

EMBRACING THE QUIET
NIGHT

A MISSOULA SMOKEJUMPERS CHRISTMAS



PIPER STONE

BLUSHING BOOKS

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CHAPTER 1



Smokejumpers: Elite group of firefighters, specially trained for massive land fires

Jackals: Missoula smokejumping team comprised of seven men

“*J*ingle Bells. Jingle Bells. Jingle all the way.” Jessica Dunn twirled as they walked out of the restaurant and glanced at the darkened skies. Missoula was blanketed by fresh snow, ice crystals shimmering in the lights of the city. She breathed in as she held her arms, delighting in the various Christmas decorations adorning almost every building.

“I love to hear you sing,” Stoker Hansen said as he moved closer.

“This is a special time of year. I would love to record a holiday album.”

“Then, why don’t you?”

“I don’t know.” She looked up and down the street, wishing every day could be this magical. Her thoughts drifted to her now defunct music career. For years, she’d been one of the leading female rock singers, fronting the popular band, Fringe. Years of road trips, concerts in front of tens of thousands and damn good money had turned into performing in front of thinning crowds,

lackluster CD sales and her wretched mood swings. The final blow? Being kicked out of her own band. Coming to Missoula, Montana had been on a whim, a dare even. *Find your soul again*, the experts had told her the moment they shoved her out and locked the door. Starting over had been difficult, gut wrenching. Staying in an incredible town was something else entirely and had Stoker written all over her decision. She shuddered as she remembered their intense love affair. The rough and rugged smokejumper was every woman's fantasy.

Inching directly behind her, he nuzzled into her neck. "Talk to that big-time producer of yours. He'll do anything you ask."

"I don't have the contract signed just yet." A product of the music industry. She'd been led down a trail then nothing signed, sealed and delivered. She'd been asked to sing at a local restaurant just one song, then the country music industry came calling, begging her to come to LA. A bone of contention, even coming between her relationship.

"You will, baby. You will."

She didn't want to talk about work, either hers or his. The fire season had been brutal, taking him away for weeks at a time. Right now, they were supposed to be enjoying time together. Their first Christmas. Everything had to be perfect. They were supposed to be planning their wedding but between his work and her unexpected trips, everything was on hold. "You know what? I can smell snow in the air. I think we're going to have a white Christmas."

He inhaled and pulled her against his chest. "And I only smell the exotic perfume of the woman I love."

"Exotic. When did my smokejumper learn such big words?" She folded her arms over his, her body quivering all over.

He swung her around, his hips swaying back and forth. "Since my woman came into my life."

"Your woman, eh?" Laughing, she slid her arms around his neck.

"Baby, you're all mine." Capturing her mouth, he pressed his tongue past her lips as his grip became tight, powerful.

The French kiss was intense, driving her onto her toes. She intertwined her fingers in his hair, savoring the way his throbbing cock pressed hard against her stomach. Lightheaded, she shuddered as the moment of passion continued and for a few precious seconds, nothing else mattered. There was nowhere else she'd rather be than in his arms. Every part of her tingling, she fell into the kiss, hungering more than usual. This man, this danger loving, powerhouse of a man managed to thrill her every day. Good looks, a muscular body and one hell of a kisser.

When he broke the kiss, he nipped her lower lip, a slight growl pushing past his lips. He stood back and brushed the tip of his finger across her nose. "You are one amazing woman."

Hearing his words gave her a series of kinky thoughts. She pressed her hand against his chest, fingering his leather jacket. "And you're my hero." When he tensed, she grabbed a handful of his shirt. "You're everybody's hero."

"That's where you're wrong." He tried to pull away.

"Don't do that. Please." She licked the underside of his chin. He'd never been comfortable with being called a savior, a hero or even a man of distinction. His days being held captive during the war in Afghanistan continued to give him nightmares. While she'd never said anything, she remained wide awake on the nights he struggled in his sleep, moaning until he cried himself to sleep.

"Not doing anything, baby. I'm fine."

Sure, you are. She held back saying all the words, the phrases she'd practiced over the months spent together. He wasn't ready for her brand of psychological overtures. "Tell you what. I'd like to get a Christmas tree."

"Tonight?"

"Tonight. It's December ninth. Time is running out, big man. Santa needs to have a place to nestle the dozens of gifts." She pushed back, giving him a heated look.

