

Chapter 1

Jacob Elliott flipped his left-turn signal on and patiently waited for Mrs. Moyer to pull out of her parking space. He knew it was Mrs. Moyer because her dog, Harold, was frantically clawing at the back window of her station wagon. Jacob Elliott was not especially good at remembering people, but he never forgot a dog. He was debating the merits of this peculiarity when a gleaming, cherry-red sports car zipped around the corner and beat him out of Mrs. Moyer's spot.

The red car door instantly flew open. Two shapely legs extended themselves from the driver's side, and a delicate blonde emerged. She threw her hands into the air in a gesture of furious exasperation and gave the door a

thunderous slam, catching the hem of her swirly pink skirt in the jaws of the powerful machine. She glared at the skirt contemptuously, gave a yank, and tore herself loose—leaving half a yard of pink material held hostage by the car. Without even so much as a backward glance she flounced off to the supermarket, fists clenched, eyes narrowed, nose defiantly tipped upward.

Jacob Elliott sat wide-eyed and slack jawed in disbelief as the glossy blond curls disappeared behind the automatic glass doors. He felt a smile creep into the corners of his mouth and a disturbing rush of heat burn across his belly. He was in love.

Life, Amy Klasse fumed, was not fair. You do all the right things, and *bam!* You get kicked in the teeth. It made her furious, especially since innocent children were going to be among the hapless victims.

Wrenching a wire cart out of the cart stack, she viciously pushed it toward the vegetables. She glared at her shredded skirt. Of all the lousy luck; now, on top of

everything else, she'd ruined her favorite outfit. Darn that car. And it wasn't as if she could afford to buy another pink skirt: She was unemployed. She'd been unemployed for twenty minutes. She looked at her watch. No, make that thirty-five minutes. All because of a chicken. A *chicken*, for crying out loud! She muttered a well-chosen expletive and indiscriminately grabbed a grapefruit from a huge display. "A chicken!" she exclaimed, thumping her fist against her forehead.

Jake watched in absolute astonishment as his newfound love flung a grapefruit into her cart and took off in a blind rage. The remaining grapefruits hesitated for a moment in precarious limbo, and then hurled themselves onto the floor like so many lemmings making the final, fatal, migration. Jake stopped a grapefruit with the side of his foot and flipped it into the air, like a soccer ball. He scooped up several more and carefully lined them up in their bin.

From the corner of his eye he caught the infuriated blonde heading for the fresh

eggs. "Oh, no," he said, groaning, "not the eggs."

In silent horror, he watched as she chose a carton and in some magical way managed to grasp only the top lid, spilling the entire dozen eggs into the immaculate glass case. The eggs instantly exploded on their companions, oozing across gleaming shelves, sliming into pristine crevices.

The blonde stared at the eggs as if they were aliens. She shook her head and muttered something indiscernible while Jake doubled over his own cart in an attempt to abort the laughter that was rising in his throat.

In his entire life he'd never come across a female who was that outraged, that clumsy, and that sexy. She wasn't sexy by centerfold standards, but there was definitely something about her that increased his heart rate. He liked the way her short blond curls bounced when she walked. He liked her peaches-and-cream coloring and her wide cornflower blue eyes, and the way she carried her slight frame. And most of all, Jake was intrigued by the intensity of her fury, the way she could

muster her pride and walk away from disaster. She was not a woman whose life would be ruined by a broken fingernail.

A stockboy appeared with a mop and sponge. "Don't worry about it," he told Amy. "Happens all the time."

Amy nodded numbly. Lord, what a mess. Those eggs were like her life—scrambled. She decided she didn't want eggs anyway. Eggs reminded her of chickens; and you know what chickens do—they steal people's jobs!

She proceeded down the aisles at a much more cautious pace, selecting fixings for a spaghetti dinner. She intended to go home, brew up some of her fantastic spaghetti sauce, and eat until she burst. Then she would sit in front of the TV and make the most of feeling sorry for herself. She hefted a bag of cat litter into her cart and continued on.

Jake saw the tear in the bottom of the litter bag. He could have told her. He could have introduced himself and explained that she was leaving a trail of cat litter that wound its way through the bulk-food

section and staunchly marched through sanitary products, but he didn't. It was much more fun to observe her at a distance and follow the granules.

