

CRYSTAL CLEAR

Storm Ryder



A young widow and her son are caught in a deadly tug-of-war of intergalactic proportion over top-secret alien biotechnology missing from the military – and the original owners want it back!

To escape the painful memories of her loss and avoid her lecherous brother-in-law, widow Gayle Randall moves her son far away from the Utah proving grounds where her test-pilot husband Steve crashed a year ago.

Alien biotechnology, critical to the top-secret Diamondhead Project, goes missing after Steve Randall's death. His brother Jack, a military 'lifer' still involved with the project, is recruited by the general in charge to investigate Gayle's possible involvement in the device's disappearance. Still coveting his late brother's wife, Jack bargains to recover the device in exchange for his freedom – and Gayle.

Meanwhile, the original owners of the alien device want it back, and they've sent someone to retrieve it by whatever means are required.

When Gayle finds out what the device is really capable of doing, will she hand it over? Will she have a choice?

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Dana Warryck

CRYSTAL CLEAR Storm Ryder



by

Dana Warryck

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PART I – Limbo

CHAPTER 1

At 14:13:23 Universal Local Time, RU9712 checked the main viewscreen again. No anomalies, nothing new to report from the target planet.

He eyed the swirling blue sphere centered in the viewscreen. Beyond it stretched the cold black expanse of space, spreading to infinity, reaching farther than he could see, farther than he could think. The same view, never changing, exactly as it had been one absolute chronological unit ago, one solar orbit ago, one eon ago.

Per local time, he'd been at this monitoring station for exactly seven hundred fifty-six days, twelve hours, forty-three minutes, and twenty-two seconds. It seemed like forever.

Forever...

RU9712 cocked his head as if hearing an odd but familiar noise.

Nothing ... just a hint of a thought ... there for a moment, then gone.

Work to be done – always, his duty. Touching myriad sensor pads to adjust the station's cloaking field, he watched his black-clad fingers flit over the main control array with speed and accuracy far superior to that of the humanoid

technicians at Central Command Outpost M10343.

Almost two standard years ago, the technicians at M40343 had refitted him for this assignment. Since that time, he had been alone, with no interaction or communication with any living beings. It seemed like forever.

Forever...

There it was again – that nudge, that tickle in his mind.

An intrinsic program glitch?

No. The techs would have corrected any malfunctions during his last refitting.

Something new, then. Why did the term *forever* continue popping unbidden into his thoughts?

He gazed at the viewscreen, at the darkness surrounding the target planet. The black void spread onward, without end.

Forever.

He turned away.

Forever – a tantalizing concept meaning without end; a long time. *Time* – a non-spatial continuum in which events occur in apparently irreversible succession. The standardized measuring convention by which living beings compared and evaluated unitary intervals of non-spatial duration, assigning merit by change of event status; past, present, and future. An interval separating two points on this continuum, a duration.

He understood time to the extent that chronology dictated the order in which he reported activities and observations to his superiors as he completed assignments. He performed one task, and then another, and yet another without error, without consideration, without prejudice, without cessation, ad infinitum. *Forever.*

A sense of uneasiness gripped him. Why did this assignment seem to drag on? Why was he here, doing things he cared nothing about? And why did he question it? His programming shouldn't allow him to harbor such thoughts.

“Forever, my love. We will be together, always and forever.”

He whirled around.

Who had spoken?

He scanned the dimly lit silver-blue surroundings filled with multi-panel viewscreens and banks of touchpad interfaces with adjustable swivel seats. On the inner wall of the enclosure designated as the command deck, a sliding panel led to a corridor with individual areas reserved for the comfort and maintenance of a humanoid staff. But there was no humanoid staff – only him. Because he didn’t sleep or eat, those staff facilities remained unused. He was alone on the station, and had been for the last two years. Still, he looked around once more to confirm he saw no movement, no evidence of anyone else on the station. He was indeed alone.

Then who had spoken?

No one on this station.

But long ago – yes, he was sure someone had spoken those words to him.

Who? How long ago?

He had no way of knowing. The blank wall in his mind barred admittance to whatever truth lay beyond. His questions faded unanswered.

A new stream of transmissions from the target planet flooded the sensor banks. His hands, of their own accord, had brought him more work. Now he was obliged to categorize and relay all the collected communication information back to Central Command. On schedule.

From the target planet’s orbiting satellites, he logged all transmissions planet-wide, on every wavelength in the spectrum, in every possible transmission format. One-half planetary rotation earlier, he’d logged ground-to-atmosphere bounce-back communications that never reached the satellites. The volume had been tremendous.

Until instructed otherwise, RU9712 would continue performing his duty, the never-ending surveillance of the target planet's transmissions. Meanwhile the station's monitors would display the same space, the same astronomical bodies, the same vast darkness punctuated with the same searing light of the target planet's sun. Minute after minute, hour after hour, day after day, he would view the same cold, black emptiness.

Alone. And it would seem like forever.