"Dozens. Wow. Someone thinks they are deserving." He swatted her ass, grinning like a kid.

"I'll have you know that when I was a little girl, we put up the tree and all the decorations right after Thanksgiving. And you bet, I deserve."

Stoker raised a single eyebrow and took a step back, his expression mischievous. "Then a tree you shall have. The presents must be earned."

Purring, she slid her hand down his chest to his crotch, fingering his already swollen cock. "I don't think I'll have any problem with that."

"Mmm... I just bet you won't. I know the perfect place to get a blue spruce, the only Christmas tree anyone should have."

As a burst of wind swirled around them, she wrinkled her nose. "We always had an artificial tree. Saves the environment."

He looked away briefly then grabbed her arms. "You are kidding me, right?"

"Not kidding at all. No needles falling. No need to water and the tree can stay up longer." Noticing the frown, she rubbed the tip of her gloved finger across his nose. "Oh, come on. A Christmas tree is all about the lights, the decorations."

Gripping both sides of her coat, he yanked her forward. "You live in Montana now. Our ways are different."

"The cowboy way?" She couldn't help but smile. Life in Montana was indeed different than Florida.

"Woman, we forge through the forest and fresh cut our trees. Wood for fires. You know what I'm about."

"Big he-man. Have ax, will cut?" His furrowed brow made her laugh.

He issued another growl. "I thought you adored my ax."

"Uh-huh. Let's go to Target."

"Not a chance." Kissing the top of her forehead, he gripped her hand. "We do things my way this year. Come on."

"Following your orders, sir?" Jessica leaned her head on his upper arm as they walked toward the truck. She'd never been happier. Life had taken a dramatic turn in the last few months.

"I *am* in charge." Stoker winked as he unlocked her door.

She pursed her mouth before peppering a kiss on his lips, her whisper full of sensual husk. "Something you never allow me to forget."

He took her hand, placing her fingers over his bulging groin. "Not a chance, sunshine. I know the perfect place to get an amazing tree." He eased her fingers to his lips, kissing the tips. "When we get home, I'm going to do some really bad things to you."

"Under the Christmas tree?"

"Smack under the tree. I'm going to peel away your clothes, kissing every inch of your body, sucking on your nipples until you beg me for more."

A shiver raced down her spine. "Do I get to play?"

"Only if you're a very good girl. Then again, I might have to give you a spanking. Long and hard."

"But I've been very obedient."

He cupped her face, rubbing his thumb across her cheek. "No, you're one naughty girl. I have a brush with your name on it. Yes, your naked body thrown over my lap. Just what you need. Imagine what you're going to get in your stocking this year."

As he closed the door, she bit her lip, giddy from the concept. She was wet and hot all over, desire bursting to the surface. She'd never seen him so happy, then again, she'd never been so content. The holiday season was turning out to be amazing. A spanking. She pressed her hand over her mouth, suppressing a moan. Getting used to his dominating ways had been... unusual. The entire team of smokejumpers believed domestic discipline was the utmost in a relationship. She continued to have her doubts.

Stoker closed the door and leaned over, opening the glove compartment. "In case you didn't realize how prepared I am." As he eased a brush into the limited light, he rubbed his hand down her thigh. "Anytime. Anywhere."

Jessica whimpered, more for effect than anything else. "You would have spanked me here? Right in this parking lot?"

He eased the key into the ignition then exhaled. "Let me think."

Crack!

She jumped when he smacked the brush against his hand.

"As I said." Shoving the implement back into the small box, he closed the door and grabbed a quick kiss.

She settled into the seat, attaching the seatbelt as her mind wandered to sinful places. Leaning forward, she studied the sky, just able to see clouds moving through the darkness. "A storm is coming."

"Not yet." He looked over and grabbed her hand, squeezing.

"Where are we getting this infamous tree?"

"There's this tree lot, not too far from Ziggy's. Ever since I can remember, my family has gotten a tree from the Michaels family. They have the best spruce trees around and the price is reasonable. Good people."

Jessica glanced over at his face, the way his entire body became animated as he talked. "Why don't you cut your own?"

"Because the land is precious. Sure, there are tree farms within driving distance, but being able to help the local folks means a hell of a lot to me. Mr. Michaels has had a rough life. That much I know. The trees are just special. The place is just around the corner."

