *keep* avoiding him. Just because he sought you out doesn’t give you a right to be with him. I want to protect my brother from you.”

“Don’t worry, Linda. I don’t want to hurt Dave any more than you want me to. I’ll make sure he’s never close to me again—if it’s possible. Besides, I don’t think he knows who I am. Maybe he’ll forget about me if I avoid him long enough.”

With those words Jane turned and strolled down the street. Linda’s bitter words echoed in her ears. “Tramp! I can’t believe she had the gall to talk to me right on the street for the whole world to see.”

“Don’t be so hard on her, dear,” Mel said placatingly. “I don’t think it was easy for her. Besides, she only wanted to reassure you. And remember, you talked to her first.”

“How *dare* you side with her!” Linda exclaimed. “She didn’t have to answer me, you know.”

“It isn’t a question of taking sides. The woman was obviously hurting, Linda, and you treated her rudely. As a lawyer, I believe that she’s innocent until proven guilty. So far, she’s shown us that she’s trying. At least, admit that much.”

“I’ll admit nothing. Let’s go home. Ma probably wants to leave, and Greta wasn’t feeling well this afternoon.”

On his way home, Dave glanced at his watch. Only eight-thirty. That meant he still had time to stop at Marcia Lehman's house. The first night he'd taken her to dinner four months previously she'd extended an open invitation for him to visit her without notice. So far, he hadn't done it. But he was depressed that night, and her optimistic outlook might cheer him up before he went home. If what Linda had told him was right, he couldn't go home in his state. His parents would undoubtedly question him, and he was in no mood to for their interrogation.

When Marcia Lehman opened the door, Dave stared down at her. Marcia was much shorter than the woman at the theater, and her dark brown hair was straight around her flawless face. The elusive lady's hair had a slight wave. Marcia wore a pastel lavender robe and matching nightgown, but she was built much like the other woman, although proportionately smaller.

"David!" Marcia exclaimed. "What a marvelous surprise!"

"I'm sorry to come unexpectedly, Marcia. I hope you aren't busy."

"Heavens no! Come in. I'll make some coffee."

Remembering how he'd planned to have coffee with the elusive lady, he declined Marcia's offer as he passed her. "Thanks, but no coffee for me. Go ahead if you want some."

"You know I don't like coffee, David," she reminded him, leading him to the sofa in the living room.

"I can understand why Ben was so much in love with you," Dave said as they sat down. "You're a beautiful woman."

"And Benjamin was a wonderful husband. I wasn't sure he would be when I married him. He wasn't my first choice

for a husband.”

“He wasn’t?” he asked, stunned. “Who did you want to marry?”

“When we were dating, I always wished a friend of his would invite me to a dance or some other function. I would have told Benjamin I wasn’t interested if I could have gotten his friend’s attention. Unfortunately, that friend only knew I existed as Benjamin’s girlfriend. So I married him after I graduated. His friend had left town, anyway. Then when Benjamin was killed in the war, everything changed. I had Mark to support. A child is an absolute joy, but he’s also a big responsibility—especially a boy. A boy needs a father to teach him how to be a man.”

Dave could feel her trying to bring marriage into the conversation, but he couldn’t let that happen. He had no doubt that Marcia would be a good wife, but not *his* wife. First, he had to see if the elusive lady could be a good wife, or even Jane Cole. Oh, how he wished he was talking like this to either of them! Marcia was a friend, and that was that. The only reason he dated her was because she was the only available woman in his age group.

“I keep seeing someone around town that I don’t know,” he said to change the subject. “I even sat next to her at the movie tonight. I don’t think she lived here before I left for college. Maybe you know her. She’s tall, brown hair with a blonde streak in front?”

“You don’t *want* to know her, either,” Marcia insisted. Then she smiled and continued in a seductive tone. “You know, David, a woman can get very lonely late at night when her son goes to bed. It gets even lonelier when she goes to bed by herself—especially when she has known the joy of intimacy. Going all the way was something I always enjoyed. A bed gets awfully big when a woman becomes a widow.”

Dave studied her. Taking Marcia to bed would be a nice

diversion. He didn't want to think about the elusive lady, and satisfying Marcia would take his mind off her—at least temporarily. “Are you suggesting what I think you are?”

“Probably. We've been dating for four months now, and you still haven't done more than give me a quick good night kiss. We haven't necked or petted or anything fun yet. Is there something wrong with me?”

“Of course not. I just didn't think you'd want me to go further than that. I didn't expect you to want more.”

“If nothing's wrong with me, why don't you kiss me instead of sitting here talking?”

“What about Mark?”

“He's been in bed for nearly an hour. I'm sure he's sound asleep, and he probably will be the entire night. Once he goes off, he hardly moves until about seven the next morning. That gives us plenty of time to be alone without him finding out.”

“I don't know, Marcia. Ben was one of my best friends when we were growing up. It feels like we would be cuckolding him.”

“Benjamin's been gone for years now, David. He would want me to live again. He would want me to move on and find a father for Mark. Benjamin wouldn't care if you satisfied me in his bed.”

“You don't think so?”

“I *know* he wouldn't. We talked about it before he went to war.”

“In that case,” Dave said as he closed the gap between them and embraced her.

But when he shut his eyes as he kissed her, the image in his mind was that of the elusive lady. Oh, how he wished they were her slightly parted lips against his! While his tongue slipped between Marcia's soft lips, he imagined they belonged to his elusive lady. The intensity of his kiss deepened when their tongues met. He ground his lips against hers

as he held her head in place, his fingers entangled in her coarse hair.

Suddenly she pushed away, whispering hoarsely, “We would be more comfortable in my bed, David.”

Just as abruptly, he returned to reality and scrambled to his feet. “I’m sorry, Marcia, but I can’t. Not tonight, anyway.”

“Why not? Was I too forward?”

“Ben was my friend. I’m not ready to bed his widow. I don’t care how much you need it. Ben, Jim, Bud, and I were the best of friends in school. We were all like brothers. For me to make love to you right now would be the same in my subconscious as making love to Linda, Sheila, or Karen. I wouldn’t make love to my sisters, and I can’t to you—at least, not until I’ve had time to re-evaluate my relationship with you. I hope you understand.”

“As a matter of fact, I don’t. Didn’t you understand what I was saying? About my high school love not being Benjamin? Didn’t you learn anything in college except from books? I said that I loved one of his friends, David. Didn’t you know that friend was you?”

This couldn’t be happening! They couldn’t be having this conversation. Marcia had been interested in *him* in high school? Unable to hide his shock, he exclaimed, “*Me?* I had no idea.”

“I know. I did a very good job of hiding it. I didn’t want to seem pushy, so I waited for you to come to me. But you never did. That’s why I married Ben.”

“My mind and heart were occupied with someone else in high school, someone impossible to date. Someone who ...” He stopped. How could he explain the reason he couldn’t date the girl to Marcia when he couldn’t even explain it to himself? All he knew was that this young girl was like a little sister to him, and to this day, he was confused by his earlier feelings for her.

“Is that why it took you so long to come back to Randall Center? Because you were afraid she’d be spoken for or married by now?”

Dave stared down at his friend’s widow. Was that the reason he’d avoided coming home? Or was there something else that kept him from town? Unsure how to answer, he said, “Yes. I’d better be going, Marcia. Coming here tonight was a bad idea. My mind is preoccupied.”

“Thinking of your high school love?”

“Not tonight. Tonight I’m thinking about work. Good night, Marcia. If it’s okay, I’d like to take you to dinner Friday night. Could you find someone to care for Mark so it will be just the two of us?”

“I think so,” she agreed as she walked him to the door. “What time will you call for me?”

“About seven.”

“Okay. I’ll be ready.”

Dave smiled down at her then kissed her lightly on the lips. “I’m sorry about tonight, Marcia. I really am. I wish I could stay, but right now it’s out of the question. Good night.”

Why hadn’t he told Marcia that he felt nothing other than friendship for her? Dave wondered on his way home. He had told her that he needed time to re-evaluate their relationship, yet he knew there was nothing to reconsider. His loyalties lay elsewhere. As guilty as he felt about not telling her, he was glad he couldn’t. He sincerely liked Marcia and didn’t want to hurt her. She’d had enough pain in her life already.

Besides, his high-school dream girl was probably unavailable. And now that he thought about it, he had changed a lot over the last few years. She *must* have changed even more. Did he dare seek her out and talk to her? Did he dare try to find out if there was even a chance with her?

Driving into the barn which he used as a garage, Dave

parked his car then went into the house. While he got ready for bed, he continued thinking of his dream girl. He needed to concentrate on his new female interest. How would he ever find out who the elusive lady was when nobody would so much as mention her name?

Taking a long stroll home, Jane let the memory of the evening engulf her. As pleasant as it had been to be so close to Dave, her tears flowed. The residents of a small Iowa town could be terribly cruel to someone who made a mistake—especially if that someone was a woman. But it wasn't until Dave's return that she ached over her situation. It wasn't until that night that her heart was torn apart.

One minute he was kind to her, expecting her to spend some time with him after the motion picture; the next thing she knew he was visiting the snobbish Marcia Lehman. She knew Dave's car, and it was his parked in front of Marcia's house. Despite the emotional pain in her heart, it was best that Dave was with Marcia. Ben's widow had a flawless reputation. Her own was irreparably marred.

How could she live in the same town as Dave without him eventually learning the truth? Randall Center may be cruelly unforgiving of her indiscretion, but life was much crueler, because she couldn't leave town. She was confined in Randall Center without even enough money to pay for the electricity her father had had installed in their house.

Maybe she should tell Dave everything and get it out in the open. He'd always been understanding, nonjudgmental. At least, he had when she was young. It was *possible* that he would support her. But what if he had changed? What if he turned against her as the rest of the town had done? Being rejected by her friends had been difficult, but being rejected by Dave, her second big brother, would be unbearable.

No, she couldn't tell him the truth. He would have to learn it on his own. That way she would never have to deal with his rejection. Once he knew the entire sordid story, which is exactly how the citizens of Randall Center would report it, he would never approach her again.

Marcia's front door opened, and Jane slipped into the shadow of a nearby tree. Seeing Dave kiss Marcia good night increased the ache in her heart. The tears that had started to subside once more streamed down her cheeks. Even though the kiss was neither lengthy nor intense, she still longed to have Dave do the same to her, and she watched sadly as he got into his car and drove out of sight. When Jane stepped out from the shadow, she was startled by Marcia's angry shout.

"Hey! Get over here! I want to talk to you."

"What is it?" Jane asked, stopping at the bottom step leading up the porch.

"Quit spying on David," Marcia demanded. "Just stay away from him."

"That's what I've *been* doing."

"Don't lie! David told me that he sat next to you at the motion picture."

"I couldn't stop him."

"You probably didn't even try. This is the only warning you're going to get from me. Stay away from David. He's my boyfriend, and I won't let you take him away from me. If you try, I'll tell him all about you. He won't want a thing to do with you after that, and you know it."

"No, please," Jane pleaded, her tears increasing with the ache in her heart. "Don't tell him. You'll hurt *him* more than you will me, and that would only make him angry with you."

"I doubt it. He's already been asking about you."

"I'm doing the best I can to avoid him. What more do you want? This is a small town. We're bound to cross paths on occasion."

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“Not if *I* can help it. Now get off my property. I have nothing more to say to the likes of you.”

Marcia went inside and slammed her door. Unable to bear the pain in her heart, Jane ran home.

Two

As he drove on a deserted road near his home, Dave noticed a woman's bicycle beside the road but saw no one near. Knowing the elusive lady owned the distinctive pink bike, he parked beside the road and followed a well-used trail into the wooded area. The path led to a small pond on the edge of his father's property which was once a popular swimming hole for teenagers. Now it was seldom used.

Walking down the trail, he remembered all the hot summer days he and his friends had spent playing in the cool water of the pond. How many months had it been since those carefree days?

Then he saw her sitting on the dock with her feet dangling in the water. Silently, he slipped behind a tree to watch her.

He could even see part of her figure from his vantage-point. Now would be the opportune time to meet her. Other than behind a tree, where could she hide from him now? He could go up to her and ask for a date. Watching her, he

imagined her facial features, indelibly etched in his mind. And she was stylish, even if she did wear dresses in different shades of brown all the time.

Picking up the towel beside her, she dried her feet then put on her stockings and shoes. As she rose, Dave took a step into the clearing until he saw a man pulling himself onto the dock. It was his youngest brother, Dennis! Dave hid again to watch the couple from the trees. Straining to hear their conversation proved fruitless; all he could make out was mumbling. But he studied their every movement to determine just how deeply they were involved.

“I shouldn’t have agreed to meet you here,” Jane said, handing the towel to Dennis. “You know what your family would say if they found out about this.”

“I don’t care, honey,” Dennis responded as he dried himself. “I’ll see you if I want to.”

“But I’ve known you all your life. Why the sudden interest in me? You were never interested before a couple of months ago.”

“I was still in school. I had to wait until my eighteenth birthday so Ma and Pa couldn’t stop me. That was when I found out where you were every night.”

“I’m flattered that you’d want to be with me, Dennis. I really am. But you can’t.”

“Why not?” he asked, draping the towel around his shoulders.

“Because your parents would be furious.”

“Then we’ll make sure they don’t find out.”

He inched toward her as she said, “They will eventually, whether you want them to or not.”

“I could come to the Whistle Stop every night.”

“That’s no romance, Dennis. Besides, you should be dating women your own age.”

“They aren’t women; they’re still girls. I’m a man now,

and I'm not interested in girls.”

“You say you're a man now. Well, those girls, as you call them, are women now. You're very attractive, Dennis. You look just like Dave except you lack a couple inches in height. You could have any woman you want.”

When Dennis reached out for her, she stepped back to avoid his touch. But she misjudged his arm length, and he grasped her shoulders securely. Then he closed the gap between them with one stride.

“I can have any woman I want—except you. The least you can do is give me a chance.”

“Don't do this, Dennis. I don't want you to get hurt, and that's exactly what would happen if I agreed to be with you. Now be a good boy and let me go so I can get home.”

“I'm not a boy!” Dennis shouted as he pulled her against him. Then just before he bent, he lowered his volume. “And I can prove it.”

Before she could protest, Dennis' mouth captured hers in a heated kiss. At the touch of his lips against hers, she relaxed against him. In her mind, she was no longer in the arms of Dennis but the arms of the man she had loved since childhood. He'd never kissed her, but if he had, his kiss would probably be like this one.

Forcing herself back to reality, she pushed away and scolded him. “Dennis Randall, that's enough. You've proven your point.”

“I may have proven my point, but that was definitely *not* enough.”

When Dennis kissed her again, Dave hurried away, feeling guilty for having spied on them.

In town he went to see his boss, Chief of Police Alan “Bud” Warren. While they were talking, he glanced out the window in time to see his elusive lady ride past on her bike. Staring out the window, he continued his conversation with

his old friend. “But you say you haven’t come up with even a clue as to who killed Jim’s mother. How do you expect *me* to help?”

“You were Jim Cole’s best friend. Maybe if *you* talk to him, you can get him to open up. He won’t talk to the law. He won’t even tell us all the people his mother knew—or who might have a motive to kill her.”

“You can’t be sure he’ll talk to me, either.”

“You’re our last chance, Dave. If you had been here at the time, I would have sent you to talk to him first.”

“I can’t promise anything, Bud. Jim’s always been very secretive about some things.” The elusive lady disappeared around the corner, so Dave turned to face Bud Warren.

“Does that bother you?”

“Of course not. Why?”

“Because you looked disappointed about something when you turned around.”

“I was admiring a woman,” Dave admitted with a broad grin, “and she turned the corner.”

“Ah-ha!” Bud said with a laugh. “Living in France for so long didn’t change you a bit. I’ll bet she was a looker, too.”

“From this distance, anyway. You know, nice figure and nice face.”

“That doesn’t sound like the David Randall I went to school with. You were always with a girl who had a fantastic figure and face.”

“France did change me in one way. I learned that fantastic isn’t everything. I met a lot of fantastic-looking women there, but very few of them were worth staying with forever.”

“So now a nice figure and face satisfy you?”

“Especially *that* nice figure and face. I sat next to her at the movie the other night. I even thought we could talk afterward, but she left before I could stop her. She’s one hell

of an elusive lady, and it's damned discouraging."

"You sound like you're really interested in this woman. Why don't you ask her for a date?"

"Believe me, if I ever get near when she's alone again, I will. The problem is, I'm never close enough to talk. Maybe you can help me. She must be the only woman in town who doesn't try to make herself look like a damned boy by wearing one of those ridiculous brassieres."

Bud furrowed his eyes in a gesture Dave took as thoughtful. "Sorry, old buddy, I don't know her name; but I do know who you're talking about. The one who dyes the front of her hair blonde, right?"

"Right!" Dave said excitedly. "Tell me something about her. Anything!"

"There's nothing to tell except that she's a slut. I'd arrest her for prostitution, but I can't prove anything."

Dave couldn't believe Bud's words. If they were true, surely, she wouldn't have left him at the movie theater. "Do you really think she's a prostitute?"

"I suspect it, which is why she's not in jail. I can't prove anything. Take some advice, would you? Don't pursue her. You have a good woman in Ben's widow. If Marcia ever finds out you're looking at that woman, she won't see you again."

"I'll think about it, but I'm a lot more attracted to my elusive lady than I am to Marcia. Did I tell you? Marcia wanted me to take her to bed the other night, but I couldn't because my mind was on that woman."

"It's a good thing you don't know her name or Marcia would be no more than a fond memory for you."

"Marcia has never been more than a companion, anyway. I like her, but I don't love her. I've been in love, so I know what I'm looking for in a wife. Believe me, Marcia doesn't have those qualities. Maybe my elusive lady does."

"Really?" Bud asked enthusiastically. "Who was it?"

“I’m keeping her name secret until I’m sure she feels the same.”

“Someone in town?”

“I’ve said all I plan to,” Dave announced as he headed toward the door. “I’ll go see if I can talk to Jim, but he’s been avoiding getting together with me since I got back. I know when I’m not wanted, so I quit trying after a couple of weeks.”

“I can only ask you to give it your best.”

“I’ll try talking to Janey, too. Maybe she can convince him to talk to me. She *might* even know something about Mary Jane’s death.”

“Just concentrate on Jim. Jane talked to us so much that I doubt she could give us any more information. I interrogated her myself, several times, and she couldn’t help. She couldn’t even get Jim to talk to me.”

“Maybe I’ll have better luck. We were always close.”

Bud raised his voice in irritation. “I said to leave her alone. It was hard enough on her to find her mother dead. Don’t make matters worse.”

“But, Bud ...”

“I mean it, Dave. Leave her alone. Or do I have to bypass our friendship and make it an order.”

“Okay, okay. I won’t talk to Jane about her mother’s death. I’d better go. It may be hard to get some time alone with Jim.”

After dinner that night Dave followed his brother to the barn, where Dennis was moving hay to the loft.

“Want some help, Denny?” Dave asked cheerfully.

“Sure, but I thought you had to work on Thursday nights.”

“Bud let me switch duty with another guy on the force

who wants to be at his son's birthday party. The boy has leukemia, and the doctors aren't sure he'll be alive for his next birthday. I work Saturday instead."

"Nice of Bud."

"So ..." Dave paused momentarily. "... we haven't had time to chat like we used to before I left."

"Not much to say anymore, I guess."

"I think you're avoiding me. You're gone almost every night, and I work odd hours."

"So that means I'm avoiding you?"

"Of course not. It's just an impression I get. Maybe you're afraid that I'm going to try to talk you into going to college."

"Aren't you?" Dennis asked sharply. "Everybody else in the family says I should. They keep reminding me that David graduated. Nobody seems to care that I *like* farming. Everybody wants me to follow in your footsteps. Well, I don't want to be in your shadow anymore. I can't understand why people think I should want the same things out of life as you do just because I *look* like you."

"I don't understand, either," Dave said softly.

"*What?*"

"I mean it. Come out of the loft, and we'll do some good old walking and talking—just like we did before I left."

"All right, but it can't be long. I have to go away later, and I need to finish this first."

Draping his arm around his brother's shoulders, Dave escorted him from the barn.

"Do you like being a copper, Dave?" Dennis asked. "I mean *really* like it?"

"It's not my life's ambition if that's what you mean. There are a few things I have to settle in my mind—and my life—before I can go on to that. Until I do, I need a source of income. Police work is as close as I can come to being a private investigator right now."

“A private investigator?” Dennis asked with a note of pride in his voice. “My brother, the detective. That’s great, but isn’t Randall Center the wrong place to be? Folks around here don’t have much use for detectives.”

“That’s why I’ll be moving away when I get things settled. I’ll go to either California or New York City. Maybe even Chicago. I haven’t decided which yet.”

“What kind of things do you have to settle?”

“I’m afraid that’s private, Denny.”

“I’ll bet I know. You’re looking for somebody to marry. There’d be a lot more women to pick from in California or New York City or Chicago. Maybe you’d find an actress or something. Wouldn’t that be great!”

“I’m here for a wife, all right, but not just *any* wife. I already have someone in mind.”

“Somebody special? Great! It must be Marcia Lehman.”

“Hell no, it’s not Marcia Lehman. I wouldn’t marry her in a million years.”

“Then who is it? Somebody you knew in school?”

“Sorry. Until I get answers, I won’t say a word. Besides, she could be a different kind of person than I knew years ago. Or she could already be married. I’m kind of afraid to find out the truth.”

“How will you ever get answers if you don’t talk to her?”

“It’s been years since I’ve been in town for more than a few days at a time.”

“I don’t see the big deal. Just find her and ask her if she’s married.”

“The big deal, Denny, is that I can’t just forget her without hearing what she has to say about my feelings. Until I get the courage, I’m still looking for someone other than Marcia to date.”

“Oh.”

Although reluctant to bring up the subject, Dave said,

“You have yourself a mighty pretty flapper yourself. Who is she?”

Dennis stopped and stared at his brother. “How did *you* know I have a girlfriend?”

“I wanted to do a little soul-searching out at the old swimming hole this morning before I went to work. I saw you two kissing.”

“If you saw us kissing, how do you know she’s pretty?”

“I’ve seen her around. I also sat beside her at the movie the other night. You could have, too, if you’d accepted my invitation. Who is she?”

“I’m not gonna tell you her name any sooner than you’re gonna tell me the name of your secret love. Ma and Pa would skin me alive if they knew I’m seeing her.”

“Why don’t they like her? Linda and Mel were at the movie, too, and they told me almost the same thing. Linda even called her a hussy. And Bud? He was even more damning. He called her a slut. He even suspects she’s a prostitute.”

“You sat beside her on purpose—or was it accidental?” Dennis asked, eyeing Dave suspiciously.

“Purposely, of course. There were plenty of available seats, but all of them were around my elusive lady. She’d been completely ostracized.”

“What do you mean *your* elusive lady?”

“That’s how I’ve come to think of her. She said maybe we could chat after the movie, but she disappeared. I was really disappointed. Since I don’t know her name, I dubbed her my elusive lady.”

“Why did you want to talk to her?”

“Because she was alone. I just wanted her to know that one person in this lousy town is friendly. Wait a minute! How the hell did *I* get on the defensive?”

“You tried to date my girlfriend.”

“She’s not your girlfriend, Dennis. I heard her scold you for kissing her. That means she isn’t romantically interested

in you. I know it isn't easy to hear, Denny, but that's one of the facts of life. It's something you need to learn."

Although Dave was calm during their conversation, Dennis reacted vehemently. "It sounds like you need to learn the same damned thing. The only reason you're telling me that is so you can have her. Well, I won't give up that easily. She's mine, and you can't have her."

"In the first place, little brother, I'll agree that I'd like to get to know her; but that's as far as I'll go. I don't even know the woman. I can't even say if I'll like her when I finally meet her. Number two, she's not *yours*. She's a person and, therefore, cannot be owned. I only call her my elusive lady for convenience. And finally, your situation and mine aren't even similar. You're attracted to a woman who isn't attracted to you. I love a woman—a dream really—who doesn't even know that I do. I have no idea how she feels about me. I don't even know if this dream I've built up in my mind is even real. It could all be a fantasy. That's something I need to find out before I can deal with rejection. In the meantime, I'm dealing with the possibility. Do you understand?"

"You're damned right I do!" Dennis shouted. "You're trying to out-talk me, and I won't let you. I'm leaving."

Dave watched as Dennis stalked away. When Dennis was gone, Dave went to the pond to think.

Dennis walked away from the farm, all the way through Randall Center to the outskirts on the other side of town, where he strolled into Damien's Whistle Stop. Although he loved to watch the trains pass on the nearby railroad tracks, his mind was centered on his conversation with Dave. Dropping onto the chair at the only empty table in the speakeasy, Dennis waited until one of the waitresses arrived before he spoke to anyone.

“You’re here early tonight, Dennis,” the red-haired woman said.

“Had a fight with my brother,” he explained. “Bring me a whiskey, would you, Trudy?”

Trudy went to the bar for his drink and returned to set it on the table before him. “You take it easy on that, Dennis. I’ll lose my job if you get crocked and start another fight in here.”

“Yeah, I know. Do you think she can get off early tonight?”

“I doubt it. She’s still on notice from the last time you wrecked the place.”

“But I’ve got to talk to her.”

“You’ll just have to wait.”

An average-height, dark-haired man glared at Dennis and went directly to the cigarette booth. “What the hell is Dennis doing here so early?”

“I don’t know,” Jane replied, visually searching the room until she saw the teenager. “He’s drinking, too.”

“I want him out of here—now.”

“I’ll try, Damien, but you know how he gets when he’s drinking. I don’t know if I’ll be able to handle him.”

“Well, do what you can.”

“All right.” Leaving the booth in Damien’s care, she hurried to Dennis’ side and questioned him. “How many of those have you had?”

“This is my third,” Dennis replied before downing the last quarter glass in one gulp. “You done working?”

“Not yet. Damien wants you out, Dennis. *Now!* And I don’t blame him. You cost him a lot of money the first time you had a fight in here. The last time he started taking it out of Trudy’s and my pay. We can’t afford that. If it happens again, we’re *both* going to lose our jobs, because you always sit at her tables, and you wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for

me. It's all I can do to support myself on my regular pay. With Damien taking part of it, it's even harder. What do you think will happen to me if I lose the only job I've been able to get around Randall Center?"

"Are you dating Dave?"

"David has nothing to do with this. I can't afford for you to get drunk and start another fight. I already lost my electricity. And the coal for my furnace is running low. I have to save it for when it's winter, so I use the fireplace right now. Do you know what goes next? Food."

"What about Dave?" Dennis roared.

"No, I'm not dating him. Now get out of here before you cost me my job."

"You just want me gone for when *he* comes to get you."

"I want you gone so I don't lose my job," she insisted. "Dennis, please. You're acting like a child. If you're serious about wanting me to date you, the least you could do is show some maturity. Go home tonight. I'll walk myself home."

Without another word, she turned her back on Dennis and stalked back to the booth. Once there, she glanced around and saw Dennis leave the building, his head hung in disappointment. As badly as she wanted to retract her words, she knew she never would. Dennis was a nice boy, but that was the whole problem—he was still emotionally a boy. Hurting him like that had been a difficult necessity.

Now if he were as mature as Dave, ... No! She couldn't even think like that! Dave was a respectable man, and she could only drag his reputation into the gutter with hers if she gave in to his obvious attraction to her. Nothing could be better for him than for her to ignore him completely—if he would let her!

THREE

After dinner the next night, Dave took Marcia to Damien's Whistle Stop. Although she originally rejected the idea, he insisted that she join him, if for no other reason than to experience something new. They were in the smoke-filled building enjoying the live music for about an hour when Dave realized he needed more cigarettes. After asking the waitress where he could buy some, he proceeded to the cigarette stand at the back of the building.

As he approached the stand, he realized the young woman operating it was his elusive lady. When she didn't turn toward him as he drew nearer, he smiled to himself. Upon reaching the booth, he spoke softly so as not to startle her. "You're quite an elusive lady."

Spinning from her chore, the woman stared up at him in shock.

"I'm not elusive," she replied. "How may I help you?"

"Tell me why you left me at the theater the other night."

"I was sparing you—from what would be said." She

nodded her head in the direction of his table. “You’d better order because here comes the lady you’re with.”

By the time Marcia reached them, he’d told her what he wanted, and she was getting it for him. Marcia slipped her arm under Dave’s and grasped his forearm with both hands. He gazed down at her and dug into his trouser pocket for some change.

“Can I get something you for, Marcia?” he asked as the woman returned to them.

“No, thank you. I just wanted to be with you,” Marcia answered sweetly. “That is all right, isn’t it, darling?”

Dave shrugged, gently shook his right arm free of Marcia’s hold, and accepted the package of cigarettes the other woman extended toward him. With his gaze riveted on the woman’s face, he put the pack in his jacket pocket. Taking her left wrist he turned it, then he dropped the coins onto her open hand. The intention—showing her that he wore no ring on his left ring finger. When he didn’t release her immediately, she shot her startled gaze to his face. Their eyes locked for several seconds.

The woman seemed vaguely familiar, but he had no idea why. She didn’t particularly look like anybody he knew. Maybe he’d seen somebody like her when he was in France.

Finally, Marcia took Dave’s arm again.

“Thank you, ma’am,” he said, quickly releasing the woman.

“You’re welcome, sir,” Jane replied. “Have a nice evening.”

Then she turned her back on him to resume her work.

Thank goodness, Marcia had joined him when she did, Jane thought, desperately fighting against the panic rising in her. She wasn’t sure she could have continued the heart-wrenching encounter another moment without breaking into tears. Her heart tore when she realized that they would likely

meet again, without someone to keep them apart like Marcia had. Oh, well. At least, she had that brief time when he held her hand to remember for the rest of her life.

When she heard the pair walk away, she sighed in relief. Obviously, he didn't recognize her yet, but someday he would. It was bound to happen. Thanks to that automobile accident, she looked much different than she had when he left. Dave didn't know about that accident and how badly she'd been injured—severely enough to need surgery to repair her face.

She returned to reality with the voice of another customer giving her his order.

Back at the table, Dave chastised Marcia for following him to the cigarette stand. "You had no right to follow me, Marcia. You should have stayed here."

"It's a free country, darling," she replied. "I had every right."

"And I had just as much of a right to get my cigarettes alone. The only reason you came over is because you saw who she was." He opened the cigarettes, took one out, and tapped it softly on the table. Putting it between his lips, he struck a match then lit the cigarette with a long drag, quickly exhaling the smoke before he continued. "The only reason you came over was because you were jealous."

"Jealous!" she exclaimed. "Nonsense! I have no reason to be jealous of that tramp. I'm so much better than she is that I wouldn't even consider jealousy."

"Then why were you there?"

"I wanted her to know you're already taken, darling."

"I'm not your darling, Marcia. Right now I'm not anybody's darling, so stop calling me that."

"I'm sorry, dear. I didn't realize it bothered you. It will never happen again."

"Don't call me dear, either. In fact, don't call me *any*

form of endearment. We aren't that close. Friends is all we are. Now let's relax and enjoy the rest of the evening the best we can under the circumstances."

"Maybe we should just leave."

Dave shook his head. "Not yet. If we do, my elusive lady will know something's wrong, and she'll know she was the cause."

"She causes trouble for every woman who enters this door," Marcia replied hostilely. "It doesn't matter if the woman is married or not. And believe me, she *doesn't* care."

"I'm not so sure of that. If she didn't, she wouldn't have tried to spare me from what would be said if I took her for coffee after the movie. I've been thinking about it, and I *know* that's why she raced out of the theater. No, Marcia, I can't believe she doesn't care."

"Listen to me, David," Marcia pleaded as she laid her hand on his wrist. "You don't know ..."

A commotion near the cigarette booth interrupted her words. Instinctively, Dave scrambled to his feet and headed toward the noise. Halfway across the room, he saw two men tormenting the cigarette lady. While everyone but Dave watched the assault, the men pulled drunkenly on her arms, making lascivious remarks.

This was the first time that two men had approached her at once. Many times one would get out of hand, and she could handle the matter. But this time she was powerless, her mind numb with fear that they would drag her out of the building and do unthinkable things to her. Oh, how she hated being who she was! How she hated her past! But most of all, she hated the small-town, holier-than-thou mentality.

Despite her fear, Jane fought furiously to free herself. The pain on her shoulders was excruciating, but she continued her battle. She wrenched her right arm loose. The man who had been holding it grabbed it harder and twisted.

Jane gasped in agony to avoid screaming. There was already quite a scene. If she made it worse, she was bound to be fired. Then, as she had told Dennis, she wouldn't be able to feed herself. A moment later, she heard a familiar deep voice.

"The lady doesn't appear to be interested in your advances," Dave said sharply.

All three stopped momentarily and glanced to the cigarette booth doorway where Dave loomed, his arms crossed over his chest. Using her assailants' surprise to her advantage, Jane continued her struggle by jerking with all her strength. But the men simply increased the power behind their grasps to hold her. Realizing that they wouldn't release her, she ceased her desperate battle to keep from getting hurt. She would just have to rely on Dave to get her out of this predicament.

"Let her go," Dave ordered.

"Who the hell are you to tell us what to do?" the slightly taller man returned angrily. "You have no right."

"I have *every* right—as an officer of the law."

"We don't believe you."

"Then keep manhandling the lady and find out."

"I don't want trouble, mister," the shorter man said, releasing her. "We were told she was easy. I thought she was just playing one of those female games to lead a man on. She didn't scream, you know."

"Maybe she was too afraid. Now apologize to the lady and get the hell out of here."

Jane stood mutely while the man apologized then hurried past Dave and out the front door. As glad as she was to have part of the problem solved, this scene wasn't over by any means. She could tell by the tight hold the other man had on her wrist. And even if Dave could solve the second half of her dilemma, a new one would undoubtedly present itself—Dave himself.

Before her, Dave glared at the second man. Taking three long strides, he stopped before the man and repeated his previous order in a warning tone. "Let her go."

"Never!" the man denied. "I have as much of a right to see her as the rest of the men around. I'll bet even you had a chance."

In one swift movement, Dave twisted the man's free arm behind his back, grasping it just above the elbow with one hand and holding his wrist at the base of his neck with the other hand. He waited momentarily, and when the man didn't release her, Dave spoke to him gruffly.

"I won't tell you again to let go. I'll take more definite action if you don't."

"And I won't tell you again . . ." The man cried out in pain when Dave jerked his arm upward and freed her. The man grabbed his shoulder as Dave steered him to the door, kicked it open, and pushed him outside, where he stumbled and fell to the ground.

The man sat up and massaged his shoulder, vowing loudly, "I'll get you for this."

Dave responded in kind. "You'll be in serious trouble if you try to carry out your threat. I've already identified myself as a police officer. Now get your crooked carcass out of here and don't come back—ever."

Even though Dave had always been protective of her when she was a child, Jane had thought it was because he was close friends with her brother; and she, his sister. Now she knew better. Obviously, Dave was protective of all women, because he couldn't know who she was from the way he'd been acting—unless Marcia had told him when they went back to their table. Maybe that was why he'd rescued her. Or maybe he'd realized on his own who she was. Either theory was likely.

Jane stood immobile in the cigarette booth, still so frightened that she was unable to move. All she could do was

stare up at Dave while he returned to her side. He was there for her again, just as he had been when she was a child. He was Prince Charming coming to her rescue.

“Are you all right, ma’am?” he asked as he approached her.