CHAPTER 2

Gayle opened the back door and gasped when she saw him standing on the stoop, looking so sharp in his Air Force blues. Tears filled her eyes, and she sucked in a ragged breath, half laughing, half sobbing.

Steve!

He'd been gone almost a year. She'd missed him so much and secretly feared she'd forget what he looked like. But he was just the same as she remembered – shorn blond hair, tall wiry build, all-American boy-next-door face, and that infectious smile that did funny things to her insides. It was as if he'd just stepped out to buy a loaf of bread and had only been gone a few minutes. Now he was home again, where he belonged.

But ... how did he know she'd moved to Fort Wayne? The Air Force must have told him. It didn't matter. He'd found her, and they were together again, like before ... before–

She reached for the screen door but froze when he rasped, “Damn, baby, you look good.” She frowned at this man she wanted – needed – to be Steve. His greenish-gray eyes crinkled in the corners when he smiled, just like Steve's. His voice sounded right, just like Steve's – but his words didn't. Steve never spoke to her like that. He was aching familiar but horribly wrong. *Why can't everything be right, like it was before ... before–*

“You going to keep me standing out here all day?” he demanded.

She knew by his condescending tone, that sneer he

passed off as a smile, the knowing look on his lean hard face, and the cruel glint in his eyes ... she knew.

He wasn't Steve, *he wasn't Steve!*

Her heart clenched, and she stifled a sob. Not Steve, but Jack, his older brother.

They looked so much alike, they could pass for twins. But inside they were as different as good and evil. She bit her lower lip.

In his pristine uniform dappled with tree-shaded sunlight, Major Jackson Kane Randall cut a formidable silhouette. His eyes, hooded by his cap visor, glittered with determination. When he stepped close to the screen door, she caught a whiff of breath mint masking cigarette smoke. She'd been that close before, and the memory flooded her with fear and revulsion. She wanted to run but couldn't. Her legs felt like clay stuck in concrete.

"Come on, Gayle. Let me in." He reached for the latch, but she grabbed it and held it shut. He sighed and dropped his hand to his side. "I promise I'll be nice."

This isn't right. Steve will—

"Steve won't give a damn. He's gone. Remember? The crash."

Her throat tightened, but she refused to cry. *Steve's not...* She couldn't finish, could say it. She reached aside to close the kitchen door in Jack's face, but suddenly the door was gone. *How had it disappeared?*

"It's been over a year, baby," Jack taunted through the screen. "You know he's never coming back."

No! You're lying! Steve's fine, just ... away ... on a mission. He's not—

"You're still in denial, Gayle. Get over it. You can't change reality just by wishing things back the way they were."

This isn't real, this isn't happening. Why can't I make it stop?

She smacked her palms against the screen door frame. *Damn you, Jack! If you hadn't recruited him to work on that stupid top-secret project—*

“It was his choice to join Diamondhead. You knew he couldn't pass up that chance to fly experimental technology.

Yes, and you knew it too, damn you!

“Things go wrong, things we can't help. That's why the job's called *test pilot*.”

No...

“What's done is done. Steve won't be coming back. Ever. I'm here now, not Steve. I want us to be together, just you and me, like we always should have been.”

No! Her heart leapt to her throat and she gasped for air. Go back to Provo to your wife and sons. Marcia and Jase and Josh deserve better, and so do I. Leave me alone.

“I want you, baby. And I know you need me.” Jack grinned like the Devil taunting her with forbidden pleasure she didn't want to experience. She glanced away, and the bay window in the dining room caught her attention. It looked just like the one in the house she and Steve had built in Provo – only those dated multicolored flame-stitch drapes belonged in her mother-in-law's house. This house she'd rented in Fort Wayne didn't even have a dining room. *How had it suddenly grown one, like a third arm?*

She looked back at Jack and noted his uniform had transformed to jeans and a chambray shirt, complete with insulated vest and hiking boots, exactly what he'd worn the last time she and Steve and he and Marcia had taken the boys climbing in the mountains. That wonderful, beautiful day with her husband and son – perfect until they'd gone back to Jack and Marcia's, and Jack had cornered her in the laundry room, trying to steal a kiss and feel her up.

With a reptilian glint in his eyes, he moved closer to the screen door and rasped, “You've been holed up in Corn

Country long enough. It's time to let go of the past and start living again. Come on, baby. You know you want me."

No! Trembling, she tried to swallow the knot in her throat. *I don't love you and I don't want to be with you. I love Steve, and I belong with him.*

"Trust me, you don't want to be with Steve. He's dead. I'm all you have left, and I'm as close as you'll ever come to getting him back in your life. I don't care if you never love me. Call out my little brother's name while you're in my arms. Whatever it takes, we'll work it out. Just come with me, be with me."

She shook her head and backed away. *No...*

He flung open the screen door with a bang and charged into the kitchen. She whirled around but stopped short to find Stevie blocking her path. "Hi, Daddy," Stevie said, waving as he grinned up at Jack.

He's not your father! She didn't understand why her seven-year-old son couldn't tell the difference.