Besides, he knew when he would make his move. Calamity Jane didn't have a purse, and there were no pockets that he could see in her bedraggled skirt. His guess was that she'd gone off in such a huff that she'd left her money behind. He pursued her at a leisurely pace, selecting a bottle of burgundy to accompany her spaghetti dinner and adding a frozen pie for dessert.

He lined up behind his quarry at the checkout, feeling an unsettling surge of affection for her while his anxiety ran amok. What if his plan didn't work? What if she was married? She didn't have a ring on her finger, but that was no guarantee. Maybe she lost her ring this morning when she was bathing the baby.

He peered over her shoulder and warily watched the fresh mushrooms and sweet peppers glide along the belt. She'd probably burned down three kitchens and poisoned countless men. Could that be why she wasn't

wearing a ring? Most likely she'd killed her husband—accidentally run him over with her flashy red car. Maybe he should reconsider . . . Nah.

The checker smiled at Amy. "Forty-three dollars and seventy-six cents."

Amy froze. No purse. There was a sweep of momentary panic until she mentally retraced her steps and assured herself the purse was safely stowed in her locker at the station. This is what happens when you lose control of your emotions, she thought. You make an idiot of yourself in the supermarket.

Jake waited. Timing was everything. You couldn't look too eager when you were picking women up at the supermarket like this. Not that he'd ever done it before, but he just knew you had to be cool about these things.

Amy pressed her lips together in dismay. "I'm sorry. I don't have my purse with me."

Now. Jake leaned forward. "Is there a problem?" Lord, she smelled wonderful when you got this close to her. Sweet, like honeysuckle, he thought. And her voice was

clear and musical. Her laughter would be like that, too, he decided.

The checker looked unconcerned. "She forgot her purse."

"Oh." Steady, Elliott, he cautioned. Subtlety, that's the key word. You have to be subtle. He turned his big soft brown eyes to Amy. "Do you live far away? Maybe you can call someone to bring the money. A neighbor?" Slight pause. "Your husband?" Clever, he thought, very clever. Hold your breath . . .

She looked despondent. "I just moved into the neighborhood. I don't know anyone, and I don't have a husband."

Whew! She didn't have a husband. Jake tried to control the smile that was twitching across his mouth. "Maybe I can help. I'd be happy to loan you the money."

"That's very nice of you, but I couldn't let you do that. You don't even know me."

Jake studied her flushed face, allowing his gaze to roam from her cap of shiny curls to her slightly upturned nose and kissable bow-shaped mouth. Her neck was smooth and elegant, her breasts small and round.

His gaze lingered at the torn skirt, wondering at the slender legs hidden within. "That's true. I don't know you, and you do look a little . . . um, unkempt."

Amy looked down at her skirt. "It was my car. It ate my skirt."

Jake nodded sympathetically. He glanced at the bags of groceries sitting in her cart. "I'll tell you what, I'll make a deal with you. It looks to me like you've got the makings of a spaghetti dinner there. As you can see"—he pointed to his cartful of TV dinners—"my culinary skills stop at defrosting. I'll pay for your food, if you'll make me a home-cooked meal. Fair?"

Now it was Amy's turn to take a long hard look at Jacob Elliott, six feet tall with broad shoulders, slim hips, and running shoes held together with surgical tape. A few crisp black hairs curled from the open neck of his shirt. His sleeves had been rolled to the elbow, displaying strong corded forearms, and Amy guessed that the shirt hid muscles in all the right places. He was perfectly yummy. Coffee-colored hair waved over his eyes and along his neck,

giving him a slightly rugged look, which was substantiated by a five o'clock shadow. Perfect teeth flashed white against a dashing smile any pirate would have been proud to own.

Amy felt a shiver run along her spine and instinctively checked to make sure her blouse was buttoned. "I don't think so," she answered, trying to ignore the fact that her mouth had gone dry as sand.

The checkout clerk shook her head in disbelief. "What a ninny."

Amy felt her jaw drop. "I beg your pardon?"

The older woman stood with her hand on her hip and grinned. "Wouldn't catch me turning down a chance to cook *his* dinner."

"I don't know this man. He could be an axe murderer."

"Honey, this is Dr. Elliott. Everyone knows Dr. Elliott. He owns the veterinary clinic just around the corner."

The checker one aisle over leaned across her cash register. "Dr. Elliott saved Sarah Maxwell's cat when it was run over by a truck. Cat was a terrible mess, but Dr. Elliott

worked on that poor little thing and stitched it together like new.”