Gazing up at him in stunned disbelief, she nodded once. Was it really possible that he still didn’t know who she was? A moment later he reached out to brush the hair from her eyes, but she shrank away from him. She couldn’t let him touch her. If she did, she would collapse into his arms and confess everything. She would probably even cry. Then he would comfort her, and she would never be unable to keep her distance as she’d promised both herself and the Randall family.

He reached for her again. The second he touched her shoulders he barked orders to the air and pulled her against him. “Good God! Somebody get her a drink! Somebody hand me a chair! Her wrist is swelling, and her arms are red. Somebody get me some cold cloths! Now!”

Employees at Damien’s were the only people to respond. A chair appeared in the booth, brought by someone she couldn’t see. The person left immediately, explaining she would be right back with some wine. As Dave helped her to sit, a member of the band raced in with a dish towel wrapped around ice.

While Dave gently held the towel around her enlarged wrist, she finally spoke. “Would you please stop this nonsense? I’m perfectly fine, and you’re creating a scene.”

“I didn’t create the scene; those bastards who assaulted you did. Besides, you need medical attention.”

“How is she?” the waitress asked as she handed Dave the wine.

“Shaken,” he replied, passing the wine to Jane. “Tell the band to play again so the customers will stop gawking. I’ll handle things here. Oh, and put the wine on my tab.”

The waitress left, and the band struck up a lively tune to which people could dance.

“Thank you for your concern,” Jane said, “but it really isn’t necessary. I’m fine. Honest.”

“What about your wrist?”

“A little sprain. Would you light a cigarette for me?”

“Sure. What kind?”

“Your brand is fine.”

As she set down her wine, he lit one of his cigarettes and handed it to her. She took a long drag and exhaled it while he lit one for himself.

“I’m sorry about all the trouble,” she said. “You aren’t going to arrest them, are you?”

“I can’t. The Whistle Stop is outside city limits, and I don’t have any jurisdiction here.”

“Thank goodness. I’d hate to have someone arrested because of me.”

“Because of *you*? If anybody got arrested, it would be because of *him*—not you. You didn’t cause the attack.”

“Don’t be so sure, David,” a woman said from behind him as he knelt beside Jane.

Marcia! In all the excitement, Jane had forgotten she was there.

With a sigh, Dave faced her. “Leave her alone, Marcia. Can’t you see she’s upset?”

“She brings things like that on herself. Don’t let her convince you she doesn’t.”

“I apologize for her remarks,” he said, returning his gaze to Jane, “because I know she’ll never do it.”

“That’s okay,” she responded. “I understand.”

“Well, *I* sure as hell don’t,” Dave declared. “I’m going to take Marcia home then come back for you. I’ll wait until you get off duty and see that you get home safely.”

Jane nearly panicked. She couldn’t let Dave do that because he would learn who she was. Then she would be forced

to explain everything, and she wasn't ready to do that. Not tonight—maybe not ever. But she couldn't let him see that she had reservations, so she had to answer as calmly as she could.

“Thanks for offering,” she replied with a slight smile, “but it really isn't necessary. You can go back to your table and enjoy the rest of the evening. You don't need to fuss over me.”

Dave stared at her, his eyes filled with concern. Despite his words of agreement, however, Jane believed that he would still come back. Protecting women wasn't something a man would change over the years. To avoid him, she waited ten minutes then sought out Damien. Before she could ask for the rest of the evening off, Damien told her to go home and get some rest because she was still pale and shaking. Thanking him, she went in search of her only female friend, Trudy, and begged her not to tell Dave who she was or where she had gone.

Outside Marcia's house, Dave parked the car and waited for her to get out. When she didn't move, he spoke irritably. “Don't you think you should relieve your mother of her baby-sitting duties, Marcia?”

“I won't get out of this car until we talk.”

“We have nothing to discuss.”

“We have *everything* to discuss,” she declared. “You treated me awful, and I want an apology.”

“You don't deserve one. That woman was attacked by two men while everybody in the Whistle Stop sat and watched—except me. I was the only man in that whole damned place who had the courtesy to help her. The *only* man.”

“She wasn't attacked. She was getting what she wanted,

the way she wanted it.”

Dave stared at her, aghast. “I can’t believe you said that. She was scared to death and fighting against two men. She could have been raped right in front of everyone, and not one person would have helped her.”

“What difference would it make? She’s already given herself to every man she knows—and *then* some. She’s a hussy, and she’s not worthy of your concern. Your great-grandfather founded Randall Center, and your family is respected here. *She’s* dirt.”

“And *you’re* a cold-hearted bitch. Get out of my car—and my life. I never want to see or hear from you again.”

“David, please,” she said sweetly. “I don’t want to argue. We were having such a pleasant evening. Let’s not spoil it because of somebody you don’t even know. Let’s put her out of our minds for now. We’ll concentrate on ending our evening the same way we started it.”

“I can’t. I have to get back out to the Whistle Stop. I want to see that she gets home safely.”

“She probably already left with another man.”

“If she did, that’s my problem. I won’t break my promise. Now good-bye, Marcia.”

Furious, Marcia got out of the car. “Take my word for it, David. She’s gone all the way with other men. But just so you can see how forgiving I am, you can come over for coffee after you satisfy your stupid curiosity.”

Dave didn’t bother to respond. Instead, he reached across the car, slammed the door, and sped off down the street. All the way back to the Whistle Stop he tried to convince himself that Marcia was probably right. He had no reason to believe that the woman would be waiting for him and every reason to believe she *wouldn’t*. She had eluded him when he was sitting next to her in the theater; it would be even easier when he was nowhere near.

Still, he wanted to believe that Marcia was wrong. Even

if Marcia wasn't, though, he could find out who the elusive lady was and where she lived from Damien's employees.

As Marcia had predicted, his elusive lady was no longer at the Whistle Stop when he returned. The first time she was free, Dave stopped his waitress from earlier to inquire about the woman.

"I can't tell you who she is," the redhead replied to his initial query. "She made me promise not to."

"Promise?" Dave repeated, stunned. "I don't understand. Why wouldn't she want me to know? I've never done anything to her."

"Oh, she knows that," the woman said quickly. "She told me that you've never been anything but a gentleman to her. And she appreciates it a lot. That's why she doesn't want you to know her name."

"But . . ."

"Listen to me, mister. I'm the only friend she has, so I'm going to speak out of line. She'll be mad as hell if she knows I told you this, but you need to know. She's been miserable since you sat next to her at the movie, so leave her alone. I've never known her to be a happy person, but she's *really* been unhappy since that night. You trying to find out about her is upsetting her even more."

"I didn't think it would have that effect."

"Well, it does, so go away. Forget about her."

"I'm not sure I can. But tonight I won't try to find her. Just tell me one thing. Did she leave alone?"

"You mean, did she leave with another man?" When Dave nodded, Trudy smiled. "No. She didn't even want to wait for that tall kid to take her home like he usually does."

"You don't mean Dennis Randall, do you?" Dave asked, already knowing the answer.

"Yeah, that's the kid. How did you know his name?"

"He's my brother."

The waitress studied Dave for several seconds. "I guess

you two do look alike. From where I stand, tall is tall.” She grinned widely. “Hell, as small as I am, even short is tall.”

Dave chuckled at the petite woman’s levity. “You know, ma’am, I’ll bet you’re good for her. From what I hear—all those nasty rumors about her lifestyle?—you probably add a touch of sunshine to her otherwise dismal days.”

“I try. She’s really not as bad as most folks believe, you know.”

“I never thought she was.” He extended his right hand toward the redhead. “By the way, my name’s Dave Randall. What’s yours?”

“Trudy Sullivan,” she replied as they shook hands.

“Well, Miss Sullivan, I want to thank you for taking the time to talk to me. And if you’ll give that elusive lady a message for me, I’d appreciate it. The next time you see her would you tell her that I’d still like to meet her—despite all the rumors I’ve heard? But I’ll also respect her feelings. Under the circumstances, I’ll wait patiently for a while. Maybe a little time to adjust to me being around will relax her. Maybe she’ll see that I’m interested in her as a person, not as someone I can go all the way with like the rest of the men I keep hearing about. Will you tell her the next time you see her?”

“Sure,” Trudy said. “That’s news she’ll be thrilled to get.”

Would she ever be free of her past? she wondered as she sat in her dark house. Or of Dave Randall’s obvious interest? It wasn’t that she didn’t like him, nor was it because he wasn’t a gentleman. The problem came from years of being an outcast because of one mistake, made at a time in her life when she was so lonely and depressed that her vulnerability was at its peak. That mistake had come from her best friend being in love for the first time just after tenth grade. She’d

felt like she'd been abandoned. Karen had come back to cry on her shoulder after her boyfriend left her, but she had still felt alone—until a young man had told her he loved her. But he hadn't, and she'd fallen for his loving words and given herself to him. Then came the pregnancy after one time in a hotel room bed. After that, the accident which killed him and badly injured her.

Then the rumors started and grew. Now she was lonelier, more depressed than she ever had been, but she would never let herself become that vulnerable again. If she had to live the rest of her life being Dave's elusive lady, she would—no matter how upsetting it was.

Dave paced the living room nervously while he waited for his youngest sister Karen to return from her date. Shortly before midnight, she arrived.

"Dave!" Karen exclaimed in surprise when she saw him. "What are you doing up? You're usually in bed by now."

"I need to talk to you, Karen. Sit down." Dave waited until his sister sank into their mother's rocking chair. "I need some advice."

"From your baby sister?"

"That's right. Tell me what's happening in Randall Center. This whole damned town is acting like one woman is the worst person to walk the earth. I want to know why—and who she is."

Karen fidgeted in the chair. "Don't be silly. Nobody's doing that."

Examining her, he asked, "Then why are you nervous?"

"I'm not. Why are you interested, anyway?"

"For one thing, I don't like what I see happening. For another thing, I want to date her."

"Take my word for it, Dave," Karen said as she rose

from the rocker, “you’d better steer clear of her. She’s nothing but trouble. I love you, and I don’t want to see you get hurt. Promise me you won’t date her.”

Karen walked to the foot of the stairs then stopped and turned toward him. “I’m exhausted. Just don’t disappoint yourself by dating that person.” Then she went upstairs.

Dropping onto the couch, Dave ran his hand through his thick hair. “How can I date someone when nobody will tell me who she is?”

Loud banging on her front door startled Jane from her pleasant dream of Dave. Quickly tying her robe around her, she hurried downstairs and opened the door—only to see Karen standing on the porch.

“I don’t believe it!” Jane exclaimed. “I never thought I’d see you at my house again.”

“This isn’t a social visit,” Karen said. “I’m here to warn you about . . .”

“Don’t say it,” she interrupted as tears welled in her eyes. “You want me to stay away from Dave. I’m trying to, Karen. I really am. But he isn’t making it easy. He keeps running into me. That’s something I can’t control.”

“Then stay away from places he might go.”

“That’s ridiculous. He could be anywhere in town, and so could I.”

“Well, you’ve got to do something.”

“Don’t you think I *want* to?” Jane asked, her heart aching and tears streaming down her cheeks. “I don’t want him to know who I am. I want to keep my identity secret forever, but I’m also realistic. He’s going to find out the truth sooner or later, Karen. And there’s nothing either of us can do to stop it.”

“Maybe not, but we can keep it from happening as long

as possible.”

“It’s getting closer, though. I can feel it. And I dread the thought of it happening. He’s going to find out about me, probably soon, and there’s nothing I can do to stop it. Then *he’s* going to avoid *me* and hate me for the rest of his life. Do you have any idea how much knowing that hurts?”

Karen’s expression turned to shock. Jane couldn’t blame her, either. The last time she’d let tears show was when her father died and Karen had been there to comfort her. Karen’s eyes showed a softening, a memory of their youth maybe? Was it possible that she could eventually have her friend back?

Despite the look in Karen’s eyes, her tone remained bitter. “It *should* hurt. It’s going to hurt him, too, and a lot worse than it does you. I’m going to keep him from finding out the truth about you as long as possible, Jane. And I’m not going to tell him who you are and what happened. You should do the same thing.”

Before Jane could respond, Karen raced away, leaving her alone in the doorway with a heart breaking so badly that all she could do was collapse against the door after she closed it. Tears of despair flooded her face as she went to bed. Finally, she cried herself to sleep about four in the morning.

FOUR

On Labor Day, the entire Randall family got together on the farm for a family picnic. The day was happy for all until the adults converged on a large picnic table for dinner in the middle of the afternoon. At that time, Dave casually announced that he decided to pay a visit to Jane Cole the next day since it was her first birthday after her mother's death. His remark, innocently made, changed the mood of the family gathering among the adults.

Before he completed his announcement, his mother dropped a large bowl of potato salad onto the ground. While Karen scrambled from the table to help her clean up the mess, everyone else engaged in new conversations as though Dave hadn't even spoken. Everyone, that was, except Dennis, who grilled Dave with a note of irritation.

"Why do you suddenly want to see Jane?"

"Because it's her birthday tomorrow," Dave replied calmly. "She could probably use some cheering up since her mother died not long ago."

“I don’t get it. You never talk about her. You don’t even know if she’s married or not. And you don’t even know where she lives—or if she wants to see you again.”

“She never turned me away when I wanted to see her in the past.”

“You were gone for a long time, Dave,” Linda inserted. “People change.”

“I guess. Well, Denny, does she still live in the same place? And *is* she married?”

“She still lives there all right. And she’s not married, but she already has a special man in her life.”

In his peripheral vision, Dave saw his father’s glare. Dennis left the table, disappearing for the remainder of the day. Although Dave wanted to discuss Jane further, he realized that she was a sore subject. As much as he wanted to know about her, continuing the conversation would only spoil the day for the other members of the family.

That evening while everyone got ready to leave, Dave called another brother aside to talk to him. Raymond was two years older than he, and the two had always been close, often confiding in each other things that they would never tell anyone else.

Once they were away from the rest, Dave questioned his shorter, black-haired brother curiously. “Why was everybody so upset about me wanting to see Jane tomorrow?”

“You really don’t know, do you,” Ray replied in amazement. “You’ve been home for a couple of months now, and you still haven’t found out.”

“Found out what?”

“Let me put it this way. Jane isn’t the same person she was when she was young. She was only thirteen when you left Randall Center, you know. That’s a long time, and some people change a lot in nine years.”

“What has she done that’s so bad?”

Ray rubbed his chin. “I don’t think I should be the one

to explain. If you plan to visit Jane tomorrow, *she* should tell you. But don't be surprised if she won't see you. I haven't talked to her for a long time, but I'll bet that she'd rather not. She'll probably tell you to go away and leave her alone."

"I don't see why. We were always like brother and sister before I went away to college. She and Karen spent so much time together that I became attached to her. I'm sure being Jim's friend also helped the closeness between Jane and me. And I certainly never gave her any reason not to want to see me now that I'm back."

"She always had a crush on you, you know. Maybe you hurt her a lot more than you realized when you went away. But I can't speak for her. That's something she'll have to explain herself."

"Has she said that she doesn't want anything to do with me?" Dave prompted.

Ray shrugged. "Not that I know of, but Karen said that Jane told her she didn't want you to visit her when you came back to town."

Melancholy swept through Dave, and he bent his head as he turned away from Ray. "Maybe I should just forget about talking to her."

But Dave stopped short when Ray laid his hand on Dave's shoulder. "Is it really that important to you to see her?"

Dave gazed down at his brother sadly. "I'm going to tell you something that I've never told another soul. I've loved Janey for so long that I can't even remember when I first started. Sure, I thought it was just as a little sister, but when I went into the Army, I realized it was more than that. No other woman has ever done for me emotionally what Janey did without even knowing it. I only came back to Randall Center to see if I could convince her to marry me—if she isn't already married. I don't even care if she's engaged. All I know is that I have to find out if she'll be my wife. I know

she was just a kid when I left, but that didn't change my love for her. I tried, too. Of course, I hid it from absolutely everybody. Not one person knew how I felt—especially not Jane. I knew she had a crush on me, but that's natural. For a man of twenty to love a thirteen-year-old girl, that's another matter."

"Then I'd suggest you follow your instincts and go see her. You never know what she'll say—or what she'll do. The only way to find out is to see her."

"I know. But if she told Karen she doesn't want me to, how can I?"

"All you can do is try. And if you feel that strongly about her, I'll stand by you. I couldn't live without Margaret. If you feel even *half* that strongly, you need Jane, and I'm on your side. Go see her."

Dave offered his brother a sad smile of gratitude. "Thanks, Ray, I will. I don't care how nervous I am about seeing her again, either. I'll convince her to stop seeing her present boyfriend and date me."

"About her present boyfriend," Ray said with a note of suspicion in his voice. "I'm not so sure she has one. I know Dennis said that she did, but I haven't heard it. And, believe me, I hear everything."

"Thanks again, Ray," Dave said absently as he turned to leave. "Would you tell Ma that I'm going to take a walk so she won't worry about me?"

"Good luck with Jane."

Walking to town, Dave headed to the Cole residence. From outside the picket fence with peeling white paint, he stared at the house, remembering all the happy times he'd spent there. But since there were no lights shining inside, he didn't approach the building. Instead he continued to watch the house while sitting in the small park across the street in the hope that Jane would appear. When she hadn't shown up after an hour, Dave rose and went home, stopping at the lake

on the way to sit and contemplate how he would approach her the next evening.

The day had been so nice that Jane decided to take an evening walk. She didn't do it often, because of all the men who approached her, but that night she couldn't resist. As she approached her house on her return, however, she stopped short. David Randall was sitting on the grass in the park across the street!

Uncertain what to do, she backed into an alley to watch him from the shadows. She wasn't ready to deal with him. In fact, she wasn't sure she would *ever* be ready, but the time was bound to come. There was no way to avoid it. She and Dave had been good friends in their youth, and he was sure to visit her sooner or later—and it looked like now. Still, she wanted to postpone the inevitable as long as possible. She was too embarrassed by all the years she'd spent having a huge crush on him.

Dave pushed himself up and wandered down the street in the opposite direction. As she stepped out of the shadows, Jane sighed. Thank goodness, he hadn't stayed very long. He'd always been stubborn, and he could have stayed all night just to get a glimpse of her. Then she would have been forced to either stay in the alley—or go home and face him.

Granted, it would be easier if she got the meeting over with now, but she didn't know what to say yet. She had to think of the right words before she could stop avoiding him. Hopefully, she would come up with the words soon because, if Dave was sitting across from her house looking at it, he was thinking of her. That meant the day was very near when he would seek her out, and she would have to explain everything.

Since Dave had been unable to talk to Jim as a friend, he went to the bank where Jim worked to speak with him in an official capacity. Jim's supervisor agreed to give Jim some free time, but Jim refused to discuss his mother's death.

When he was no closer to a constructive conversation after a half an hour, Dave spoke up angrily. "All right. You don't want to talk about what happened to Mary Jane? Fine. I'll go get some answers from Janey. *She'll* talk to me."

"Don't you go near my sister," Jim warned. "You'll upset her even more. Leave her alone. And I *mean* it."

"We have to find out who killed your mother," Dave insisted.

"Find out on your own. If Jane tells me that you interrogated her, I swear to God you'll be sorry."

Equally angry, Dave stood to leave. "Okay, have it your way. If you don't want your mother's killer caught, that's your problem. I'll find him without your help."

Storming out of the bank, Dave returned to his job. All day he wondered if he should contact Jane, not just about her mother's death but also because he wanted to see her again. Since he'd made no progress with Jim, Jane was his final chance. Then he remembered that Jim had married several years before. His wife must know something, so Dave found out where Jim lived and went to the house, only to find no one home.

After work, Dave went home, bathed, shaved, and changed into his best suit. When he entered the kitchen, his mother, who was beginning dinner, looked up with a startled expression.

"What's the matter, Ma?" Dave asked with a smile. "You've seen me dressed up plenty of times."

"Sure I have," Lucille Randall, a petite woman with a

long, straight nose and gray hair, said, “but you look more like a man going on a very special date.”

“I’m not even going on a date, Ma. I’m going to meet Jane Cole and offer her my condolences. I also have to try to talk her into helping Bud Warren solve Mary Jane’s murder.”

“Oh, I see. Where are you meeting her?”

“At her house.”

The metal pan she was holding fell to the floor with a clang. Bending over, Dave picked it up and returned it to her. “What’s the matter, Ma?”

“Nothing. I’m just getting clumsy in my old age.”

“You’re not old yet, Ma,” Dave said with a laugh. “I’m leaving now, so I won’t be here for dinner. But I’ll try to be home early.”

“All right, dear.” Without turning toward him, Lucille continued to fix the meal. “Say hello for me.”

On his way out, Dave passed Karen in the living room and absently said good-bye.

Dave found entering the fence gate difficult. Trying to gather courage, he stared at the white house with green shutters and again remembered his childhood days—when he was only friends with Jim because it provided an excuse to be around Jane more often. If he was honest with himself, he’d never been that good of a friend with Jim. In fact, he might not have ever done anything with him if it hadn’t been for their mutual friends who liked Jim and included him. Oh, he’d claimed to be good friends, but looking back on it, he doubted he was.

Finally, with a deep breath for courage, he pushed open the gate, strolled to the house, and knocked on the door. A distant voice called for him to wait a minute before he heard footsteps. When the door opened, Dave’s eyes widened in astonishment; the smile disappeared from his lips. Standing

in the doorway was his elusive lady, her expression mirroring his.

“Oh, no!” she cried, slamming the door closed. It had finally happened!

After recovering from his initial shock, Dave knocked again.

“Go away!” came her reply, again sounding distant.

“I’m here to see Jane Cole. Would you at least tell her?”

“No.”

“Are you Jim’s wife?”

“No! Now go away!”

“I won’t leave until I talk to Jane.”

“You don’t want to. Forget about her, and never come back here.”

“My name is ...”

“I know perfectly well who you are, David Randall. Now go away.”

“Maybe I’m not as sure as you, but I think I know who you are now, too.” While he spoke, Dave slowly turned the doorknob, opening it just a crack. “All I want to do is talk, Janey.”

When she didn’t answer, he opened the door all the way and saw her cleaning the fireplace. Her head and shoulders were in the opening, so he entered the house, closing the door behind him. “Let’s just talk, okay, Janey?”

With a sigh, she came out of the fireplace, standing erect with her shoulders held proudly back. The time had come, and it really wasn’t unexpected. He had probably heard the rumors and had come to find out the truth. She’d just have to tell him. It was the only way. But she still had no idea how to word her confession. Facing him, she finally said, “There’s nothing to talk about, Dave. Please—just leave.”

“Not until we have a conversation.”

“Haven’t you heard?” she asked flatly. “I’m not decent

enough to have a conversation with. Certainly your family has told you that by now—not to mention Marcia Lehman. I wouldn't even put it past Bud Warren to tell you.”

“You're still very astute, Jane. All of them discouraged me from seeing you. The only person who gave me any encouragement was Ray, and that's only because we had a heart-to-heart talk. He supports me seeing you.”

“You don't belong here, Dave. I'm not the same person you used to know.”

“I can tell. You used to be the image of your mother, and I was sure that would never change. I didn't even recognize you at the theater.”

“There's a reason for that. And I'm not the same in other ways, either.”

“That doesn't matter—not to me. You're Jane Cole, and you're the reason I came back to Randall Center. I have to talk to you, and I won't leave until I do. I'm not asking the world of you, Janey. I just want to talk.” Remembering the small bouquet of daisies in his hand, he held them out toward her. “By the way, these are for you. If I'm not mistaken, they were your favorites.”

“You're not mistaken, but I can't accept them. If I do, you'll get the wrong idea. You'll think that I agree to a conversation when I don't.”

To her horror, Dave gazed into her eyes. He'd always told her that if there was one thing she couldn't do, it was hide her true feelings in her eyes.

Thank goodness, his next words told her she had finally succeeded in doing so. “You really do want me to leave.”

Kneeling down before the fireplace, she returned to her work. “Yes.”

He gently grasped her elbow with his free hand, and Jane squeezed her eyes shut to ward off the tears.

The second his hand touched her bare skin, she felt emotionally closer to him. This was the feeling she remembered

as a girl whenever she'd cried on his shoulder.

Helping her to her feet, he spoke in a soothing voice, as he had when she was a child. "I wonder who's fooling whom here. You're not fooling me, that's for sure. You've never been able to lie, and you've never been able to hide anything in your beautiful, blue eyes. They betray you, Janey. If you can tell me to my face that you don't want me here, I'll leave. But the flowers stay. I don't have any use for them."

"Dave Randall, I don't want ..." Pausing, she gazed up at him, her eyes brimming with tears. "I don't want ... you to leave. Sit down, and we'll talk for a while."

His eyes glistened merrily as he spread out his arms. "First come give your number two big brother a hug. It's been a long time since we've seen each other."

No matter how desperately she wanted to, she couldn't. She needed an excuse to avoid contact. "But I'm filthy. I have ashes all over me. You're so nicely dressed I don't want to get you dirty for your date."

"I don't have a date, and a little dirt never hurt anybody."

"If you're sure," she said as she embraced him tentatively.

Dave's his arms folded around her. It felt so good for him to be holding her like this! All the secure feelings of years past came flooding back to her in Dave's arms. He'd always been there for her, no matter how small the problem. If only he knew that *he* was the problem now! She wouldn't need the security he provided if she weren't about to confess everything that had happened in his absence. When he planted a lingering kiss on top of her head, she wished he would continue forever.

"You'll never know how much I missed you, Janey," he said softly.

Regaining her senses, she pushed away from him. "I missed you, too. Let's sit down and talk. After all, that is

what you came here for.”

“You know,” Dave said as they sank onto the couch, “you’re certainly not the freckled little girl with beautiful platinum blonde braids that I remember. You’ve changed a lot.”

“It’s called growing up. I must say, though, you haven’t changed.”

“It’s more than that, Janey. Tell me something. Why didn’t you wait for me to take you home from work the other night?”

“I didn’t want you to know who I was, but now I’m glad you do. I was having a hard time keeping away from you since that night at the movies. I wanted to tell you who I was so badly that I couldn’t even concentrate on the movie. I spent the whole time wondering if I could get away from you. I didn’t *want* to, but I wasn’t ready for you to know who I was. Actually, I’m still not ready.”

“It’s too late now. That’s why you had to let me stay.”

“I didn’t have to, Dave. I *wanted* to. There are some things you need to know about me.”

“I don’t need to know *anything* about you, Janey. I don’t care. I want to talk about old times. I want to be with you on your birthday just like I used to be. Only today I can be with you without anybody caring about my reasons. Today I can be with you as a man with a woman—a very attractive woman, I might add.”

“Now I know what you learned when you were in military intelligence,” she said with a forced grin. “You learned how to lie and make people believe you.”

“That’s no lie, Janey. You’ve grown into a very attractive woman.”

“Is that why you held my hand for a second when you paid for the cigarettes? You didn’t know who I was then, did you?”

“No,” he admitted.

“So you were flirting.”

“Guilty as charged. I’ve had my ...” His confession was cut short by a knock at the door.

Jane excused herself to answer it. “Hi, Jim, guess who’s here. David Randall. He hasn’t changed, either. Come on in and join us. We were just getting ready to reminisce.”

“What does he want?” Jim asked in a demanding tone.

“I don’t know. I guess he just stopped by to talk on his way to a date. He’s dressed up in his Sunday best.”

“I can’t stay, Jane. I just stopped by to tell you that I won’t be able to have dinner with you tonight.”

“But you promised. Jim, please, this is my first birthday since Mom died. Don’t make me spend it alone.”

“I’m sorry, but I’ve got an important business meeting.”

“I’m not as naive as Elaine was,” she shot back. “I know exactly what kind of business meeting you have. You’re going to your friend’s—and believe me, I use that term *very* loosely—and gamble away whatever money you have left. Or you’re going to do a little *dirty* work to finance that gambling.”

“Where I go and what I do is none of your business,” he declared. “And don’t try to make me feel guilty for having some fun. Don’t you even care how I feel?”

“Don’t you care how *I* feel? My birthday only comes once a year. That should mean something to you—especially this year when Mom’s gone. You’re the only person I have to celebrate with.”

“Celebrate with Randall. *He’ll* make you happy on your birthday. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Don’t be so sure I’ll be here for you to talk to,” Jane said irately. “I’m tired of your shenanigans. If you can’t stop doing what you do, I don’t want to see you again.”

“You have to,” Jim replied with a malicious laugh. “I’m behind on the mortgage and lost my house, so I’ll be moving in after work tomorrow.”

“You’re moving in *here*?” she asked, astonished.

“That’s right, Jane. So you’d better get used to my *she-nanigans*. I won’t fight with you about it like I did Elaine. I had to take it from my wife, but I *don’t* have to take it from my baby sister.”

Jane glared at him. “You can’t come here. I won’t let you. Mom left the house to *me*. It’s my right to deny you a room. What’s more, I intend to exercise that right.”

Jim’s laugh was so sinister that she instinctively backed up two steps as he said, “I’ll see you after work tomorrow.”

Too stunned to move, Jane watched him stroll down the sidewalk and through the gate.

FIVE

When Jane didn't return to the living room within a reasonable amount of time, Dave joined her at the door.

"Are you all right, Janey?" he asked in concern.

"I'm fine—a little unnerved, but fine. Did you hear the way he laughed? It was creepy. He sounded like a different person."

"I agree. It wasn't natural. Did he frighten you?"

"No, but he did shock me. I can't believe his attitude." She closed the door before facing Dave. "I don't want him to live with me, but I don't know how I'll handle it tomorrow night."

"Would you like me to be here when he comes?"

"Do you think you could? I mean, would you be off duty in time to come? I wouldn't want you to get in trouble. Bud can be a tyrant when he wants to be."

"I'll be sure to be free. Come on back to the couch."

Draping his arm around her shoulders, Dave led Jane back to the sofa. When they were seated again, she said, "You must have a date with a very special lady. You're really spruced up. I didn't realize that you were so close to

Marcia.”

“I dressed up for you.”

“For me?” she asked in amazement.

“Sure. I was going to go out alone for dinner then go to the Whistle Stop and wait for you to get off work. If that place weren’t out of town, I’d close it down. Since Jim won’t be here, why don’t I take you to dinner tonight?”

Jane smiled at his offer. “Thanks, but I have to work. Why don’t you have dinner here with me instead? I have plenty of food.”

Beaming, Dave said, “I’d like that. Now I can find out if you’re a good cook. The last time I tasted your food was over nine years ago. I sure hope you’ve improved.”

“So do I. I’ll be right back. I want to clean up a little before I start cooking.”

In the kitchen they chatted about old times while Jane fixed dinner. Before long, Dave mentioned her parents, sending her running from the room in immediate tears. He followed her to her bedroom. There he found her lying face-down on her bed, crying into her pillow. Sitting next to her on the edge of the bed, he stroked her soft hair and spoke soothingly. “I’m sorry, Janey. I know it must be very hard on you.”

“I’m the one who should be sorry,” she sobbed. “The only reason I’m crying now is because I didn’t at Mom’s funeral. I *hate* this town.”

“You can cry all you want to with me. There’s no need to be something you’re not. You’re Jane Lynn Cole, and Jane Lynn Cole is a bright, lovely, energetic woman who’s very friendly and *very* sensitive. Just be yourself with me, Janey.”

Rolling onto her back, she gazed up at him through the tears. “Do you remember one day when you were eighteen and I had just turned eleven? Do you remember offering to watch me so Mom and Dad could go out of town for the weekend? Jim was in the Navy, so you came home from

college to stay with me.”

“You bet I remember.”

“Then you must remember that my cat died that weekend. You found an old boot box, and we buried him in the backyard. Do you remember you read from my Bible, and I didn’t even cry?”

“Until later,” he added. “Then I had to hold you and rock you for a solid hour before you stopped.”

She sat up beside him and their gazes locked. “I know I don’t have any right to ask you this, but ...”

Without hesitation, he embraced her. “You don’t even have to ask. I’ll hold you for as long as you want, Cindy. If you want me to hold you all night, I will.”

“Cindy,” she repeated as she slid her arms around him. “It sure has been a long time since you called me that. It’s still my favorite fairy tale, too. But it has a different meaning to me now. Back then, we weren’t poor, of course. We were comfortable. Then came a time when I *became* the poor girl who longed to be taken to live in riches, who waited for her Prince Charming to appear and whisk her away to a happy life without ever having to be sad again. Then I realized that even Cinderella must have been lonely at times. As the prince, her husband would be busy. Since she had no friends, she must have gotten very lonely in that palace with nobody but servants to talk to. I discovered that happy, although I dream of it, doesn’t necessarily mean freedom from being alone. One can be lonely in a room full of people.”

He stroked her cheek with his thumb as he had on a number of occasions when she was a child. Although she painted her face like almost all women now, she knew he could feel that, beneath the makeup, her skin had scarring. Thank goodness, people didn’t look at her differently because she wore powder and rouge.

Not differently, she thought with a frown, because they considered her a tramp, anyway.

“That doesn’t sound like my Janey,” Dave observed as he continued to caress her cheek. “You always had an optimistic view of life. What happened to change it?”

“Everything, but it’s too much to explain right now. Dinner will burn if we don’t get downstairs.”

“You will tell me, though, won’t you?”

“Now that you know who I am, I don’t have a choice. I’ll tell you after work tonight if you’ll meet me there. Of course, I’ll have to make my excuses to Dennis, because he always escorts me home.”

“Don’t worry about Dennis. I’ll talk to him and explain. That leads me to one more question. Janey,” he asked hesitantly, “are you already spoken for?”

“Spoken for?”

“Do you have a boyfriend?”

Pushing away from him, she studied his distressed expression before she answered. “Dennis told you I did, didn’t he. No, Dave. No matter what Dennis said, I don’t have a boyfriend. He’s the only man who wants a commitment from me, and I already told him it’s out of the question. Now let’s go finish dinner before it’s ruined.”

They ate in near silence, with Dave offering to wash the dishes while she got ready for work. Both completed their tasks at nearly the same moment, then he drove her to the Whistle Stop in his Packard Twin Six roadster.

“Thanks a bunch for the ride, Dave,” she said, preparing to get out of the car. “As too many people say now, it was the cat’s pajamas. I enjoyed the ride. You won’t forget to meet me here after work, will you?”

“I’m not leaving you here alone after what I saw the other night,” he insisted with a grin. “I’m staying to make sure nobody bothers you.”

“That isn’t necessary, Dave. Really.”

“Oh, yes, it is.” Getting out of his specially painted red car, he walked around it to open the passenger door for her.

“If I have my way, you’ll never be molested again. Time for work, Cinderella.”

She smiled as she stepped out of the car. “You’re really making too much of this. I appreciate your concern, but it’s unnecessary. Besides, Marcia will be furious if she ever finds out about this.”

“I’m not dating Marcia anymore, Janey. After the things she said to and about you, I told her to get out of my life and stay out. Shall we go?”

When he offered her his arm, she accepted it, and he escorted her into the building. Many times during the evening Dave, sitting at the table closest to the cigarette booth, intervened for Jane when men became drunk and obnoxious. After about two hours, men stopped pestering her the remainder of the night.

Near closing time Jane saw Dennis enter the building. Dave appeared to be watching for him; and as soon as he saw his youngest brother, he rose to escort Dennis from the building. As badly as Jane wanted to know what was happening, she stayed at her post, instinctively knowing what the brothers were to discuss was between them, even if she was the topic of their conversation.

