



Why did Steve grow silent all at once? What was going on?

“Oh, and I’ll want you to stay the entire two months,” he finally added. “I’ll have to check to see when my lawyer has some free time to sign the legal agreements.”

At first Gina didn’t answer. Everything was happening too fast. She hardly had time to catch her breath, much less say anything. “Speaking of checking,” she said after long pause, “I’ll need to speak with my business partner, Nicole Danton. I want to make sure she’s okay with all this.”

Steve looked pleased with himself as he straightened some papers on his desk. “Of course.”

He was captivating, but Gina had not forgotten her reasons for mistrusting him. “Would it be possible for me to receive a pay advance?” she asked, knowing she was stretching the boundaries a bit. “I’d like to have it today, if possible.”

“No problem.”

He opened a desk drawer, pulled out a checkbook, and filled it out. Then he reached across his desk and handed her the check. Steve leaned back in his chair, put his hands together behind his head, and stretched.

He certainly seemed relaxed. She sure wasn't. His cute-guy image would be hard to miss, not to mention the high cheekbones, perfectly formed nose, and those dark, wide-set eyes. Yet Gina kept remembering everything Myra had said about him. If he were an honorable man, she'd be trying to figure out how to attract his interest on a more personal level. As it was, Gina wanted to close the business deal and leave his office as soon as possible. She glanced toward the door.

"There's something else I'd like to mention before you leave," he said.

She forced a calm response. "What might that be?"

"I'd like to see the property I'll be financing, and I'd like you to drive out to the building site with me. I've heard of the little town of Hill River for years, and I'm looking forward to seeing it for the first time."

A thought came to her. Myra Bryson had said Steve was a womanizer. If he was she might be getting sucked into an uncomfortable situation. "You want me to drive to Hill River with you, sir? Why?"

"It's a formality." Steve sent her a long appraisal. "I believe I can visualize the project better if I see it through your eyes."

Obviously he found her entertaining. Why else would his mouth curve upward every time she said or did something?

"I'll admit I don't usually do this. In your case I thought it might be a good idea." He cocked his head to one side; his smile widened. "We'll be working together closely for the next few months. I thought it would give us a chance to become better acquainted and make plans for the trip."

"All right," she said. "You're my future boss. Making plans for the trip does make sense. When would you like to leave?"

"Let's see." He glanced down at a paper on his desk. "Today is Friday. I'll pick you up tomorrow afternoon around two. And wear something casual. We'll be having a picnic before driving home." A dash of amusement warmed his smile. "I'll be bringing my swimsuit. Feel free to bring yours too, if you're so inclined."

Gina stiffened. A fast comeback flooded her, conceived in her mind to make Steve as uncomfortable as he'd made her and filled to the brim with sarcasm. Her moral code stopped her. Instead of hitting back she'd turn the other cheek. For Gina to retaliate meant being hit twice, once by the offensive comment and again when her own harsh comeback crushed her heart.

Phil Arnold's face formed in her mind. She hardly knew Steve Bryson, yet he somehow reminded her of her former fiancé. How strange was that? Not only did both men like to get a rise out of her, they used some of the same tactics. Steve called her Shy Ann. Phil had called her Teach. She might have thought Phil and Steve were twins separated at birth. But Steve had olive skin, while Phil was a blue-eyed blond like Gina's handsome father.

She lifted her chin a notch, focusing her gaze on the ceiling not far above his head. "It's late, sir. I must go. I want to thank you for taking time out from your busy schedule to talk to me and for your offer of help. I'll see you Saturday afternoon at two."

And she wouldn't be bringing a swimsuit.

Gina turned toward the door, praying she'd be given the poise and strength to leave Steve's office without bumping into something or otherwise embarrassing herself. In the hall outside his office, she sent up another prayer, thanking the Lord for making it through the interview with Steve.



STEVE BRYSON GAZED out his floor-to-ceiling window on the third floor, watching Gina stalk across the parking lot in the direction of her car. He grinned. How many other executives were standing at their windows, doing the same thing? He'd expected Amanda's tutor to be professional; it never entered his head she'd be so beautiful.

He continued to watch until Gina's white Buick disappeared from view. She'd said she was going to a party for her students,

and his daughter would be there. Amanda liked ginger cookies as much as Steve did. He'd have his secretary order some, cut in the shape of the Gingerbread Man, and sent to the party as soon as possible.

Gina might like him a little more for sending them, and Steve did want her to like him. *Gina*. Was he trying to impress the good doctor? And so what if he was?

Funny, the name Gina didn't fit her somehow. He reached for his cell phone, touching in his lawyer's number. After a moment the lawyer picked up.

"Mr. Bryson, hello."

"Hi, Joe. Got a minute?"

"For you? Sure."

"Remember the investigation I had you do on Dr. Gina Hollister?"

"The one I hired a private investigator to run?"

"Yeah. Well, I never read the report. You read the main points over the phone. I'd like to read the whole thing. Mind sending a scan or faxing me a copy?"