“And Frannie Newfarmer’s beagle,” a woman two carts behind Amy added. “He nursed her beagle back to health when it was poisoned by the gardening service. Dr. Elliott slept in the office every night for almost a week, watching over that dog, till he was sure the little fella would live.”

Jacob Elliott smiled down at Amy. “See, you can trust me.”

Not by the hairs on your chinny chin chin, she thought. There was unmistakable mischief in his liquid brown eyes—bedroom eyes. And his wide mouth had a sensual curve to it that went straight to the pit of her stomach. He might be great at saving beagles, but she’d bet he was hell on single women. “I don’t live far from here,” Amy explained. “I’ll drive home and get some money.”

Jake slouched against his cart, counting the seconds until she realized her keys were locked in her car. When the startled expression appeared in her eyes he calmly paid for both their groceries and escorted

her to the parking lot. "The large jeep-type vehicle," he told her. "The purple job with the big black dog."

Amy stumbled slightly at the sight of the "purple job." It was big and square, more maroon than purple, splattered with mud and riddled with rust. A coat hanger antenna zigzagged crazily from the hood, and a bashed-in rear bumper sported a faded sticker that read HAVE YOU HUGGED YOUR VETERINARIAN TODAY? She'd never been one to look a gift horse in the mouth, but she wasn't sure about being hauled home in a car Fred Flintstone would have rejected. It was definitely past its prime . . . by about three hundred years.

Jake opened the door and put the groceries in back with the dog. "This is Spot. Spot, meet—"

"Amy Klasse." She patted Spot on the head. "One of your patients?"

"My roommate."

The dog was black, a sleek, shiny ebony without a single white or brown hair on his entire body. "I know I'm going to regret

asking, but why is this animal named 'Spot'?"

"I always wanted a dog named 'Spot.'"

"Of course."

Jake turned the key in the ignition and seemed unperturbed by the loud grinding sounds emanating from the engine. "Do you have any roommates?"

"I live with a cat."

"That's it?" Jake asked, barely able to keep from grinning.

"Pardon?"

"Just a cat?" No mother, father, sister, brother, girl friend, boyfriend, maiden aunt? He'd never felt so lucky.

"Just a cat." No husband. No fiancé. No boyfriend. She wasn't sure why. Most likely it was her lifestyle. Her alarm rang at four A.M. Quick shower, fix hair, English muffin, apply beginnings of makeup, get to studio for early-morning taping. Afternoon rehearsal and promotional appearances. Supper. Early to bed—alone. And then there was—that. That physical, um, situation.

Amy sighed. She never sighed—especially

not about her life. She liked her life. At least she had liked it until today, when she lost her job, ripped her skirt, made a shambles of the supermarket, and last but *not* least, entrusted herself to the care of Jacob Elliott, veterinarian extraordinaire, total stranger.

Panic rippled through her. She didn't know this man, and not only was he driving her home . . . he was invited for dinner. She couldn't believe she was doing this. Cautious Amy, the woman who avoided singles bars like the plague, had just gotten picked up in the supermarket. She took a deep breath and told herself to stay calm. It wasn't really a pickup. More like a rescue. And he had excellent recommendations from the checkout ladies.

Still, there was something unsettling about him. His appearance shouted laid-back slob, even though his eyes crackled with energy. He was just the sort of man she'd diligently ignored: devilishly attractive and impossible to categorize. He was the sort of man who'd certainly complicate a woman's life. And her life was complicated enough, she thought. "Definitely!"

Jake looked at her from the corner of his eye. "You're not going to break anything, are you?"

She crossed her arms over her chest and said, "Hmmm." It was the sort of snorting sound you might expect a bull to make before charging.

"I probably shouldn't ask such a delicate question, but who are you talking to, and why the devil are you so mad?"

"Myself, and because I've been replaced by a chicken. A seven-pound Rhode Island Red that can cluck 'The Star-Spangled Banner' and count with its stupid chicken toes."

"I don't think chickens have toes."

"Ha!" Amy said. "A lot you know."

It had been several years since Penn State veterinary school, but Jake was almost certain chickens didn't have toes. Probably not the best time to press the issue, he decided.

The engine finally caught and three loud volleys exploded from the tailpipe. Amy had never been in a car that backfired. She had always equated such mechanical indignities

with human intestinal problems. She slunk into her seat, praying not to be recognized. Life could only get better. This had to be the bottom, didn't it?