There were so many wonderful aspects about living in Missoula, but buying local, sharing good times with so many people from town was a delightful highlight. "Then let's get the biggest tree he has."

"Twenty-footer?"

"At least."

Stoker laughed and made a turn, gripping the steering wheel as he pressed down on the accelerator. "You get to pick out the tree."

They both remained quiet and she crowded close to the console, her hand rubbing up and down his arm. She hadn't been able to figure out a special Christmas gift, even though ideas coursed through her mind every day. Nothing seemed right. Perfect. And

Stoker deserved the most incredible gift she could imagine. She groaned and watched the display of holiday lights, some garish, some merely a small reminder of the special season. From humongous blown up Santa's waving to anyone passing by to thousands of blinking lights, highlighting every inch of rooflines to sidewalks, the season seemed special.

"We're almost there. If it's anything like past years, he'll have hot chocolate ready."

"A perfect ending to a wonderful night."

"Darlin', you haven't seen anything yet. He might have the reindeer like he did last year."

She noticed his expression turning pensive. "You had a big tree?"

Hesitating, he shook his head and sighed. "No. I didn't have a tree last year. There wasn't a reason to celebrate. The firefighters did a special event at the lot. For charity. We had a good time."

Hearing the sadness in his voice, she squeezed his arm, unsure of what to say.

"All right. Here we..." Stoker's words trailed off as he eased the truck against the curb.

Jessica peered out the window. The lot was vacant, dark and there were no trees of any kind. "What happened?"

"I don't know." He eased the gear into park and climbed out of the truck.

Following, she could see the space had been partitioned off, as if anticipating a full lot. She noticed a cardboard sign, a wooden stake haphazardly stuck into the ground. She adjusted her collar, trying to keep out the wind, and moved closer. A single streetlight hovered overhead, the old florescent style lamp flickering on and off, creating a haunted feeling. She shook her head and fingered the lettering. Written in a red magic marker, the lettering itself appeared despondent, as if there was no life, no reason. "*No trees. No money. Merry Christmas.*" "Christ. That's horrible."

He kicked his heel into the dirt and gravel as he paced the area,

moving through the empty space. "He's always been here. Always. He makes money selling trees. Why would he do this?"

"Wouldn't he have to purchase the trees first?"

"You're right. I don't think he owns the land. I don't know. He and I talked every year, but I never really got to know him."

"Times have been rough for people. Maybe he couldn't afford to pay the price for the trees in the interim." She read the crude sign again then shoved her hands into her coat pockets. "There's other tree lots. Right?"

"Not like this. This place brings back so many memories. Mr. Michaels' trees were the best. I can't explain why."

"You don't have to." She moved even closer, until she was only a foot behind him. His tense shoulders, the way his breathing was ragged reminded her what a special man he was. Stoker took everything so personally, as if he continued to have the weight of the world on his shoulders. "Why don't we get an artificial this year?"

"No!" He hissed and flashed a look in her direction. "Just not the same. Okay? Let's look for another tree tomorrow."

"Baby, talk to me. Why does this bother you so much?"

"Doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does to me."

He sniffed and shuffled his feet, the silence remaining.

Give him space. Give him time. The words, the near mantra had lingered, flowing in the back of her mind since the beginning of their relationship, but she refused to allow the night to be ruined. Holding her breath, she eased her hands onto his shoulders, leaning in. "Let's go home."

He shook his head several times before nodding. "Yeah, home. Sounds good." His face remained pinched as he scanned the empty lot.

"I'll meet you back at the truck." She took a step away, fighting tears. He'd been brooding since just before Thanksgiving, his mood swings all over the place. Demons remained, furrowing deep

inside. When he said nothing, she turned and walked briskly back toward the vehicle. How the hell was she supposed to get through to him when he refused to talk to her? She yanked off her gloves and brushed away the wayward tears, refusing to succumb to sadness.

Whoosh!

“Oh!” Squealing, the air was pushed out of her as she was shoved to the ground. Twisting, she rolled in the snow as she tried to get out from under him, laughter floating between them.

Stoker maneuvered on top, thrusting her arms over her head.

“What are you doing?”

“Showing you who’s boss.” He held her down as he bent over, dragging the tip of his tongue across the seam of her mouth.

Sensing yet another shift in his mood, she jerked up, trying her best to free her hands. “We might have to renegotiate.”