“What do you want?” Dennis asked once they were in the graveled parking lot.

“I want to talk to you,” Dave worded. “But don’t worry. This is no lecture—just a big brother offering some unsolicited advice. But first, I’d better explain something.”

When Dave paused, Dennis asked, “What?”

“You remember I told you that I came home to see if I could marry a special woman, don’t you?”

“Of course.”

“I found out today that the special woman is my elusive lady.”

“Jane Cole?” Dennis asked incredulously.

“I know you’re infatuated with me but be reasonable. She’s not interested in you, Denny. She told me so herself.”

“And you think she’s interested in *you*?”

“I don’t know what to think. All I know is that I love her as much now as I ever did—maybe *more* now that she’s an adult. Anyway, I’ve been with her several hours since we last spoke, and I guarantee I don’t love her like a little sister.”

“So you want me to walk away and let you have her.”

“No, but I do want a chance to be alone with her, to talk with her, to see what she’s thinking. We’ve been friends for a long time, Dennis—long before you were born. Hell, I was at the house the day Big Jim and Mary Jane brought her home from the hospital. Won’t you at least admit that we need our time to reminisce?”

“That much, yes. But no dating.”

“I can’t guarantee that. I’m sorry, Dennis. I can’t just let her walk away without finding out if what I feel for her is true love. Can’t you understand that?”

“No. She knows how I feel. She has from the start.”

“And you know how she feels. Janey already told you that she’s not interested. You should accept that like the man you are. Rejection is a fact of life, Dennis.”

“What if she rejects you, too?”

“Then I’ll have to live with it. I’m not asking the world of you, Denny. All I’m asking is time, especially tonight. Janey told me that she has something I need to know. If you don’t want to give me more time than that, all right. But at least give me tonight to talk to her. You and I can discuss what happens next after that.”

“Oh, all right,” Dennis answered reluctantly. “I’ll go home. Just don’t run off with her.”

“Don’t worry, Denny. Janey and I won’t run anywhere.”

Dave watched as his dejected brother strolled away with his hands thrust deep into his pockets, his head bent, and his shoulders hunched. As Dennis shuffled his feet through the gravel, sympathy tugged at Dave's heart. He knew how he would feel under similar circumstances. Still, he couldn't bring himself to comfort Dennis. He wanted Jane, especially now that he knew who she was, and he was determined to have her if possible. The only way to deal with Dennis was man-to-man. Treating him as a child would only alienate him further.

From her booth, Jane watched for Dave to return and motioned to him when he glanced her way as he entered the building. Without going to his table, he met her at the door of the cigarette booth.

"How did it go?" she asked.

"Getting him to leave for tonight was no problem, but I can't guarantee it will be as easy next time."

"Next time?"

"I'll explain later." Like he had done when she was a child, he lightly laid his right hand on her left cheek. "I have a feeling this is going to be a very long night, Jane. We both seem to have a lot to say."

"If it's going to be that long, maybe I should ask for some time off."

"How much longer before you get off?"

"About a half an hour."

"In that case, I'll wait. A half an hour isn't that long."

When Jane finished work, Dave escorted her from the Whistle Stop with her hand tucked into the crook of his elbow. From there he drove her to the lake where she took off her shoes and stockings to soak her tired feet in the cool

water. At her suggestion Dave followed suit, rolling up his pants legs to his knees and sitting beside her on the end of the dock.

“I’m glad you brought me here to talk,” she admitted.

“What better place to talk than your favorite spot in the county?” he replied cheerfully.

“You remember more about me than I expected you to. I’m impressed.”

“It’s nothing. You have no idea how glad I am to have found out who you are. I’ve been trying to for a week now. When I saw you at the door, I really thought you were Jim’s wife.” Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a pack of cigarettes and held it toward her. “Want one?”

“No, thanks. I don’t smoke much, just when I’m nervous or upset. Right now I’m very calm.”

“I’m glad,” he replied as he took out a cigarette then lit it.

“I’ve always been at ease with you, Dave.”

Smoke drifted from his mouth as he said, “Good. Then you’ll agree to be my dinner date tomorrow night.”

Jane stifled a giggle, desperately trying to keep the conversation solemn. “You still think you’re pretty tricky, don’t you, David Randall. If you remember so much about me, you ought to remember that I never fell for your tricks.”

“I was hoping time would change your ability to ward them off. Does that mean you won’t date me?”

“Exactly.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t date.”

“You don’t?” he asked in surprise. “But you’re a lovely lady. I’d think that men would flock to be with you.”

“Oh, they do,” she admitted, “but they all want one thing. I stopped dating a long time ago so I wouldn’t have to deal with inconsiderate and unwanted advances.”

“Then I was right all along.”

“Right about what?”

“All the rumors. I never believed them, you know. Everyone told me that you’re a terrible woman, even before I knew who you were, but I refused to believe them.”

Jane stared out over the water, struggling to keep her tears at bay. “I’m everything they say I am. You should have heeded their warnings and stayed away from me.”

“I can’t accept that. I want to date you, and I’m going to convince you to accept my offer.”

“I can’t, Dave,” she insisted.

“Damn it!” he exclaimed, scrambling to his feet. “Why the hell not? I’ve never done anything to hurt you, and you should know I never would.”

When she started to stand, he reached down and helped her to her feet. “I do know. And if I could date you, I’d accept your invitation in a second—*less*. But I can’t, because *I* could hurt *you*. There’s so much about me that you don’t know, Dave, so much that happened in all the years you were gone. I’m not the same person you used to know.”

He grasped her shoulders and gazed into her eyes. “Absolutely nothing you could have done, no matter how much you changed, nothing could change how I feel about you. *Nothing* could matter.”

“One thing could, and I have to tell you about it before somebody else does and exaggerates what happened. If you want to date me, it’s best if you hear it from me.”

Jane stopped, unsure of how to explain how her life had changed so drastically. As she studied Dave’s face, she saw his eyes, unyielding in his scrutiny of her. If only he would look elsewhere, if only his gaze weren’t so steady.

“What is it, Jane? What do you think is so terrible that I won’t understand?”

With a deep breath she began her story. When she was fifteen, her father died. Starved for the lost love she had known, she went to bed with a soldier from a nearby town.

He had proclaimed his love and had taken an unsuspecting, immature woman into his bed. No one in Randall Center had known about the soldier. He took her for a car ride one night, and she explained she was pregnant. To her horror, he'd explained that he was already married, and he wanted her to get rid of the baby. His car swerved. She grabbed the wheel to correct it. A moment later, they slammed into a tree on the driver's side. He died almost instantly, and she flew through the windshield. It had been a miracle that she hadn't miscarried. After several surgeries, the doctors said that was all they could do for her scars, but her father found a doctor in Des Moines who had had a great record of fixing people's deformities.

"That doctor," she explained, "fixed my disfigured face so, when I wear paint, nobody can tell I had such bad injuries. It's why I look so different now. Anyway, by then, I was due to have the baby. She was a little girl, and I named her Mary Lynn, after Mom and me. She was born two months prematurely and died three weeks after her birth. By then, of course, the whole town knew I was pregnant. I couldn't hide it. Many people told me that God killed Mary because I had sinned, but ..."

"I can't believe they would say something like that to you!" he exclaimed.

"It didn't matter then, Dave. I was devastated, and I agreed with them. I was convinced God was punishing me. I was labeled the bad girl, and no one was willing to let me prove them wrong. Finally, I quit trying. So the women talk, and the men brag."

"And none of them are right," he stated as he slipped his arm around her shoulders.

"It doesn't matter if they're right or wrong, Dave," she pointed out as he steered her back to land. "The damage has been done, and there's nothing I can do about it."

"Maybe I can change their minds."

“They don’t want to change their minds. They have somebody to point at. *That’s* what they want—what they *need*, I guess. What’s that saying? *Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.*”

“But words are hurting you a lot, and I’m going to see that you’re never hurt again. I’m going to date you, and you’re going to quit your job at the Whistle Stop.”

“I can’t,” she denied. “It keeps food on my table.”

“I’ll support you. You just tell Damien that you quit.”

“I can’t let you do that. It would prove that everyone in Randall Center is right, and it would make you look as bad as I do. I won’t agree to it. Never!”

“But, Jane, I can’t bear to see you mauled and insulted by the men who frequent that place.”

“Then don’t go there. I refuse to quit my job for you or anybody else.”

Knowing that he was defeated, he reluctantly agreed. With any luck he could think of a way to get her fired without her realizing that he was behind it. “Okay. We’ll leave that for now. What about dating me?”

“I can’t,” she insisted. “If a certain person finds out, I’ll be in serious trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Jane Lynn Cole, answer me this instant,” he said sternly. “Is somebody threatening you?”

“I’ll tell you the truth,” she replied, “but only if you promise not to press me for names.”

“Just tell me.”

“Not without your promise. And you know you can’t intimidate me or talk me into it once I’ve made up my mind.”

“All right, all right. I promise. Now tell me what’s happening.”

Jane’s explanation shocked Dave more than her first

admission. For several years, a married man had been using emotional blackmail to ensure that she would have an affair with him. Dave was enraged that such a thing could happen; he was jealous because another man had the woman he loved. And he was disappointed when she explained that her agreement with the man was all that kept her from dating him.

“Exactly what kind of agreement is this?” Dave asked angrily.

“If I keep him happy once a month, he won’t accuse me of prostitution and report me to the police. He also said that he’ll kill any other man I try to date and make it look like an accident. *Now* can you understand why I can’t date you?”

“I understand fully, and I don’t like it. I’m a policeman myself, Janey. Tell me who he is so I can arrest him and put an end to your problem.”

“Even if I told you, you’d never believe me. He’s a very powerful man in Randall Center. Nobody would take my word above his. So, unless I want to go to prison, I have to do what he says. I’ve made some pretty bad mistakes in my life, but nothing I should go to jail for.”

“Is this man’s threat why you keep refusing Dennis?”

“No. I just don’t want to date him, and I can’t convince him of that.”

“So I noticed. Maybe I can help get it across to him.”

“Thanks for offering, but he won’t listen. Would you please take me home now, Dave? I don’t want the man to find out we’re together. The last thing I want is for you to get hurt.”

“I can take care of myself, Janey,” he assured her. “Besides, I haven’t had a chance to say anything that’s on *my* mind.”

“Under the circumstances, you’d probably better not. Now that you know all about my sordid past, you shouldn’t have anything to say, anyway.”

“Nothing you’ve told me has changed my opinion of you. In fact, it’s only raised your esteem in my eyes.”

“Well, it *should* change your opinion. Now will you take me home?”

“On one condition. I still want to talk to you. I’ll just do it at the house instead of here, because it’s too important.”

“If you do that, he’ll be sure to see your car. He’s warned me specifically to stay away from you. He said he would have no qualms killing you. I care too much about you to chance that happening.”

“I’ll park my car in front of Marcia’s house and walk. But I *have* to talk to you.”

“That sounds reasonable. I really don’t want the night to end yet, anyway.”

“Good. Let’s go.”

In town the streets were deserted, but Jane insisted that he abide by his words and park in front of Marcia’s house. When he let her out at home, she raced inside to change her clothes before he returned. By the time he got back, she’d put on a regular dress and lit two kerosene lamps in the living room. They sat on the couch facing the fire before either of them spoke.

“Do you think anybody saw you come here?” she asked in concern.

“It’s so late now, Janey,” he replied, leaning back and draping his arms across the back of the sofa, “only men who are sneaking around are out at this hour. Men, I might add, like myself. I feel like a little boy doing something he shouldn’t.”

“Which is exactly what everybody in town would say if they found out you were here.”

Dave shrugged then gently pulled her hair, so she also

leaned back. “I don’t care what people think. All I care about is being with you.”

“Then why didn’t you visit me when you first came back?”

“I was afraid you were married, and I couldn’t get together with Jim so the conversation would naturally come around to you. I think he’s been avoiding me.”

“I *know* he has. He doesn’t want anything to do with you.”

“Why not?”

“He has a good reason. Just don’t ask me what it is. Which reminds me, why did you want to come here?”

“I can tell by the kerosene lamps that you already know,” he said as he ran his hand over her smooth, soft hair. “It’s obvious that you wanted to create the mood.”

“Mood? I’m not creating a mood. I can’t afford electricity, so I use kerosene. Now what are you talking about?”

“Good acting. I almost believe you.”

“I’m not acting. I really don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Sitting forward only slightly, Dave examined her in the dim light. In her eyes he saw her innocence, an innocence that went deeper than their line of conversation. When he laid his hand on her cheek, she leaned into it. He wanted to embrace her so badly that he could already taste her lips against his! With a quick sigh, he cleared his thoughts.

“God, Jane, you have absolutely no idea how much I’ve missed you. All I want to do is hold you and never let you go.”

The notion of Dave doing just that excited Jane more than she wanted to admit. In all her dreams, she’d never believed he could say such romantic things. In all her dreams, she’d never believed she would be so thrilled to hear them! “That sounds wonderful, Dave—only I don’t understand.

You're my second big brother, my protector."

"Before I went to college, I was. But now then. You're twenty-two, and I'm twenty-nine. I want to date you, but you're telling me I can't. Do you have any idea how that makes me feel?" Although she started to speak, he didn't give her the opportunity as he hurried on. "Miserable. That's how I feel. And I don't give a damn if my life is in danger. I want to be with you as often as I can. Only one thing can stop me."

"What's that?" she asked when he finally paused.

"You telling me that, even if there weren't a threat to my life, you wouldn't want to date me."

Without warning she rose to stand before the fireplace, staring at the extinguished logs as she contemplated her choice of words. He followed her and turned her by placing his hands on her waist.

"Please don't send me away. I've waited all your life for you. You were by far the most beautiful, most delightful baby I've ever seen. Not even my own brothers and sisters could compare to you. And I've always been there for you. The day you took your first step I was there to pick you up when you fell. I was there to tell you it wasn't a disaster when you lost your first tooth. I was there when little Bobby Milhouser wouldn't stop pulling your braids. Don't you see it by now, Jane? I was always there because I wanted to be—not because Jim was my best friend. I *wanted* to teach you to ride a bike and help you when you had trouble with your multiplication tables. Back then, I thought I just liked being your big brother. Now I know different."

"I was glad to have you there, too," she admitted.

"But?"

"There are no buts. I'm just a bit stunned. It sounds as though you were only friendly with Jim to be near me."

"That's *exactly* what I'm saying. I can live without his friendship, Jane, but not without yours. Now answer me. If

it weren't for that threat on my life, would you date me?"

She answered him without hesitation. "Yes."

"Then we'll do it. I'd better leave now, though. It's awfully late."

"Before you go, would you do me a favor?"

"Anything."

"Would you kiss me?"

"I don't want you to think I'm like the rest of the men around here."

"Don't be silly. I know you aren't. We're old friends. I think I know you well enough to know you're different. The only way you could ever hurt me is by refusing to kiss me good night."

"In that case ..."

He pulled her closer and bent over her up-turned head until their lips met, sparking a reaction in her for which she was unprepared. If Jane had known that she would have such a strong response, she never would have suggested it. Now that she was in his embrace, she wanted to stay there forever, sampling the new sensations that engulfed her as they had earlier that day in his arms. These sensations were even stronger than the ones she'd previously experienced, more powerful than anything she'd ever encountered. And they didn't just excite her, they overwhelmed her. Then, to her dismay, he pushed her away.

"Good night, Janey. I'll see you again tomorrow."

"Okay. Good night."

At the door they kissed once again before she watched him leave.

SIX

Jane was disappointed when Dave didn't appear the next day before she had to leave for work. He had obviously forgotten that he said he would be there when Jim moved his belongings into the house. So she wouldn't be alone with Jim, she locked the doors and stayed in her room to make it seem as though she wasn't home. Several times she heard him knocking and peeked out the window to see if his or Dave's car was parked outside. Each time it had been Jim. As Jane left for work, Jim came back, but she insisted that she didn't want him to move in.

"This was Mom's house, Jane," he reminded her irately, "and I have every right to live here."

"You have *no* right because she willed it to me alone. That makes it *my* house, not Mom's. And I refuse to let you move in as long as you're still gambling. Besides, I know how you make your gambling money, and I don't condone it."

"How do you plan to keep me out?"

"However I have to." Pushing past him, Jane locked the door behind her. "Right now, though, I have to get to work."

Jim grabbed her upper arms roughly and glared at her with fire in his blue eyes. "Unlock it."

"No!" she denied hotly.

Shaking her violently, he repeated his order until she acquiesced and turned to unlock the door with tears in her eyes. Luggage in hands, he stormed into the house at the same moment Dave drove up in the squad car. Jane stared at the open door, unable to believe that Jim's mean streak had been directed toward her. He'd never tried to hurt her before, and his first demonstration of physical force warned her to be constantly alert.

"I'm sorry I'm late, Janey," Dave apologized from beside her. "Bud kept me at the office longer than usual. Did Jim get here yet?"

"He's in the house," she answered. "Probably unpacking."

"I thought you didn't want him to stay with you. What happened to change your mind?"

"It doesn't matter now," she replied, facing him. "If you'll excuse me, I have to get to work."

"Do you want me to drive you?"

"Not tonight. I have plenty of time, and it's nice out."

"I agree. May I walk with you? My uniform ought to keep away undesirables. And we could have a nice quiet talk on the way."

"That's not a good idea, either. There's no telling who would see us together. Like I told you last night, your life is in jeopardy if he finds out. I'll walk alone and see you later. Is that fair enough?"

"Okay. I'll go home, change and eat. Then I'll run out to the Whistle Stop."

"All right. I really do have to go now."

When Dave arrived, Jane saw him enter despite the many male customers gathered around the booth as she scurried around to fill their orders. The crowd cleared, and Dave strode to the counter while she unpacked boxes of cigarettes then put them in their proper places.

“Do you have time to fill another order, ma’am?” he asked cheerfully.

She recognized his voice, picked up a package of his brand of cigarettes, and turned toward him. As she offered the cigarettes to him, his expression change. What had he been thinking, anyway? Although he still smiled, he had a distant look in his eyes; and his smile was softer than it had been, almost as though he was in another time and place. She examined his face, her eyes lingering at his deep dimples then moving to take in her favorite feature—his square chin.

“You look like you’re thinking about something from the past, Dave,” she observed. “France maybe?”

“Further back than that, Janey.” He reached over the counter to touch the scar by her eye with his right index finger. “All the way back to the fight you and Karen had.”

She giggled, and her face heated in embarrassment. “You were coming to my rescue even then.”

“You looked so pitiful in your pretty dress—all frills and femininity—standing there with a bruised and bleeding eye, tears streaming down your cheeks. Even then I was attracted to you. Imagine the craziness I felt! A thirteen-year-old boy attracted to a six-year-old kid! If I’d told my friends, I would have been a laughingstock! I told myself it was because you were like my little sister, but I sure couldn’t convince myself of it.”

“Dave, please,” she said quietly as he raised his voice in excitement. “People are starting to stare.”

“Sorry.” With a wink, he bent over the counter and planted a quick kiss on her lips. “There. Now they’ll have something to talk about, too. I’ll wait for you to get off work

so we can spend some time alone for a while.”

“I can’t tonight, Dave,” she replied nervously.

“Why not?”

“I ... I have a *date*.”

“I don’t understand,” he admitted sadly. “You told me that you don’t date.”

Jane fought back tears of frustration and forced herself to reply calmly. It was too important that he understand what she was saying for her to be anything but rational. “I said a lot of other things, too, Dave. *One* of those things was that you shouldn’t see me in public, and *one* of those things was about Mary Lynn. So you see, tonight I can’t let you wait for me because I have a *date* after work. Even Dennis doesn’t come here on those Wednesday nights.”

“In other words, you want me to leave for the same reason I had to park at Marcia’s house.”

With a sigh of relief, she replied with a nod. “Yes.”

“I don’t like this, Jane, and I’m not going to give up so easily. You can count on seeing me again, and not just here.”

The smile had long ago disappeared from her lips and, as he grasped her chin tenderly, he kissed her once again before he stalked from the speakeasy. She stared after him sadly, wishing that he’d lost some of his stubbornness during the years he’d been gone. But he obviously hadn’t. As much as she enjoyed having him around, she had to discourage him. If she didn’t, he would probably die, something she could never bear. A voice from behind her startled her back into reality.

“I thought I told you not to bring your sheiks here, Jane,” Damien said, his voice filled with rage.

Facing him, Jane spoke with a cracking voice. “I’m sorry, Damien. I didn’t think he would do anything other than wait for me to get off work, just like Dennis does. You gave your permission for *him* to wait and take me home, so I didn’t think you’d mind if his brother did. I promise you

that I had no idea Dave would kiss me, and I certainly didn't encourage him."

"All right, but if that ever happens again, I'll fire you on the spot. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir."

Dave hadn't been gone ten minutes when Bud Warren entered the building. With an angry frown, Jane turned so she couldn't see him. While she worked, she muttered under her breath. "I don't care if he *is* the chief of police. He's a monster, and one of these days I'm going to get even. He's the one who ruined my life—nobody else."

Before she realized it, Damien came to her to tell her it was closing time.

"Do I really have to leave, Damien?" she asked slowly. "I still have a lot to do."

"Any other night I'd say yes, but I can't tonight. I have to get home. My wife was mad at me when I left the house. Besides, you always leave right away on the third Wednesdays."

"I know, but I like to finish before I go home."

"Not tonight. I'll be here early tomorrow, and you can finish then. Now get going. I have a few fences to mend."

Disappointment flooded through her as she got her purse from under the counter and left with a flat good night. Once outside, Jane leaned against the building for a few seconds to steady herself. Wednesday nights had never been this hard before, and she wondered why it was so difficult to face the inevitable that night. She'd never enjoyed going to the hotel in the next town. It was dirty and roach-ridden—the perfect setting for the dirty acts she was forced to perform there. She hated herself for being so spineless. She couldn't even call his bluff or put him on the defensive, because she was too afraid that he wasn't just threatening her. And she *really* didn't want to go to prison.

“You finally ready?” Bud asked, approaching her from the side.

“Something happened, Bud,” she said, not really knowing what she was going to say next. “I can’t tonight.”

“You can, and you will. Otherwise, I’ll have to arrest you.”

“For what?” she asked spitefully. “Prostitution? Not only do you have no proof, I never did it so you’ll never be able *get* proof.”

Grabbing her arm, he forced her to his car about ten feet away. “Get in.”

“No. Jim moved in with me tonight, and he’s expecting me home after work.”

“I’m not worried about Jim. I have ways of handling him. It’s Dave that worries me. Now get in.”

“Oh, no! I almost forgot ...”

“Either you get in,” Bud threatened as he reached for the pistol in his shoulder holster, “or the next time I see Dave, he’s a dead man. I saw him come out of the Whistle Stop tonight, so I take it that you either sent him away or he didn’t see you. If you don’t get in, though, I promise he won’t see the end of tomorrow.”

Reluctantly opening the car door, Jane got in. Bud slammed it behind her, got in on the driver’s side and started the car, saying sarcastically, “You made a very wise decision, Jane.”

“What choice did I have?” she countered. “I don’t want innocent people to die. I’ve already had to deal with too much death in my lifetime. I don’t want to *ause* one.”

“Especially Dave’s, right?”

“Do we really have to talk about this? Can’t we just get going and get it over with?”

As Bud drove out of the parking lot and down the long driveway leading to the highway, Jane settled into her seat and stared out the passenger door window.

In the trees off to the right, she saw a movement then heard a car door slam. A full moon on a cloudless night barely disclosed Dave's car hidden in the shade of the trees. Had she not been searching for an automobile because of what she saw and heard, she never would have noticed it. She just prayed Bud hadn't noticed Dave's car because, if Dave was getting into it at that moment, it could only mean one thing. Not only had Dave understood what she was telling him earlier that evening, he was going to get her out of the mess she had gotten herself into. Right now she was glad that his feelings and attitude toward her hadn't changed during their years of separation. He was still coming to her rescue. All she had to do was stall Bud long enough for Dave to get to her before it was too late again.

Dave waited in the car five minutes after he watched Bud and Jane enter the sleazy hotel. As he drove past, he realized that she must have seen him somewhere along the way, because she paused momentarily to turn and say something to Bud. But she watched the street instead of looking at the man she was with. Only when he drove past and nodded at her did she enter the hotel. The expression on her face told him that she didn't want to be with Bud.

Jane hadn't been exaggerating when she told him that people would believe the man over her. And Dave was furious that his long-time friend would even consider such threats against a woman. No wonder Bud had threatened to kill him if Jane dated him. Bud knew that he'd always been her protector and knew that Dave would come after him if he found out. Bud also knew that threatening Dave's life was the only way to keep Jane in line. At that moment, Dave realized that Jane must have started balking at their monthly rendezvous.

His original plan was to wait at least fifteen minutes before following them and interrupting their liaison; but after seeing the distressed look on Jane's face, he couldn't bear the torture of not knowing what was transpiring in the room. Scurrying out of the car, he raced to the front desk in the hotel and rang the bell to summon the clerk.

"Go ahead and fill out the register, mister," the young man said as he peeked out from a back room. "I'll be with you in a second."

"I'm not here for a room," Dave replied frantically. "And come right away. This is important."

The clerk joined Dave. "What is it, sir?"

"That couple who came in here just before me. What room are they in?"

"I can't tell you that. I'm on strict orders to see that no one disturbs Mr. and Mrs. Malone."

Malone! Mary Jane Cole's maiden name. This was getting worse all the time. Convincing the clerk would be difficult when he believed Jane and Bud were married.

"Look, mister," Dave continued, "that couple isn't married."

"Of course, they are. Mr. Malone told me nearly a year ago all about their outings her are so they can get away from their children and keep their marriage interesting. That's why they never stay more than a couple of hours and never bring luggage."

"Did you ever consider that they're just having an affair? That this hotel is being used as a cover from his wife?"

"I don't know who you are, sir," the clerk said, "but that remark was uncalled for. It may not look true, but this is a respectable establishment. The owner would never permit such goings-on here. You'd better leave—now."

"Not until I get the lady out of that room. Now which one is it?"

"Ah-ha. You just want the lady. Well, I'll protect their

privacy.” Slapping the registration book closed, he tucked it under his arm. “Now if you’ll excuse me ...”

“I *won't* excuse you.” Dave reached across the desk and grabbed the man’s jacket lapels. “I’m a police officer, mister. You’d better tell me the room number immediately, or I’ll see to it that this place is closed down for permitting immoral practices on the premises. Then you wouldn’t have a job at all.”

When the man stared up at him, Dave jerked the smaller man closer to him and ordered him to tell the room number.

“Three ...” the man stammered. “Three-three-four.”

Dropping the man, Dave bounded up the nearby staircase, taking the steps three at a time with his long legs. Quietly locating the room, he resisted the urge to break down the door to get Jane away from Bud. Instead, he cupped his hands by his ear and leaned against the door in an attempt to hear their conversation. He thought he heard Jane say something about a gun as he arrived outside the room and wanted to be sure she was completely out of danger before he made his entrance. Now that he was against the door, their conversation was a bit clearer, although he was still unable to hear every word.

“Why are you threatening me with your gun?” Jane asked as she lay on the iron bed with her hands handcuffed around one of the bars of the headboard. “This is humiliating—and frightening. If this is some sort of joke or game, I don’t think either is fun.”

“First you didn’t want to come tonight. Then you refused to get undressed. I warned you what would happen if you didn’t cooperate. Obviously, you didn’t believe me. Now I’m going to prove that I’ll do it, and I’ll do it again if you ever try another stunt like tonight.”

“As far as I’m concerned, you’ve been doing it for years. Maybe it wasn’t physical rape, but it was emotional rape.”

“Emotional rape!” Bud chuckled menacingly. “*Now* who’s joking! If you ever tried to prosecute me on such a ridiculous charge, you’d be laughed right out of the courtroom.”

“That’s exactly what I consider giving you sex just to keep you from killing my loved ones. I didn’t *want* to do it, but I had to to protect my family and friends. You blackmailed me into having sex with you.”

“You’ve said enough,” he spat out. “Now it’s time for some action.”

“Please, Bud. Put the gun on the dresser. I’ll cooperate if you’ll just do that much. Please! It’s frightening knowing you could accidentally pull the trigger. I don’t care if you leave me cuffed to the bed. Just *please* put down the gun.”

“Oh, all right. I’ll put it on the dresser.”

Dave listened carefully to which direction Bud moved. Since he didn’t have his own pistol with him, being able to reach Bud’s before the police chief did was his best chance of freeing Jane. Pleased with the unexpected stroke of luck that the dresser must be just inside to the right, Dave examined the door and realized that it opened toward the left. As quietly as he could, he ran down the hall to the stairs. Back at the desk he found the clerk no more helpful than he had been earlier.

“Listen here, mister,” Dave explained frantically, “there’s a woman upstairs who’s about to be raped. I listened at the door, and I heard a lot that I didn’t like.”

“Why should I believe you? You already admitted that you want her out of there.”

“Damn it, don’t you understand? He has a gun, and she

doesn't want to be there. Come up with me and help me get into the room. Jane's situation is desperate. We've got to get her out of there."

"Forget it, mister. I won't help you break them up."

"Then remember that I asked for your help *before* I broke down the damned door."

"If you do, I'll call the police," the little clerk warned.

Dave glanced over his shoulder as he hurried away.

"Good idea."

Jane watched in fear as the muscular chief of police shed his trousers. There was an expression in his dark brown eyes that she'd never seen before. Unable to speak, she stared at him as he approached to kneel over her. But when he tore the low-cut bodice of her dress, she found her voice.

"Dave!" she screamed.

Bud raised his hand and slapped her hard across the cheek at the same moment the door crashed open. Dave slipped to the dresser just three strides to his right. Jane saw her savior grab the gun and level it at Bud.

With a hateful grin, she gazed up at the man above her while he stared at Dave in shock. After only a momentary silence, she spoke. "After all these months I can finally say with I think of you."

"*Look* at her when she's talking to you," Dave ordered.

Bud turned his head toward Jane before she continued.

"You're a dirty, low-life, scum, you bastard."

Blinded by anger, Bud raised his hand, balling it into a fist and was about to bring it down when Dave demanded, "Don't you dare, you son of a bitch. Don't touch her and don't move. The police are on their way, and I want them to see for themselves what a chief of police is capable of." Without taking his eyes from Bud, he questioned Jane in

concern. "Are you okay, Janey?"

"Yes, but he hit me."

"I heard. It's all over now, sweetie. He'll never bother you again."

Two policemen raced into the room at that moment. "What's going on here?"

"I just aborted a rape. As you can see, he was about to hit her when I stopped him, and he hit her once before that."

"And he tore my dress, Dave."

"She likes it this way," Bud protested.

"I do not!" she shrieked. "I hate it! I hate *you!*"

As the two police officers took Bud into custody, Dave found Bud's handcuff key in the pocket of his trousers and released Jane, who hugged him so tight she thought she might cut off his breath. Dave spoke to her softly while he embraced her and stroked her hair.

"It's all over now, Janey. He'll never blackmail you into this sleazy hotel again. We'll go down to the police station and press charges against him. We won't let him get away with what he did to you. I promise he'll pay for this with a prison term, my darling."

"*Prison?*" she repeated frantically. "You mean I have to relive all of this in a court of law? His word against mine? No, Dave. I can't."

Bud paused as he zipped his pants and stared at her in shock, while the officers on either side of him also stared in astonishment.

"But, sweetie, he hurt you. He was going to rape you."

"I can't, Dave. Please don't make me. Let him go. Now that you know the truth, he won't do it again. You won't, will you, Bud?"

"No, Jane," he answered absently, continuing to stare at her. "Never again. I swear it."

"See, Dave? Can't we just forget what happened? Please?"

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. I just want to get out of here.”

“All right then, Janey. If that’s what you want.”

“Thank you. Will you hand me my coat, so I’ll be covered when we leave?”

Dave helped Jane into her lightweight coat and escorted her from the room. Jane ignored Bud as Dave relinquished the gun to one of the local officers. Oh, how she wanted to give Bud an angry knee to the crotch! But she didn’t dare with police standing there. After advising the officers to return Bud’s weapon only after he and Jane were in his car and driving away, Dave escorted her from the room. The officers agreed without hesitation.

SEVEN

*T*he drive back to Randall Center was long and silent. Jane was still shaken after her near-rape; and Dave, although she sensed he wanted to console her, didn't speak. His only means of comforting her were occasional tender caresses of her neck, shoulder, or hand, brief contacts accompanied by supportive smiles and quick glances.

Those gestures were all Jane needed,. She didn't want to talk and was grateful that he didn't. Not until he shut off the engine in front of her house did she turn on the seat to address him.

"Thanks for everything, Dave," she said. "And I don't think I've ever meant those words more. A handsome prince really has rescued me from the dirt and filth I lived in."

"You've always been my Cinderella, Jane. You know that."

"I know. But tonight ... Well, tonight you saved my sanity."

"The night isn't over yet, and Bud isn't behind bars. You wouldn't press charges, so they couldn't arrest him. He

could still come for you.”

“I don’t think he’d come to my home with Jim living here.”

“He’s pretty mad, Jane. I wouldn’t put anything past him.”

“Do you really think he might try something?”

“He would if he doesn’t know Jim’s living with you. And that brings me to another point. You seemed afraid of Jim, too. I think you’re as terrified of him as you are Bud.”

“In the first place, Bud does know about Jim. I mentioned it when I was trying to get out of going with him tonight. In the second place,” she added as she studied her hands in the dark, “you know Jim would never hurt me.”

“I know nothing of the kind. All I know is that there was a *time* when he would never have hurt you. I’m not so sure of that now.”

“And here I thought *I* was the one who should be ... What’s that new term? Ah, yes. Paranoid.”

“I’m not going to let you go into that house alone,” Dave insisted. “And I’m *not* letting you sleep there while Jim’s here—especially since you’re afraid of him.”

“For heaven’s sake, Dave.”

“I mean it, Janey. I’m going in there with you, and I’m going to sleep on the couch. The couch, hell! I’m going to sleep on a chair outside your bedroom door.”

“You can’t be serious!” she exclaimed, astonished.

“I sure as hell am. Before we go in, though, I’m going to do something.”

Reaching across the car, he grasped the back of her head firmly and pulled her closer as he moved toward her until their lips met. He kissed her good night soundly but without passion.

“That’s another thing, Dave,” she added when he released her. “You almost got me fired tonight. Damien saw you kiss me. If it ever happens again, I’ll be fired on the spot.”

So don't do it while I'm working."

"I'll try not to."

"Don't *try*, Dave. You can't do it—period."

"I can't believe you want that job so badly that you'll deny yourself, but okay. Let's go in the house. And remember, no talking. I don't want Jim to know I'm there."

"Oh, all right, but only if you sleep on the sofa. I'll toss you a blanket when I get upstairs."

Jane had been changed and in bed for a half an hour before she rose, donned her robe then tip-toed barefoot downstairs. When she saw Dave was still awake, she whispered into his ear to keep from waking her brother.

"I'm too afraid to sleep, Dave. Would you hold me like you used?"

Wordlessly he rose and led her to her bedroom where they got under the covers. Her bed was barely big enough for them, but she liked that. She wore her nightgown and robe, and he was fully clothed except for his shoes. While she cuddled against his chest, Dave slid his left arm under her neck, rolled to his side, and draped his right arm over her.

"Thank you," she said quietly.