Jake exhaled a long sigh of contentment. Everything was working perfectly. Life couldn't get any better. "Where to, my lady?"

"King's Park West. Wheatstone Drive."

The car chugged out of the parking lot and headed west. "About this chicken . . ."

"I'd like to feed it to my cat."

"Not many people are replaced by a chicken."

"Yeah. Lucky me."

"Just exactly what sort of job did you have?"

"Lulu the Clown. I hosted a daytime television show for preschoolers on one of the local stations. I sang a little and danced a little and told stories."

"I've seen that show. My nephew loves it." Lulu the Clown. Jake got an instant image of the lively young female clown with a bush of curly red hair and long slender legs clad in red-and-white striped

stockings. He remembered her as being sensational, with an obvious affection for her Munchkin audience.

Spot slung his massive head over the back of the front seat and rested his jaw on Amy's shoulder. Amy unconsciously scratched the dog between the ears. "After college I tried teaching first grade, but my principal thought my methods were . . . unorthodox."

"Let me guess. Lulu?"

Amy grinned. "Sometimes. Sometimes I'd be Katy Kitten or a medieval princess, or Annie Oakley. I just wanted to make things more interesting. More entertaining. Time can pass very slowly for a seven-year-old who's away from his mom six hours a day."

Jake wanted to punch out that principal. In fact, Jake was ready to punch out anyone who didn't appreciate Amy.

Good Lord, he silently groaned, how could he be so besotted by someone he'd only known for ten minutes? He made a conscious effort to relax, loosening his white-knuckled grip on the wheel, easing the tension at the base of his neck.

There had been strong feelings for a few other women in his life, but nothing like this. Nothing that hit him so fast and so hard. This was scary. Four hours ago he was in surgery, happily operating on Tommy Hostrup's cat. Four hours ago he'd been contented, well adjusted, a respected member of the community . . . and now he was sweating bullets because he was afraid he was going to attack the delicious little morsel sitting next to him. If she knew what he was thinking she'd probably jump out the window.

Amy indicated that he should take a right-hand turn, and continued. "Anyway, when the school year came to a close I decided maybe I wasn't destined to teach first grade. I loved working with children, but I needed something with more personal freedom . . . more action. The idea for a TV show came to me in the middle of the night. I woke up in a sweat, thinking, holy cow, wouldn't it be great to entertain hundreds of kids at a time instead of just twenty-five! So, the next day I got dressed up in my clown suit and marched into the studio."

Amy rolled her eyes. "I still don't believe I had the nerve to do that! I read *The Little Engine That Could* to the station manager. He sat there the whole time, smoking a cigar and looking at me as if I was from outer space. I was into the second round of singing 'I'm a Little Teapot' when Gilda Szalagy, the Morning Cooker, walked in and announced she was leaving to take a job in Atlanta. They gave me her slot on a trial basis, and I've been Lulu the Clown ever since . . . until four o'clock today."

"Didn't you have a contract?"

She shook her head. "Nope. It's a mom-and-pop-type station. We just went day by day. It was always very low key. Very pleasant."

"Did they say why they were replacing you?"

"Two weeks ago Sam, the station manager, retired. The new station manager said the show needed a fresh face."

"Yeah, but a fresh beak? Hard to believe a chicken could entertain kids for a whole hour."

"The chicken comes with a trainer. I

suppose she'll read the stories and sing the songs."

"And the chicken will do the dancing?"

Amy grinned. "Listen, I've seen the chicken dance—it's pretty good."

"I bet its legs aren't nearly as nice as yours."

"Thank you." It was a funny little compliment, but it made her feel better. Now that the anger was subsiding she was left with an empty sadness. It had been the injustice and the suddenness of the action that had stung her heart. She'd worked hard to entertain and educate her young audience. She felt a responsibility to those children. What would they think when she simply didn't appear tomorrow? How would they know that she loved them . . . that she hadn't willy-nilly abandoned them?

That rotten new manager hadn't even given her a chance to say good-bye. She couldn't believe he'd even been hired. Who needed to have *the* highest ratings on the air? Amy thought they'd been doing just fine. She felt a tear catch in her lower lashes. "Damn."

Jake covered her hand with his. "It's okay."

"I didn't even get a chance to say good-bye. I asked them for one more day. Just one more day, and they said *no*."

He didn't know how to comfort her. He saw the brightness in her eyes and was scared to death that she was about to burst into tears. He waited a moment. "So now what?"

"I don't know."

