



Gina shook her head. “If you think Steve Bryson gets me, you’re wrong. His ex-wife died a month or so ago, and—”

“I know all that.”

“You couldn’t know he wants a father-daughter relationship with Amanda now. I just found out myself, and Amanda’s indifferent to him.”

“I don’t blame her after what you told me.”

“Besides helping Amanda with her studies,” Gina went on, “all he wants me to do is help him communicate with his daughter.”

“What could you do? Hold his hand?”

“Nicole.”

Nicole shook her head. “Frankly I don’t trust the man. I can’t believe the way Bryson forced you into this.”

“He didn’t exactly force me. I could have refused.”

“You can’t mean you really intend to go to Colorado.”

“I told him I would. It was the only possible answer to our problem.”

“I can think of a few others.”

Gina laughed at her peace-loving friend. “Put down those tiny fists. You look ridiculous.”

“Not a chance. I’m not the Big Bad Wolf for nothing.” Nicole punched the air to make her point.

Nicole’s heavy gold college ring with its blue stone captured the sunlight coming from one of the east windows. The third finger of her left hand was still naked.

Gina empathized with her friend. Nicole had hoped Robert would give her an engagement ring. Gina had once hoped she’d be able to keep hers.

“Why Colorado?” Nicole asked, bringing Gina back to the present.

“I was told Mr. Bryson has business interests there.”

“There and everywhere else around the world,” Nicole mumbled. “Men like Steve Bryson will go anywhere as long as there are plenty of women around.”

“Mr. Bryson couldn’t be as bad as we heard he was. Nobody could. Spending the summer in Colorado sounds like fun. His lawyer said we’ll be staying in a very large house in the style of old Germany. I suppose they use it as a ski lodge. Doesn’t that sound exciting?”

“I’d say it sounds convenient—for a man like Steve. Has he also employed a hundred violinists to play sweet music under your window every night? Or does he plan to hold you captive in the tower of a German-style castle somewhere?”

“Be reasonable, Nicole. Unless I do this we can forget about our plans to build a learning center in the Texas Hill Country.”

“The loan would have gone through.”

Gina shook her head. “No, it wouldn’t have. Now it will.” She placed her hand on her friend’s shoulder. “This is an answer to our prayers.”

“It’s sure not an answer to mine.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Gina saw Amanda Bryson start across the room in their direction. “Amanda’s heading this way,”

she whispered. "Let me be the one to tell her I've decided to accept the job."

As they watched Amanda stumbled, possibly on a crack in the rough concrete floor. She caught herself and looked around to see if anyone was watching.

Gina looked down but not soon enough. Her eyes merged with Amanda's dark gaze. A narrow streak of red punch stained the front of Amanda's blue dress and a corner of her white apron.

Sympathy flowed to Amanda because Gina knew exactly how the teenager felt. From experience she also knew that to say anything about it would only make matters worse.

"How are things going back in the kitchen?" Gina asked casually as Amanda stopped in front of them.

"I spilled some punch on the floor and a few other places." She tried to cover the stain on her apron with her right hand. "Other than that everything's fine."

"Did you mop up the mess?"

"More or less."

"I'll go in and check," Nicole put in. She turned to a teenage boy standing nearby. "Come on, Freddie. Get over here. Make yourself useful."

The look on Freddie's face as he and Nicole walked off reminded Gina of a dog caught in a canine catcher's net.

Gina grinned then sniffed the air. "Do I smell gingerbread?"

"You mean this?" Amanda reached in the pocket of her apron and pulled out a cookie cut in the shape of a gingerbread man. "Daddy had two dozen of these sent over. They arrived a few minutes ago. Guess he thinks I'm still five years old."

"Sending cookies to the party was a nice gesture on your father's part, Amanda. They're perfect for the younger children."

Amanda went over to the trash can in the corner, discarded her cookie, and glanced back at Gina. "Last night Daddy called again. He still wants me to go to Colorado this summer."

"I know."

“Know? You talked to him?”

“Before I came in here. I told him I’d go to Colorado after all.”

Amanda’s dark eyes sparkled. “You did?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, Dr. Hollister, I’ve been praying you’d say that. I’d about given up hope. I mean you and Dr. Danton are still planning to build the center, aren’t you?”

“Yes but it wouldn’t have been completed in time for the fall term anyway. So I got to thinking. What’s the rush? We’ll start building in September.”