"It's my pleasure," he whispered into her hair. Minutes later he continued. "I want you to know this, Jane. It's important to me that you do. I love you, Jane. Now I know that I always have, even when you were young."

She didn't respond, though, and kept her eyes closed to avoid answering him.

"Jane? Oh, well," he whispered. "I said it once. I can do it again."

Jane could only hope that he *would* say it again. She liked hearing him say that he loved her. It gave her peace and a feeling of acceptance.

The door banged open, jolting her from her dreams. As she bolted into sitting position, Dave did the same, sitting side by side on the bed. Glowering at Dave, Jim stood in the doorway. In his hands, he held Dave's shoes. Jane stared at him, her eyes wide with apprehension, her heart pounding in her chest, her breathing labored and irregular. She was consumed with fear—not for herself but for the man at her right. Then she felt Dave, his hand under the covers, gently squeeze her thigh in reassurance and some of the tension drained from her. Only enough, however, to ease the tightness in her lungs. Reality was no more than a distant ringing in her ears as the men argued.

“I thought so!” Jim shouted as he held Dave's shoes at arms' length. “When I saw these in the living room, I knew it was either you or Dennis. She doesn't want anything to do with him, so I figured it had to be you.”

“Calm down,” Dave returned. “Nothing happened.”

“You can't seriously expect me to believe that. I told you to stay away from her.”

“Look at me, damn it,” Dave said, tossing the covers aside. “I'm completely dressed. Nothing happened!”

“You had plenty of time to dress. I know my sister well enough to know she'd never turn you down. She'd give herself to you in a second.”

Dave's eyes narrowed. “Don't you *dare* talk about her like that! You're worse than the rest of this damnable town. You're her brother, for God's sake. You should support her through anything, through *everything*.”

“Support someone like *her*? You can't be serious. She's ruined my reputation in town just by being my sister. I wish it had been her instead of Ma!”

Jane gasped as reality abruptly hit her. “No!”

In that moment, Dave drew her into his protective embrace. His right arm encircled her shoulders around the front

while he held her head securely with her right ear against his chest and his left hand covering her left ear, as though desperate to block out the stinging words. Despite being embarrassed, she couldn't bring herself to move away from him. She was too comfortable, too secure in his embrace to do more than listen to his irate voice.

"I can't believe what a bastard you've turned into. No wonder you didn't want to see me. You just leave Janey alone."

"Stay out of our lives!" Jim demanded.

"I'll *gladly* stay out of yours," Dave returned, "but only if you stay out of Jane's. She's part of my life now whether you like it or not. And I plan to become part of *her* life. This is Jane's house, and she doesn't want you here. So get the hell out."

"I've *had* it with you, Randall!"

Out of the corner of her eye, Jane saw Jim pull back his right arm. The next thing she saw was Dave's face as he spun around, dropping her onto her back to shield her from the shoe. A moment later he winced in pain as it landed with a muffled thud. Afraid that he might have been injured, Jane cried out his name, only vaguely hearing Jim flee from the house.

Dave was unable to reply. The sharp pain in his back told him that the heel of his shoe had hit him directly on the spine. He made a concerted effort to conceal his pain from Jane. But it wasn't the throbbing in his back that forced his silence, rather the numbing realization that Jim wished the woman he loved dead. Such a thing was incomprehensible. Then her frantic words filtered through to his consciousness.

"Please, Dave," she begged. "Answer me. Are you okay?"

He stared down at her intently. Damn, she was pretty in the morning, even with the light scarring on her face. How

many times had he dreamed of waking up in her bed? That was easy. At least once a week since he'd gone off to college. Back then a mental image of a cute woman with long blonde braids and freckles adorning her button nose lived in dreams, one who looked just like her mother. All that remained of that dream woman was the blond streak that fell across her forehead and the slightly crooked button nose, probably a result of the car accident. Tenderly pushing the hair from her forehead, he trailed his fingers along her hairline to her chin.

"Dave?" she repeated.

"Would you have done it, Janey?" he whispered.

"Done what?"

"Given yourself to me if I had asked?"

"No!" she answered. "I mean yes. Oh, damn! I don't know, Dave. Maybe. Probably. Hell, I don't know. Just don't complicate my life by asking."

Dave lowered himself onto her. After the first brief kiss he said, "I'm sorry, love ..." A longer kiss. "... but I have to know the truth ..." A deeper kiss. "... or I'll go insane wondering."

His lips covered hers in a demandingly hungry kiss filled with more desire than she'd ever known. His body was heavy upon her, but she found that the weight excited her. His hands skimmed from knees to her hips and waist. Then his actions slowed to caress her nightgown-clad body with languid motions.

He kissed her with a heat she'd never before experienced. His tongue dove into her mouth, clashing with hers as no man ever had before. His hand slid up her ribs until he caressed her breast tenderly, taunting her excited nipple with the palm.

Unable to bear the enjoyable torment of his embrace a moment longer, Jane writhed beneath him. But when she arched her back, lifting her hips off the bed in a desperate,

feeble attempt to fulfill her need for him, he released her lips from his sweet captivity.

“Jane?” he asked. “I’m asking now. May I go all the way with you? To show you how much I love you?”

Her heart ached with joy. The way he’d treated her was so different from the other two men that she couldn’t believe how much she enjoyed the encounter. To her surprise, she replied in a shaky, passion-filled voice that was husky with desire. “Yes. Oh, yes!”

Dave smiled down at her mischievously. “I’m sorry, love, but I can’t right now. I have to go to work.”

Her excitement disappeared in that instant. Her desperation at the thought of Dave working for her enemy was too much to bear. “No! You can’t go to work. Bud’s there. He’ll send you to do something dangerous just to get even with you. That way he can kill you without doing it himself.”

“Don’t worry, Jane. Nothing’s going to happen.” He kissed her neck tenderly. “Tonight we’ll make love. Until then I want you to do something for me.”

“What?”

“Keep yourself warm ...” He paused momentarily. “... and quit your job. Now that I’m sure of how you feel, I want to take care of you. So first quit your job, then get Jim’s things out of here. I’ll leave work early so I can change the locks on your doors. I’m moving in with you so I can protect you better.”

“Dave, ...”

“Don’t argue with me. After what happened last night and what was said this morning, I will *not* let you live alone.”

“But, Dave ...”

“I’ve really got to go, Janey.” He kissed her quickly. “I’d much rather stay to keep you safe and drive you out to the Whistle Stop so you can give Damien the good news, but I can’t. One problem is that I haven’t decided who causes you the most immediate danger—Jim or Bud. Right now I’m

going on the past. Jim may be full of threats and insinuations, but he would never hurt you. Bud has, so I'll watch him today. I'm going to talk to him, too, sweetie. I'm going to make it very clear about what will happen if he comes within ten feet of you."

"David Carlton Randall," his mother asked when he rushed in the kitchen door and sat down at the table, "where have you been all night?"

"It's a long story, Ma," he admitted, "but I spent the night with Janey."

Lucille gasped in astonishment. "You spent the night with that *floozy*? I thought we raised you to have better morals than that. How could you do that to us? And then you had the nerve to come home and brag about it."

Dave sighed. "You don't understand, Ma. Jim had moved in against her will, and she was almost raped by another man. Jane was upset, so I stayed to comfort her and to make sure Jim didn't bother her. It was as innocent as that."

"Oh, it was, was it? And where did you sleep?"

"On the couch," he replied, shifting in his chair.

"Don't lie to me, David. It never worked when you were young, and it won't work now."

"I was *going* to, anyway. But Jane was really upset, so she asked me to join her in her bed."

"And, of course, you lacked the good sense to say no."

"Honest, Ma. Nothing happened. I didn't take off my shirt, let alone my pants."

"David Randall!" she exclaimed in shock. "Such a way to talk! You should be ashamed of yourself."

"Well, I'm not. I'm proud of my restraint. It wasn't easy for me, but she'd been assaulted. She didn't need my adding to her troubles. She needed understanding, Ma, not a man

who wanted her as he's never wanted another woman."

"I can't believe you're talking like this. What happened to you while you were away? You turned into someone I don't know."

"Nothing happened to me that didn't happen to thousands of other men who went through the hells of war. I learned the importance of love and commitment. Now that I know Jane will accept me, I can't turn away from her when she needs me most. What kind of man would I be if I left her after proclaiming my love to her?"

To Dave, it didn't matter that Jane had already been asleep when he told her of his love. He had said it and had, therefore, made a commitment. That she hadn't heard him didn't change his feelings or beliefs. He was as committed to her as if she'd heard every word he'd said.

"You actually told her that you love her?" she asked in surprise.

"Yes. Please be reasonable about this, Ma. Everybody accepted Jane before she made a mistake. Whatever happened to the belief *Let he who is without sin cast the first stone*? It seems to me that the people of Randall Center have completely forgotten that one."

Lucille didn't know how to respond. Dave was right, and she'd been as guilty as the rest of the town for stoning Jane Cole. But was it really wrong that she wanted her son to associate with Marcia Lehman instead of someone like Jane? Such concern for her son's welfare couldn't be considered inappropriate. But if that were the case, why did she suddenly feel guilty about the way she'd ostracized Jane for so many years?

"If that's really how you feel," Lucille said, "there's nothing anybody can do. Just remember one thing. You can't change the opinion of an entire town by snapping your fingers. They're still going to see Jane as a bad girl. They're

still going to hate her.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it,” he replied, stalking out of the kitchen.

The moment he arrived at the small police station Dave sought out Bud Warren to confront him again. When Bud’s secretary informed Dave that he was indeed in but was in a meeting and not to be disturbed, Dave stormed into the office, anyway. Bud sent the other police officer out and motioned for Dave to be seated.

As the other officer hurried out the door, closing it behind him, Dave shouted, “Why the hell did you treat Janey like that?”

“Settle down, pal,” Bud said flatly. “And have a seat.”

“I don’t want a seat, damnit!” Dave exclaimed. “And I’m sure as hell not your *pal*. How could you, a chief of police, treat *anybody* like that? And doing it to Jane is twice as bad. Twice as bad, hell! It’s a hundred, a *thousand* times as bad. She was your friend for years, and you treated her like a whore. I still can’t believe what I saw last night. You’re a real bastard, do you know that?”

“She’s the one who started it,” Bud said. “We’ve been having an affair for years now. If you don’t believe me, ask your precious Janey. She’ll tell you that’s been the case.”

“She already told me that she gave herself willingly. But the kind of duress she was under because of you was no less than blackmail on your part. Sure you used her emotions to get what you wanted instead of money, but it was still blackmail. It was despicable. You took advantage of her, and I’m going to see to it that you never go near her again.”

“Oh, you are? How do you plan to do that?”

“I’ll watch you constantly if I have to—all day and night—just to make sure you never come within ten feet of

her for the rest of your life. Ten feet, hell! Fifty. A hundred! Just stay away from her.”

“At least, then I’ll know *you* aren’t in her,” Bud worded bitterly. “I’d hate to think ...”

But before he could finish, Dave nearly dove across the desk to jerk Bud off his chair by the shirt and fling him easily against the wall. The door flew open as Dave rushed to Bud and lifted him to his feet. Glancing over his shoulder, Dave saw the secretary and an officer coming into the room.

“Get the hell out of here!” Dave growled. “This is a personal matter!”

In an instant, they left, closing the door behind them, while Dave returned his attention to the man in his hands. “Apologize!”

“Never!” Bud denied vehemently. “The only reason you want to keep me away from Jane is so you can get into her. Admit it. You’ve wanted her for years. You probably had her long before you went off to college. Statutory rape. Is that what happened—*pal*? Did you come back to claim her again? To take what you want from her like you used to? Maybe you want to put a bastard in her belly to replace the one she killed.”

Dave had been too stunned to react to the stinging words at first. But when Bud accused Jane of killing her own child, rage consumed him. Balling his hand, he smashed a large fist into Bud’s stomach, forcing out a gush of air through his former friend’s mouth as he doubled over in pain. Again Dave straightened him up by holding him against the wall.

“Keep talking like *that*, Warren, and I’ll be more than happy to let you spend some time in the Cedar Rapids hospital. You ever been in there before? I understand the food is atrocious and the nurses are worse. How would you ever get well without a pretty nurse to rape—just like you’ve been raping my woman every month for years.”

“I never once raped her.”

“What do *you* call threatening the people she loves if she doesn’t have sex with you?”

“She undressed and laid down willingly every time. And she spread her legs for me willingly, too. What do you think of *that*?”

“This!” Another fist to Bud’s stomach, as Dave held him against the wall. “Jane’s baby was never the bastard in Randall Center, Bud. She was just the innocent victim of a mistake. The only bastard in this rotten town is you.”

“Damn it, Randall. What the hell’s wrong with you?”

“You’re maligning the woman I love, the woman I want to marry. And you damned near destroyed that for me last night when you tried to rape her. How did that make you feel, anyway?”

“I was in complete control—until *you* ruined everything.”

Dave stared at Bud, unable to fathom what he’d heard. “You really would have gone through with it, wouldn’t you.”

“Damned right I would have. She’s a bitch and a slut. That’s how she would have loved it all along. She just never gave me the chance before. But last night *I* was in control.”

Dave was stunned by Bud’s frank admission and released him, watching the police chief drop to his knees. Doubled over at Dave’s feet, Bud held his stomach in his arms and stared up at Dave with a painful yet angry expression.

“You’d better watch out on your assignments from now on, Randall,” Bud warned. “Keep an eye looking behind you all the time. You never can tell when or where I’ll get even.”

“I don’t worry about myself, Warren, but I do worry about my woman. You stay away from her. And believe me, if you come around again, if you try to assault or blackmail her in *any* way, she’ll press charges. Maybe then I can convince her to accuse you of attempted rape, then you’ll get what’s due you.”

Dave strode out of Bud’s office. He’d made his point,

ELUSIVE LADY

and he had to leave before he lost control of his temper and really did put Bud in the hospital.

EIGHT

*F*rom the moment Jane saw Dave heading toward her booth, she knew he was angry because she hadn't quit. His expression was pleasant enough, though, even cheerful. What gave him away was his bearing. And it was probably only she herself who noticed the loss of the normal bounce in his easy-going gait. If he was angry now, he would be furious when he learned that she hadn't had the courage to pack Jim's clothes while he was at work.

Jane watched him approach the door with an unflinching gaze that turned to shock when he grabbed a chair and brought it into the booth with him. Plopping down on it, he smiled up at her.

"You're not supposed to be in here, Dave," she warned.

"Too bad," he responded lightly. "If you're going to be stubborn and insist on working, I'm going to be stubborn and sit right here every night to protect you from insinuations and molestations."

She glanced around. "David, please. You're acting ridiculous. There's no reason for you to sit in the booth with me. You can either sit with the other patrons or go home. You're embarrassing me."

"Hopefully, I'll embarrass you enough to make you quit and let me take care of you."

“I’ve already explained why I can’t do that. I’m an adult now. I can’t expect you to be there to protect me all the time. I can be responsible for myself.”

“Just because you don’t feel you can expect it doesn’t mean I can’t be there.”

“I have work to do.”

“Then do it.”

For the next hour and a half, Dave sat silently by while Jane worked. To demonstrate her displeasure, she ignored him. Each time a man made lewd remarks to her, Dave shifted in his chair and cleared his throat. Before long, he began to do the same with every man who came to the booth, and a short time later, men ceased approaching Jane at all. When Jane took a break and Trudy replaced her, Dave left.

“Where did Dave go?” Jane asked when she returned from the restroom.

“I don’t know,” Trudy admitted with a shrug. “He just said something about having a surprise for you then left.”

Glancing at the door, Jane sighed. “In a way, I’m *glad* he left. I’m going to get in trouble if I don’t sell more cigarettes and cigars soon. I like having him here, having him discourage the male customers, but Damien’s already warned me about him.”

“What do you mean?”

“Jim moved into my house last night. Dave wouldn’t let me sleep in the house alone with Jim. He insisted on spending the night. After the encounter they had this morning, Dave told me to pack Jim’s things and get him out of the house. He’s even going to change the locks. I couldn’t do it, though. Jim and I may have our differences right now, but he’s my brother. I can’t just throw him out when he has no other place to live. But that’s not even *half* of the story.”

“So tell me it all,” Trudy prompted. “You know I won’t repeat anything.”

“I can’t, but Dave’s going to be furious when he finds out I didn’t do what he told me. He wasn’t exactly pleased when I didn’t quit my job like he told me to, so I know what to expect as far as Jim goes.”

“How can he ask you to quit your only means of support?”

“He didn’t *ask* me; he *told* me. Dave doesn’t see it as my only means of support, either. He has the crazy idea that he’s going to get Jim out and move in to make sure he stays out. *Dave* wants to support me.”

“You mean get married?” Trudy asked hopefully.

Jane chuckled. “Somebody as respectable as Dave marry *me*? You must be kidding. No, Dave hasn’t said a word about marriage. He just wants to protect me like he always has—like his little sister.”

“It doesn’t sound like that to me.” Trudy nodded once toward the door, and Jane turned in time to see Dave return, as Trudy excused herself. “You’re not the only one who’ll get in trouble if I don’t get busy.”

On her way out of the booth, Trudy passed Dave. Dave nodded his head once. A faint tug at her heart brought a new emotion to her, and she knew instantly what it was. She was jealous because Dave had paid a bit of attention to Trudy. To keep her feelings hidden, she returned to her work while he seated himself in the chair to watch her.

Later Dennis appeared at the cigarette booth to let her know he had arrived to escort her home. When he saw Dave, he grabbed Jane’s upper arm across the counter, whispering heatedly. “What’s he doing here?”

“He’s playing big brother,” she replied. “You know how protective Dave can be.”

“Of family,” he added. “Is he going to take you home again tonight?”

“I don’t know. We haven’t discussed it. If he offers, though, I won’t turn him down. You should keep that in

mind from now on. Dave and I have always been very close, and I'd like to keep his friendship."

"Over mine?"

"Stop acting like that. I want you both as my friends. It's just that there's a special bond between Dave and me that's been there for as long as I can remember." Jane glanced at the young man's hand. "Now let go of me. I have work to do."

"Not until you promise to let *me* walk you home."

From his chair, Dave's voice drew their attention, and both stared at him mutely as he spoke in a firm yet kind tone. "Let go of her, Denny. She made her decision, so have the courtesy to accept her choice."

A pout came to Dennis' lips. "It's not fair. You didn't even ask her."

"Then consider this my question. Go on now. You can walk her home another night."

Dennis stalked toward the door. Jane remembered from childhood how badly unrequited love hurt; she knew the heartache all too well. Each time she saw Dave with another girl over the years—a girl of his own age—she wanted to cry. But she'd always waited until she was in her room to let the tears come, because she never wanted Dave to know how much he hurt her each time he brought a girl to the Cole house.

"What's *he* doing in the booth?" Damien asked, drawing Jane from her thoughts.

"Hi, Damien," she greeted. "I didn't think you were going to be in until later."

"So I see. I got a message that he's cutting down my cigarette business. I want him out of here, Jane. Now!"

"I've tried. When he wouldn't listen to reason, I kept ignoring him. But he just won't leave. I can't physically evict him, either. I don't think there's a man in the building able to get Dave to leave unless he wants to."

Before speaking again, Damien watched as Dave rose from his seat and wandered to the door of the booth to lean against the jamb.

“Okay, Jane,” Damien acquiesced. “Don’t encourage him, and he can stay. But if I see any indication that you’re even *talking* to him, I know how to get him to leave. He’ll follow you right out the door when I fire you.”

“Thanks for understanding, Damien. I won’t say a word to him. I won’t even *look* at him.”

Despite his attempts to get her attention, Jane, growing more irritated by his behavior with each passing minute, ignored Dave. After about a half an hour, he stopped speaking to her but began following her every move until Jane was tempted to scream at him to leave her alone.

Catching Trudy as she passed the booth, Jane explained that she needed to visit the bathroom for a couple of minutes and asked if Trudy would substitute for her during that time. Upon her return, Jane thanked Trudy then began to unbox and store some cigarette packages. Within a couple of minutes, Jane’s attention was drawn to a crash just on the other side of her counter, immediately followed by Trudy’s exclamation of self-disgust.

Racing to the window of her booth with Dave right behind her, Jane noticed Trudy had already stooped down to pick up several broken glasses. Almost immediately, Damien arrived to assist in the clean-up. Before Jane could react, Dave grabbed her arm and spun her to face him.

As she stared up at him in astonishment, his lips met hers in a kiss so passionate that flames of desire engulfed her, causing her to offer no resistance when he slid his arms around her. The kiss this morning was special, but tonight it was different. This was how she’d longed he would kiss her since in her bed that morning. For years she’d dreamed of this moment, dreamed that Dave would one day want her as

badly as she wanted him. With Dave firmly pressing her body against him, her dreams had come true.

Whether he loved her or not didn't matter. She would give herself to Dave if he asked. In fact, when he found a respectable woman to marry, she would keep her bed open to him even after the wedding. She'd already ruined her reputation, so what difference did it make if she slept with Dave when he was married? With a little luck, maybe she could even bear his child.

"You're fired!"

Damien's enraged words burst into her dream-world like an explosion, yet she didn't even try to free herself from Dave's passionate embrace. As long as she'd already lost her job, she may as well enjoy all the desire Dave was willing to give her.

Several more seconds passed before he pulled back his head and stared down at her.

"God, Janey," he whispered heatedly, "I never should have done that in front of so many people. It was only supposed to be a short kiss, but I couldn't stop."

"It's okay, Dave," she returned. "It didn't make any difference how long it lasted after Damien fired me."

"Are you going to try to get your job back?"

"What good would it do? Damien warned me that he'd never hire me again if something like that happened."

"Then get the money he owes you, and I'll take you home."

Dave got exactly what he wanted, Jane realized—for her not to work at the Whistle Stop. She also realized that he had plotted a way to get her to leave her job, even if she didn't leave voluntarily. He had forced the issue by kissing her tonight. What else would he do if she didn't agree to his plans?

While Jane met with Damien in the office, Dave thanked Trudy for helping draw attention to the cigarette

booth. Passing her a five-dollar bill, he insisted that she let him know if the broken glasses cost more to replace than that. When he saw Jane approaching, he sent Trudy away.

During the ride to Jane's house, Dave tried to keep her mind occupied by gently questioning her. "Why wouldn't you cooperate with Bud about your mother? Was it just because of what he was putting you through? Bud warned me not to talk to you, but now I doubt his reason. He didn't want me to know what he was doing to you. Or maybe he didn't want me to find you and learn the reason. Or maybe it was a little jealousy. So, is that the reason you didn't cooperate?"

"No, I had a better reason than not trusting him, even better than not wanting to be in the same room with him."

"Which is?"

"I can't tell *you*, either. Answering your questions would produce the same results as answering Bud's."

Pulling the car to the side of the road, he turned off the motor to study her in the dark. All of his investigative instincts called for him to question her further, yet he wasn't sure he wanted to know the answer he sensed was the cause of her silence. Laying his hand on the back of her neck, he worded his question carefully so as not to offend her. "Janey, do you know more about your mother's murder than you told Bud?"

"I can't say. And don't press me. I have a very good reason to keep quiet."

"A good reason like protecting yourself?" When her startled gaze shot from her hands, demurely folded in her lap, to his eyes, Dave knew his instinct had been right again. "You don't have to protect yourself now, Jane. You have me to do that for you."

"I wish you'd quit talking that way, Dave," she said as tears came to her eyes. "I'm not worthy of your concern."

“Let *me* decide who’s worthy of my concern. How could you have lived with this for so long? It must be eating away at you like rust on metal.”

Again she stared at her hands. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t have a choice but to live with Mom’s death. You know that.”

“But you don’t have to put yourself through hell just because you witnessed it.” When he smoothed down her hair with a tender motion, she grabbed his wrist to remove his hand. He examined her suspiciously for a moment then asked, “Now what’s wrong, my love?”

“Don’t do that. Even if I’d witnessed Mom’s murder—and I’m not admitting that I did—nobody would believe me. I’m not the kind of woman people listen to.”

“Well, I’m still a *man* people listen to. If you tell me who you saw do it, I’ll tell Bud myself. He’ll listen to me.”

“After last night? Be reasonable, Dave. Bud won’t listen to either of us.”

“Ah-ha! I knew you witnessed your mother’s murder. Jane Lynn Cole, you tell me this instant who did it.”

“I didn’t exactly see it happen, but I’m pretty sure I know who did it. And I’m not proud that I’ve kept silent for so long. Still, that doesn’t mean I’m going to give in to your demand. I *can’t* tell you who, and that’s that. If you can’t accept it, I’ll get out of the car right here and walk the rest of the way home.”

“Tell me!” he roared.

“Never!” she denied, grabbing the handle to open the door. When Dave’s hand encircled her upper arm and he pulled her toward him, she glared. “Leave me alone! I don’t need you. I’ve lived my life without you for years, and I can do it again.”

“Well, you have me whether you like it or not.”

“If you don’t let go this instant, David Randall, I’ll go to Bud and insist that *you* raped me—because you were so excited after what you saw last night.”

As she had hoped, Dave released her without hesitation. Scrambling from the roadster, she raced down the country road toward town only to have Dave follow her, catching her within a few yards. As he drew her against him, she could no longer hold in her distress. Tears sprang forth with such strength that she believed she had never cried so hard.

For many minutes they stood in the same spot while Dave rubbed her back in a comforting gesture that she had no desire to break. She’d held her emotions in her heart for so long that she felt as though she would fall apart, and now she did just that. But she didn’t mind, because Dave wouldn’t see her distress as a contradiction of her reputation. He didn’t even believe she’d done anything so bad that she should be an outcast.

As her tears began to subside, Dave spoke in a tender voice. “You don’t have to protect him anymore, Jane. It’s in the open, and you can be free of your burden.”

“Nothing’s changed, Dave,” she disagreed. “I still can’t tell you who it was.”

“You don’t have to. I already know.”

She shot her startled gaze to his face. “How *could* you? I haven’t said a word to anybody.”

“No, you haven’t. You wouldn’t now if I didn’t come right out and say that Jim murdered your mother.” She released a sharp gasp as she stared up at him. “Thank God, you got him out of your house while he was at work.”

“But I didn’t,” she admitted. “I couldn’t force him into the street. He’s my brother no matter what I believe he did. I can’t let him go to jail.”

“For God’s sake, woman,” Dave said, “what the hell’s wrong with you? You can’t protect a murderer. He has to be punished so he doesn’t kill again.”

“He has no reason to kill again—not unless I tell Bud what I saw.”

“Wait! You just said you didn’t witness the murder.”

“I didn’t,” she said. “I do know that when I came home, Jim was washing the dishes. Have you *ever* known him to do women’s work? When I found Mom with blood all over her, I had a feeling she talked to Jim. I just *knew* he had stabbed her. But I have no proof. And he was gone by the time I found Mom. If he found out, Jim would have every reason to kill me. Is that what you want?”

“You know it’s not. That’s why I’m moving into your house. But I don’t understand why he would kill his own mother.”

Jane bent her head in shame as tears again threatened to flow. “Probably because of me. If I’d kept what I found out to myself, Mom would be alive today.”

“What did you find out?”

“If I tell you, you’ll be in danger, too, because you’ll go straight to Jim just like she did. I told her not to say anything, but she wouldn’t listen to me. I *begged* her to keep my secret from him.”

“Then Jim has no idea that you know this secret?”

“I’m not sure, but I plan on keeping quiet, anyway—for the rest of my life if I have to.”

“So you want to keep two secrets. And one of them you expect *me* to keep, too. Well, I’ve got a surprise for you. I won’t sit back and let your brother get away with murder. I’m going to arrest him as soon as we get back to the house, so tell me everything. He won’t be able to hurt you if he’s in jail.”

“Maybe you’re right. But could we go back to the car first? I’m getting cold out here.”

Once they were in Dave's Packard, he said, "Now, tell me Jim's motive for killing your mother."

"If you heard our discussion the other night, you already know he's heavily involved in gambling; and most of the time, he loses. He supports his habit by embezzling. That's how I found out what he was doing. People in Randall Center don't know about his gambling. I was the only one who suspected him. That's why I kept a close eye on him when I heard about the investigation by bank officials. He was smart enough not to take large amounts of cash at a time—only enough to get him out of debt over a period of a month.

"One day, I told Mom what I knew. After that night, things gradually got worse. First, he took larger amounts of money. I know, because I did a little investigating of my own and found out he has a savings account in a bank in Cedar Rapids. Each deposit coincided with the missing money from our bank."

When Jane paused, Dave prompted her to continue. "What else is there?"

"He and Elaine started arguing more and more—first about a woman then about his gambling. I'd known for quite a while because I happened to be in the same town when I saw him coming out of a parlor. It was a Wednesday night, if you understand what I'm saying. But Bud didn't suspect a thing. He was too busy trying to hide me from Jim.

"Anyway, Elaine had only recently learned about it. Eventually, she left him. She had to leave, because Jim had become violent, and she's going to have his child. But he doesn't know about that. Anyway, after Elaine left, I did some more investigating. I'm still finding this hard to believe, but he's a rumrunner, too—for Damien. He's never been one to drink liquor. That's why it's almost impossible to believe. Of course, I never believed he could steal or murder, either. I don't think he started running until a couple of

months ago, though. That's when he suddenly began taking long trips without saying where he was going."

"He's changed more than you did. I think it's time we go into town and put that scum behind bars for good."

"But there's only one person to give testimony at his trial, Dave—me. Do you really think a jury will take my word over Jim's when he's never openly committed anything people would consider a sin?"

"Once he's been arrested, the police will find evidence to back up your story. Right now, though, you're all we've got to go on. I don't know about the rest of the town, but *I* believe you. Let's go arrest Jim."

When Dave reached to start his car, Jane grasped his wrist to stop him, drawing his attention to her face before she spoke. "I'm sorry about what I said a while ago, Dave."

"What was that?" he asked.

"About me telling Bud you raped me. I didn't mean it. I was angry because you kept insisting that I give you information I didn't think I should."

"I knew you didn't mean it, so there's no need to apologize."

Once more he moved to start his automobile, this time his action stopped by the desperation in her voice. "And I never should have said that I don't need you. It isn't even remotely true. I needed your protection and friendship when I was a child, and nothing's changed."

Trailing his hand over her soft hair, he smiled as he spoke in a near whisper. "That's one thing you can always count on, Cinderella. No matter where I am, I'll be there for you. I don't care how old we are. I'll always be your Prince Charming. If I'm a hundred and you're ninety-three, I'll still come running if you call." He smiled to lighten the conversation. "That's *if* I can still run. I might have to hobble by then."

NINE

Upon their arrival at Jane's house, Dave noticed a young woman sitting on the front steps. Before they got out of the car, he asked who it was, and Jane admitted that it was Jim's mistress, Sally. Jane and Dave approached the woman, who stood as they entered the gate. When the couple reached the foot of the stairs, the petite woman spoke to Jane.

"Where's Jim?" Sally demanded.

"I don't know," Jane said.

"Do you really think I'm going to believe *you*?"

"If you'd already decided not to believe me, why did you ask?"

"A person can always hope that you'll change. Now where's Jim?"

"Maybe if you tell me why you're here, I can figure out where he might be."

"About four-thirty I called his office," Sally said, "and talked him out of spending the evening with his trashy sister and spending it with me instead. About five-thirty he called me back and broke our date. Now where is he?"

"Obviously not here, so why don't you leave?" Jane

suggested without altering her tone.

“Listen here, you tramp. I’m not leaving until I get some answers. Maybe you’re one of those women who go all the way with everybody—including your own brother.”

Unable to bear another word of Sally’s verbal abuse, Dave spoke in Jane’s defense. “It seems to me that *you’re* the tramp. Jane never broke up a marriage.” When Sally pulled back her open hand to slap him, he caught her wrist and warned, “I wouldn’t do that if I were you. I might file assault charges. Now get off Jane’s property.” As he tugged gently on her arm, she came down the steps. “And tell all your friends that Jane Lynn Cole is changing her image with the help of David Randall. Understand?”

“I’ll get you for this, Cole,” Sally threatened.

“I said get out of here,” Dave said in a warning tone.

“Thanks, Dave,” Jane said as they watched the woman flee.

“It was nothing,” he replied with a wink. “Nothing except fun.”

“It may have been nothing but fun to you, but to me it was everything. Any other night I would have degraded myself by shouting back at her. But tonight I stayed calm when she insulted me. You’ve given me something very special today.”

“I didn’t give you anything.”

“Yes, you did,” she insisted with a soft smile. “You gave me the courage to take back my self-respect. Right now, I almost believe I can make the people of Randall Center change their minds about me. I’m not even sure it will be very hard with you behind me.”

“That’s the way I want to hear you talk,” he praised. “Only I won’t be behind you. I’ll be at your side. Now let’s see if we can find some clue as to where Jim is.”

While Dave searched downstairs, Jane went upstairs for

a clue as to where Jim might have gone. Finding some of Jim's clothes gone, she went to her room. A note attached to her dresser mirror caught her attention. Unfolding the piece of paper, she read its contents with a gasp. No! This couldn't be! She had to stop him. Her head became muddled, like her brain had turned to Jell-O; spots appeared before her eyes. The tinny ringing in her ears increased until she collapsed. Somehow, as she lost consciousness, she felt her head hit the dresser.

What was that noise? Dave wondered as he bounded up the steps, calling to Jane. When she didn't respond, he checked her room. There she was, lying unconscious on the floor. His heart ached at the thought that Jim had hurt her, and he raced to her side. Rolling her onto her back so he could examine her, he noticed the blood on the side of her forehead. Dear Lord, she had to be okay. He'd just found her again; he couldn't bear to lose her so soon.

Scooping her into his arms, he laid her on the bed then rushed to the bathroom for a cold, wet hand towel, a bottle of peroxide, and dressings for her cut.

After cleaning Jane's wound, he bandaged it. But she still had not regained consciousness. Returning to the bathroom, he frantically searched the medicine cabinet and linen closet for smelling salts. Then he noticed a bottle of ammonia on the top shelf of the closet. On his way back to Jane's side, he uncapped it. After setting it on the nightstand, he took her into his arms and laid her head against his shoulder. He passed the bottle beneath her nose, and she awoke with a jerk. Relieved, Dave gently laid her back down.

"What happened?" she asked.

"I don't know," he replied. "I found you out cold on the floor by your dresser. You must have fallen and hit your

head. You have a doozy of a cut and a good-sized lump on your forehead.”

“I vaguely remember that.” She paused to offer him a slight smile. “I have a doozy of a headache, too.”

Dave chuckled at her reply. “I’m not surprised. How did you fall?”

“I didn’t. I fainted. I was reading Jim’s note when everything went black. I have to go to Canton, Ohio.”

“You’re not going anywhere. You were out for several minutes, Janey. You’re going to stay in bed and rest.”

“I can’t, Dave. I have to stop him.”

“Stop him from what?”

“He’s going after his wife. He might kill her.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Didn’t you read the note?”

“I’ve been too busy taking care of you. Where is it?”

“Somewhere around my dresser, I guess. He said he was going to make sure Elaine doesn’t go to the Canton police and have them call Bud about what happened here. Maybe she knows more than I thought she did. Don’t you understand what that means, Dave? It means he’s going to kill Elaine—and their baby. I can’t let him do that.”

“You don’t have a choice, Janey. You’re in no condition to travel around the block let alone to Ohio.”