She had rent to pay, car payments, utility bills. Thank goodness, she had a savings account, but that wouldn't last forever.

"If I could find a temporary job to get me through the summer, I could go back to teaching school in September," she said.

Jake didn't even hesitate. "You're in luck. I could give you a job. I happen to need a receptionist." He needed a receptionist like a hole in the head, but he'd do anything to be near her. He quickly reviewed his budget and determined he'd be able to pay her a modest salary. The awkward part would be finding work for her in the small, two-man office.

Work for Jacob Elliott? Amy's heart flopped in her chest and her stomach contracted into a knot of anxiety. What an odd reaction, she thought. Why was she so panic-stricken at the thought of working for Jacob Elliott? Because Jacob Elliott was the most incredible male she'd ever met, and there were a whole bunch of warm, tingling sensations occurring in private places throughout her body. If she could tingle like this when she was depressed, what would happen in a day or two when she became her usual cheery self? Those tingles were going to get her into a mess of trouble if she wasn't careful.

She was so preoccupied with her thoughts that she almost missed her house. "There!" she gasped. "The brick Cape Cod with the tan trim."

Jake hit the brakes and made a fast turn into the driveway. He squinted at the two-foot-high grass and twelve-foot-tall hedge. Ivy crept over almost every inch of brick, snaking across windows, peeping down the chimney, slithering along drainpipes.

Border shrubs had grown to gigantic proportions.

"You live here?" Jake thought the house looked like it was being eaten alive by its own greenery. The five-foot-high, six-foot-wide spreading juniper that had spread across her front stoop reminded him of Jaws.

"It's a little overgrown."

Jake bit his lip to keep from laughing. A little overgrown? She could lose a rhinoceros in that lawn.

Amy jumped from the Jeep and balanced a grocery bag on her hip. "I just moved into this house last month. I've been so busy fixing the inside that I just haven't gotten around to the yard."

She paused at the front door and skeptically surveyed her property. "To tell you the truth, I'm not sure where to begin. I've never had a yard before. And this bush . . ."

"Jaws?"

Amy giggled. "Yeah. Sometimes I worry it's going to reach out and grab me."

“Couldn’t blame it.”

Amy felt the keys slide through her fingers and land on the cement porch. She’d never heard anyone’s voice change so quickly from casual joking to husky intimacy. His comment had been nothing more than a low murmur, deep and dusky, like fine smoky whiskey . . . or rustling sheets. She realized he was very close. His dark eyes caressed her lips, her throat . . . Holy Toledo, he was going to kiss her. Her heart frantically pounded in her chest. She took a small step backward—and fell off the small stoop into a blooming forsythia.

Jake couldn’t believe his eyes. For a brief moment Amy seemed gobbled up by the yellow bush. Two slim legs frantically waved amidst the leaves and flowers and there was a flash of pink panties. He’d taken a few women by surprise, but he’d never *ever* seen the unabashed terror that Amy had displayed before leaping into the forsythia. Lord, he was a real lady killer. One smoldering look and he had her running for the hills.

He gently lifted her out of the bush and

set her on her feet. Bits of yellow flower and bright green leaves stuck in her hair. The white lace blouse had a small tear in the left sleeve.

Amy fluffed out her skirt as if she were the queen of England. "I got a little nervous," she explained.

"I noticed."

"I . . . um, I thought you were going to kiss me. I always get nervous about the first kiss."

"Only the first kiss?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Good. Then let's get the damn thing over with." He pulled her to him and touched his lips to hers. The kiss deepened, and as they melted together, the world seemed to stand still. Jake released her and took a shaky breath. "Maybe we'd better go inside now."

Amy blinked at him. She'd known him for less than fifteen minutes, and here he was, kissing her senseless. She really should be mad at him, she thought, but the truth was, she hadn't done anything to discourage the kiss. In fact, she'd been looking forward to it, in a terrified, curious sort of way. She

just hadn't expected the kiss to be so . . . magical.

"Earth to Amy."

"Boy, that was some kiss."

"Did you like it?"

"Yes. You're a terrific kisser." She bent to scoop up the groceries that had spilled and to hide her cheeks till the blush cooled down. Had she really just said that? "This sure has been a strange day."

She kicked the door open and ushered Jake into the cool interior. "Um, about the job offer. We certainly wouldn't want to go around kissing each other if we were working together. It would be . . . awkward."

Jake thought it would be wonderful. He couldn't imagine more ideal working conditions.