“Not a chance.” He kissed the tip of her nose before climbing off and tugging her to her feet. “A warm bath. A spanking by the fire. A glass of wine. Then we shall see.”

“In that order?”

“Hmmm... Spanking first.” Sticking out his knee, he popped her over and swatted her ass several times until she yelped. “Now, we go home.”

Jessica lounged against his arm, her hand brushing back and forth across his crotch, as he drove home. Home was his cabin in the crest of the most gorgeous mountain range. The man had horses and the cabin was complete with an oversized stone fireplace. What wasn’t there to love? She switched on the radio, smiling as holiday music filled the small space.

The classic holiday station was filled with songs from the Big Band era, crooners creating what she’d consider the perfect mood. Music. The thought threw her mind into overdrive. Sadly, she remained tense, resisting glancing at her watch at least three times. She’d anticipated the call coming during the middle of dinner. The producer was a formidable man, refusing to take no for an answer.

There'd been no interruptions, but she could sense Stoker knew she was expecting a call or a text. She lifted her head as gravel crunched under the tires. They were almost home.

"We do have the best outside lights in the area," Stoker commented as he kissed the top of her head.

"Not enough." The single strand of lights was sad, put up after some intense nagging.

He chuckled as he pulled the truck just outside the front door. Cutting the engine, he peered out the windshield. "I can only imagine the electric bill next month."

Punching him in the arm, she mumbled under her breath as she jumped out of the truck. "I'm buying a thousand more, no two thousand more tomorrow. Along with that artificial tree!" She jumped onto the porch, fumbling to find her keys. She could hear MacGyver barking, awaiting their arrival.

"I'm cutting off your allowance!"

"Never!" She made it inside before his boots hit the porch stairs. Breathing hard, she jerked off and dropped her coat, laughing the entire time. Rubbing Mac's head, she dropped her purse and raced into the kitchen, giggling as she heard the front door slam. Determined to make the rest of the evening special, she raced around the kitchen island, her hands placed on the end as he rushed into the room.

Stoker stopped short, his grin turning seductive then commanding. "Come here, little girl. Take your punishment."

"Nope."

"You will or your spanking will be worse." He grinned as he yanked off his coat, tossing the leather onto a kitchen chair.

Woof! Woof!

She eyed Mac as he raced into the room, jumping on the back of Stoker's legs. "Mac says no."

"And he's not in charge." He darted to the left, then the right.

"No!" She couldn't stop laughing as he rounded the corner, getting closer. "Mac. Save me!" Somehow, she managed to race

around him and back into the living room, almost doubling over with laughter.

“You can run, sweetheart, but I will catch you always.” Wrapping his hand around her wrist, he yanked her back as he plopped down on the couch, tugging her over his lap.

Woof!

She struggled in his hold as MacGyver jumped on the couch, licking her face as she continued to laugh.

He pressed his hand on the small of her back. “No fighting or I’ll strip you naked.”

Crack! Pop!

“Ouch! That hurts.”

“Spankings are supposed to hurt. Remember?”

Smack! Crack!

“I didn’t do anything wrong,” she insisted and buried her face into the pillow.

“Today. Let’s talk any other day.”

Whap! Smack! Pop!

He peppered her ass with hard strikes, one coming right after the other. “Back talking. Not listening. Those are just two of your normal infractions.”

Crack! Whap! Pop!

Jessica kicked out again as the punishment continued until she stopped struggling, accepting not only her discipline, but his total control. Within seconds tension eased, replaced by a series of warm sensations rushing into every cell.

“And argumentative? Off the charts,” Stoker mused as he continued.

Smack! Slap!

Clenching her eyes shut, she gripped the arm of the couch, completely letting go. Everything about his touch, the way his fingers brushed her skin or his kisses early in the morning were incredible, giving her a sense of peace. His domination was unexpected, a different type of relationship but one she’d grown to

desire more every day. His firm hand alone was enough to give her goose bumps.

“Ten more. Then we’ll see in the morning if you’ve learned your lesson. If not, I might be forced to use my belt.”

Whap! Crack!

She heard the words, knew what he was saying, but at this point she’d slipped into her own moment of pure ecstasy.

“You did very well,” he growled as he eased her down onto her knees and cupped both sides of her face. “You need this every day.”