Nicole came out of the kitchen, a dishcloth in each hand, and started toward them. Gina knew Nicole didn’t want her to go to Colorado, and she’d do all she could to stop her. Gina hoped that by the time she left, Nicole would accept her decision.

Besides hoping, Gina also prayed that taking the job Steve offered was the right thing to do and not some scheme cooked up by her overly active imagination. Steve reminded her of someone, but she still couldn’t figure out who. Was her imagination working overtime?



ON THE DRIVE back to her apartment, Gina switched from thinking about Nicole’s opinion of Steve Bryson to the article on Ward Dremont, then back to Steve again. Did Steve have ungentlemanly designs on her as Nicole implied? If so he’d be greatly disappointed. She wasn’t interested in Steve Bryson—at least, she hoped she wasn’t. And she planned to read the entire article about the mad scientist as soon as she got home.

Then she remembered she’d forgotten to renew her subscription to the local newspaper. Maybe she could learn something on the subject via one of the 24-hour television news channels.

Antique furniture and a feeling of safety and acceptance greeted her as soon as she walked in the door. Gina clicked on the television, listening as she changed out of her costume. She'd convinced herself that Ward Dremont's new discovery would be the biggest story of the day, but she was wrong. Gina had to wait over half an hour to hear one of the shortest news reports in the history of journalism: "Dr. Ward Dremont, head scientist working on what he is calling Project Humanity 205, will be getting financial backing from an unnamed billionaire. Updates at 6 and 10. Stay tuned for the weather."

Steve Bryson was super rich. Was he the one financing Dremont? She shook her head. No, that would be too ironic.

Why did her every thought now begin and end with Steve Bryson? And why would Steve finance someone like Ward Dremont? Gina bit her lower lip. Maybe she was just tired. *Not too tired to go to my computer and search the Internet for Ward Dremont and see what I can find out.*

She was about to enter her tiny office when she heard a knock at her door.

"Gina," her mother called from the hallway outside, "are you home?"

"Yes, Mama." Gina smiled and opened the door.

Her mother entered her apartment, holding a covered dish in both hands. Gina's parents divorced years ago, yet her mother still went by her married name, Mrs. Lucille Hollister. Since Gina's father walked out on the marriage, the sadness in Mom's gray eyes was obvious to anyone who knew her. On that particular day, however, Gina saw joy in her mother's eyes when invited to come inside.

Her mother handed Gina the metal pan covered in aluminum foil. "I brought your supper. I know how busy you are."

"How sweet, Mom. Smells good, too. Thanks. What is it?"

"Soupy pinto beans and cornbread mashed and all mixed together the way you like it."

She could taste it already. “You shouldn’t have gone to so much trouble, but I sure am glad you did.”

She took the covered dish into the kitchen, placing it on the cabinet next to the stove top while digesting all her mother had said—and what she hadn’t. If she knew her mother as well as she thought she did, Mom was hiding something. Was it a man? Was Mom dating someone? If so it was about time! If her mother’s bubbly voice wasn’t enough of a clue, Mom was wearing an intoxicating new perfume, the kind most men found irresistible.

Gina breathed in a whiff of perfumed air. “What’s up, Mom? And don’t say ‘nothing.’ It’s written all over you.”

Mom laughed softly. “Whatever do you mean?”

“You’re dating someone,” Gina exclaimed. “Aren’t you?” Gina grabbed her mother’s hand and led her over to the couch. “I want to hear everything, absolutely everything. And when’s the wedding?”

“Wedding? Well, I know you’ve been wanting me to start dating again, but—”

“You’re going to marry the guy, aren’t you?”

Her cheeks flushed. “I think it’s premature to discuss something like that.”

“But you *are* seeing someone?”

“Yes.” Mom ducked her head. “In fact he’s taking me to a dinner party next Friday night.”

“He must be fabulous, or you wouldn’t have found him interesting. So what’s keeping you and Mr. Wonderful apart?”

Lucille Hollister fingered the strap of her white leather purse.

“Well, out with it, Mom.”

She moistened her lips and took a deep breath. “He doesn’t think his daughter would approve. His daughter was hurt by her parents’ divorce and hasn’t recovered from it yet.”

“Doesn’t she love her father?” Gina asked. “For heaven’s sake, doesn’t she want him to be happy?”

“Of course she wants him to be happy. I think she loves her father very much.”

“Then why ...?”