He set the grocery bags on the kitchen counter and looked around. It was nice. Light and airy. Beige wall-to-wall carpet in the living room-dining room. Creamy-colored sheers on the front windows. A big comfy-looking couch in sort of a rosy color. The walls were freshly painted eggshell

white. The house had an air of cleanliness and order. It was a peaceful haven—not what he would have expected of Lulu the Clown. And it was very different from his own cramped, messy apartment. He slouched against the counter.

“You’ve decided to take the receptionist job?”

“It would only be temporary.”

“Of course.”

“And no kisses.”

“Of course.”

Amy didn’t know whether she should trust his answers or not. He might have said “of course” but his eyes were sending a message all their own. It didn’t matter. She needed the job, and she could handle Jacob Elliott. She would be friendly but professional, pleasant but firm. Everything would be fine.

Amy drained her wineglass and dumped the package of ground meat into a large Pyrex bowl. She added an egg, a small amount of grated cheese, bread crumbs, and freshly chopped parsley. She narrowed

her eyes, and her upper lip curled slightly. "Now we have to be brave. We have to mush this stuff together. Are you ready?"

Jake raised an eyebrow. "What did you have in mind?"

"We gotta wump it a good one." She wrinkled her nose and plunged her fist into the mixture. "Wump." She stared glassy-eyed at her target. "Needs something. Ketchup."

Jake added a dollop of ketchup and returned to his stool in the middle of the kitchen. She was snockered—on one glass of wine. If he hadn't seen it with his own eyes he wouldn't have believed it.

The raw egg and ketchup squished between Amy's fingers. "Yuck! Lucky for you I have a strong stomach. Not everyone can mix meatballs with their bare hands," she said, plopping a lump of meatball goo in her hand. She attempted to roll it into a ball, but it stuck to her fingers and went flaccid in her palm. She looked at it in dismay and chewed on her lip. "Can't understand what's the matter. I'm always such a good meat-baller."

"Maybe we should just pop a couple of those TV dinners into the oven."

Amy held her hand up. "No need. I'll have everything under control in just a minute. More bread crumbs!" she ordered.

"Um . . . we're out of bread crumbs."

Amy paused. "Tell you the truth, I'm not hungry, anyway." She poured out more wine and leaned against the counter. Jake had four eyes. Funny she hadn't noticed that before. And he was fuzzy. She should bring that to his attention. "Jacob, you're fuzzy . . . and your mouth is crooked."

"How about we put some water on for coffee, hmm?"

"Never drink coffee. Makes me nervous." Amy placed her wineglass on the toaster. "Look, I can make my wineglass wobble on the toaster, can you do that?"

She took an unsteady step toward him and walked her fingers up the front of his shirt. "Know what? I'm drunk as a skunk. Good thing you're such a nice person. There are men who would take advantage of a situation like this."

Jake watched her fingers move from his

collar to his neck. They slid along the outer rim of his ear and tangled in his hair. He felt her breasts nudge against the wall of his chest and he wasn't sure if he deserved her trusting compliment.

"That's me . . . all-around nice person." What was she doing now? Lord, she was nibbling at the base of his throat. And her hands . . . where were her hands going? "Listen, Amy, even nice people lose control. I mean, they have moments when—"

"Not me. Never lose control. Cool as a cucumber."

"Easy for you to say, but it's hard for me to be cool when you've got your hands on my backside."

Amy looked down. Sure enough, her hands had found their way into his back pockets. She must be dreaming because she'd never attacked—never even *thought* of attacking—a man in her life. "Oh. Does that bother you?"

"Yes!"

"Me too. Is it warm in here?"

"I thought you were cool. Never lost control."

“Never have before.” Her eyes opened wide. “This could be a moment-ee-ous occasion. You know why, Jake? Because you make me tingle. That’s a first. Are you going to be the first? Wanna know where I tingle?”

“I could be your first?”

“Don’t you want to know about the tingles?”

“No. I want to know about the momentous occasion.”

She shook her head sadly. “It’s never happened.”

“Wait a minute,” Jake said, “don’t tell me you’ve never—”

“Never.”

“You mean, you’re a—”

“Yup.”

A virgin, for Pete’s sake. A twenty-six-year-old virgin. He’d thought they’d gone the way of the dinosaur. Jake held her at arm’s length. What the devil was he supposed to do with a drunk virgin? Not that he was in the habit of taking advantage of defenseless women—but he had plans for this particular woman. Romantic plans.