“I have to,” she insisted. “If I don’t, he could get into even more trouble. Besides, I have to stop the killing. Mom already died because of me. I can’t let Jim kill his wife and child because of me, too.”

“Then I’ll find him and stop him.”

“What makes you think he’ll listen to you? He doesn’t want anything to do with you, remember? And what if he finds out that I told you what I know? He’ll kill you, too. Then he’ll come back for me. He has to be stopped.”

“I’m going to Canton, Janey,” Dave declared, “and I’m going alone. I want to make sure Jim doesn’t kill anyone else

as much as you do.”

“I know, but you could *both* be killed. Please, Dave, I know your reputation. I’m more afraid Jim will kill you than the other way around.”

“Nobody’s going to get killed, Jane. I’m only going to talk to him.”

“And what if he doesn’t want to talk? What if he tries to kill you? Will you stand there and tell him not to do it because you’re his friend? If he gets a gun and shoots at you, are you going to shoot back like you normally would? Or are you going to try to reason with him?”

“It’s not going to come to a shoot-out, Jane,” Dave insisted reassuringly. “We solved our problems by talking when we were kids, and we can do it again.”

“I can’t talk you out of this, can I?”

“No.”

“Then I’m going with you,” she declared.

Dave shook his head. “Oh, no, you’re not. I’m not about to risk your life, too.”

“I’ll follow you,” she threatened.

“I’ll tie you to your bed if I have to.”

“I’ll get loose. Face it, Dave, I’m going with you, or I’m going alone. I’m the only one who can protect you two from each other.”

“You *can’t* go,” Dave replied. “Jim could kill you as well as he could me. I can’t let that happen.”

“Look at it this way then,” she argued. “Either we go together, or we go separately. That’s all there is to it.”

“You won’t change your mind, will you?”

“I’m no more stubborn than you are.”

Dave sighed at length. “We may as well go together. At least, I can protect you that way. We’ll leave tonight.”

“Oh, Dave, thank you,” she exclaimed. Throwing her arms around his neck, she kissed him soundly but quickly.

To cover her unexpected embarrassment, Jane scrambled off the bed and went to her closet for her suitcase. As she packed her clothes, she chattered about all she needed to do before she could leave and asked Dave to contact her neighbor about watching the house during her absence.

The whole time Jane was talking Dave interrupted, but she ignored him. Eventually, he grasped her upper arms while turning her to face him.

“I’m sorry,” Jane said, gazing up into his eyes. “I didn’t mean to kiss you. It just happened. I shouldn’t have done it.”

“What about this morning?”

“That was different. I should have thought before I kissed you. I can’t help it that I’m very demonstrative when I’m as happy as I was when you told me I could go with you.”

“Shut up, Janey.”

“But I’m apologizing for what I did. There I was lying on a bed—*my* bed—kissing you!”

“Please shut up, Janey.”

“I’m so embarrassed. I feel like an absolute fool. I wish there were some way I could take back what I did, but there isn’t. I’ve never done anything like that before. I don’t go around kissing men in my bed, Dave. Honest, I don’t. I don’t know what got into me. I just don’t know how I could ever apologize enough for ...”

His lips pressed against hers. His arms tightened around her. His tongue slipped between her slightly parted lips to touch her tongue. His arms moved, and his fingers tangled in her hair.

Caught off guard, Jane didn’t respond. But when their tongues met, she released a deep sighed and returned his caress, glad to be in his arms again. If she reacted like this every time they kissed, they would never get to Canton to warn Elaine of the danger. Long before she wanted to, she reluctantly pushed away from him, but he continued to

caress her head.

Jane struggled to hold back her unshed tears.

“Thank you for letting me hold you again, Janey,” he said. “I know you’re in a hurry to stop Jim, and I’m sorry I didn’t give you a chance to stop *me*.”

Jane smiled. “I’m not.”

“You didn’t mind?” he asked incredulously.

“Not at all,” she admitted.

“Then why the tears?”

“Because so much has happened in my life.”

“That’s all in the past. None of it matters now—not to me.”

“Maybe I should pack.”

“Okay,” Dave agreed. “I’ll go next door and explain that you’re leaving town for a while. Should I take a key?”

“Helen already has one,” Jane explained. “I have a tendency to lock myself out, so I keep a spare key at her house.”

“I’ll make sure she takes care of everything while you’re gone.”

“Thanks, Dave. I really appreciate your help.”

“That’s what Prince Charmings do,” he said with a wink.

She smiled up at him. “Maybe you should let me go so we can get busy.”

Dave released her slowly. He strode away but when he reached the door, he stopped and turned around. Three long steps brought him back to Jane, he swept her into his arms, kissed her soundly, then explained with a mischievous grin. “I needed one more.”

Instead of packing, Jane went to her bedroom window to watch Dave jog across the lawn and jump over the fence. Sadness tore her heart. He was so happy. Her eyes moistened again as Dave disappeared into the house next door.

How would she ever dissuade him from staying with her when she couldn’t resist his advances? She didn’t want to

endanger him, but he never let her have her way when it came to them separating. He always swept her into his arms and kissed her, as though he knew that would get her to change her mind.

With a sigh, she turned from the window. Now to decide what to wear on their trip. She was still in her slip when Dave bounded back into her bedroom a few minutes later. As she hastily slid into one of her many tan dresses, Dave muttered an apology and backed out of the room.

“You can come back in,” Jane said when her dress was in place.

Peeking around the door frame, he caught a side view of her stretching to reach the zipper in the back of her dress. Then he heard her utter under her breath, “Damn.” For nearly a minute he watched her struggle to loosen her jammed zipper. Jane reached over her shoulders but could not budge it; she reached behind her back, causing her breasts to strain enticingly against the material, to pull the zipper down but was unable to grasp it. As she made a quarter turn to face the door, she called Dave’s name.

“Can I help you?” he asked innocently.

“My zipper’s stuck. Would you fix it for me?”

“I’d be glad to.” Joining her, he examined the zipper while he spoke. “You sure did a good job. What happened?”

“I was in too big of a hurry to get decent for you.”

Freeing the material, he zipped it up and asked, “Anything else I can help with?”

“You can take my dresses off the hangers if you want.”

While they worked, Dave noticed that Jane had only dresses of different shades of tan and made a mental note to ask her why on their trip to Canton. At the moment, though, he sensed that she didn’t want conversation, and he decided helping her in silence would be best. But Dave kept wondering if he’d moved too fast or if he’d embarrassed her further

by walking into her room when she wasn't completely dressed.

Jane's thoughts centered on Dave's reaction to their kiss. The expression on his face when she glanced into the dresser mirror during their prolonged embrace concerned her. Clearly, his interest went much deeper than the physical attraction other men had. Dave wanted more than just her body—he wanted all she had to give a man. She couldn't stop him from becoming emotionally involved. That was obvious. But she still needed to keep their friendship platonic, if possible. Even if she had to act a part she didn't feel.

When they finished packing her suitcase, they went to his parents' home so he could pack a suitcase for himself. Although she wanted to wait for him in the car, he escorted her into the living room with his arm draped around her shoulders. Lucille and Paul Randall stared in surprise when the couple entered the room.

"Janey," Dave said as though he didn't notice the expression on their faces, "you remember my folks, don't you?"

"Of course. Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Randall. It's good to see you again."

"Hello, Jane," Lucille responded with obvious forced politeness. "What brings you here?"

"I'm taking her to Canton, Ohio," Dave explained. "Jim and his wife broke up, and Janey wants to try to patch up their relationship. Would you entertain her while I pack?"

"Of course. Sit down, Jane."

As Dave left the room, Paul excused himself and followed his son. On his way by, he turned off the radio, silencing the room. In Dave's bedroom, Paul stood before the

closet and tried to get his son to discuss the scene in the living room. But Dave avoided all conversation until he needed in the closet.

“Excuse me, Pa,” he said politely.

“I’m not moving until you sit down and talk to me,” Paul insisted.

“I don’t have time. Janey and I have to get started. It’s important that we get to Canton as soon as possible.”

“Unless it’s a matter of life and death, you can spare a little time. I want to talk to you, son,” Paul said. “Now sit down.”

Dave dropped onto his bed and with a sigh of exasperation. “Okay, Pa. What’s wrong?”

“You shouldn’t be with Jane Cole.”

“Don’t you *dare* tell me who I can associate with,” Dave responded hotly. “I’m twenty-nine years old, and I’ll be with whomever I please.”

“She’s not a woman you should date.”

“It’s *my* life, Pa.”

“But you don’t know ...”

“I *do* know—probably more than you. And I know all about what the stinking town thinks of Janey. Frankly, I’m surprised you believe the rumors. You’ve known her all of her life.”

“You’ve been out of town for a long time, son. It’s easy for you to ignore her pregnancy, because you didn’t see her when she was carrying that poor child.”

“If I had, Mary Lynn would never have been born out of wedlock. I would have convinced Jane to marry me.”

“A marriage of convenience is seldom a happy one, son.”

“You don’t have any idea of what I’m trying to say, do you,” Dave declared. “You don’t even care.”

“I know *exactly* what you’re saying. I’ve seen that look on your face before. Only that time it was on my face, and it

was when I met your mother.”

“Then don’t try to stop me, Pa. I’m going to be with Jane as often and as long as I can. That’s why I insisted on taking her to Canton.” Rising, Dave glared at his father. “Now please move so I can pack.”

“She never defended herself against the rumors, David. She never once stepped forward to deny what people said. She never told anybody the truth about her pregnancy—not even Karen.”

“Maybe she didn’t feel like she should *have* to defend herself!” Dave shouted, finally losing his temper. “She’s always had a fierce pride—ever since she was a baby.”

“Don’t yell at me, David. Even at your age, you should show some respect. And yes, I did think of her not wanting to defend herself. But it’s hard not to believe rumors when somebody who’d been so close wouldn’t even tell us what happened.”

Dave’s heart ached over his father’s words. “For God’s sake, Pa. Jane was like *family*. You should have trusted that she had problems that led to her predicament.” He inhaled deeply and steeled himself to end this distressing conversation. “I refuse to abandon her. Now I’ve got to pack.”

“Not one thing I say will change your mind? Not even if I say that your reputation will be ruined if you keep seeing her?”

“Maybe I could improve hers.”

“If that’s how you feel, there’s nothing anybody can say that will change your mind.”

“Absolutely nothing.”

“I suppose all I can do is wish you a safe trip,” Paul observed as he moved to let his son into the closet.

Jane had never felt the stress she did now that she was

trying to chat with Lucille Randall. In fact, she was almost relieved when Karen returned from her date and shouted, “What are *you* doing here?”

“Dave brought me,” Jane replied in a normal tone.

“I thought I told you to leave him alone.”

“I tried to, but Dave insisted. I couldn’t convince him to stay away from me.”

“You could have turned him down,” Karen insisted. “You didn’t have to let him know who you were.”

“Karen,” Lucille reprimanded, “that’s no way to speak to a guest in our home.”

“She’s not *my* guest. Besides, she’ll ruin Dave’s good name if she’s seen with him.”

“I already explained that to him,” Jane inserted. “He didn’t care.”

“I’ll *bet* you explained.”

“Stop it, Karen,” Lucille chastised.

“That’s okay, Mrs. Randall. I’ll wait outside.” Without a good-bye, Jane walked out of the house.

Dave’s heart sank when learned that Jane was waiting outside. He hurried to join her, only to discover that both she and her suitcase were gone. Fury raced through him. What had his family done to send her away

“She’s gone!” he declared as he entered the house. “Which one of you scared her away?”

“What are you talking about?” Lucille asked.

“Jane, damnit!” His heart ripping within his chest. “She left me. How could people who profess to love me want to see me miserable just because they don’t think she’s good enough for me? That’s *my* decision to make. Somebody better tell me why she left.”

“She wanted to leave,” Karen said, her tone filled with

bitterness. “And you can be damned sure that none of us tried to stop her. Be smart and take her hint, Dave. Let her leave you. She’s not good enough for you, anyway.”

“I told you that’s my decision to make!” Dave roared. “Did she say where she was going?”

Rising, Lucille wandered to the door where Dave stood and laid her hand on his cheek. The warm touch and sympathetic tone in her voice did little to calm Dave’s rage. “All she said was that she was going to wait outside. We didn’t know she was leaving, David. I promise.”

Her gentle words touched his heart, and his anger subsided. “I believe you, Ma, and I’m sorry I overreacted. But Jane means everything to me. I don’t want to lose her.”

“It may have taken me a full day of thinking, but I understand that now. Just be sure of your feelings before you do anything rash—like telling Jane. I’m not sure she’s able to return the depth of emotion you have for her, and I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“I couldn’t be more confident of my feelings than I am right this second. Finding her gone has torn me apart.”

“Then go find her, David. Take my advice, though. Before you say anything to her, be sure that these feelings aren’t something from the past.”

“All right, Ma. I’ll do my best.” After kissing her cheek, he raced out of the house in search of Jane.

For nearly a half an hour, he combed the series of roads looking for her. His heart pounded so hard, he swore he could hear it. Was he going to have a heart attack? Lord, he hoped not. Not while he was driving. Besides, he couldn’t bear to lose Jane before he had a chance to be with her.

“Please, God,” he prayed aloud. “If we’re meant to be together, let me find her.”

There she was! Walking toward the train depot. At least, that’s where he assumed she was heading. He had to stop her from going without him. He had to be with her!

Parking on the roadside, he ran to catch up with her.

“Jane, wait!” he called out as he sped after her on foot.

But she continued to walk away from him. The moment he reached her, he grabbed her upper arm to stop her.

“Don’t,” she pleaded without looking at him.

“Why did you walk out on me?”

“I had to.”

“That’s no reason. I heard Karen shouting, but I couldn’t understand her. Was she rude to you, Janey?”

“Even if she was, it doesn’t matter. The important thing is that she made me realize the truth.”

TEN

Dave took Jane's suitcase, set it downm then stepped in front of her.

"What truth is that?" he asked in concern.

"I have no right to monopolize your time. You deserve to spend time with a respectable woman—like Marcia. And you certainly don't need someone of my caliber interfering in your life. I should go my own way, solve my own problems. That's what I did while you were in France, and that's what I should do now."

"You have more of a right to monopolize my time than any other woman. After all, we've been friends for a long, long time. Besides, what about *my* rights? Don't I have any say in whom I want to see?"

"Be realistic, Dave. We can't always have what we want. Look at me. I wanted my baby, but I couldn't have her. I wanted to be respected, but I couldn't be. I wanted to be clean, but I'm not. That's realism, Dave. Getting things we want is nothing more than idealism. To accept reality, you have to accept life for exactly what it gives you and not expect more. Earlier I was caught up in your fantasy of

sunshine, roses, and fine wine. But I've come to my senses now. I've come back to reality—where everything is rain-storms, dandelions, and moonshine.”

He gazed down at her, unable to believe she'd said that. “Reality doesn't have to be so bleak. Even Cinderella lived happily ever after.”

“Listen to yourself! You're trying to convince me with a story, a fairy tale, a *fantasy*. Can't you understand that my life can't have a happy ending? I'm plain, everyday Jane Lynn Cole. I'm the bad girl in town, the woman everybody points at and scoffs. I'm Randall Center's *scarlet* woman. Can't you see the big red A? Can't you see that I'm not destined to be happy.”

“No,” he said softly, “I can't. And I don't understand how you can know that unless you reach out and grab the chance.”

“Because I'm realistic.”

“Do you know what's real? I'm real, and so is what I'm telling you. Real is giving yourself a chance to be happy, but you can't find that happiness unless you want to.”

“You can't be happy even if you want it.”

“I'm happy,” he insisted, “but I wouldn't be if I hadn't given myself the chance.”

Jane stared up at him. “You really believe that, don't you.”

“Of course, I do. Happiness doesn't just walk into your life, Janey. You have to get out there and find it. Find it, hell! You have to *make* it. I don't think you realize how long it took me to decide to come back to Randall Center after my enlistment. I did decide, though, and I'm finally happy.”

“Dave,” she said hesitantly.

“What?”

“I'm getting cold just standing here.”

“Then let's get in the car. We'll talk more on the way.”

“If you don't mind, I'd rather not talk.”

“Does that mean you’ll still accept my help in finding Jim?”

“Yes, but you have to understand something. I’ve been miserable for a long time. I’m afraid to even *try* to be happy, and I don’t want to find happiness only to lose it. I’m afraid I’d go insane if that happened.”

“Don’t worry, Jane,” he replied with a smile. “I’ll help you find happiness. We made it through the death of your cat together, and we’ll make it through this together.”

Escorting Jane back to the car, Dave held her securely around the shoulders while he carried her suitcase. After putting her bag behind the seat, he helped her into the automobile and suggested she sit in the middle so his body would help warm her. Then he went around the car and got in behind the steering wheel. Before starting the Packard, he laid his arm on the back of the seat around Jane, twisted to face her then, with his left hand on her waist, kissed her soundly. After the brief caress, he started the motor and began the long drive in silence. Not much time had passed when he realized that Jane had already fallen asleep.

In the early morning hours, Dave felt drowsy, so he parked at the side of the road to get some sleep. But with Jane’s head on his shoulder, he was unable to relax. Thoughts of how good it felt to hold her again, of how much better it felt to kiss her, ran rampant through his mind. Careful not to disturb her, he slid his right arm around her.

Jane awoke with a start, asking, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I was just getting comfortable so I could get some sleep.”

“What time is it?”

“About four-thirty.”

“Then why are you stopping?”

“I’m tired. I figured we could sleep in the car for a while. Maybe you’ve been doing a good job of sawing logs, but I

can't seem to relax now that we're stopped."

"Why not?"

"I'm not sure. All I know is every time I close my eyes, I see the two of us in your bedroom yesterday morning." He paused a moment, unsure he should admit the truth, then added, "I wonder if traveling with you is such a good idea."

Jane sat erect and gazed at him, trying to judge his meaning by the expression on his face, but it was too dark to see him well. "I don't understand. Are you telling me this is the end of the trip for you?"

"That's not it at all. I just can't help wondering if my decision was a wise one. After all the years we've been apart, after all the years that have passed since I first realized how special you are to me, I don't know if I can restrain myself. All I want to do is hold you and kiss you, Jane. But I'm afraid to after what happened with Bud."

"I see." Closing her eyes, she bowed her head. Shame about her past consumed her. "I warned you."

"Warn me about what?"

"About me, of course." Her heart ached at what she felt she must say. "Maybe admitting everything that happened in my past was stupid, but I had to be honest with you. I couldn't let you believe what all the rest of Randall Center believes—and, as you know, that includes your family."

"Yeah, I know. Pa and I had quite an argument about you while I was packing, but I told him that he couldn't stop me from seeing you."

Jane struggled not to cry. "So *he* warned you, too."

"Why do you keep talking about my being warned?"

"Because even though you do it, you're afraid to hold me and kiss me. You're afraid to hurt your reputation by touching me."

Dave put three fingertips under her chin while he turned to her. Although he gently lifted her head, she kept her eyes

averted by staring at the steering wheel.

“Jane,” he whispered, “look into my eyes.”

Her gaze met his. She knew sadness showed in her eyes, but she couldn't pretend she was happy. Finally, he spoke in such a tender tone that Jane's heart tightened with emotion.

“You don't understand in the slightest. I'm not afraid because of your reputation. I'm afraid because of what my so-called friend did to you. I'm afraid because you were forced into an affair you didn't want. I don't want you to get the wrong idea about my intentions. I don't want to intimidate you. I don't even want you to *think* that I am. And I don't want to insult you or threaten you. All I want to do is cherish you. Do you believe me?”

His voice told her even more than his words. The seriousness in his tone was all she needed. Dave would never do to her what Bud had done. Unsure how to respond, she spoke in a whisper she found hard to hear. “Yes.” Then she fell silent, not knowing if he needed more.

“When I kiss you and hold you, it's different from the way I suspect other men do it. I have more on my mind than getting you into the closest bed and having sex with you. I respect you, Jane. And when I get you to the nearest bed, it won't be to have sex with you. It will be to show my love.”

As nice as that sounded, she doubted it could happen that way. “But there's nothing respectable *about* me.”

“That's everyone else's opinion, not mine. And it certainly shouldn't be yours. Just remember one thing. When I kiss you, it's because I cherish you.”

Without warning, Dave pulled Jane to him and kissed her. Despite the confined quarters of his car, he maneuvered into a position where he could fully embrace her.

Despite the vow she'd made to herself while walking from the Randall farm, Jane responded to him. How could she ever maintain her distance if she reacted instinctively

whenever he held her?

The thought drained from her mind as Dave's tongue passed her lips and teeth to make contact with hers. Emotion swept over her. Desire consumed her in his arms. Unable to contain herself, she gave in to all the exciting feelings raging through her.

His lips bore down against hers as if he'd been deprived of this pleasure for far too long. His embrace, as total as it could be in the confines of his car, was secure, as though he never wanted to let her go. But one of his hands did release her.

It slid across her shoulder and down her arm until it reached her elbow. Then it skipped over to her breast. Instantly passion mounted in her. She sighed into Dave's devouring mouth. His hand squeezed her mound tenderly, and she gasped at the intense sensations that flooded to her loins.

Suddenly, long before she was ready, he released her. Resettling himself, he turned her so her back was against him and embraced her around her ribs, just below her breasts. Finally, he spoke in a quiet, tender tone. "Do you remember why I kiss you?"

Her voice cracked as she laid her arms on top of his. "Because you think you respect and cherish me."

"At least, you're improving. Actually, I *know* I respect and cherish you, but I suppose it will take some time for you to accept that. It's probably been so long since a man has truly cared about you that it's hard for you to get used to the idea."

"Can I still be honest with you, Dave?"

"I wouldn't want it any other way."

"This isn't easy for me to say, but I want to try. You seem to think that sunshine, roses, and fine wine are possible, and I really like the idea of having them someday. When I was asleep, I dreamed I was happy for the first time in years. It wasn't a fraudulent happiness, either; it was *true*

happiness. And the feeling was so satisfying that I want to see if I can have that same feeling in reality. I want to try.”

“I’m glad to hear that, Jane. Why don’t you go back to that dream now? We’ll be mighty tired if we don’t get some sleep.”

After Dave got a couple hours of sleep and they took to the road again, he tauntingly told Jane that she talked in her sleep.

“I did?” she asked, embarrassed. “What did I say?”

“You mumbled something about electrifying bells. I didn’t catch it all. What in the world are electrifying bells?”

“Oh,” she sighed with relief. “When I was a teenager, I believed I could tell if I loved somebody if I heard bells ringing and felt electricity in my heart when I kissed him. I even told Karen that I called it electrifying bells.” She paused then added, “Of course, that’s when Karen and I were still best friends.”

“Do you still believe it?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t given it any thought for an awfully long time.”

“You must have subconsciously because you were sure dreaming about it last night.”

“I guess,” she agreed noncommittally.

“We should be in Chicago tonight. I thought we’d spend the night in a hotel.”

To Jane’s delight, Dave rented a room for each of them in a nice hotel. As he walked her to her room on the third floor, Jane announced that she wanted a long, hot bath and a nap, and asked him to wake her in time for dinner.

Jane thought she had just laid down when there was a knock at her door. She glanced at her watch, only to see that she'd been sleeping for three hours. Stumbling out of bed, she asked who it was. Dave's cheerful, rich, baritone voice replied. When she opened the door, he extended a large, gift-wrapped box toward her. She stared at it in amazement, neither moving nor speaking.

"Take it, Janey," Dave ordered with a smile as he placed the package in her hands. "It's a belated birthday present."

"I don't know what to say," she admitted, accepting the package and sitting on the edge of the bed with it.

"Don't say anything until after you open it."

Unwrapping the present, Jane found a high-fashion, sky blue dress inside. She held it against her body to examine it in the dresser mirror as Dave approached her from behind and laid his hands on her shoulders with his thumbs rubbing her neck. A shiver raced down her spine.

"That color suits you," he said. "Do you like it?"

"Oh, Dave," she replied with a smile, "I really do. But why? How did you know my size? Where did you get it? *When* did you get it? What do I say to you other than thank you? That doesn't seem enough."

"You sound as though you're planning to write a newspaper article about the dress," he said, chuckling at her enthusiasm. "The only question you didn't ask was who. But if you must know, I got it at Marshall Field's while you were napping. I knew what size by helping you pack. Why? Because you don't own one colorful dress, so I decided to remedy that. As for what you can say, thank you and a promise that you'll wear it to dinner with me."

"Thank you, and I promise."

"That's my girl. I'll be back in about an hour."

Before leaving the room, he kissed the side of her neck, sending a shiver down her arm. Dave smiled and winked at her in the mirror then left.

Excited about trying on her present, Jane stripped out of her old dress and slipped into the new one. Unlike her old dress that had a natural waistline, this dress sported a low waist, which came around her hips. The hem stopped just below her knees, not mid-calf like her other dresses. A little beading from the shoulder to the waist added just enough to make the dress fancy without giving the impression to people that she was a floozy. The long sleeves, although ending just above her wrists instead of just below, gave her an elongated appearance. And the V neckline was low enough to only show a hint of her cleavage.

Thank goodness, Dave hadn't gotten something that came any lower. He had good taste, though, because this hue of blue highlighted her eyes. It would be a shame to cover it with her coat, but she could take that off at the restaurant where others could see that the dress fit beautifully.

She hadn't felt this pretty in years!

She didn't know how much time had passed, but a knock on her door startled her. Rushing to see who it was, she opened the door to see Dave standing before her—clean-shaven and wearing a suit.

Without a word, he pulled a small box tied with a ribbon from behind his back and handed it to her. Jane sauntered to the middle of the room as Dave followed her, although neither spoke until she opened it.

"Oh, Dave!" she exclaimed, lifting the corsage of white rose buds from the box. Bringing them to her face, she inhaled their fragrance. "They're beautiful. Thank you."

"Beautiful flowers for a beautiful lady."

Bowing her head, Jane's face heated as she blushed and mumbled a thank you. Ever since the accident, she hadn't felt beautiful—or even pretty. Now she did, though, and it was all due to Dave.

"May I have the honor of pinning them on you?"

"Please," she said as she handed him the corsage.

Dave pinned the flowers onto the shoulder of her dress, touching her bare skin as he did. The feel of her softness sent the sensation of excitement through him. With the corsage firmly in place, he ran his hand up to her cheek, constantly touching her. Jane caressed his wrist, giving him the initial impression that she disliked his movements. But to his surprise and pleasure, she pressed her cheek against his hand as they gazed into each other's eyes.

"I don't think I ever realized how blue your eyes are, Jane," he said in a near whisper. "They're almost the color of sapphires."

"The blue dress makes them appear that way, I suppose."

"Then why do you wear tan all the time? The color of your eyes is much too pretty to mute with drab clothes."

"I refuse to wear the bright colors people believe a prostitute wears. I want as little recognition as possible, so I wear only what you call drab colors like tans and browns, and sometimes grays—except to work, which is my uniform."

"You wanted them to know you weren't what they thought without verbally protesting their accusations."

Her astonishment reflected on her face. "That's exactly what I've been doing. But not one person in Randall Center paid attention to my silent statement of innocence."

"I understand," he admitted, giving her a brief hug. "Now. As much as I'd like to continue our conversation, I think we should go to dinner. I can't wait another second to show off the most beautiful woman in all of Chicago."

"What about the actresses?"

"You're a lot more beautiful than they are."

Again Jane blushed. "Let's go. You're embarrassing me."

After a pheasant dinner, Dave suggested that they go dancing, but Jane insisted that they return to the hotel. At her door, she asked him to join her for a while so they could talk. Before he agreed, however, he excused himself to his own room for a few minutes. So he could get in, Jane left the door unlocked.

Jane hurried to the community bathroom down the hall to clean her teeth and freshen up. She could have done that at the vanity in her room, but she didn't want him to walk in on her while she was doing so.

To her surprise, Dave stood beside the bed, his suitcoat and tie removed, with two glasses of wine in his hands. He extended one toward her as she closed the door.

"To happiness," he said when she took one glass.

"Yes," she agreed, touching her glass to his. "To happiness."

As they sipped their wine, Dave glanced around the room. "I thought they'd furnish comfortable chairs in this place. But they don't have any at all."

"We could use the bed as a sofa," Jane suggested as she settled herself on it, propping a pillow against the headboard to lean against. "Sit down. I don't know where you got the wine—and I don't want to—but I'm glad you did. It's good."

"I just wish it were daytime," he admitted, sinking down beside her.

"Why?"

"We have the roses and the fine wine, but we're missing the sunshine. We have to settle with two out of three."

"That's odd. I could have sworn we had all three. The roses are in the corsage; the fine wine is in our glasses; and the sunshine is in your eyes."

"It's obvious, huh?"

"Thankfully, yes."

"Do you have any idea how I know your feelings about

not protesting and keeping things to yourself?” His abrupt change of the subject startled Jane, but Dave continued as if he didn’t notice. “I went through it in France. I dated a lot of women in Paris, but I almost never slept with them. The guys in my outfit gave me a hard time about it. They had me figured for a man who likes other men and spends time with women to cover it up. It wasn’t that the opportunity seldom arose, either, because I never wanted for a willing partner. I just turned most of them down. Oh, I could have saved face and told the guys that I’d slept with more than a few; but I didn’t think it was any of their business.”

“If you had the opportunity, why didn’t you take it?”

“I learned that sex without love isn’t right for me, but the guys I was with couldn’t understand that. The times that I needed physical relief just weren’t that often.”

“So you didn’t even bother to explain.”

“Right.” Getting off the bed, Dave wandered to the dresser for the bottle of wine and returned to fill their glasses. After he set the bottle on the floor next to his side of the bed, he sat down. “Pa told me something during our fight last night. He said you never told anybody how Mary was conceived. How did you meet her father?”

Secretly glad he had brought up the topic, she hesitated before she responded. At least, Dave would be nonjudgmental. “I was swimming at the pond, and he came down there, too. Lenny and I were the only ones there, so we started talking. One thing led to another, and I invited him home for dinner. Jim had been in the Navy for three years, and I hadn’t seen you in two years. Dad had died less than a year earlier. I was lonely and upset. I believed those men deserted me.”

“He filled a void for you.”

“Exactly. Anyway, Lenny was very handsome and even more charming. I’d never been so vulnerable in my life. Lenny was there for me, though, a lot like you were there on my birthday this year. He convinced me that he loved me,

Dave. He said he was only in the area for a short time, and I wanted to give him my most prized possession, but I didn't know anything about sex. That's not an excuse, either, just a statement of fact. We made love about five times. I really didn't know I could get pregnant, Dave. I swear I didn't."

Dave's fingers entwined with hers, and he lifted their hands to kiss her fingers. "I understand."

"I don't want understanding. I want forgiveness."

"I know," he admitted in a low voice, "but I don't know why you after what I confessed."

"Because men are expected to get experience before marriage."

"And just how do you expect men to get experience without women?" he replied. "How did the accident happen?"

"We were driving down the road on a date, and I told him about the baby. All of a sudden, he veered toward a big tree. I knew if I didn't do something I was going to get killed. So I grabbed the wheel and turned it toward me. He turned it back toward the tree, and the next thing I knew, I was in the hospital. The doctor told me that I was lucky to be alive and that Lenny had died. I just know he was trying to kill me, but I saved myself by grabbing the wheel. For a while, I thought I'd gotten lucky, that I'd miscarried. But I hadn't. That's when my life. Between the scarring and showing in pregnancy, I lost more than just Lenny. I lost my reputation. You have to be disappointed in me for conceiving and giving birth out of wedlock."

"To the contrary. It takes a lot of strength to suffer through what you have for the past six years. I'm proud of you for holding up so well under the pressure."

Pausing to sip her wine twice, Jane pondered the advisability of asking him a question. No longer able to contain her curiosity, she said, "There's something I want to ask you, Dave, but it's too personal, you don't have to answer it."

“I don’t have anything to hide from you, Janey. You told me everything there is to know about you, so I should do the same for you.”

“But what I want to ask could easily ...” She paused when someone knocked at the door. “Who could that be?”

ELEVEN

“Jim!” Dave exclaimed when he opened the door.

The brown-haired man only a little taller than Jane glared up at Dave. “I thought so.”

“What are you doing here, Jim?” Jane questioned, joining them at the door. “I thought you were going to Canton.”

“That’s exactly what I *wanted* you to think. I want to talk with you alone, Randall. Want to join me in the hall?”

Dave passed his glass to Jane. “Keep this safe until I get back.”

“Okay,” she agreed.

Closing the door behind him, Dave suggested that he and Jim conduct their discussion closer to the stairs so Jane wouldn’t hear. Jim seemed a little too eager to comply, but Dave dismissed it as being Jim’s protectiveness of Jane. Once they were away from the room, Jim started the conversation.

“What were you doing in Jane’s room?”

“Talking,” Dave replied.

“Over wine?”

“Yes.”

“About what?”

“Something personal.”

“Like what?”

“I told you it was personal. If you can’t take my word for it, I don’t have anything else to say.”

“You’re seducing my sister. I deserve answers.”

“I’m not seducing her,” Dave said declared. “I’m just helping her find you.”

“With wine, flowers, a dress, and a fancy dinner?”

“I’m showing her what happiness is like.”

“You can’t *buy* her happiness.”

“Maybe not, but I can sure as hell *give* it to her. Jane’s grown up now, and I want to be with her. I gave her presents because I wanted to, not because I was trying to buy her *or* seduce her. You know Jane’s always been special to me.”

“I don’t believe you. You just want to get what you can from her. I followed you from Randall Center and know exactly what you’ve been doing. You didn’t even know I was behind you because you were too interested in my sister.”

“I don’t give a damned *what* you believe.” Dave paused before changing the subject. “I did a lot of investigating, Jim. Don’t you think you should go back and turn yourself in? Aren’t you tired of hiding from the law?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, yes, you do. If I had any jurisdiction here, I’d arrest you myself.”

“On what charges?”

“I have plenty, starting with a little embezzlement. A little rumrunning.” He paused for effect and whispered, “A little murder.”

To Dave’s amazement, Jim slid his right hand into his jacket pocket and withdrew a small pistol and pointed it in Dave. His eyes not leaving the weapon, Dave backed up two steps and raised his hands as Jim spoke in a hardened tone. “You have *no* evidence of any of that.”

Jane's instincts screamed at her. Something was wrong. Her brother and best friend were about to have an altercation which could lead to ... Unable to complete the thought, Jane threw open the door and called for Dave. Both men looked over at her. Jim casually put his hand in his pocket; Dave seemed to glance at Jim's pocket then let his eyes meet Jim's. Almost simultaneously, Jim gave Dave a quick nod.

"Just a second, Janey," Dave said.

"Don't hurt her, Randall," Jim warned in a whisper that Jane could barely make out. "Despite what I said in her room the other morning, I love her. And I'll protect her until one of us dies."

"Thanks for letting me know," Dave responded aloud. "I'll keep that in mind."

As Jim left, he knocked into Dave, throwing the larger man off balance and causing him to tumble down the flight of stairs while Jim raced after him. That was no accident, Jane realized. Jim had deliberately run into Dave and caused him to fall. Jane cried out Dave's name as he crashed to the landing. She scurried down the steps as Dave's head slammed against the wall. His eyes closed, showing her that he had been knocked out. Only seconds later, he opened his eyes again. As she knelt beside him, he stared up at her, obviously stunned by the injury.

"Dave?" she asked in concern. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," he replied with a half-smile.

"Are you sure? You hit your head pretty hard."