"Glad to. I'll get right on it."

"Thanks, Joe. And I hope you have a great day."

Ten minutes later Steve's secretary came into his office with a smile on her face. "Here's the fax you wanted, sir."

"Thanks, Josie. You're a peach."

She blushed and left the room.

He read the fax quickly, finding it a little dry. The facts were there, but he wanted more. He would have his assistant, Drake Rather, see what else he could dig up. Steve found Dr. Hollister extremely exciting and wanted to learn all he could about her.



BESIDES MYSTERIES AND BIBLE PROPHECY, Gina's reading interests consisted of sweet historical romance novels and westerns. An old-fashioned girl, she preferred rural areas and

small towns to city lights and heavy traffic. She'd mapped out a route from Steve's office to the party, keeping her off the freeway. Now seated behind the wheel and waiting for the traffic light to change, Steve's words came back to haunt her.

His meaning was clear. Steve was talking about more than a swimsuit when he said, "Feel free to bring yours too, if you're so inclined."

Well, Gina was not "so inclined." The entire scene in the parking lot and in his office played in her mind as if it were happening now. She needed to focus her eyes and mind on the road ahead and keep driving.

She drove on, glancing out a side window, recalling the way this part of the city had looked when she was a child. It was a farming area then. Now the entire area was dotted with lovely homes for families. Amanda Bryson's grandmother, Mrs. Lola Ford, lived in one of them—a white colonial behind a guarded gate.

Mrs. Ford's two-story house was one of the largest and most elegant homes in Austin. Everybody said so. Gina also admired the lovely "summer house" directly behind it.

More names from her past she didn't want to remember appeared on her mental screen. Stella and Trudy were bullies from Gina's high school days. She might never forget the hateful things they said and did, and they lived in this neighborhood.

The light changed from green to yellow. Almost immediately, it turned red. Her foot touched the break pedal. If only something as simple as stepping on the break would remove unwelcome thoughts and memories from her mind.

Did Steve know Gina was a Bible believer? The thought had just popped into her head, but surely he knew. Someone would have told him. She dismissed the question.

She hadn't known how to respond to Steve's teasing without sounding sarcastic. Now she'd left his office, and dozens of snappy comebacks she would never use but would have put him in his place dominated her thoughts.

To be fair Steve would probably agree to every item in the agreement she wanted him to sign. The joking around could be his way of making her feel at ease.

Gina supposed she should give him the opportunity to prove himself. But why was Steve Bryson suddenly in her life? They had nothing in common except love for Amanda, and she didn't think he was a churchgoer. It wouldn't be easy, but maybe she should take what she learned in church as a child to heart and help him in some way.



THE COSTUME PARTY was in an old public building. By the time Gina arrived, the younger children had gathered around the refreshment table, wearing masks and colorful costumes. The older students in white aprons were standing around too, attempting to look busy. But where was Amanda?

A little boy dressed as Superman stood right in front of her. Gina smiled. "Do you know where Amanda Bryson is?"

He shook his head. "I'm with Miss Danton's group, and I'm new. I don't know anybody."

"Thanks, Superman."

Gina searched for Amanda. She didn't find her, but when Nicole Danton waved from across the room, she waved back. Always full of surprises Nicole looked hilarious. Gina couldn't be sure, but her business partner must be the Big Bad Wolf.

The headpiece alone made Gina want to laugh out loud, with those pointed wooly ears and outrageous red tongue dangling over Nicole's right shoulder. Gina wondered how a petite person like Nicole could hold up such a heavy mask.

Nobody fit the image of the Big Bad Wolf better than Steve Bryson, she mused. He probably wouldn't consider attending a party for children, much less wear a costume.



RED, blue, and yellow balloons floated in the air, attached to gold strings. They were taped around doors, windows, and on every wall. She couldn't have been more surprised to see how cheerful her partner had made the normally drab hall. *Good job!* Nicole had managed without her help.

But where was Amanda? And where did the photograph on the wall come from?

Gina went and stood in front of a blown-up photograph of a castle. As a child she'd loved stories about castles and knights in shining armor. She read the inscription under the picture:

"Travelers love German castles. Neuschwanstein Castle was built by King Ludwig II of Bavaria. Some call him the 'Fairytale King.'" Too bad she couldn't afford trips to Europe, so she could visit interesting locations.

She joined a line of children at the refreshment table. "Have any of you seen Amanda Bryson around here this morning?"

Everybody shrugged. Then a little girl wearing a red hood pointed to a door on the other side of the room. "I know who Amanda is, and I saw when she went to the kitchen."

"Thanks, Little Red Riding Hood." Gina smiled. "It's not every day I get to meet a celebrity like you."

The child looked down at her costume, grinning from ear to ear.

So Amanda was in the kitchen. Gina could go right in and talk to her. Instead she'd give Amanda a few minutes. She placed a tiny sandwich and a cup of ice cream on her plate, then glanced over at Nicole.