Breathing out, she licked her dry lips and pushed his legs open, crawling in closer. “Every single day?”

“Yep. I should spank you every morning. Then when you sit down, you’ll be reminded that I own you.” His words husky, he rubbed his hand down the length of her neck, squeezing her breast.

A wash of heat rushed up from her cunt, sliding along her skin until her face was flushed, her mouth watering. She fumbled with his belt as he pinched her nipple. The dichotomy of pain and pleasure left her clinging to him, desperate to have his cock in her mouth. Her fingers remained stiff, yet she managed to unbutton and unzip as he slipped his hand into her blouse, pushing past the thin lace of her bra, she wanted nothing more than to have him rip off her clothes, and take her in a desperate rage.

“What do you want?”

“Everything.” When she freed his throbbing cock, she smiled before lowering her head, engulfing just the tip, savoring the intense scent of a man who scintillated her mind as well as her body. She kept her eyes locked on his face as she sucked, using her strong jaw muscles and eased her other hand just under his balls. The moment she rolled them between her fingers, he grunted, his body shaking.

“Jesus!” Stoker tugged at her blouse, blinking as he struggled in his attempt to unfasten it. Hissing, he yanked both sides, popping the buttons.

She pushed him back as she licked around his cockhead then

took his shaft down an inch at a time. Pumping the base, she continued sucking until he thumped against the back of the couch, spreading his legs wide open.

“Suck me, baby. Yeah. God!” He placed his hand on top of her head, his fingers intertwining in her long strands of hair.

Very slowly, she pulled back then licked the underside of his cock until she reached his testicles. Darting out her tongue, she licked around his swollen balls as she inhaled, shivering from the intense wafting of his sex. She took one into her mouth as she twisted her hand around his shaft, moving up and down until the friction forced his ass off the couch.

“Damn! You’re going to make me come.”

She blew a swath of air across his balls before sucking on the other then licked back up. “Then I guess I should stop.”

“You do and another spanking,” he teased, his words strangled.

“I might risk it.” She opened her mouth and blew out before taking half of his dick into her mouth. The taste of his pre-cum, as a long string trickled down the back of her throat, gave her another series of quivers. She could do this all night long. Moving up and down, she took another inch with each pass until the tip hit the back of her mouth.

Ting. Ting.

Tensing, she continued her actions as the sound of her phone, still nestled in her purse, floated into the room. Her hand went slack as she debated answering the call. Of course, she knew who was on the other end. They were calling, the executives from the record company.

Stoker allowed an exaggerated sound to slip past his lips. He let go of her hair and looked up. “I guess you need to answer that.”

She eased back and frowned as she darted a glance toward her bag. “I won’t be long.”

Ting. Ting.

“Sure. Whatever.” He sat up, scooting to the side and brushing

both hands through his hair. "Go on. I know it's important. It always is."

Scrambling to her feet, she shook her head. "Not always. I don't get many calls."

"Lately, you do."

As she took long strides, grabbing her purse, she realized he was exactly on point. The calls came at odd times, weekends, nights. There was no rhyme or reason as to when she received what everyone at the record company perceived as an important contact. She huffed hearing him mumble under his breath.

"I'm getting a beer."

She swallowed hard before answering. "Jessica Dunn."

"Jessica. Mark Gillespie. I hope I didn't catch you at a bad time."

"No. This is fine." She couldn't help but roll her eyes, cringing when she heard Stoker slapping his hand against something in the kitchen.

"Good. I know it's short notice, but we have everything ready for the contract. Now, I do admit that we need to have a few sessions in the studio, just to make certain we're all going in the right direction."

Wham!

The clattering of glasses was close to pissing her off. Stoker had his career and she did everything she could to support him. What about hers? The words suddenly dawned on her. "The studio? I don't understand." She'd been out to California twice to test her work with a new band, even recording three demos, all in an effort to secure a record deal. The last had also had the band recording six new songs. In her mind, enough for the entire CD. This was unexpected.

"Nothing to worry about. I assure you," Mark said then laughed.

The sound of others talking behind him created a block of noises. "What do you need?" She walked closer to the kitchen, daring to look inside. Stoker stood at the back window, his hand on the glass. This wasn't good.

"I'm sorry. Hold on just a second." Mark's laughter became muffled.