"It takes a bigger man than your brother to put me down for the count."

"Let me help you back up to my room so you can lie down for a while."

As Jane grasped his upper arm, Dave pushed himself off the floor. A sharp pain stabbed through his ankle, and his leg buckled under him. Draping his arm around her shoulders, Jane helped him up the stairs and back to her bed before she scolded him gently. "You told me you were all right."

Dave took a sip of the wine she offered him. "I must have sprained my ankle. Except for that, I'm fine. What made you so excited when you opened the door?"

"I felt like there was some kind of trouble."

"You were just overly anxious," he responded, embracing her. "Jim realized that, so he left. He was afraid he had upset you by the way he acted and decided it would be better for you if he didn't come back with me."

"What did he want?" Jane moved to sit beside his foot and took off his shoe and sock to examine his ankle. "And why didn't you arrest him? More importantly, how did he find us?"

Although her actions were tender, a sharp pain shot through his ankle. He sucked in a breath through his teeth to keep from crying out. "I don't have any jurisdiction, and he followed us. I think he wanted to make sure I don't have improper intentions. He's afraid I'll hurt you."

"I don't know why he would be. You've never hurt me in the past. I'm going to ask the desk clerk if we can have some ice for this. What about your head? You were out for a couple seconds, so maybe you need some ice for it, too."

"Don't fuss over me, Jane."

"If I don't, no one else will," she said with a smile. "I'm going downstairs. I'll be back with some ice shortly."

Before he could protest again, Jane hurried out the door, leaving him alone with his thoughts. It hadn't been easy to stop kissing her earlier, but he'd known that he must. It was the only way he could prove to her that he truly felt that she was special. Now she was forcing him back into her room, where anything could happen if he wasn't careful.

With a heavy sigh, he tucked his hands under his head and closed his eyes. It probably wouldn't take her long, and he didn't dare think about what could have happened earlier. Oh, how he wished he could hold her again! He would kiss her passionately, and caress her body with such tenderness that she would ...

His manhood swelled with desire at the mere thought. He *had* to get his mind off Jane, or he would sweep her into his arms the second she crossed the threshold. Sitting up again, he recalled his conversation with Jim to still his arousal.

By the time Jane returned, Dave had emptied his glass of wine and was pouring himself more to dull the pain in his ankle. Moving his leg carefully, Jane wrapped the towel filled with ice around it then seated herself beside him.

"Do you plan to finish that whole bottle by yourself?" she asked as she took his glass then handed him hers.

"That's a tempting suggestion," he admitted with a chuckle while he filled her glass. "If you want more, you'd better not mention it again."

"Does your ankle hurt that much?"

"Yes, but the ice should help." Passing her glass back, he accepted his in return and took a sip of wine. "Did you know that Jim is worried that I'll try to take advantage of you?"

"He is?" she asked in surprise

"He did warn me not to hurt you."

"Does that mean you'll be going back to your own room when we empty the bottle?" she asked. When he nodded, she added, "Would you please stay? I'm afraid Jim will come back. I'm afraid he knows I found out about his crimes and, I'm more scared than ever. I'm afraid to be alone. But I'm *more* afraid to let you be alone."

"I know you are, Jane." Setting first his drink then hers on the floor, he took her into his arms. "But I'd better go. If

he found out we spent the night together, he'd be furious."

"The only way he could find out is to come into the room, and I won't let him in."

"You don't have to let him in if I'm in my room, either."

"There must be some way to change your mind."

"There isn't. Tell you what, though. Lie down, and I'll massage your back for a while. Maybe that will help relieve some of your tension."

"What about your ankle?"

"The ice is already helping. Go ahead and lie down."

So as not to wrinkle her new dress, Jane excused herself and took her suitcase into the closet. It was tight in there, but she didn't want Dave to see her undress. When she exited, she wore a long, pastel blue, lightweight robe which clung alluringly to her body. Lying on her stomach, she watched as he unbuttoned the top three buttons on his shirt.

"Relax now," he said softly. "I'll help you take your mind off your brother."

Jane started when he touched her. His movements were much more caressing than she'd anticipated. As he pressed his thumbs on either side of her spine, he dragged his fingertips along her side from the base of her neck to her hips. Her nerves tingled wherever he touched her. When he slid his hands up her back, she sighed contentedly, as though the act forced the air from her lungs.

"Feel good?" Dave asked, his voice barely audible.

"Wonderful," she drawled.

He continued his relaxing motions. For what seemed like an eternity, Jane battled the desires growing within her. Each movement of Dave's hands brought forth increasingly intense sensations which had lain dormant for many years. Again she ignored her determination to remain distant. Instead, she pretended that her common sense didn't even exist and accepted the happiness Dave was giving her. Wonderful

feelings that inflamed her soul until she couldn't hold her lower body still, despite her desperate attempts to do so.

After nearly twenty minutes, he stopped his movements then rolled Jane onto her back by grasping her waist. His gaze caught hers, and he brushed the blonde hair from her eyes.

Jane examined him. In his eyes she saw an expression no man had ever shown her. His light brown eyes carried more than the look of a man who wanted her like other men. They shone with a much deeper feeling than lust, although she was reluctant to put a name on it.

“Dave.” Her voice cracked with emotion, surprising her.

“I don't know what to do, Jane,” he admitted. “I've dreamed of this moment for years, and now that it's here I don't know what to do. In all my dreams, it had been an easy decision, but that was before I learned how beautifully you'd grown up. Those dreams were before I found out about Bud. And I *never* dreamed I would have to get up and walk away from you.”

“Walk away?” she repeated in a sad question.

“Yes. You deserve to be treated like a lady, and we both know ladies don't go all the way until after the wedding. You should know, though, that I want you like I've never wanted another woman. If I don't get up and walk out, I could very easily get carried away.”

“If that's what you really believe, I can't stop you.”

“I'm glad you understand. It makes this a little easier.”

“I said I can't stop you, Dave,” she corrected, “not that I understand—because I don't.”

“I wish I could stay to explain. But if Jim comes back and finds me here, there'll be real trouble.”

“Would you do me a favor first? Would you kiss me good night? Just quickly if you want?”

“Don't you understand, Jane? What I *want* to do and what I *should* do are two entirely different things.” He

paused and stared into her eyes. “God help me. I can’t deny you.”

The only part of his body that touched her was his lips as they caressed hers in a tender kiss. She longed for more. But how would she ever persuade him to abandon what remained of his willpower when she had no experience in showing a man what she wanted? Dave needed more than encouragement; he needed a woman able to take the initiative. Unfortunately, that woman wasn’t her. Asking for a good night kiss was one thing. Asking for anything more required a much stronger, much more self-assured woman than she. At least, she had convinced him to kiss her good night. That was more than she would have done with any other man.

Dave pulled back and studied her for several moments before he broke the silence. “I really do wish I could stay, but I’d better get out of here. I can’t go on like this, and I don’t want you to think that I only want what Bud wanted from you.”

“I don’t.”

“I’ll wake you up for breakfast.”

“Would you do me one more favor?”

“If I can.”

“I’m still afraid that Jim will come back. Could I borrow your gun? Just for protection in case he gets in. Please?”

“I’ll go get it and be right back,” he agreed, limping toward the door.

Upon his return, Dave placed his revolver on the nightstand next to Jane then asked if she knew how to use it. When she admitted that she didn’t, he sat beside her to demonstrate the proper handling of the pistol. Sliding his arms around her, he showed her how to hold it steadily. To express her gratitude, Jane kissed his cheek.

“Thanks a lot, Dave. Only one thing could give me more security than having your gun.”

“I know. And there’s nothing I’d like more than to stay.” He released a long, slow sigh as he ran his large hand over her hair. “I couldn’t keep my distance for an entire night. I’ve been dreaming of this moment for years.”

“Dave,” she whispered, placing one fingertip on his lips, “if that’s really how you felt, kiss me now.”

He laid her back then lay down beside her. Almost immediately, his lips caught hers in a passionate kiss. When he caressed her waist, Jane slid her arms around his back to show her acceptance. His right hand moved upward over the crisp cotton of her robe, tickling her ribs seductively. As his soft touch continued, completely new feelings engulfed her. The hand on her covered breast was gentle, not the rough caress Bud always used. And she responded unashamedly, releasing the buttons on his shirt while he massaged her.

After pushing Dave’s shirt down his arms, Jane slid her hands to his shoulders, delighting in the feel of his hard muscles. Then she let her fingers wander through the hair moderately covering his chest. As his fingers sought out the sash on her robe, Jane slipped her hands over his ribs to caress his back. Dave shed his shirt without breaking the kiss, tossing it aside.

His actions were languorous. His fingers separated the material of her robe. Beneath it, she wore a satin, sleeveless nightgown that ended just above her knees. His hands slid down the fabric until it ended then moved to her bare legs and slid up her side under the nightgown. While pushing the lingerie out of his way, his hands drifted up the skin on her sides to caress her naked breasts.

The sensation of his cool hands on her warm body increased Jane’s desire. Her motions became uncontrollable, but his movements continued their slow progress, tenderly massaging her breasts, her stomach, her thighs. When his thumbs lightly brushed over her womanhood, she started at the instantaneous reaction it caused in her.

Pulling back his head, Dave examined her body with an expression of admiration Jane would never forget. Now she knew for sure. He thought of her as more than a receptacle for his desire. From the look in his brown eyes, she was the object of his desire—the *only* reason for his arousal.

“My God, Jane,” he whispered hotly. “I never dreamed you would look like this. You’re more beautiful than I imagined.”

“If that pleases you,” she returned, “show me.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.”

While Dave finished undressing, Jane slipped out of her robe and nightgown and dropped them on the floor, her own appreciative gaze not once leaving his astonishing body as he turned out the lamp on the nightstand. From somewhere outside a light illuminated the room with a dim, soft brightness. But the room itself faded into a memory. Jane thought only of the man kissing her, the same man she had avoided for months because she was afraid he wouldn’t understand. What a tragic waste of time!

Then those thoughts drained from her mind. Dave offered her feathery kisses from her mouth, down her neck, across her chest, to her breast, centering his attention on the taut tip to suckle gently before making his way to her other breast. His actions felt wonderful—tender and loving in an overpowering embrace Jane had no desire to break.

At last he maneuvered himself between her legs, joining with her slowly. Lifting her hips, she met him to bring about their complete physical union. Then time seemed to stop. All the emotions, all the feelings that had been hidden so deep within her heart that she had no inkling they were even present burst forth in a frenzy. And she led Dave to a deliberate, passionate, intense culmination of long-denied desires.

When Dave lifted himself off her, Jane rolled onto her

side with her back to him.

“Are you disappointed, Janey” he asked.

“Of course not!” she exclaimed. “I enjoyed being with you. Why would you think I didn’t?”

“You rolled away from me as soon as you could.”

“It wasn’t because I was disappointed, Dave,” she admitted without moving.

“Then what is it? Come over here and explain.”

“I can’t.”

Behind her, Dave repositioned himself to bend over her and meet her gaze. “I can tell something’s bothering you, Janey. Please tell me what it is.”

“Okay,” she admitted, “something *is* bothering me, but I don’t want to discuss it. I just want to sleep.”

“All right—if that’s really what you want.”

To Jane’s astonishment, Dave draped his arm over her side, tenderly embracing her breast as he kissed her temple. Then he lay down and molded his body against her.

Unable to contain her curiosity, she asked, “What are you doing?”

“Getting comfortable so we can sleep.”

“You’re staying?” she asked in surprise. “I don’t understand. You said ...”

“That was before. Surely, you didn’t expect me to leave now that we’ve gone all the way.”

“Actually, I did. That’s why I didn’t want to look at you. I couldn’t bear seeing you walk out the door.”

“So that’s why you didn’t want to talk about it. You were afraid that I’d stay because I felt sorry for you if you said something.”

“How did you know?”

“You’ve always had a fierce pride, Jane. That’s one of the things I never forgot about you. And in the few days we’ve been together, you’ve already proven that hasn’t changed over the years.”

“I didn’t realize you knew me so well.”

“I shouldn’t have waited to visit you when I got back to Randall Center,” he admitted. “What a huge waste of time.”

Jane hugged his arm between her breasts and responded dreamily. “And I shouldn’t have spent months avoiding you. I should have followed my instincts instead of my logic. If I had, we could have been enjoying each other’s company during that time.”

“Well, we’re enjoying it now. And we’ll keep right on enjoying it. Right now we need sleep. I don’t trust Jim, and I want to get to Canton as soon as possible.”

“How can you drive with a sprained ankle?”

“It isn’t that bad,” he said. “Now would you please go to sleep?”

When the sun rose the following morning, Dave got up and slipped into his shirt and pants while Jane watched him from the bed. As he put on his socks and shoes, he noticed that his left ankle was still quite swollen even though the severe pain had dissipated into a dull ache.

“Thanks for staying with me last night, Dave,” Jane said while he sat next to her on the bed. “I really appreciate it.”

“Not half as much as I do,” he admitted, pushing the stubborn lock of blonde hair out of her eyes. “I still can’t believe that my dreams have finally come true.”

“I have a confession. Because of my past, I never thought you’d want to associate with me, let alone do what we did last night.”

“The only past I care about is last night—and this morning. Let’s clean up, and I’ll meet you here in about an hour.”

“Wait. I have to know something.” After a brief pause, she asked, “Was bedding me worth the wait for you?”

“I didn’t bed you, Jane; I *made love* with you. There’s a

big difference, but I didn't realize that until last night." He paused to kiss her quickly. "And it was more than worth the wait; it was the most satisfying experience of my life."

"Prove it," she urged mischievously. "Kiss me again."

"If I do, ..." Dave's words were interrupted by loud banging on the door. "Oh, my God! That's got to be Jim."

"Hand me my robe," she whispered. "I'll answer it."

TWELVE

Dave picked up his pistol from the nightstand. Just as Jane reached the door, a strange male voice shouted “David Randall!” and ordered that he open it. When she turned to look at him, Dave nodded once, so she opened the door just enough to see who it was. Stunned, she stared at Dave over her shoulder, her face pale with fear.

“Oh, no!” she gasped. “It’s the police.”

“Let us in, ma’am. And get out of the way.” The man at the door pushed it all the way open, at the same time stepping between Jane and Dave with his pistol trained on Dave. “Drop the gun, Randall. You’re under arrest for unlawful restraint.”

His heart seemed to stop for a moment. It made no sense. Jane was with him, and he hadn’t restrained anybody else—unlawfully or otherwise. Laying his weapon on the nightstand, he asked, “What are you talking about?”

“Just come peacefully. Everything will be explained at headquarters. Maynard, get the gun.”

“Wait just a minute,” Dave demanded. “I’m as much of a cop as you are. Leave that gun where it is.”

“Well, right now, you’re under arrest. Cuff him first, Maynard,” said the man protecting Jane. “Then get the gun. If I were you, Randall, I’d come along willingly. You’re in enough trouble as it is.”

“But Dave hasn’t done anything,” Jane insisted.

“We were warned that you might say that—because you’re afraid of him. But don’t worry. I’ll make sure you’re safe.”

“Don’t argue with them, Janey,” Dave said as Maynard snapped the handcuffs on his wrists behind his back. “Just get dressed and meet me down at the station. We should have it all cleared up by the time you get there.”

“But, Dave ...” she started to say.

“Don’t argue. Just do as you’re told.”

“Stop threatening her, Randall,” the first man said. “She doesn’t have to listen to you anymore.”

“I’m *not* threatening her. I’m just giving her some instructions.”

As Maynard escorted Dave past Jane, Dave noticed her tears. “It’s okay, Jane. Meet me down at the station.”

Jane nodded while Dave spoke to the officer between them. “Wait for her to dress. She doesn’t know her way around town. But so help me God, you’d better keep your hands off her.”

“Oh,” the man in uniform said, “threatening a police officer now, huh? Get him out of here, Maynard.”

Maynard yanked on Dave’s arm; and Dave, limping, left with him. She should have said something about his sprained ankle. What was she thinking? She should have *done* something! But she didn’t know what. How did you stop the police from arresting somebody when they didn’t believe you?

The officer left behind strode to the nightstand and picked up Dave’s weapon.

“Would you mind stepping outside while I change my

clothes?" she asked.

"Of course, ma'am," he replied, leaving the room and closing the door behind him.

Why was this happening? she wondered while she changed her clothes. Why would the police arrest Dave when she hadn't lodged a complaint? It didn't make sense. Her one night of happiness in nearly seven years had turned into a morning of disaster. If only she could think of something to convince the officer that Dave hadn't done anything wrong.

What was it the officer had said, anyway? Jane wondered as she slid into a dress. Something about he'd been warned that she would defend Dave. But how was that possible? Who would warn ...

The answer flashed across Jane's mind. Jim! He'd probably gone to the police and told them that Dave was holding her hostage. But why? He knew how she felt about Dave. He *knew* Dave wouldn't have to hold her against her will. No, it couldn't have been Jim. He had nothing to gain from having Dave arrested, because Dave couldn't do anything to him in Chicago, anyway.

By the time Jane arrived at the police station, Dave had already been fingerprinted and had his photographs taken. They were about to take him to the jail house when Jane and Sgt. Clow, the officer who stayed behind at the hotel, entered the station. When Jane saw that Dave was still handcuffed, she raced to him and clung tightly to his arm. Sgt. Clow pulled her away.

"Where are you taking him?" she asked frantically. "You can't do this."

"I'm afraid they can," Dave replied. "You'll have to bail me out. I've got some more money in my suitcase at the hotel. Go get it."

"Whatever you say."

"Okay, that's enough," Sgt. Clow said.

"But, sir," Jane begged. "I need to know what to do.

Dave didn't do anything wrong. You can't put him in jail. Please. Let us explain."

"There's nothing to explain. Time to go, Randall."

"Please," Dave said, "I just need to tell her one more thing."

"Okay," Sgt. Clow agreed. "But that's it."

Dave gazed down at her. "You've got to get out of Chicago as soon as you get the money and pay my bail. I'll meet you in Canton as soon as I can. Warn his wife. Do you understand?"

"No. I want to stay and help."

"You can't. Jim's the one who filed charges. He could be out there waiting for you, and I can't protect you while I'm in jail. Now go get the money."

"I'm not leaving Chicago—or this police station—until I'm sure this is straightened out. If Jim put you in here ..."

Dave interrupted her. "Remember last night, Jane?"

"I'll never forget it," she admitted softly.

"That's your one thing," Sgt. Clow interrupted. "Time to go."

As Sgt. Clow directed Dave to a nearby door, Dave said, "Think about what happened after I went to get my gun last night. Think about *everything* after that. I didn't mean it. I was doing exactly what Bud did. *Exactly*, do you understand?" Dave shouted as he disappeared behind the door while Sgt. Clow remained behind. "Now pay my bail and get the hell out of my life. I don't want to see you when I get out of here."

Jane's heart broke. How could he say such a thing? He'd never been so cruel. Never! Why did he want to hurt her like that? He'd always been kind and understanding no matter what was happening.

With Dave gone, Sgt. Clow escorted Jane to a room where he looked over some papers and told her that Dave's bail was set at three hundred dollars. Numbed by her distress,

Jane took a cab back to the hotel searched in Dave's suitcase for the money. He had only \$225 hidden in his clothes. With the money in her purse, she was able to make it \$249.62—still not enough for his bail. She took the suitcases, went to the lobby, checked out of the hotel, and asked where the nearest telegraph office was located. Once she found it, she wired Paul and Lucille Randall, briefly explaining the problem and the urgency of a reply.

“Ma!” Karen shouted as she ran into the house from the yard. “Ma! Dave's in jail.”

“*What?*” Lucille asked in astonishment. “How do you know?”

Karen held a piece of paper toward her mother. “This telegram is from Jane.”

“Your father's out in the field.”

“Ma, Dave's in Chicago. How long will it take us to get there? Jane's the reason he's in jail, Ma. I *know* she is. Why couldn't she leave him alone?”

“Now just a minute, young lady,” Lucille said. “You know Jane would never do anything to hurt your brother. She stayed away from him as long as she could when he came home, and she did her best to talk him out of dating her. Don't unjustly accuse her now that she's trying to help him. What does the telegram say?”

“It says he's in jail and needs \$50.38 to get out. That's an awful lot of money, Ma. How did that little tramp get Dave in this much trouble?”

“I told you to stop it,” Lucille said. “I have some money stored away. You check with your father to see how much he has, then check your purse and empty it. I might need every penny you have.”

While Karen ran to the field to get any money her father

had with him, Lucille checked all of his pockets and got what change she could from them. In her bedroom closet, she took the shoe box in which she kept her secret emergency savings, consisting of a little over two hundred dollars. When she got back to the house, Karen took the money from her purse and gave it to her mother.

“Dave is smart enough to have plenty of cash in case of an emergency,” Lucille said. “I have a feeling that Jane is using all of whatever money they both have to bail him out. That means they won’t have any. I want you to take the train to Chicago and save enough money to come home. Tell him to keep the rest.”

“I can’t go there, Ma,” Karen protested. “I couldn’t be civil to Jane if I had to.”

“Well, you *do* have to be civil, Karen, because I can’t go. I promised Patsy Jamison that I’d look after her mother for a few days because Patsy is sick. I have commitments. You get on the road and take this money to Dave and Jane. This is just short of four hundred dollars so there’s plenty left over for them to live on for a while.”

“But, Ma ...”

“Go. And try to get along with Jane. You two used to be close. Try to see what happened from her view.”

On her way through Randall Center, Karen telegraphed Jane and suggested that they meet at the police station to save time.

Jane paced the police station waiting area. How could she ever convince the authorities that she wasn’t afraid of Dave when Jim had done such a thorough job of convincing them that she was? Apparently, Jim had thought of everything, too. Each time she tried a different approach, the police insisted they knew she would say that—because Mr.

Cole had said that she would.

Dave had been wrong to think she could have happiness. She'd merely tasted it the last night—and it had been cruelly ripped away from her that morning. Being with him had been the most beautiful experience of her life, yet he had told her that their time together was exactly what Bud had done. Even though in her heart she didn't believe his words, they haunted her mind, bringing deeper grief and unhappiness than she'd felt—even stronger than when Mary died.

At four that afternoon, she noticed new policemen entering the station while ones who had been present all day left. An unexpected sense of triumph washed over her as she the shift changed. Maybe the authorities who hadn't spoken to Jim would listen to her. Watching carefully, she waited until Sgt. Clow left then went to the desk sergeant.

"Excuse me, sir," she said tentatively.

Glancing up from his work, he returned his gaze to the papers in front of him. "Can I help you, miss?"

"I hope so. A friend of mine was unjustly arrested this morning, and nobody will listen to me."

"I'll listen," he replied as he returned his gaze to her.

"They claim he held me hostage, but that isn't what happened. My brother just told them that because he wanted to protect me. But my brother didn't know we'd eloped." Where had those words come from? she wondered.

"What's your husband's name?"

"David Carlton Randall."

"*Was* he in your room all night?"

"Of course," she admitted. "Like I said, we had eloped. Dave didn't hold me hostage like Jim believes."

The young sergeant glanced at her hands when she laid them on the desk. "If you two are married, why aren't you wearing a wedding ring?"

Oh, no! Now what did she do? Nobody gets married without at least the bride having a wedding band. How could

she cover up the mistake? Well, the other words had just flown out of her mouth, she may as well let the next words do the same. “Like I said, we eloped. Jim was trying to stop us, and we were in a hurry. Last night, Dave and Jim had an argument, and Jim bumped into Dave and knocked him down a flight of steps. We had a second room just in case Jim caused trouble, but I wanted Dave to stay with me because I knew Jim wouldn’t hurt him if I was there.”

“I assume this argument was over you.”

“That doesn’t matter. The point is that Dave’s been in jail all day for no reason—except my brother’s vengeance. Can’t you do something to get him out?”

“I don’t know. Let me see. Did you give a statement?” he asked. “If you did, I might be able to get it out of the files and see if the captain will drop the charges.”

Jane grimaced. How was she going to get out of this mess? “I tried to, but my brother had convinced them that I would agree with anything Dave told them because I was being threatened.” That wasn’t exactly what happened, but Jim had meant Dave had threatened her. So what if she lied? She needed to get Dave out of jail.

“Why don’t you have a seat.” Pointing to a row of chairs straight across from the desk, he added, “I’ll keep you advised on what’s happening.”

“Thank you, sir,” she said. Turning, she went to where he’d indicated and sat down, silently praying the policeman could do something to clear Dave of the charges.

In the cell he shared with another man, Dave stared at a spot on the floor next to his uninjured foot. He couldn’t decide which was worse—the pain in his sprained ankle which had been treated by the police, or the agony in his heart, which had not. How could he have been so cruel to Jane? He

didn't even care that she'd taken his money and left him to rot behind bars. In fact, she deserved more than the \$225 he had. She deserved every penny of the thirty thousand he had in the Randall Center bank—if Jim hadn't already found a way to get it.

Nothing would ever alleviate the guilt he eating through him. He even doubted that Jane's forgiveness would relieve it.

Who was he trying to fool? Jane would never forgive such a horrible admission as he had made, and he wouldn't blame her. Still, he hadn't expected her to leave him stranded in prison.

"I thought you'd only be here a couple of hours," his cellmate said sarcastically.

"I was wrong," Dave admitted, struggling to keep his voice from cracking. "I thought she'd at least pay my bail."

"A man can't trust any woman."

"I could trust Jane before I opened my big mouth. She's the most loyal person I know, and I insulted her just to keep her safe. This is all my fault. She deserves every cent she took."

"Is that what you think happened?"

"What else could it be?"

"Tell the coppers and have her put away. Let her find out what it's like to sit in jail for a while."

Dave raised his head to glare at the other man. "Are you insane? Jane's life has been hell for the last few years. Even if she took everything I own, I wouldn't tell the police. Hell, I'd go out, make more money, and hand it to her on a gold platter—silver isn't even good enough."

"*You're* the insane one," the man shot back. "You're blaming yourself for some piece of trash walking off with your money."

"She's not trash!" Dave roared, rising irately. Pain shot through his ankle, and he collapsed to his cot. "You're

damned lucky my ankle hurts so bad. Otherwise, I'd tear you apart for maligning my woman."

"Your woman! For God's sake, mister, she doesn't give a damned about you."

"What's going on in here?" a guard demanded as he arrived at their cell.

Dave sighed. "Nothing."

"Well, get up, Randall. The captain wants to see you."

When Karen got to the police station, she greeted Jane angrily. "Here's Dave's bail money. I hope you're happy."

"I'm really grateful for you getting here so fast, Karen," Jane said as she rose to meet her former friend. "I don't want Dave to sit in jail any longer than necessary."

"How did you get him in there, anyway?"

"I didn't," Jane explained. "Just before they took Dave to a cell, he told me that Jim filed the charges. Were you able to get all the money or do I have to get a loan?"

"Ma sent every penny we had—a lot more than you wanted. She wanted to be sure that you and Dave have something to live on for a while."

The desk sergeant entered the room where Jane and Karen were talking and announced that they were releasing Dave due to her statement that they had eloped, and bail was waived. Jane released a sigh of relief and thanked him. But Karen waited until the policeman was gone before she spoke again.

"You married for my brother?" Karen asked in horror.

Jane pulled her away from others nearby and whispered, "Shh. I just told the police that because they wouldn't believe me that Dave didn't do anything illegal. It's a long story, but Jim told the police that Dave threatened me and that I would say anything to keep him out of trouble. Jim told

them I was scared of Dave. Dave wanted me to leave Chicago because he thought Jim would try to hurt me, but I wouldn't do it. I didn't even leave the police station except to get our things from the hotel. I had to be sure that Dave was cleared."

"Why?" Karen asked.

"I know what you think of me, Karen. Why else would you have warned me to stay away from Dave? But I would have tried to stay away from him, anyway. The last person I ever wanted to know about my past was Dave. You don't know the anguish I went through when I told him about Mary Lynn."

"Who is Mary Lynn?" Karen asked.

"Her daughter," Dave said from behind them. When they turned to face him, he limped over to Jane and draped his arm around her shoulders. "If you'd been a better friend to her, you would have remembered that."

"Please don't, Dave," Jane said softly. "It's okay."

"How about you, sweetie?" he asked as he gazed down at her. "Are you all right after what I said? I've worried about it ever since."

"I'm fine."

"It wasn't like Bud—not in the least. It was just the opposite. Do you believe me?"

"Yes."

"How can I convince you to forgive me for what I said?"

"You don't have to, Dave, because I know you didn't mean it. You were just trying to get me to leave so Jim wouldn't hurt me. But see? I stayed, and I'm fine."

Dave's lips captured hers in a sweet kiss. At their contact, Jane inhaled sharply, once again stunned by the sudden, raging desires that swept through her whenever he held her.

His tongue taunted her lips to part them then slipped into her hungry mouth. When their tongues collided, he tightened his hold, crushing her breasts against his chest while his lips

ground upon hers, driving him further down the path to oblivion as she melted against him. He was as mad with desire as she was! And that knowledge heightened her joy at once more being in his arms—until Karen’s voice brought her back to reality.

“How touching,” she said sarcastically. “I just traveled all the way from Iowa, and I don’t even get a hello.”

“Hello,” Dave said, releasing Jane’s lips but not her body. “Why are you here, anyway?”

“Your friend here sent a telegram saying that you needed money. She probably planned to keep it for herself since you’re not in jail anymore.”

“I *asked* her to get money to post my bail,” Dave replied. “If she had to wire you, it was because there wasn’t enough in my suitcase. How much was the bail, Jane?”

“Three hundred dollars,” she answered.

“That explains it. I only had \$225.”

“Well, she only asked for \$50.38.”

“That’s because I had \$24.62 of my own to put in the fund,” Jane explained as she turned in Dave’s arms. “Since Dave was in jail because of me, I wanted to help.”

“Hold it right there, you two,” Dave ordered, his tone of voice patronizing. “You’re my two favorite young women, and I don’t like what I see. So what if Janey made a mistake when she was young, Karen? Why must you act like it was permanent? Her life has been hell because friends like you didn’t stand by her when she needed you most. I’m not taking Janey back to Randall Center, either. We’re going to another town to make our life. And when we come back to visit? Maybe that town will have forgotten about the mistakes she made.”

“What are you talking about?” Jane interrupted. “All I know about is going to Canton.”

“And we are, but I won’t let you get away from me as easily as you did when I went to college.”

“But, Dave,” Karen inserted, “you went away eleven years ago. We were only eleven. What do you mean Jane got away from you? She was just another sister to you.”

“That changed over time. Besides, I’m not too old for her now. I realized she was more than a sister when her cat died. When I tried to find a wife, I realized that no one would measure up to Jane. I won’t hide anything anymore. If you can’t understand that, I don’t *need* a sister like you.”

“David Randall,” Jane scolded, “you take that back this minute. You’re crazy if you think I’m going to let you disown your sister. You talk to her nicely. And don’t threaten her because you don’t get your way. If you don’t apologize, I’ll walk out that door in a second.”

“But, Janey ...”

“I mean it, Dave. I’ll leave if you don’t apologize. And I *won’t* come back.”

Although Dave apologized, Karen was far from graceful in accepting it. “Thanks, but I know you don’t mean it. She has you so blind that you can’t see what she is.”

Dave glared at his sister. “What everybody said about her were rumors, and she didn’t feel she should have to defend herself. Okay, she had a baby out of wedlock. She’s not the first woman that ever happened to. She also paid her dues when she lost her baby. So why do you and everybody else want to hurt her more by rubbing salt into her wounds? Just leave her alone. If you can’t be honest about what’s happened, don’t bother coming near me. And if you have to insult her, be sure it isn’t around me, because I can’t promise I’ll react nicely.”

Without another word, Dave led Jane, too startled by his words to protest, from the building.

THIRTEEN

“How did you get me out of jail without having to pay bail?” Dave asked when they were outside.

“I signed a sworn statement that you didn’t do anything against my will.” She didn’t have the courage to tell him that she lied and told the officer that they had eloped. Dave would probably be appalled by her having signed a statement that was a lie. “But we’ll never make it to Canton in time to save Elaine now.”

“That’s probably the way Jim planned it. I still think we should try, though. How about you?”

“I agree. Should we leave right now? I put our bags in one of those baggage check areas at the train depot. Was that okay? You didn’t have any more money in yours, anyway.”

Suddenly, the police station door banged open, and they turned to see Karen running toward them. “Jane! Jane, wait for me!”

In a flash of memory, Jane recalled the times in school when Karen had called for her to wait so they could talk about their respective male interests as they walked to Jane’s home. But Jane’s smile vanished almost immediately when

she remembered that it was no longer their school years—and a lot had happened between then and now.

“I’m sorry, Jane,” Karen said when she reached her brother and friend. “I’ve been awful these past few years. I don’t know what I can do to make it all up to you, but I’ve really missed our friendship. Can you ever forgive me for what I’ve done?”

“I don’t blame you, Karen. I don’t know if I would have reacted the same way if you’d been the one who got pregnant, but I really do understand what happened. I don’t need to forgive you, either. I did that a long time ago. And I’d love to be friends again. After all we went through while we were growing up, I always knew we could reconcile someday.”

“Then why didn’t you come to me? Why did we have to be apart for so long?”

“You needed time to accept what happened to me. Besides, I was the bad girl. My coming to you would have made you look bad, too. I couldn’t do that to you. None of what people said was true—except Mary, of course. I hope you can understand and believe *me* now.”

“I do—now. Let’s be friends again. If we can, that is.”

Jane smiled. “As far as I’m concerned, I never *stopped* being your friend. Had you come to me, I would have accepted you in a second.”

“But I said some awful things to you.”

“So I would remember that Dave is a close friend, too. You didn’t want me to be tempted to tell him the truth, but I had to. If I hadn’t, somebody else would have spread the rumors. Despite all that’s happened to me, I’m still an honest person. That will never change. I *needed* to tell Dave so he would trust me.”

“I’m glad you did,” Karen admitted as tears streamed down her cheeks. “If you hadn’t, I might have told him what I believe. Are we going to start our friendship over?”

Jane also cried with her as she hugged Karen. “No.

We're going to take up where we left off. Good friends don't start over. They go on."

"Now that's what I wanted to see," Dave said with a smile. "I think we need to celebrate. We're all going out to dinner and the theater tonight."

Karen and Jane separated and wiped their eyes as Karen said, "I have to get home. Ma's expecting me early tomorrow morning."

"We'll wire her and let her know you're staying."

"But this is my only dress. I didn't come prepared for dinner anywhere much less the theater."

"Then we won't go to the theater. We'll celebrate with dinner, but I do insist on that. First, we'll get our bags from the train depot, then we'll all check into a hotel for the night."

"What about my ticket home? I've already got it."

Jane couldn't resist inserting her own thoughts. "But what about Jim? I haven't seen him since last night. Maybe he already has a head start on us."

"Even if he did leave town, we have time," Dave replied. "Jim he won't do anything right away. He's never been impulsive. He'll want to know all the details of her life now so he can plan scrupulously."

"That was a long time ago. He does a lot of impulsive things now. I've seen it for myself."

Jane meant what happened to her mother, and she hoped she didn't have to explain to Dave. She certainly didn't want Karen to suspect what she herself believed. An internal sigh of relief swept through her when he interpreted her words correctly.