"D'ya know, some men don't like that I'm a . . . um, inexperienced person."

Jake gently tucked an errant curl behind her ear and realized, with chagrined shock, that he wasn't one of those men. It had caught him by surprise, but the more he thought about it, the better he liked it. It was refreshing to find a woman who'd decided to wait for marriage. And if Amy had decided to wait for marriage, then that was fine with him—because he'd already decided to marry her.

Suddenly, she went slack in his arms, as if some great weight had descended upon her shoulders. "Amy?"

"Wow," she said. "Wine sure makes me tired."

Jake scooped her up into his arms and grinned. The little tyke was out on her feet. "Where's your bedroom?"

She nuzzled against his shoulder. "You animal."

"That's me, Jake the Animal. Is your bedroom upstairs or downstairs?"

"Downstairs." Amy's eyes opened wide. "Are you going to . . . deflower me?"

"Not tonight."

"Darn." Amy was surprised at that. Virginitiy had been fine this morning. It had felt comfortable last night and last week. It was all the chicken's fault, she thought. Somehow, the chicken had made her dissatisfied with virginitiy. Gosh, her head felt funny.

"I think you'll feel differently in the morning," Jake said, smiling. He gently set her down on her bed and set off to find a nightie for her to change into. He opened a dresser drawer and found red silk teddies, flimsy panties, and wispy lace bras. Didn't look like virginal clothes to him. "Uh, you sure—"

"Trust me. I'm as pure as you can get." She gave him a big wink.

"So where are your sensible nightgowns?"

Amy looked at him with unfocused eyes. "Jake? I have the whirlies."

Jake shook his head. "How could you get so drunk on one glass of wine?"

"I never drink anything stronger than root beer."

"So why did you have wine tonight?"

"I wasn't thinking. You have that effect on me. I get all flustered, and then I do dopey things."

Jake felt his heart skip a beat.

"And you make me tingle. I've never tingled before. You know what? I like to tingle."

"Maybe you're hyperventilating."

"All by myself?"

Jake grinned. "Usually hyperventilating is a solitary activity."

"Well, I'm tired of solitivity actarities."

"Okay, maybe sometime when you're sober we can hyperventilate together." He selected an ivory nightshirt from her lingerie drawer. It wasn't sensible, but it wasn't totally decadent, either. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he began to carefully unbutton Amy's blouse.

"I thought you weren't going to deflower me."

"I'm not deflowering you. I'm dedressing you. I'm putting you to bed. Alone."

"Party pooper."

"Don't push me."

Jake slid her shirt off her shoulders and groaned at the sight of her in a practically transparent, filmy lace bra. This was torture. Retribution for cheating on his third-grade spelling test. Penance for running yellow lights. And there was Mary Ann Kwiatkowski. When he was in the sixth grade he'd traded a three-page book report for a peek under Mary Ann Kwiatkowski's skirt. She'd gotten a D on the report, and now God was getting him for swindling Mary Ann Kwiatkowski.

Amy grabbed the nightshirt. "I don't think it's proper to dedress someone unless she asks you to." Amy smiled. "Will you?"

He clenched his teeth. *Elliott, don't even think of it!* "Will you be okay if I leave you alone?"

"I suppose so, but, well, this has been very disappointing, Jacob. I finally decide to ask for help dedressing, and what happens? I can't find anyone to do it."

Jake smiled and closed the bedroom door. He suspected this was not an ordinary day in the life of Amy Klasse. Amy Klasse was

obviously intelligent and gutsy. She had high professional and personal standards and possessed the self-discipline to maintain those standards . . . until tonight. Her self-discipline had done a definite nosedive halfway into the meatballs.

He returned to the kitchen and took time to examine the room. Like the rest of the house, it was bright but serene. A rose-and-turquoise Tiffany lamp hung over a round pine table. A deep-purple African violet in a new clay pot served as a centerpiece. The appliances looked new—as did the countertops and pine cabinets. Lulu the Clown must have commanded a decent salary. The house wasn't flashy, but it had a feel of well-chosen quality to it. Jake liked it. It was comfy.

He looked at the bowl of meatball gook and scratched his head. He should do something with it, but what? When in doubt, put it in the refrigerator. He poured himself another glass of wine and hummed happily as he slid a frozen chicken dinner into the oven. He remembered Spot and added a tray of frozen lasagna.