Lucille lifted one hand in the same halting gesture she'd used to hush Gina as a child. “You don't know all the facts yet, Gina, so you're not in a position to know what should or shouldn't be done.” She glanced down at her watch. “I stopped by to say hi, but I have an appointment in thirty minutes. I'll be late unless I leave immediately.”

Gina wasn't through pumping her mother for information. “Is your appointment with *him*?”

“Yes.” Her mother rose from the couch. “I'm not answering so much as one more of your questions.”

“I'll be wondering about your date.” Gina followed her mother out her front door and into the hall. “You will call me and fill me in on all the details, won't you?”

Her mother smiled and stepped into the elevator.

The doors closed. Gina wanted to call her back, but it was too late. She didn't know her future stepfather's name, and she forgot to tell Mom about Colorado. Oh well, there'd be plenty of time for that. They wouldn't be leaving until the last week in June.

Memories of her parents' divorce returned like a hard slap in the face. The recollections continued as the beans and cornbread warmed in the oven. Gina's father walked out on her mother, not the other way around. Then he demanded a divorce and ran off with a younger woman. Her mother had always said she'd never marry again, but after so much heartbreak, Mom had earned the right to find happiness.

Gina turned on her computer, typed in the name Ward Dremont in the search slot, and touched the enter key. Several sites came up, each telling about this famous scientist. She was in a hurry, clicking on the site at the top of the list.

An error message flashed on the screen. *Rats*. The Internet was down again. It was obvious she wasn't going to find out more

about the mad scientist or the identity of the billionaire backing him, at least not immediately—and she did like *immediately*. Gina turned off her computer.

After eating a generous serving of pinto beans and cornbread for supper, she wasn't hungry anymore. She tried again to get on the Internet but without success. If that wasn't enough, her cell phone needed to be recharged.

The taste of cold, sugary chocolate ice cream drew her to the kitchen. As a child her mother had often offered her sweet desserts to cheer her up when her day went wrong or was particularly stressful. This was one of those days.



AN HOUR later someone knocked at her door. She peered through the small glass window to see a man wearing a delivery company uniform standing in the hallway, holding something in his arms. What was he doing here? She didn't order anything. Puzzled she opened the door.

“Are you Dr. Gina Hollister?”

“Yes.”

“Then these are for you.” He pulled out a receipt pad. “Sign here.”

She squinted trying to make out the return address on the receipt, but it was impossible to read from that distance. The delivery man tapped his forefinger on the top of the white box, waiting as she dug in her purse for a tip. When he finally handed her the box and left, an air of anticipation engulfed her. The box smelled like roses.

Who would be sending her flowers? Gina untied the ribbon with eager fingers and opened the box. Inside she found eighteen yellow roses. She searched for a card but couldn't find one.

Gina put the flowers in a milk-white vase, filled the vase with water, and set it in the middle of her small dining room table.



She was about to dump the empty box in the trashcan when she noticed a rather lengthy note hidden behind a sheet of silver paper.

“Dear Dr. Hollister,” she read. “Steve Bryson here.”

*Mr. Bryson? What’s he up to, sending me flowers?* Gina continued reading.

“I might have upset you today, ma’am, and I want to apologize. Sometimes I tend to forget a stranger wouldn’t know I have a habit of teasing people I like. In the future, I’ll try to tone down my remarks.

“After you left my office, my aunt phoned from her home in Houston. She reminded me that besides being part English, Italian, German, and who knows what else, I’m also part Native-American on my father’s side. Primarily, though, I’m plain old American, and I like a relaxed atmosphere when dealing with my employees.

“On the chance we might not get along in the future, maybe we should come up with a plan. My aunt reminded me that according to the history books, some Native-Americans smoked peace pipes. Maybe we should consider something similar. Peace in the workplace is always important. In any case I’m truly sorry if I upset you in any way and hope these flowers will express how much.

Sincerely,

Steven Edmond Bryson, III”

The thoughtful gesture pleased her, but she doubted Steve purchased the flowers himself. He would have one of his secretaries do chores like that. At least he signed the card.

Memories flooded her mind of another box of flowers and an engagement ring she had returned. Phil had his secretary send her flowers, and then he ran away with the secretary.

Steve did claim to be sorry for making her feel uncomfortable. Perhaps he was. It was thoughtful of him to send flowers, but as Nicole would say, what did he hope to gain?