"If he was impulsive, he would be in jail by now. He covered every one of his tracks well enough to avoid the law for a long time, and that takes planning. When he gets to Canton, he's going to need to watch Elaine's movements before he does anything. Now, let's go to the train depot. We'll

get Karen another ticket while we're there. Then I need to go to the Western Union office and have Ma wire me some more money. Hopefully, we'll get it by the end of the day, no later than tomorrow."

The hotel they checked into had only two rooms left, so Dave paid for them then escorted the women to their room before he went to another so they could all freshen up for dinner.

The last hotel was nice, but this one was fancy. Jane couldn't believe that they even had individual bathrooms for some of their guests. The room she and Karen shared had one, but there was still a communal bathroom in the hallway, which she believed she would have to use. When she saw their private one, her happiness increased. Yea! She didn't have to change clothes in a closet.

Things had been so disquieting at the police station that Jane had forgotten to tell Dave what she had learned about Jim and his conspicuous absence from the station. Just as she prepared to knock on his door, she heard someone whistling a cheerful tune nearby and turned to see him come up the last step carrying a large box.

"David Randall," she said sternly as he limped toward her room in the opposite direction, "you're supposed to be staying off that foot—not running around shopping again."

"I had to, Janey," he returned as he tucked the box under one arm. Draping his other arm around her shoulders, he added, "In case you don't remember, I'm dining with two gorgeous young ladies tonight. Karen looks like a farmgirl, which is fine on the farm but terrible in Chicago. As for you, I'm sick and tired of seeing you in drab colors. There are three dresses in here for you, and one for Karen."

"You shouldn't have bought me more dresses," she said

as they made their way to the room. “I can wear the one you gave me yesterday.”

“And you’ll probably have to before this trip is over. Once we get settled, though, I’m going to throw out—no, *burn*—all those brown dresses and get you a whole new wardrobe.”

“There you go with that talk about us settling. I wish you’d stop it.”

“Why?” he asked, stopping at the door to her room.

“You know why. Look, we can’t discuss it now, because Karen and I need to change, but we will. And I mean it.”

“Sure you do.” He grinned then kissed her again. “Now get your sexy carcass in that room, and get ready for our date. I’m hungry.”

“You’re always hungry.”

“And you’d better get used to it.” Shoving the box into her arms, he turned her to face the door and patted her bottom playfully with both hands. “Go on now. I’ll be back in about a half an hour.”

Jane giggled. “Sometimes I wonder about you, David Randall. I never know what to expect next.”

“I hope I can keep it that way for the rest of your life. I’d hate for you to get bored with me.”

“David, please,” she protested as he opened the door and gently pushed her into the room. Even before she could turn around, the door closed, and she shook her head slowly as Karen exited the bathroom.

“That was quick,” Karen said.

“How do you and your family put up with his antics twenty-four hours a day?” Jane quipped.

“You mean all that joking?” When Jane nodded, Karen grinned. “It isn’t always easy. Usually, we just throw it back at him. I’m surprised you don’t remember that from when we were kids. But I’m glad he’s back to his old self. He’s really been depressed since he got back to Randall Center,

but he's been joking with us more and more in the last few days. And it's probably because of you. This morning, I wouldn't have admitted this, but I think you're the reason. What's in the box?"

Laying it on the double bed, Jane took the lid off while Karen peered over her shoulder. "Dave went shopping instead. He bought us some clothes for dinner."

"That's an awful lot of clothes for one meal," Karen remarked as Jane emptied the box.

"He said he doesn't like my dresses, so he bought me three to wear while we're traveling."

Picking up a dark blue one with white trim, Karen looked at the tag. "I thought so. This one's mine. I can tell by the size."

While Karen started to change, Jane stared at the sea green, tangerine, and medium blue dresses still lying on the bed. As nice as it was to have pretty things, but she was concerned about accepting them. She was afraid that he would expect some form of repayment. "I can't afford these dresses, Karen. I don't even have a job anymore—thanks to Dave."

Karen paused in taking off her dress. "Why thanks to Dave?"

"He told me to quit my job. I didn't, so he got me fired."

"I don't understand. Why would he tell you to quit?"

"He didn't like me working at the Whistle Stop, and now I can't afford to live—let alone reimburse him for the clothes he keeps buying me."

"He bought you more?"

"Yes. Last night he gave me a beautiful sky-blue dress for a belated birthday present. It must have cost a fortune. These look cheaper, but I still can't afford to pay him back."

"I doubt he wants you to." Karen slid into the dress and spun around slowly. "Well? What do you think?"

"It's very nice."

“Which one are you going to wear?”

“None of them. I’ll return them all tomorrow. I don’t know how I’ll explain it to the saleswoman, but I’ll think of something.”

“You can’t *do* that,” Karen proclaimed. “It would hurt Dave’s feelings.”

“But I can’t afford them.”

“*He* can, and he wants to *give* them to you. He enjoys giving people things. You should remember that. He gave you a lot of things when we were growing up. You used to brag about it because you had such a big crush on him.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake.” Exasperated, Karen strode to the bed and picked up the orange dress. “Here. Put this one on. He probably bought it because it’s so bright. Dave loves bright colors.”

After dinner, everyone returned to the women’s room to talk until about ten, when Dave announced that he should go to his own room so everybody could get to sleep. While he kissed Karen on the cheek, Jane moved to the door.

“Thanks for the dresses, Dave,” she said when he reached her. “I don’t know how I’ll ever repay you, but ...”

“Right here,” he interrupted with a grin, tapping his finger on his lips. “That’s all the repayment I want.”

“But Dave ...”

“I mean it. Don’t humiliate me by trying to give me money. I bought them because I wanted you to look your prettiest—not because I want anything in return. Now give your benefactor a thank-you kiss smack dab on his lips.”

Before she could protest again, he embraced her, pinning her against him as his lips caught hers in a loving kiss that shot flames of urgency throughout her body again.

Although she felt she should move away, she couldn't. His hands took a slow trek down her back to her buttocks where he squeezed her gently and tightened his hold. Again she felt his desire grow between them, and again she sighed heatedly before his tongue touched her lips in a silent request for admittance.

Then Karen's voice drifted to Jane's ears. "Um, excuse me?"

Dave released Jane's lips to stare at his sister for several moments. A wide grin crossed his mouth. Then he returned his gaze to Jane's blue eyes. "Sorry, sis. I lose my head when I'm with Janey. What do you want?"

"The key to your room."

"Why?" he asked in surprise.

"So you two can have some privacy. I can see that I'm intruding."

"Don't be silly," Jane said. "You're not intruding."

"Just give me your key, Dave. I'll sleep there tonight. I know, uh, Jane's no ... no virgin. I mean, after all, she had a baby. I, uh, suppose I'd kind of, uh, want to do that again, too—if I had done it before, I mean," she added quickly.

"Absolutely not," Dave replied. "I told Janey that the only thing I want for those dresses is a kiss. If I stay here, things could get even more interesting. Then she would think I'm trying to buy her with presents. Besides, I already told you that we all need our sleep. You're certainly understanding for a kid sister, though. And I want to thank you for offering to let us be together."

"Don't. I only did it because I was embarrassed. It's obvious how crazy you two are about each other."

Although he longed to stay with Jane, he didn't dare. He might decide to stay with her in Chicago forever if he did. "We appreciate it, Kare. But we'd better sleep separately tonight."

“Dave’s right, Karen,” she agreed. “It’s kind of you to offer.”

“Now that that’s settled,” Dave announced before he kissed Jane’s head softly, “I’d better go. Good night, ladies.”

“Good night,” they chorused as he left the room, closing the door behind him. After locking it, Jane faced Karen again. “I didn’t think you’d be so understanding.”

“Neither did I. Even when I overheard Pa tell Ma how Dave feels about you, I couldn’t believe it. But when he berated me for calling you a name, I realized they were right.”

“He’s *always* been very protective of me,” Jane reminded her. “Even when you and I got into fights, he sided with me.”

“I remember. You know, Jane? There are time when I have, um ... certain *feelings* myself. I wish I had the courage to find out what they’re all about. Maybe I could be more at ease with the situation between you two. Now let’s do what Dave said and go to sleep. I’m exhausted.”

Lying in bed beside Karen, Jane waited impatiently until she thought her friend was sound asleep before she rose and donned her robe over her nightgown. If Karen awoke, that would mean either making an excuse or telling her that she was going to talk with Dave, which she doubted Karen would believe after their earlier conversation. That was precisely what she intended to do, though—talk, and nothing else.

Successfully leaving the room without waking Karen, Jane hurried down the hall and lifted her hand to knock on Dave’s door. Suddenly, she stopped. What if he got the wrong idea? What if he thought the same thing Karen would—that she’d come to sleep with him?

The door swung open, and Jane stared up at Dave in astonishment as he gazed down at her, his face mirroring hers for several seconds.

He stood before her without a shirt, his bare chest exposed to his view. Why hadn't she noticed how well built he was before? His stomach practically looked like a washboard with all the muscles rippling as he breathed. She couldn't move as she studied the man who had shown her his love. And those biceps! They were so pronounced that she couldn't wait for his arms to hold her again. If only ...

She moved her gaze to his face. A mischievous grin spread across his lips, and he grasped her raised fist.

"I hope you were planning to use this on my door and not my head," he teased, pulling her into his room. "I know I got you all excited then left, but I really don't think I deserve being hit for it."

"Why do you always tease me, Dave?" she asked as he closed the door and locked it.

"I don't treat you any differently than I do the other people I love. Well, a *little* differently. I'd never kiss them the way I do you."

"Well, I wish you'd stop."

"Teasing you, I hope. I'd hate to think you want me to stop kissing you."

"David, please. Why can't you be serious?"

"I am."

"You don't sound like it. Why were you leaving your room?"

Dave shrugged and grasped her shoulders, pulling her against him. The hair on his chest taunted the skin above the scooped neckline of her dress.

"I heard a noise, so I wanted to investigate. You know me. I'm probably one of the nosiest people around. I can't tell you how glad I am that it was you out there. Now I need to kiss you again."

She had to get out of his grasp, or she would succumb to his desires. Before he could bend, Jane twisted from his hold and turned her back on him. "Would you *please* be

serious for a while?”

Stepping around her, he grasped her shoulders and gazed down at her in concern. “What’s the matter, Janey? You never used to mind my teasing. In fact, you used to come back at me better than anybody else. Your practical jokes were wonderful—especially the worms you and Karen put in my shoes.”

“I guess I’ve lost my touch. I don’t see much to joke about in life anymore. It’s cruel, and it’s demeaning. And quite frankly, neither of those things make for anything to laugh at or be happy about.”

“What about me?”

Stunned, she gazed up at him, expecting to see a bright smile despite the sorrowful tone of his voice. Instead, his expression appeared as unhappy as his voice. “What *about* you?”

“Do I make for something to be happy about?” Sinking onto the bed, he pulled her down beside him and grasped her hand tenderly between both of his. “I thought I showed you last night that you can be happy. You laughed and teased me back, and you looked like you were having a wonderful evening. What happened to change that?”

“Jim mostly, but Karen, too. She knows what we did last night. She’s not just speculating, either; she’s sure of it.”

“So?” he said with a shrug. “She knows how I feel about you. I told both her and my folks in no uncertain terms.”

“Look, Dave,” she said firmly as she wandered to stare at a wall hanging. “I didn’t come here to discuss this.”

“Good,” he said cheerfully. “Let’s canoodle. Who knows, maybe we’ll end up going all the way like we did last night.”

When Dave embraced her, she scrambled from his arms again to glare at him. “Would you please pay attention? This is important. I didn’t tell you something earlier, and I need to get it off my chest. ...”

“And such a lovely chest it is,” he taunted as his gaze drifted to her bosom.

“I mean it, Dave. Stop fooling around. This is serious, because I could go to jail.”

When he stared at her in horror, she knew she had his full attention. “I lied on my signed paperwork, Dave. I didn’t want to say anything in front of Karen, but I vowed that we had eloped, and Jim didn’t know it. I told them that we hadn’t told him. I’m sorry I put you in such an awkward position, but the words just came out of my mouth, and I didn’t know how to get out of them.”

Dave’s light brown eyes took on a mischievous glint. “We could make it right by doing just that.”

“Please, Dave. Stop it. This is serious.”

“What makes you think I’m *not* serious?”

“You know it’s not going to happen, so stop changing the subject. If the police decide to check on my alibi for you, they could come to get me.”

“They won’t,” he replied, the jovial tone finally leaving his voice. “Besides, I like the idea of eloping.”

“I know you think you’re being serious, but a lot of time has passed between when you left and now. We need to spend more time together to know if this is what you want. Now about Jim.”

FOURTEEN

“What about him?” Dave asked.

“The police sergeant told me Jim didn’t show up at the station. I was concerned, so I asked Sgt. Clow if he’d been there since you were arrested. That’s when he said Jim left instructions to call him at a certain phone number in Detroit. He would have done it for me, too, except I told him not to bother. I got the number instead and told Sgt. Clow I’d call myself in a few hours.”

“Then we’ll just have to change our plans and follow him. Relax, Jane. We’ll find him before he does anything stupid.”

“How can you be sure?” she asked as he approached her and drew her into his arms to embrace her in a loose hold she could easily break—if she wanted. All she wanted, though, was for him to tighten his hold, to devour her mouth, to fill her with the desperate longing he did every time he kissed her. And when she spoke again, her voice betrayed her feelings. “He’s more than a step ahead of us, Dave. He knew exactly how to keep us in Chicago. We don’t even know he’ll be in Detroit when we get there.”

“Let’s not talk about this, love,” he breathed in a near whisper. “In fact, let’s not talk about anything.”

“Why does this always happen with us, Dave?” she asked, laying her head on his chest. “Why can’t we hold a conversation without ending up in each other’s arms?”

“It’s your fault, you know. You’re so damned beautiful I can’t help myself.”

“You’re the only person in Randall Center who believes that. Besides, I have a lot of scars.”

“Are you kidding? You’re the most beautiful woman in town, and you always have been. *And* your scars are hardly noticeable. All the boys my age could hardly wait for you to grow up, Jane, and all the women my age were jealous whenever the men mentioned your name. Maybe that’s how this mess against you started when all you did was make a mistake. Men who want a woman—women who are jealous—I don’t know. It sounds like that’s exactly what happened.”

“Do we really have to talk about this?”

“It’s the only thing keeping me from doing what I *really* want to do. Talking about it reminds me of what you went through while I was away—of what I said this morning—of how badly I must have hurt you. Oh, Janey. You don’t know the torment I went through while I sat in that cell. I’d hoped that you’d run off with my money. I even told my cellmate that you deserved to take *all* my money, and then I’d go out and make more for you.”

“You didn’t really think I’d take it, did you?” she asked, pushing away just far enough to see his face clearly, her hands resting on his bare chest..

“I didn’t say that. I said I *hoped* you would. After what I said, you deserve all thirty thousand dollars—*more*.”

“Did you really think I’d desert you? I hope not, because I could never do that to you—not ever.”

“The thought did cross my mind.” Releasing her, he limped to the window and stared down at the street three

stories below. “Cross it, hell. The idea got in my mind and stayed there. I was really worried that you’d walked out on me like you did at my folks’ house, only this time for good.”

“I’ll never do it again, Dave,” she vowed as she joined him and slid her arms around him. “You’re the only loyal friend I have. That’s something I can’t even say about Karen. I could never desert a friend who will accept all my flaws and mistakes without judging me, not even for a second. In case you haven’t noticed, I *need* your friendship.”

“And I need *you*, my love,” he said, turning around in her arms to embrace her again. “Right now, though, you’d better get back to your room—unless, perhaps, you have more to tell me about Jim.”

“No. That was all.”

“You realize, don’t you, that he could have created a ruse to put us off track. He knows we’re following him, so he might try to lose us along his way to Canton. Besides, going through Detroit could be a direction to Canton. That reminds me. I need to get some maps so we can plot the best route. I didn’t need one to Chicago because I’ve been here so many times, but I don’t have any for Indiana or Ohio. Apparently, Michigan, too. Now go back to your room, Janey. Please.”

“All right,” she agreed downheartedly before she wandered to the door. Grasping the doorknob, she couldn’t force herself to turn it. Without facing him, she spoke in a voice which reflected the agony in her heart. “Was last night really that bad for you, Dave? Is it honestly that hard for you to be alone with me?”

“It’s hard as hell, but not because last night was bad for me. It’s hard because it was so damned *good*, and I don’t want you to think I meant what I said this morning. Now, please. Just go back to your room.”

Holding her head high had never been as difficult as it was at that moment. How could Dave lie to her after all

they'd been through in the last few days? Yet he'd sent her away even though she'd thought he would at least kiss her to prove his point. One minute he teased her when she wanted him to be serious, and the next he tore her heart with his savage lies.

He'd admitted that it was hard for him to be with her then told her that last night was good. The two contradicted each other, so he had to have been trying to soften the blow of his rejection. But it hadn't worked. It only made his words harder to bear. Any man who liked what she had given Dave wouldn't have sent her back to her room. He would have proven how good it was by making love to her again.

Jane struggled to maintain her composure, but she couldn't stop sobbing. She'd been in bed about a half an hour when her restraint disappeared and she cried out in emotional agony. Her tears no longer controllable, they streamed from her eyes in a torrent. Of all the men she knew, she never believed Dave would hurt her so much.

"What's wrong, Jane?" Karen asked in concern.

"Nothing," she denied. "Go back to sleep."

"Not until you tell me the truth. What's wrong?"

"I went to tell Dave something important—and he sent me away. That wouldn't have been so bad, except he told me that he can't stand to be alone with me. I love him, Karen. I thought he was my friend, my second big brother. How could he say such a cruel thing to me?"

"I can't believe he did. Are you sure?"

"Positive. Look, Karen," she said as she got out of bed, "you go back to sleep. I'll go in the bathroom, so I don't bother you."

Why had he let her leave? Dave wondered. Even though he'd been honest, his words hadn't come out right. If Karen weren't in the room with Jane, he'd go to her and try to set things right. But they couldn't talk freely with his sister

present. What a fool he'd been! With any luck, Jane would come to him, but the chances were slim after what he'd said.

A knock on the door sent him across the room to open it, saying excitedly, "Jane!" before he saw Karen standing outside his door. "Oh. It's you."

When Dave limped away from the open door, Karen entered the room then shut it as she spoke. "Did you and Jane have a fight?"

"No. I was just a little too honest this time. I think I hurt her feelings."

"She's shattered. I don't know what you said, but she's convinced that you can't stand to be alone with her."

"That's what I told her. I meant it, too, Karen. Being alone with Janey is awful after last night."

"What happened last night?"

"Let's just say that we shared something very special. I don't know how to explain this to you, but Jane means everything to me. I'd give her the world if I could."

"Then how could you upset her like that?"

"I didn't have a choice. Did you know that all the rumors about Jane and men are lies that she's had to live through all this time? Did you know that a certain man has been emotionally blackmailing her to have an affair with him? He kept threatening to hurt the people she cares about most, to have her arrested. He even threatened death."

"Is that how Mrs. Cole died?"

"No. That was something completely different. Thank God, I was able to break up the affair for her. Last night while I was comforting her, things got out of hand. When I was arrested this morning, I was afraid for her safety and wanted to get her out of Chicago. So I told her that what we had was no different from what she had with the other man. I really thought she'd leave me then, and it really hurt."

"Now *she*'s hurting. You should go to her and straighten things out."

“I don’t know what to say.”

Karen chuckled. “You at a loss for words? Not only is that hard to believe, it’s funny, too.”

“I wish it were. Unfortunately, it’s very serious. I’ve been in love with Jane for an awfully long time, Karen—since she was just a little girl. Back then, though, I was very confused about it. At first, I thought it was because she was like my little sister, but eventually I realized that it wasn’t. I know I hurt her this morning, but I can’t retract my words. I don’t know what I can say to take away her pain. She walked out of here with a lot of pride tonight, but I could tell by the way her shoulders sagged that it was just a front to keep me from seeing how much I’d hurt her.”

“Maybe words aren’t what she needs.”

“What do you mean? At the very least, I have to apologize to her.”

“That’s true. If you want to know what I think—and I’m sure you do, or I wouldn’t be interfering—she needs her second big brother back.”

“But I can’t be that anymore. When she was young, I had her age to remind me to be a big brother. Now her age reminds me that she’s a woman—a beautiful, intelligent woman—who makes me react like a man.”

“Jane doesn’t want a man, Dave. She wants you the way you used to be.”

“She can’t have that David Randall anymore, damn it!” he shouted. “He’s gone, and I never want to see him again. I love Jane, and I’ll be damned if I’ll go back to a past I was miserable with. In fact, I think I’ll come right out and tell her exactly how I feel.”

Why didn’t Karen answer the door? Jane wondered as she exited the bathroom to respond to the frantic knock.

Noticing the light on and Karen gone, she hurried across the room and pulled back the door, only to have Dave brush past her before she could say a word.

"I just talked to Karen," Dave announced as Jane closed the door. "And I'm really sorry, but I can't be a big brother to you—not anymore."

"Why not?" she asked sadly.

"*Why not?* Why the hell do you *think* not? Not only can't I, but I *won't*—no matter how much you plead. My days of playing big brother are over, Jane. At least, they are for you."

"Why are you doing this to me?" she demanded. "Why are you rejecting me?"

"I'm *not* rejecting you. I'm killing off the old Dave Randall."

"You can't! I loved the old Dave Randall. He was a terrific big brother and the only true friend I've ever had."

"You already have a big brother," Dave declared. "And if you want a true friend, buy a damned dog. I can't live in the past anymore, Jane. And I sure as hell can't accept the kind of love you're willing to give me. If that's all you feel for me, I can't stay with you, because it's just not enough."

Jane gasped at the idea that flashed across her mind and stared up at him in astonishment. Unsure she really wanted an answer, she asked, "What do you mean?"

"You know what the hell I mean. I don't want another little sister—I have plenty of those already. I want more than just friendship. And I want a damned sight more than a gratuitous night in bed with you. I want more than just your beautiful body, Jane," he said, his voice softening as he explained. "I want your sharp mind, your indomitable spirit, your loving heart."

"My spirit isn't indomitable," she denied in an instinctive attempt to change the subject.

"Oh, yes, it is. Any other woman would have crumbled under all you went through. First Jim left, then I did, then

your father died. You got pregnant, Janey, and you stayed in Randall Center knowing how people would feel about you. Then you lost Mary's father, who you think tried to kill you—and Mary."

"I didn't stay because I wanted to, Dave," she told him. "I couldn't afford to leave."

"You still stayed when everybody despised you. Then Bud—that bastard—did his dirty-work, and you found out about Jim. Then he turns around and kills your mother." Tenderly grasping her shoulders, he gazed down at her, his eyes emitting more love than she'd ever seen. "Well, Cinderella, I'm back in your life now. Your Prince Charming came riding up in his red Packard to save you from all the dirtiness in your life. I've got the glass slipper that's going to change your life."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I'm an optimist—just like you used to be."

"Do you really expect me to believe that my life will change just because you're back?"

"Not if you won't give me a chance."

"I had to quit high school, so I'm not nearly as educated as you. Still, I'm smart enough to know the difference between reality and an impossible dream."

"It isn't impossible. Besides, if I know you, you read all the books you could find. You probably even studied them. I'll bet that if they gave you a test right this second about everything you missed in school—hell, no. If they tested you on everything you should have learned throughout all of high school, you'd pass with an A. How much other studying did you do?"

"Well," she admitted, "Mom spent a lot of her extra money on books from the university. So did Jim. He was always proud of my scholastic achievements, you know."

"So if you'd gone to college like you should have, what level would you be at?"

“If I’d gone, I would have graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in English literature. Mom even found teachers willing to give me their normal final exams when I finished each textbook. None of it counted, though, so what difference does it make?”

“The only difference it makes to me is that I’m even more proud of you. But none of this is getting to the main reason of my visit.” Reaching into his pants pocket, he withdrew a pack of cigarettes. “Want one?”

“All right. I’m a little on edge. Maybe one will help.”

“My sentiments exactly. Let’s sit on the bed.” Once they were seated, he lit two cigarettes and passed one to Jane. “I really am proud of you for all you’ve gone through and accomplished, but it has nothing to do with why I’m here. Like I said, our previous relationship is in the past, and I can’t go back.”

“So what should I do? Look for Jim alone?”

“Of course not. You don’t seem to understand what I’m trying to say. Let me put it a different way. Do you know what would happen if I’d been around when you were pregnant?”

Although she knew his question was rhetorical, she felt compelled to interject something while he inhaled on his cigarette. “No, what?”

“I would have married you.” When Jane stared at him in wide-eyed shock, her mouth gaping, Dave smiled. “It’s true, Jane. Even when I was twenty-two and you were fifteen, I knew I loved you. Hell, I knew when your cat died—before! I feel like I’ve known forever.”

“Do you mean what I think you do?”

“You know exactly what I mean. I even said we should go ahead and elope. I told you that I cherish you, Janey. Remember? What the hell do you think that means, anyway?”

“It means love, but ...”

“There are no buts where my love for you is concerned.

What do you think I've been insinuating since I got out of the slammer? Do you think I just said we should elope to make your statement to the police true?"

All his references to a future concerning them flashed across her mind as she stared at the burning end of her cigarette. What she had taken as levity at the time was in reality very serious.

Reality! There was that terrifying word again. Reality had been cruel to her, and she wasn't sure she wanted to give a new reality the chance to hurt her more deeply than the old had. And his saying they should elope ...

"I love you, Jane," Dave declared. "I want to marry you."

"Marry me?" she repeated in shock. "*Me?*"

"Yes, you. Will you be my wife?"

"No, Dave. I can't."

What had she said? The one dream she'd had all of her life was of this moment. And she had turned him down! It was the most ludicrous thing she'd done in her life. Why had she said no?

"Why not?" he asked sadly. "Don't you love me?"

"Of course, I do, but ..."

"No buts, Jane. I'll give you time to change your mind. It doesn't matter. I've already waited a long time for you, and I'll wait a lifetime if I have to. But I don't think that will be necessary." Stubbing his cigarette out in the ashtray, he took hers from her and disposed of it, too. Then he gently laid her back on the bed and bent over her. "I love you with all my heart, Jane. At least, let me show you exactly how much."

"Is that wise?"

"Wise? I don't know. Imperative? Definitely. I have to show you that last night was more than what I claimed at the police station this morning. And I need proof that you were giving yourself to me out of more than just gratitude."

“But Da...”

Before she could finish her protest, his lips covered hers in a hungry kiss that sent any thought of denying him from her mind. He released his trousers to slide them over his hips while he tugged her nightgown up out of his way. Oh, how she wanted him! Unlike Bud, he was a gentle, thorough lover who made her believe that her past meant nothing to him.

“Please, Dave,” she whispered hotly into his ear. “I’ve never wanted a man before. Please do it with me now. I need you, Dave. I have all night.”

“Oh, Janey,” he sighed as he plunged into her. “I love you so much. All I want to do is ...”

Beneath him Jane thrashed uncontrollably, striving to bring him to a climax that would show him that she loved him as much as he did her. And apparently, she was succeeding, for he thrust into her over and over, faster and faster, until she could no longer bear the excitement in her loins. She wanted to slow down, but her body refused to listen to her mind. Her hands rubbed his biceps, caressing and kneading them. Her tongue seemed to develop a mind of its own as it thrust into his mouth to reunite with his tongue.

Then her body could bear no more, and she tore her mouth away from his to catch her breath. Tearing frantically at his back, she climaxed with a scream of joy that Dave silenced with a deep kiss while he ground into her body with his own fulfillment.

Collapsing onto her, they lay there for several minutes until their bodies separated. Only then did Dave prop himself above her. Their gazes met and locked before he asked, “Do you love me, Jane?”

“Yes,” she admitted breathlessly.

“Tell me.”

“I ... I ... I don’t know if I can.”

“Tell me.” he ordered just before he bent over her and kissed her nipple. “Or I’ll keep this up all night, and you

won't get a minute of sleep.”

“Neither will you,” she returned, grinning mischievously and matching his movements.

“A delicious sacrifice,” he whispered.

He kissed her other nipple the suckled gently on it. She inhaled sharply at the exquisite feeling deep within her.

“Tell me, or this could be the best sleepless night we've ever had.”

Between her legs, she felt him begin to grow again. He rubbed against her womanhood seductively, and she couldn't believe the intense emotions that assailed her heart. Repositioning himself, he slid into her again. Their motion became powerful within her again and she moaned in pleasure.

“Oh, David. I do. I love you.”

He kissed her again but only briefly. “How much?”

“I'm afraid to say.”

“That's good enough for me.”

A door closing startled them, and they both stopped instantly to stare at Karen, who stood just inside the room, her eyes wide with shock.

“Oh, my God!” Dave exclaimed, hastily exiting Jane and pulling up his pants while she rearranged her nightgown. When they were both suitably covered, he kissed her quickly and hurried out of the room, vowing, “I really do love you, Jane. Good night.”

As Dave closed the door behind him, Jane raced into the bathroom where she remained for quite a while, too embarrassed to confront Karen. Once she felt she could tolerate questions, she emerged to find Karen apparently sleeping. If she was or not, Jane didn't know, nor did she care to find out. All she wanted to do was lie down and drift into a peaceful dream of the man she had finally admitted she loved. And that was exactly what she did.

FIFTEEN

When Jane awoke the next morning, she was alone in the bed. Glancing around, she noticed the dress Dave had given Karen lying on the floor—torn beyond repair. Picking up the material, she sank down onto the bed to examine it until Karen, who Jane could hear moving about the bathroom, joined her. In minutes, Karen entered the room, and Jane gazed up at her sadly.

“Why did you do it?” Jane asked.

Karen glared at Jane. “I don’t want that dress anymore. It would only remind me of what you did to my brother.”

How could this be happening? Jane wondered. Why had Karen changed back to the Karen she’d been since they were fifteen? Why were they suddenly not friends again? Finally finding her voice, Jane said, “I didn’t do anything to Dave.”

“You made him go all the way with you,” Karen shot at her.

So this was about what Karen had witnessed last night. Well, Jane could handle that without losing her temper. “It was Dave’s idea, Karen.”

“Dave never would have had the idea if you weren’t

trash. He's not that kind of man. He wouldn't do it with just anybody."

Jane inhaled sharply and squeezed her eyes shut. That hurt as much as if her friend had stabbed her in the heart. In fact, that's exactly what it felt like. A sharp pain rushed through her heart when Karen said the words. But she had to calm down Dave's sister. She had to convince Karen that she was doing nothing to encourage Dave.

"You're right," Jane said. "He wouldn't. Don't you understand, Karen? He loves me. I don't know when it happened or how—and I really don't think he does, either—but it did."

"Why does he love *you*?" Karen demanded. "You're trash."

Tears came to Jane's eyes, and she fought to control them. Last night Karen had been her friend again, but now she was slinging hurtful words. A tiny rivulet slid down her cheek. "What's come over you, Karen? Last night you wanted to be friends again. Now you're treating me like you have been for nearly seven years."

"Last night," Karen explained angrily, "you *acted* like a friend. Then, as soon as I was gone, you seduced my brother. That's not being a friend."

"What does one thing have to do with the other?" Jane asked as she wiped away her tears. "Why can't I be your friend and still care deeply for Dave?"

"I notice you didn't deny seducing him."

"I've already denied it. Why should I repeat myself?" Jane struggled to hold the tears at bay, but she was losing the battle.

"You said you didn't want to hurt him. How do you think you're going to avoid it with *your* reputation?"

Her chest ached as though she was having a heart attack. She could scarcely catch her breath. How would she ever convince her friend, her *lifelong* friend, that she had no

desire to hurt Dave? Then again, Karen hadn't been her friend for the last seven years. How could she have forgotten that after one night of rekindling the closeness they'd had as children? But she had to say something to convince Karen.

"Dave doesn't care about my reputation," Jane said. "He's the *only* person—other than Mom—who doesn't hold my mistake against me. Even Jim doesn't like what happened. Do you know what it's like not to have a single friend? Do you know how lonely it gets?"

"What about Trudy Sullivan?" Karen countered. "She was your friend."

"At work. We didn't associate with each other away from Damien's."

"So you took Dave away from his family," Karen accused. "Just so you could seduce him into being your friend."

Jane couldn't take it anymore. Her tears increased under Karen's accusations. "I didn't!"

"You did! He's not even going back to Randall Center because of you."

"I didn't know about that until he told you. Besides, *I* have to go back, whether he does or not. Everything I own is in Randall Center."

"Fine. *You* go back. At least, Dave won't be around you."

"I don't understand," Jane said as she brushed away her tears with her fingertips. "Last night you were willing to let us be alone in this very room. Then when we were, you got mad about it. Why?"

"*I thought* you were just going to neck," Karen shot back. "But you couldn't settle for that, could you? You had to make him go all the way."

Before Jane could respond, Dave spoke from the doorway. "Jane didn't *make* me do anything, Karen. *I wanted* to make love with her. It's time for you to grow up and accept the truth. I love Jane, and nobody—not even my family—

will separate me from her again.”

Startled, Jane stared at him. She hadn't even heard Dave open the door.

“You would give up all of us for *her*?” Karen asked.

“In a second,” he answered, striding to Jane's side with a barely perceptible limp. Sitting down beside her, he slid his arm around her back to tenderly grasp her side and gaze down at her. “And as soon as I can convince her to say yes, I'm going to marry her.”

“*Marry* her? Do you know what Ma would say about that?”

“As a matter of fact, I do,” Dave said, returning his attention to Karen. “She'd be happy for me, and she would give us her blessing.”

Karen grimaced at the thought. “Yeah, I think she would. But Pa ...”

“Would come around after Ma talked to him. As for the rest of the family, Ray's with me. He already told me so. Dennis and Linda will cause some problems. Linda flat-out hates Jane, and Dennis will be jealous as hell. Sheila will come around like Pa, and so will Ron. The only one I can't predict is you. Last night, you *wanted* us to be together. This morning you seem to have taken the opposite view. I think we deserve an explanation.”

“I didn't know you were so infatuated,” Karen said meekly.

“The hell you didn't. I told you that I want to marry her when you came to my room. Did you really think that was going to change after we made love?”

Bowing her head, Karen mumbled, “I guess not.” Then she looked back to them with tears in her eyes. “You've always sided with Jane against me. Why should I expect that to change now? Jane was always so perfect, always so cute. I thought that you'd agree with me when you found out she wasn't perfect anymore. I really thought that, for once in my

life, you would see things my way. But no! You sided with Jane again.”

Stunned, Jane spoke up for the first time since Dave entered the room. She couldn't believe what Karen just said. “I don't believe this! All your life you've been *jealous* of me?”

“Why shouldn't I have been?” Karen returned. “He's *my* brother. Whenever we had a fight, he took care of you. I could be standing beside you, crying my eyes out, and he would comfort *you*. And you wouldn't have a tear in your eye.”

“That's because I knew she wouldn't cry,” Dave told her. “But I could see the hurt in her eyes. You would cry and let it out. Janey always held everything in, and that hurt is a lot worse. Besides, you always picked the fights—just like you did yesterday in the police station, just like you did this morning. I heard you from my room when I came into the hall to get you two for breakfast.”

“How else could I get your attention when Jane was around?” Karen asked.

“My attention?” he repeated. “I always bawled you out afterwards. Is that really the kind of attention you wanted from me?”

Understanding now how Karen must have felt all those years, Jane said, “It was better than being ignored, wasn't it, Karen?”

Karen stared at Jane in disbelief. “You understand?”