She swallowed hard and inched into the kitchen. In the dim lighting, she could just see his reflection, his pensive face. No, his pissed expression. He was enraged. She rubbed her tired eyes and walked back into the living room, pacing back and forth. Leaving during the holidays was ridiculous. What the hell were they going to do before Christmas?

"Jessica. I apologize. We're having a party tonight, but I wanted to make certain and connect with you. Anyway, I have a flight lined up for tomorrow. You can leave straight from Missoula with a connection. You'll be here in time to meet with the top executives. I don't mind telling you that getting everyone here on a Sunday took some doing."

Jessica couldn't have heard correctly. The asshole had booked a plane already? Gritting her teeth, she tried to remember that less than a year ago, she'd been a has been, nothing more than a tawdry lounge singer. *Bide your time. You can do this. Just a few days.* "Okay. I guess that's all right, but I do need to get back." Maybe the man didn't celebrate Christmas.

"Sweetie. This is better than okay. We are signing you to a four-record deal. I just need a few days with you, recording some new songs. We've had a slight change in the band members."

"A few days? It's Christmas." Had he mentioned there was another change?

Mark sighed then laughed, a hitch in the tone. "Do I need to remind you what we've already invested so far?"

Invested? Now, she was pissed, but she wanted this. Regaining and rebuilding her career meant everything to her. "I leave tomorrow? What about this change?"

"We can talk about details tomorrow. Seven am flight your time. I'll have you back by the fourteenth. I'll have my assistant meet you at the airport. Everything else will be taken care of. Deal?"

She could just make out another woman's laughter, the clinking

of glasses. After stealing another look at the door to the kitchen, she closed her eyes. "That's fine. I'll be ready. Tomorrow at seven. Thank you."

"Oh, and don't forget to bring your guitar and a few nice dresses. We do have some parties that you will need to attend. All in an effort to build your posse. See you tomorrow."

Click!

Jessica held the phone to her head, her heart racing. How in the hell was she supposed to tell Stoker she was leaving? They were supposed to go to a party at Ziggy's on Tuesday. The event had been planned for over a month. She tossed the phone down on the coffee table and clenched her fists. *You need to do this. This is your career.* Yeah, true enough.

Garnering her courage, she walked with purpose into the kitchen. "Stoker, I need to..."

"You don't have to tell me," he interrupted then swiveled in her direction, his eyes blazing. "You're leaving tomorrow. I take it you won't be back for a while either."

The words were accusatory, as if she was going to spend time with another lover. "Yes. The record company is ready to sign. Isn't that wonderful?" The words sounded hollow, a weak attempt at soothing the savage beast. His beast.

"And this can't wait until after Christmas?"

"No, it can't. They want to get everything in place. I'm supposed to cut the last few songs for the CD in January. Remember?" She inched closer, beads of perspiration trickling down the back of her neck. "This is important to me."

"And so are we!" he snapped then recoiled, turning his head.

An awkward silence settled in.

"I just don't get why this has to be now." He looked down.

She was so unsure of what to do, but knew that if she didn't go, the deal would be toast. "I have to go. You know that. Just five days. Less really because I'll be here the night of the fourteenth. I'll be back before you know it."

Stoker tilted his head, his expression hard. "Five days. Sure. Might as well make it two weeks."

"Don't be ridiculous! You go for weeks at a time!"

"I. Save. Lives."

The words stung, hitting her straight in her heart. She swallowed and looked down at Mac's sweet face. This wasn't an argument that she could win. "I know that. That's why you're a hero. I'm not. I'm just a lousy musician. I do nothing for this world but sing. Right?"

"That's not what I meant."

"No? Well, that's what you were thinking. Holier than thou when you need to be. Aren't you, Stoker?" Seeing the flash of anger in his eyes as well as a hint of remorse, she retreated, tears slipping past her lashes. "Yeah, just like I thought. Fine. Maybe we need some time apart. To think. To think hard. Don't call me. I don't want to hear from you. Understand?" When he said nothing, she sniffed. "Lots of time. I'm going to bed." Storming off, she allowed the tears to flow. The old argument was tiring, leaving her questioning everything about their relationship.

This trip might be just what they both needed. Silence. There would be no discussions and zero phone calls. Then, he could see what life without her would be like. She raced into the bedroom, slamming the door. Then she threw herself across the bed. Why couldn't this be easier?