The children were eating ice cream and drinking red punch. Nicole had removed her mask and was also drinking punch while having a conversation with some of her students. Gina didn't want to interrupt.

She went and stood in one corner of the room. An opened newspaper lay on the table next to her. She glanced down at the headlines: "World Famous Scientist Makes Incredible Discovery." The name Ward Dremont was written in smaller

print. Wasn't he the horrible scientist she and her grandma read about, the one hoping to turn humans into super-humans or maybe super-animals?

Gina had first heard of him on television. Then the conversation with Grandma sparked her interest, and they'd agreed. Mad Scientist was the only name that fit a scientific genius like Ward Dremont, who reminded her of someone.

She was about to reach for the newspaper for a better look when Nicole started toward her from the other side of the room, carrying her refreshment plate with her. She still wasn't wearing her mask.

Nicole grinned. "Hi."

Gina nodded, smiling right back at her friend. "Hi, yourself."

Nicole's infectious grin started in her eyes, and from the animated expression on her face, she had something on her mind she was dying to share. *Cute* described Nicole perfectly. Her short black hair curled softly around her pixy face as it always did. Gina still wanted to read the newspaper but might have to wait until she got home and read her own copy.

"Sorry I couldn't be here any sooner." Gina motioned toward the poster of the castle on the other side of the room. "Where did the picture of the castle come from?"

"It was there when I arrived. Apparently a travel convention was held here recently. Guess they forgot to take that one down. So ..." Nicole giggled girlishly. "Out with it. I know you have something you want to tell me about your conversation with Steve Bryson. I can hardly wait to hear it."

"The meeting went well." For now Gina hoped to leave out the part about accepting the job offer.

Nicole shook her head. Ebony curls trembled. "I don't think I've heard all you have to tell. Come on, Gina. I'm asking for details. Is Amanda's father as big a flirt as we've always heard?"

Gina shrugged because she didn't want to talk about Steve Bryson. "As I said, the interview went well." She glanced toward



one of the yellow balloons. “By the way, the decorations are great. Sorry I couldn’t help.”

“No problem. The older children filled in. You can do the decorations next time.”

Nicole put her plate on the table next to the newspaper and attempted to consume an especially runny ice cream cone. A drop of strawberry ice cream dripped down the front of her brown velvet wolf costume.

“Lick around the edges,” Gina suggested.

“I’m trying.”

Gina knew better than to tackle something as potentially messy as an ice cream cone and instead dipped a plastic spoon into her cardboard cup. The cold sweet taste of vanilla soon filled her mouth.

Nicole appeared to be holding up rather well if, as Gina thought, her boyfriend was on the verge of breaking up with her. Nicole and Robert went out on the previous night. Gina was eager to hear how things turned out, but it was up to her friend to choose the time and place to answer those kinds of questions.

“You’ve stalled long enough.” Nicole sent her a heart-to-heart appraisal. “I want to know what happened during the interview with Steve Bryson.”

“I’m not stalling. Mr. Bryson is merely the father of one of my students. Amanda lived with her mother until Myra’s untimely death in the boating accident. All I wanted to do was meet her father, since Amanda will be living with him now.”

“Are you sure something isn’t going on between you two? I saw a certain look in your eyes when I mentioned him. I haven’t seen you smile like that in ages.”

Gina hesitated, searching for a comeback to end the war before it got started. Then one of Nicole’s students came into view.

Dressed as a fairy princess, she came right up to them. Her shimmering pink costume brushed against Nicole’s velvety one. The little girl stood on tiptoes, whispering something in Nicole’s

ear. Glitter-dust, like pink snowflakes, fell around their feet. Then Nicole nodded and smiled, patting the child on the shoulder, and the fairy princess went to join the other children. But would Nicole still smile when she learned Gina accepted the job Mr. Bryson offered?

After another long moment, Gina broke down and told Nicole about the new job.

“Why would you consider taking a job like that?” Nicole demanded.

She’d sounded angry. However, Gina knew Nicole well enough to know it was an act, designed to ruffle Gina’s feathers a little.

“You know we’re planning to build a learning center this summer,” Nicole went on. “Do you expect me to supervise the work all by myself?”

“The bank loan didn’t go through.” The edges of Gina’s mouth turned up, hoping to put a positive stamp on the news. However, she knew from experience her smile probably looked forced. “Mr. Swain at the bank said we didn’t qualify, but ...”

“But?” Nicole looked as if she’d lost her last friend.

“I’m sorry. If I go to Colorado and tutor Amanda, Mr. Bryson promised to make us a rent-to-own loan so we can build the center. I think we’re lucky to have gotten a deal like that.”

“I can’t believe this guy,” Nicole fumed. “Getting you to accept his employment offer the way he did was bad enough. Offering to give us a personal loan to sweeten the deal? Well, I have to ask why, Gina? What does Bryson get out of all this? You?”