“Of course. When I was pregnant, everybody in Randall Center ignored me—even you. It wasn't until after Mary died that they started all their accusations and insinuations. The things they said—how I deserved to lose her, how she died because I had been a floosy, how I should never have been allowed to have her in the first place—hurt. You could never know the terrible loneliness I went through, the incredible heartbreak that those statements caused.”

“And believe me, sister,” Dave said, hugging Jane,

“being slightly neglected by one brother is nothing compared to being ignored by an entire town.”

Jane agreed. “I never thought about it until this minute, Karen, but Dave’s right. What I went through is a lot worse than a brother standing up for his sister’s friend instead of his sister. The experiences I had before and after Mary’s death transformed me from a happy, optimistic young lady into a miserable, pessimistic woman. You’ll never know what I’ve been through—and nobody but Dave ever will because that’s the way I want it. I take that back. Not even Dave will know the depth of my suffering. I didn’t want the world to know that I hurt. I wanted people to think that I was strong enough to shoulder their words. You couldn’t imagine the number of nights I cried myself to sleep.”

Now Dave regretted his conversation with Karen. He’d told her that Jane had been blackmailed into an affair, and she hadn’t wanted it known. He hadn’t even been back in her life for a week, and he’d already broken a confidence. If he didn’t want to ruin their relationship so soon after he’d professed his love, he had to say something now.

“Uh, Janey,” he said. “There’s something you should know. I already told Karen about some of the things you had to go through.”

Jane gasped in shock and shot her gaze to his face. “Details?”

“No!” he exclaimed. “I would *never* reveal details without your permission.”

With a sigh, she leaned against him. “Then no harm was done.” She returned her gaze to Karen. “I don’t know what Dave told you, but it doesn’t matter. I know he wouldn’t exaggerate or lie. In fact, I imagine he downplayed what happened. That doesn’t really matter, though. The point is that everything’s in the past now, and I’m going to do my utmost to see that the present—and the future—are different.”

“And she’s going to do it with *my* help,” Dave declared as he smiled down at her.

Karen bowed her head in shame, mumbling, “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry for me,” Jane said.

“Not *for* you, Jane,” Karen admitted. “I’m sorry *to* you. I never should have turned my back on our friendship. I know I said that yesterday, but that’s *all* I’d done. I said the words, but I didn’t mean them. I was losing my favorite brother, and I said the words that would keep him with me. Even my tears were fake. Today I *feel* sorry. I’m ashamed of how I’ve been treating you. I’m ashamed that I didn’t tell people everything I believed deep in my heart. I knew all along that what people were saying couldn’t be true. I *knew*, and I didn’t defend you.”

“You were as young as I was when all this started. You didn’t know how to react any more than I did. You just got into a situation that you didn’t know how to change. I did, too, so I understand how easily this can happen.”

“How can you be so understanding?” Karen asked skeptically.

Jane shrugged. “I imagine it’s because I’ve been through so much. Now, shouldn’t we be getting you to the depot? Your train’s due to leave in less than an hour.”

After Karen left, Dave announced that he and Jane wouldn’t be going to Detroit. He didn’t know why Jim had decided to go to there, but they had to go to Canton. Jim would eventually go there.

They arrived midevening three days later, stopping overnight twice. By the time they found a hotel and paid in advance for two rooms for the night, it was almost ten o’clock—too late to just drop in for a visit with Elaine. But

Jane felt notifying her sister-in-law was too important and insisted that they go to the house to warn Elaine if Jim hadn't already arrived. When no one answered their knock, they returned to their rooms.

Jane was already in her negligee when a knock on her door startled her. When she opened it, Dave, his awed expression telling her everything she needed to know, stood in the doorway. His eyes took her in from head to toe as she stood before him wearing the only silk nightgown she owned.

"Now that I see you," he said, "I'm not sure saying good night was such a good idea. I can't resist you."

Pushing lightly on her bare shoulders, he backed her farther into her room and closed the door with his foot. Without another word, he embraced her. His lips caught hers in a sweet kiss, before it intensified.

Dave backed to the bed. His tongue explored her mouth with increasing heat. Jane allowed him free rein of her body. His hands caressed her back and buttocks. Somehow, she'd known he would come to her room again tonight. That's why she hadn't put on a robe to cover herself.

The next thing she knew he was lying under her on the bed. She could feel his manhood against her thigh and moved into a more intimate position by throwing her leg over him to straddle his body. His hands slipped under the soft material of her negligee. Of course, she wore no underclothes, and Dave took full advantage of that, caressing her back and buttocks with the same gentleness he would a kitten.

His hands slid up her bare back until he grasped her shoulders. Now her nightgown bared her lower torso. He pushed her back only far enough to break the kiss. "Oh, God, Janey. Your skin is as soft as you gown."

Instead of responding, she drew her knees up to squat over his body. Reaching down, she released the buttons on

his trousers to expose his excited member. With a heated sigh, she impaled herself on him.

“Oh, God!” he sighed.

She moved upon him. The sensations only he could cause in her grew in intensity like they never had before, and she threw back her head with a hot moan of desire. Dave tugged on her nightgown until she had to bend over for him to slide it over her head. He tossed it aside and caressed her breasts with his large hands, squeezing them gently, tenderly pinching the hard nipples while she continued to grind upon him.

Then it came, the excitement of pure womanhood, the throbbing of fulfillment, the muffled scream of joy that came through clenched teeth.

A moment later, Dave joined her climax and pushed as far into her as possible. Finally, unable to hold herself up a moment longer, she collapsed upon him. Several minutes later, when nature separated them, she rolled onto her side and cuddled against him. Running her fingers through the hair on his chest, Jane said, “You realize, don’t you, that you’re wasting money.”

“How?” he asked as he smoothed her hair.

“You’re spending an awful lot on hotel rooms that you don’t use.”

“Are you trying to tell me that I should sleep in my own rooms? Or, hopefully, you’re trying to tell me that I should only get one room when we stay at a hotel. Come on, Janey, which one is it? Are you going to kick me out or let me stay?”

She raised up to grin at him. “Far be it that *I* tell you what to do. I’m just along for the ride. The only reason you’re with me now is because I threatened to follow you. Suppose I had come on my own. You wouldn’t be paying for two rooms, would you? You’d only be paying for a room for yourself, and I’d be paying for a room for myself. Of course,

I'd be staying somewhere other than hotels. I certainly can't afford this kind of luxury even for one night."

"What *are* you saying?"

"Quite a lot, if you ask me," she teased.

"In that case," Dave said, "I see two options. I can keep getting two rooms, or I can resort to getting only one."

"The second option would be a lot cheaper."

"That's what I was hoping you'd say. I'd be happy to cancel the rooms here I've been staying in. There's just one problem."

"What's that?"

"The manager knows we're using two rooms. We'll have to go to another hotel and register as Mr. and Mrs. Randall or else get married to make it legal."

Jane giggled. "I'm not sure I'm ready for a step like that. Let's just *play* at being married."

"I'm serious, Jane," he declared soberly. "Let's get married."

Jane examined him to see if he really meant what he said. "You're serious? You're not just teasing me again? That's nothing to tease about now, you know, Dave. We're adults, and you don't joke about things like that when you're adults. It's not like when we were kids and you promised to wait for me when I asked."

"I'm completely serious, Jane. I wouldn't be here now if I didn't want to marry you. I already told you how I feel about you."

"I don't know, Dave. Marriage is a big step. I need to think about it for a while."

"All right, love. But I'm warning you. I expect a firm answer—one way or the other—by the time we get back to Randall Center."

"I don't understand, Dave," she replied as she snuggled closer to him. "I didn't think you wanted to go back there."

"I don't, but we don't have a choice. We'll get Jim, take

him home, sell your house, and get out of that God-awful town. Then everything will be fine again. I promise. Now shut up and go to sleep. Maybe your dreams will help you come to a decision about my proposal.”

Jane said nothing as Dave tenderly kissed her hair. He was serious about marrying her, but she wasn't sure it was a good idea. Between Jim and Bud, Dave could die if she accepted his proposal. If only she knew what to do!

SIXTEEN

When Dave was finally able to contact the Andrews residence after a week in Canton, he discovered that Elaine had gone on a trip to visit a cousin in Pennsylvania and would be gone at least another week. Dave asked that they contact him if Jim tried to get in touch with Elaine or if she happened to come home. He explained that it was extremely important that he speak with her immediately upon her return. To save money, Dave purchased two plain gold wedding bands, and they moved into a boarding house as husband and wife.

Another two weeks passed without a phone call; Dave and Jane began to worry and sent a telegram to Bud Warren to find out if Jim was back in Randall Center. Bud's return wire gave them even more reason for concern. Apparently, Jim had disappeared at the same time Dave and Jane did, giving no notice to his employer and leaving no forwarding address. Dave contacted Mrs. Andrews again to remind her that they were waiting to hear from her daughter. But Elaine had still not returned from Pennsylvania, so Dave gave Mrs. Andrews a different number where they could be reached since they'd moved to cheaper accommodations. Before

hanging up the phone at the reception desk at the boarding house, Dave again expressed the importance of Elaine contacting him immediately upon her return.

Finally, after another five days, Elaine's call came, and Dave asked if he and Jane could meet her at her house as soon as they were able to get there.

Elaine, a heavily pregnant, petite brunette, opened the door for Dave and Jane and escorted them into the living room of her parents' home. She offered refreshments, which they politely declined. Then they all sat down to talk.

"Elaine," Jane started, "this is David Randall. He and Jim grew up as best friends. That's why Dave came to Canton with me. You have to listen to what he says, okay?"

Elaine smiled. "Sure. Jim talked about you a lot, Dave. It's nice to finally meet you. Mom said that you have something important to tell me."

"From everything Janey's told me," Dave replied, "this isn't going to be easy for you. But we both think you should know. Jim disappeared, and we have a good reason to believe that he might be here in Canton. Jane feels that he might try to hurt you. He left her a note telling her that he came to make sure you didn't go to the Canton police, tell them exactly what happened in Randall Center, and have them call Chief Warren. Janey thinks your life might be in danger."

"What could I tell the Canton police?" Elaine asked, trying to sound innocent.

"Come on, Elaine," Jane said impatiently. "You *know* what Jim did at the bank. He embezzled tens of thousands of dollars. You know that as well as I do."

"Okay," Elaine admitted, "I do. But I already told Jim that I wouldn't say anything if he'd agree to a divorce."

"I doubt Jim will take any chances now, Mrs. Cole,"

Dave said.

“Call me Elaine. Why do you say that?”

“Jane has proof that he killed someone. Jim doesn’t know that, but it means he won’t hesitate to commit murder again if he feels threatened or scared. Jane doesn’t know this, but he could easily have killed me back in Chicago. Instead he made sure I’d spend some time in jail so he could get out of town without Jane or me knowing. I can’t be positive that’s why he did it, but it seems very likely. Anyway, the important thing is that we warned you in time to save your life. All you have to do is stay away from him if he comes around.”

“What if seeing him is unavoidable?” Elaine asked in concern. “I still love him, you know. I didn’t stop just because he humiliated me.”

“If you see him alone, Elaine,” Jane said, “you may not live to love him. He might kill you to keep you from talking. That would kill your baby, too. Every time Jim does something wrong, I can feel it. I stopped him from killing Dave in Chicago. I could tell by the way Dave explained that I was right, that his life had been in danger. I was just waiting for him to admit it. That’s why I won’t leave his side as long as I know Jim’s free. We’ve got to stop him from making things worse for himself. You can help us by letting us know if Jim tries to contact you. Will you help?”

“What choice do I have? I know in my head that Jim’s a killer; I just need to convince my heart. I’ll call you the minute I hear from him. If you’re both so sure that he’s somewhere in Canton, it wouldn’t be very wise to deny it. And don’t worry. I’m not about to see him alone *or* with a crowd of people around. Just because I still love him doesn’t mean that I’ve lost all common sense.”

That night at dinner, Dave brought up a topic he was hesitant to discuss but felt he must. “Jane, I want you to be honest with me. We’ve been together for an entire month now. What do you think?”

Stunned by his question, Jane stared across the table at him. “What do I think about *what*?”

“About us,” he replied impatiently. “I bought you that wedding band so we could stay in the same boarding house room, to pretend that we’re married. Four weeks ago I asked you to marry me, and you said you needed some time to think about it.”

“Four weeks isn’t that long, Dave,” she replied. “I need more time.”

“But we don’t *have* much more time to decide. We have to make the decision soon or it will be too late.”

“Too late? We’ve got our whole lives ahead of us. We don’t need to decide right away. I think we should both give it quite a bit more thought.”

“By quite a bit, do you possibly mean nine months?”

Jane studied her meal. She could only hope he wasn’t asking that question because he knew. To hide her suspicions, she asked, “What kind of question is that?” Reaching across the table, he took her hand in his. As he touched her, the coldness in her voice warmed dramatically. “I’m sorry, Dave. I didn’t think I’d ever have to tell you what happened.”

“Tell me what, Jane?” he asked in a near whisper. “That you’re carrying my child? Surely, you didn’t think you could hide it from me when we’re living in the same room.”

Jane bowed her head and mumbled, “I was trying my hardest.”

Across from her, Dave squeezed her hand tenderly to draw her gaze back to his face. “I have a confession to make, Janey. I *planned* for it to happen.”

Her mouth dropped open in stunned disbelief, and she whispered in irritation. “You did it on *purpose*?”

“It didn’t start out that way, but when neither one of us could resist each other, I figured what the hell. If I got you pregnant, you’d have to marry me. So I decided to make love to you every night. I knew I succeeded when I noticed subtle changes in you. You look a little different. You even *act* a little different, especially when I touch your breasts.”

Nervous with the topic, she interrupted him softly. “That’s because they’re tender.”

“I see. They’re also a little bigger, although I doubted that would ever be possible with you. And you spend an awful lot of time in the bathroom every morning. I can hear you throwing up.”

“But, Dave,” she started to protest.

Dave laid two fingers against her lips to silence her. “Let me finish. I’ve waited to marry you too long as it is. I didn’t want to have to wait until you decided that’s what you wanted, too. I wanted you to *have* to marry me to save face in town. Unfortunately, by the sound of things, you don’t care much about saving face anymore. But that’s *my* problem. I’ll just have to wait a little longer. Hell, I’ll wait forever if I have to. All I want is for you to have my child. If I have to wait until after it’s born and prove all along that I love you, that’s what I’ll do. I can only hope and pray that you’ll change your mind and marry me before then so the baby will be biologically—and legally—mine.”

“How do you know that the baby’s yours, Dave? You know every well that Bud Warren could be the father.”

“It doesn’t matter to me. I could love any child that you bear—because it’s part of you.”

Jane smiled. “That’s very sweet of you to say, but ...”

“But you don’t think the baby *is* Bud’s, do you,” he urged. “If you did, you would have started showing symptoms before last week.”

Again Jane bowed her head. Dave was right. It probably was his baby—no, it was *definitely* his baby. But how could

she explain her actions without him thinking badly of her?

“Okay,” he said when she didn’t respond, “I won’t force you into an answer. I’ll admit that I’m not sure I’m the father, but I don’t care. I do care about something else, though, and I need an answer. Why did you let me make love to you every night when you knew you could get pregnant?”

Returning her gaze to his light brown eyes, she replied hesitantly at first, not sure she should admit the truth. “I couldn’t turn you down, Dave. I love you as much as you do me, and I couldn’t spurn your physical needs just to prove that I’m a virtuous woman—especially since I’m about as far from virtuous as a woman can get. I let you make love to me ... No, I made love *with* you every night because I wanted to, and there’s no other reason for my behavior.”

“If you love me,” he asked slowly, “why won’t you marry me?”

“I’m afraid I’ll saddle you with an unwanted child.”

“*Unwanted?*” Dave repeated in a shocked whisper. “My God, Jane, how can you even *think* that? I love you. How could I *not* want to be a father to your child? Please, Jane. *Please* say you’ll marry me. I’m convinced that baby is mine. Please don’t deprive me of being its father.”

Although her heart went out to him, Jane couldn’t give Dave the answer he wanted. “I’m sorry, Dave, but I can’t say yes. Not yet, anyway. I need more time. Please. You said yourself that you’ve already waited a long time, so a couple more months before I make a decision shouldn’t make much difference. You can still be with me during the time it takes me to make up my mind.”

“All right, Janey,” he acquiesced. “I’ll wait as patiently as I can. But don’t blame me if I keep asking you if you’ve decided, because I really am anxious to have you as my wife.”

Five days later Dave was called to the phone while he and Jane were eating dinner at the boarding house. He was surprised to hear how frantic Elaine sounded when he answered.

“Dave, it’s Elaine. You’ve got to get over here right away. Jim called and said he’s coming over whether I like it or not. I told him that I was the only one home and didn’t want to see him alone, but he said he didn’t care *what* I want. He said that he doesn’t want anyone else around when we talk, anyway. What should I do when he gets here?”

“Don’t open the door,” Dave advised her, trying to keep his voice calm and reassuring. “I’m on my way.”

“What about Jane? Isn’t she going to come with you?”

“No. I’m not even going to tell her who this phone call is from. I’m going to tell her it was my mother.”

“You’ve *got* to bring her, Dave,” Elaine insisted frantically. “She’s the only one who can reach Jim anymore. She’s the only one who can handle him.”

“I can’t risk it, Elaine,” Dave said. “Jane’s not feeling well, and I don’t want her upset.”

“If you don’t bring her, I won’t let you in the house, either.” Dave heard banging in the background. “Oh, my God! He’s already here.”

“I’ll be right there, Elaine. Whatever you do, don’t open the door for him.”

“Please bring her, Dave. Please!”

Dave hung up and returned to Jane. “That was Ma, Janey. I have to go run an errand for her before the stores close for the night. Wait here for me. If I’m not back by the time you’re done eating, go on back to the room and wait.”

“Okay,” Jane agreed as he left.

When he was out of sight, Jane followed Dave far enough behind so he wouldn’t notice her. She knew he’d

been dishonest with her, and she knew why. Dave was on his way to confront Jim, and she refused to let Jim take away her baby's father.

So she wasn't surprised when Dave led her to Elaine's house a short distance away. She watched Dave go to the door and knock. Several minutes later Elaine opened it, her face bruised and swollen. Before Elaine could speak, Jim appeared at the door and placed a pistol against her temple.

Dave raised his hands slightly and backed down the porch steps while Jim pulled Elaine to the opposite side of the house-length porch to stand with her in the shadows.

Jane moved stealthily around the house. If she was quiet, she could surprise Jim by appearing directly across from him. Then she would also be available in case Dave needed her help. As she got closer, she could hear the conversation.

"You're crazy, Randall," Jim declared. "I have no intention of turning myself in just for disciplining my wife a little bit. She deserved what she got, because she ran away from me."

"Running away is no excuse for violence, Jim," Dave said, inching toward the steps to the porch. "You have no right to harm her. You could also hurt your baby."

"I *do* have a right. She's my wife, and it's my baby, which I never wanted, by the way."

"And if Janey were my wife, would I have the same privilege of beating her?"

"Of course not. Jane's had a hard life. She doesn't deserve to be hurt again."

"Elaine didn't deserve it, either, Jim." Dave reached the foot of the ten steps.

The sooner he could get back up them, Jane decided, the better it would be for Elaine. *Move a step closer*, Jane thought, willing her words to Dave's mind.

"You put one foot on those steps, buddy," Jim warned,

“and I’ll pull the trigger.”

No, no, no! She hadn’t wanted *Jim* to get the message.

“Think about it, Jim,” Dave said. “If you pull that trigger, there will be witnesses. You’ll have to kill me, too, because I won’t hesitate to tell the police what you did.”

“Don’t threaten me, either, because I’ll kill you, too, if I have to.”

“Then what would Janey do? You know how we feel about each other. What would she do if you killed me? She’d be alone again, and you know it.”

“Jane will never be alone as long as I’m around. I’m the only man who won’t leave her. You did it once, you know. And another man did it after that. And so did Dad.”

“You left her before I did, Jim,” Dave reminded him. “Besides, you can’t satisfy her womanly needs. She needs a man who isn’t a relative for that.”

“Not *you*! You were eighteen when you first told me that you cared about Jane more than like a sister. But you never told her. You went away to college and then to the Army to keep away from her.”

“Okay, I’ll admit that going into the Army was a way of escaping my feelings for Jane, but I never could have deserted her forever. That’s why I finally went home. I had to be with her again.”

While they spoke, Jane slipped onto the porch opposite where Jim and Elaine were standing. She motioned for Elaine to stay quiet then silently inched her way along the house, carefully staying in the shadows.

“Look, Jim, I came here for a reason. Turn yourself in to Bud. There’s a witness who can testify to what you did.”

“I didn’t do anything.” Jim loosened his hold on Elaine and pointed the gun at Dave instead. “Don’t force me to shoot you, Dave.”

“That’s the last thing I’m going to do,” Dave said, “because I have too much to live for. In fact, when I talked to

you at the bank, I had no idea that I would have so much to live for today.”

While Dave spoke, Elaine broke away from Jim and raced as fast as she could into the darkness. Jane was relieved that Elaine was finally out of the way. But Jim cocked the hammer on the pistol and steadied his arm at Dave with his free left hand. Dave reached for the weapon he had under his coat. This was going to turn into a shoot-out!

“No!” Jane screamed as she raced toward the steps.

Jim pivoted toward the noise and pulled the trigger. To Dave, who also swung his head toward the sound, the shot sounded like an explosion. Jane collapse, and Dave cried out her name.

SEVENTEEN

Dave reached out to grab her, but instead of stopping her decent, he lost his balance and fell to the ground as she rolled on top of him. For a few stunned moments no one moved. Then Dave gently moved Jane and slid out from under her. Holding her in his arms, he picked her up and turned toward Jim.

“I’m taking her to a doctor, Jim,” Dave warned. “If you hurt her, so help me God, I’ll come after you and make sure you spend the rest of your miserable life in jail.”

“Don’t move her!” Elaine shouted. “She could be hurt too bad. Let me call the hospital and have them send an ambulance. It should only take a few minutes.”

Weeping, Dave laid Jane on the ground, took off his jacket, and covered her with it. As Jim joined them, Dave spoke to her softly.

“It’s okay, Cinderella,” he said. “Just relax. I’ll make sure everything will be fine.”

“The baby,” she said weakly as blood flowed from her

abdomen.

“Don’t worry about the baby, Janey. You just worry about you. Concentrate on getting well.”

“My head hurts.”

Dave smoothed back the blonde hair falling into her eyes. “I know, my love. You hit it pretty hard on the steps. I tried to stop you from falling all the way, but I couldn’t. I’m sorry.”

“I don’t think I can stay awake much longer.”

“Then go to sleep.”

“I can’t. The baby.”

“Let’s hope the baby will be okay, too. The most important thing right now is you.”

“Don’t cry, Dave.” And Jane lost consciousness.

From behind him, Dave heard Elaine announce that the ambulance should only be a few minutes. She handed him a towel and told him to hold it on her wound. Then she told Jim that she’d also called the police and expected him to stay until they arrived. To Dave’s surprise, Jim offered no resistance and sat on the bottom step to await their arrival.

After spending the night in Jane’s hospital room, Dave went to the police station to tell Jim what had happened. When they were able to speak to each other, Dave told Jim that the bullet had gone through Jane without causing serious damage. She should be fine in a few days, when he would take her back to Randall Center to get her belongings. Then, Dave announced, he and Jane would move out of town.

“I didn’t mean to shoot her, Dave,” Jim said, his voice filled with regret. “It was an accident.”

“I know,” Dave said. “You were going to shoot me.”

“But I never wanted to hurt Jane. She’s my little sister. How could I hurt her?”

“I don’t know, but it will never happen again, because you’ll never even *see* her again.”

“You can’t keep us apart.”

“I can sure as hell try,” Dave declared.

“Tell me something, Dave. Why was she talking about Mary last night?”

At the mention of his child, Dave instantly lost his anger. He was much too concerned about Jane losing the product of their love to respond in anything but a sorrowful tone. “She wasn’t talking about Mary, Jim. She was talking about *our* baby. Hers and mine.”

“*Yours?*” Jim roared in a rage. If they hadn’t been separated by a table and wire partition, Jim would have pounced on him in that moment. A guard grabbed him and set him back in his chair. “What did you do to my sister? What kind of lies did you tell her to get her to have sex with you? And what the hell are you going to do so Jane and the baby aren’t hurt like she and Mary were?”

“I’m going to marry her—as soon as she agrees. I’m having a little trouble convincing her to say yes.”

Jim glared at Dave. “I don’t believe that. Jane’s loved you for a long time. She would agree to marry you without a second of thought.”

“I wish to hell that you were right. I’d like nothing more than to get married right now, but she won’t hear of it. She thinks I might regret marrying her after a while.”

“I still can’t believe I shot her, Dave. It really was an accident. Even *you* know I could never purposely hurt Jane. Do you think she’ll forgive me?”

“That all depends on if she loses the baby or not. Right now she’s still carrying it, but the doctors think she could lose it yet. The fall she took was a bad one. She’s really bruised up and has a broken ankle so she’s in a cast to her knee. Thank God, she’ll live. You could have killed her, you know. You could have shot her right through the heart or the

head. What kind of fool thing were you trying to prove? And why did you use a knife on your mother if you have a gun?"

"Are you accusing me of killing my own mother?" Jim asked incredulously.

"I don't have to," Dave explained. "Jane saw you in the house, remember? You even talked to her. You were doing dishes. Jane even saw red in the water when she threw it out. I'd say that's pretty conclusive evidence except for her not seeing you actually commit the crime. Now that you're in custody, I'm not afraid to confront you with what she saw, because I know she'll be safe."

"You're just trying to trick me into confessing to something I didn't do."

"The big flaw in your plan was that you did dishes, but you didn't dump out the dish water. Jane isn't stupid, Jim. You left before she found your mother, so she figured it out. I'd care to wager that Mary Jane was still warm to the touch. I read the paperwork, and she had her throat slashed from behind. So no blood there wouldn't have been any blood on you. Is that what happened, Jim? You killed your own mother while she was sleeping?"

Jim said nothing.

"Why do you think we came here, Jim? We were afraid you would try to kill Elaine to keep her quiet about your gambling and embezzlement. It seems as though our suspicions about that were right, too. You were trying to get rid of the people who could testify to your having a lot of gambling debts."

"Will Jane really be all right, Dave?" Jim asked, changing the subject. "You aren't just saying that, are you? And what about Elaine? She went to the hospital with Jane, didn't she? They didn't find anything wrong with *her*, did they? Or our baby?"

"She and your baby are just fine. Neither one of them are in any danger. Don't try to convince me that you're the

loving husband, either. You're just trying to change the subject, and it won't work. I wired Bud and told him that Jane's pretty certain you were the one who killed your mother, so he'll extradite you back to Iowa for trial. I also told him that Jane knows you embezzled from the bank."

"I had to!" Jim shouted.

Unable to bear being with Jim a moment longer, Dave rose to leave. "I have to go. I promised Janey that I'd be back as soon as possible."

"Will you bring her to see me when she gets out of the hospital? I'd like to apologize."

"No," Dave denied, shaking his head. "I'll never let Janey be near you again. Even if you get off—because there's only circumstantial evidence—and don't go to jail, I won't let you anywhere near our home. I'll *never* let you around Janey again."

"I'm sorry you feel that way," Jim said.,

"I'm sorry won't help. Good-bye, Jim."

Without another word, Dave left.

Dave ran into the doctor as he came out after examining her. "How is she, doctor?"

Before speaking, Dr. Lackey led Dave away from the door of Jane's room. "I don't think Miss Cole will explain the situation, so I will. As you know, her condition was very delicate last night."

"She was very uncomfortable and bleeding quite a bit."

"While you were gone, she had a spontaneous abortion."

"*What?*" Dave asked sadly. "Does that mean Janey lost our baby?"

"Exactly. I'm sorry, but I didn't think she would tell you. She kept talking about not wanting to know if you'll

still want to marry her if she lost the baby. I had to tell her that I can't guarantee that she'll be able to conceive again. So she wasn't going to say anything about her miscarriage. I tried to convince her that you had a right to know, but she said that you didn't because she wasn't going to marry you while she was pregnant, anyway. She said she didn't want to know that you only wanted her because of her pregnancy."

"I'll have to convince her that she's wrong, that I want to marry her whether she can have a baby or not."

"Good luck," the doctor said. "You can go on in and see her as soon as the nurse comes out."

Filled with dread, Dave entered Jane's room. He tried to act cheerful to make Jane more at ease, but his attempt was unsuccessful. He could still see her tumbling down the steps at Elaine's house. When he noticed that she didn't realize he was acting, he decided to continue the part until she said something.

"I hear you had a pretty tough morning, Janey," he said lightly, "but don't you worry. We're going to pull you through this. How's your ankle feel?"

"The nurse gave me some pain medication, so not too bad now," she replied. "But it's still kind of sore."

"At least, it's better. So, are you going to marry me when we get you out of here? Or do I have to wait until we get back to Randall Center?"

"I *can't* marry you, Dave. I can't force you into such a permanent step. That's no way to start a marriage."

"Janey," he explained as he took her hand in his, "I talked to the doctor, and he told me that you miscarried and the possibility of you not being able to get pregnant again. Now I'm asking you if you'll marry me. The only real question in my mind is if you'll do it now or when we get back."

“But I lost your baby,” she said with tears in her eyes. “I wasn’t woman enough to carry it full term. Maybe I’m not woman enough to have *any* children.”

“It isn’t children that make the woman, Jane. It’s a good man beside her. And personally, I think I’m a pretty damned good man. So what do you say? Will you marry me?”

“I don’t know. I dreamed about a time when we would be together forever, but I never let myself think about answering you. Everything still seems unreal to me; everything seems like the Cinderella story.”

“And you’re Cinderella. I’ve been telling you that for years. Now would you please quit stalling and answer Prince Charming here? Tell me you’ll marry me before we go back to Randall Center.”

“First let’s talk about Jim,” she said, changing the subject.

“There’s nothing to say about him,” Dave declared. “You don’t have to be afraid of him anymore. I already told him that I have no intention of you ever seeing him again. I hope you don’t mind.”

“No, Dave. I don’t mind. In fact, that’s what *I* wanted to tell him.”

“You’ll have to testify at the trial, Janey, but there will be a lot of people around and he’ll be in custody. There won’t be anything to worry about as far as that goes.”

“I’m glad. I can’t forgive him for murdering Mom—or for making me lose your baby. I really wanted that baby, Dave.” Suddenly, her tears erupted into a torrent.

Taking her in his arms, Dave hugged her gently. “I know, Janey. I wanted the baby, too. But he wasn’t meant to be. We’ll get married and try to make another one. How does that sound?”

“It sounds perfect,” she said happily, although she was still crying.

Dave sat back and held her at arms’ length. “Does that

mean you'll marry me?"

"Of course, I will. You didn't really think I could say no forever, did you? Just promise me one thing. Do your best to keep Jim away from me. I don't want our children to know what their uncle did. I'd rather have them know about my past than that their uncle murdered his own mother."

"That promise will be easy to keep. Now would you concentrate on getting well so we can make a baby that will live? Maybe we can even make a dozen of them."

"Oh, no, we can't. You're not the one who has to carry them and give birth to them. We'll try to have more than one but forget about a dozen. We'll decide how many to have after we're married and not before."

Every day that Jane was in the hospital, Dave tried to convince her to marry him immediately so they could honeymoon in Chicago. On the final day, he made a move that she didn't expect.

Getting down on one knee beside the chair in which she sat, he reached into his pocket. Withdrawing a small box, he opened it to reveal the diamond ring inside.

"Jane Lynn Cole? I'm asking you one last time," he said. "Will you marry me?"

She stared at the ring in awe. Granted, she'd heard about men proposing with a diamond ring, but it was rare. And she certainly never believed she would receive one. She didn't know when he had purchased it but seeing it changed her mind. It was so romantic, after all of his proposals, to get a ring and present it to her so they could show the world they were engaged. That had been more romantic than him just asking her again and again.

"I can't believe you did this," she finally said.

"Surely, you didn't expect me to never buy you one of

these.”

“It’s so uncommon these days, so no, I didn’t think you would.”

“Okay then, what do you say? For another last time, will you marry me?”

“Oh, David,” she said, her heart aching with joy. “Yes. Yes, I’ll marry you.”

“Thank, God! I wasn’t sure how many last times I was going to have to use.”

After removing the wedding band from her finger, he took the ring from the box and slid it onto her finger. While he set the box aside, she twisted the ring to watch the diamond sparkle in the light.

They wed the day they left Canton. When they reached Chicago, they decided to start their married life in the place where they discovered how much they loved each other. After all, Jane insisted, investigative work would be more plentiful in a big city.

After five days of searching, they found a small house just outside of Chicago and made arrangements to buy it. Finally, they returned to Randall Center to announce their marriage, withdraw his money, and sell Jane’s possessions.

“You didn’t even invite us to the wedding?” Lucille asked in disappointment when they told his family.

“We would have, Ma,” Dave explained, “but we didn’t want to wait to get married.”

“No,” Paul said angrily, “because you knew we would disapprove of your choice of a wife. Well, we still don’t approve. Eloping doesn’t change that fact.”

“Dave and Jane are in love, Pa,” Karen inserted. “They have been for years, and you know it. You just didn’t want to accept it because of what everybody said about her.”

“It still doesn’t change our feelings. We wanted more for you, son.”

“You wanted more than my happiness?” Dave asked.

“How could that be? I couldn’t have been happier with any other woman. It’s Janey I’ve loved since I was a child, and it’s Janey I longed for and came back from Paris for.”

“Then you’re blind to what happened here while you were gone, son,” Paul said, “because this woman ...”

Dave lost control of his temper and shouted at his father. “This woman was almost killed trying to save my life! And she was carrying our baby when it happened!”

“Please, Dave,” Jane said softly, as she put her hand on his arm. “Don’t make matters worse. It’s obvious that your father dislikes me, so why try to change his mind? We won’t be living here, anyway.”

“You won’t?” Lucille asked, startled.

“No, Ma. We’re going back to Chicago—where we found our mutual love. There will be a lot more work there for me so I can support my wife and family. When we finally *have* a family, that is.” Dave’s voice took on a tone of anger. “Janey’s brother didn’t just embezzle from the bank; he also killed his mother. Janey lost our baby after a fall down a flight of steps when he shot her.”

Karen spoke up in the couple’s behalf. “Ma, Pa, try to understand. Dave loves Jane. You wouldn’t want him to marry someone he doesn’t love, would you?”

“No, but we wanted a respectable woman like Marcia Lehman for him, too,” Lucille said.

“I can understand that, Mrs. Randall,” Jane said. “I tried to convince Dave of the same thing, but he wouldn’t listen.”

“I guess he wouldn’t. All I can say, Jane, is welcome to the family. Dave’s father and I will get used to the idea. Maybe someday we can all be together in the same town to live again.”

“We won’t live in the same town,” Dave said as he smiled at his bride. “We’re going to live where we found true love. But we will visit—and you can visit us. You can even stay in our house when our baby’s born. Hopefully, that will

be in about ten months.” He rose and pulled Jane to her feet. “Come on, my love. Now that we’ve made our announcement, I have a craving that we can’t satisfy here. Let’s go to your house and see about starting that baby.”

Jane giggled in embarrassment as she hobbled out of the house on her crutches. Her Cinderella story had a happy ending after all.