Jack grabbed her by the shoulders, spun her around to face him, and backed her up against the sink counter. "I could have been – should have been – his daddy. But my little brother was always in the way. Always making nice. Always the perfect husband and father. You were his, and I hated him for it. But now that's over. He's gone, and I have you all to myself." He mashed his mouth against hers with punishing pressure, then drew back and eyed her. "You're mine, Gayle. All mine."

No, no! She tried to push him away. His hands clamped on her shoulders, imprisoning her, shaking her...

* * * * *

"Mommy, Mommy, wake up! You're having a bad dream!"

Gayle blinked her teary eyes and sat up on the couch. She looked around, confirming she was in her house in Fort Wayne, Indiana, not Provo, Utah, and was with Stevie – just Stevie, not Jack.

“Are you okay?” Stevie stood beside her, surveying her with the timid worry.

Swiping her tears away, she reached out and drew him close. “Yeah, honey. I’m okay.”

“Well ... can I turn on the TV now? My show’s about to start.”

“Your show?” She ran a hand through her mop of hair and tried to clear the fog of that horrifying nightmare. It wouldn’t fade from her memory fast enough.

“Yeah. You know. The one you said you wanted to watch with me. *Storm Ryder*.”

“Oh.” She dragged her hands down her face and tried to concentrate. Jack’s phone call at four this morning had caught her off guard. Groggy from deep sleep, she’d answered before thinking. What he’d said put her on edge and kept her awake, which explained why she’d needed an afternoon nap and then experienced that awful dream. He was on his way from Provo to talk to her about things he said couldn’t be discussed over the phone. Things regarding Steve and the Diamondhead Project.

She hadn’t agreed to meet with him, but she knew that wouldn’t stop him from coming if he’d already made up his mind. It had been six months since she’d moved – six months since she’d last seen the bastard, and their last meeting had not been pleasant. He’d tried every sneaky, underhanded way he could to think of to get her to sleep with him, and to hell with his wife and kids. She knew she needed to face her demon and deal with him, but she didn’t want that confrontation.

When the sudden blast of slam-bam kid-focused commercials bombarded her ears, she forgot about Jack.

Grabbing the remote from Stevie, she hit the mute button. With a heavy sigh, she rested her forearms on her knees and forced a smile. “Now, tell me again. What’s this *Storm Ryder* show about?” Patting a spot on the couch, she invited Stevie to sit beside her. “Is it a cartoon?”

“No, it’s way better than that! Storm Ryder’s cool!” Stevie plopped on the couch and grinned at her. “He’s big and strong, and he’s got this neat morph suit, and—”

“Morph suit?”

“Yeah. Armormorphic. That’s what it’s called. You know. It changes his outsides into metal plates and stuff to protect him from guns and knives, and the Giant Alien Fire Ant Queen who spits green acid slime.”

Green acid slime? Gayle curled her upper lip in disgust, thinking of the gooey grilled cheese sandwiches she’d fixed for lunch. They didn’t seem near so tasty now.

“See, Storm Ryder used to be this mild-mannered scientist named Jake Ryder, until a freak accident changed him.”

Gayle smirked. Of course – super heroes always started out mild-mannered until some freak accident forever changed things.

“Now he’s got a bunch of equipment in a secret underground laboratory. He rides through the sky on a bolt of lightning that comes out of a big machine, so he started going by the name Storm Ryder. Get it?”

Gayle chuckled. How convenient that his last name was already Ryder.

“And he can shoot lightning balls from a cannon mounted on his arm!”

“A cannon?”

“Yeah. To fight evil dudes.”

“How often does he use this cannon?” Gayle prodded, frowning.

“Oh, don’t worry, Mom,” Stevie reassured, waving his hands to deflect her concern. “Storm Ryder doesn’t ever shoot anybody with it. He just uses it to scare people and blow up evil machines. See, even though the bad guys try real hard to hurt him, they can’t. And they can’t find him ‘cause nobody knows who he is, ‘cause nobody ever sees his face except for his mouth. Not even us kids watching him on TV know what he looks like in real life, ‘cause he can change his looks and pretend to be other people.

“The coolest thing is trying to figure out who he is when he’s not in his morph suit. He wears disguises when he’s out in public, and he always looks different. One week he was a substitute schoolteacher, and I never guessed it till the very last. That was pretty neat, ‘cause I thought all along he was the homeless guy that kept showing up everywhere.”

“How interesting,” Gayle muttered. Stevie was fired with excitement she hadn’t seen in him since before his father’s death. It surprised her that the show struck a chord in him, considering the lack of personal identification with the main character. She feared senseless action created the real draw. “So, this Storm Ryder does a lot of fighting?”

“Nah. When he talks mean to bad guys, most of them get scared and just run off ‘cause they can’t see who he is or find out where he hides out. And they know they can’t hurt him or kill him ‘cause he’s superhuman.”

Gayle frowned. She didn’t like the idea of her son focusing unwavering trust and attention on a fictional television hero who could do no wrong and come to no harm. Such beings didn’t exist in the real world and, if anyone yearned for escape from the sorrow and tragedy of life, Stevie did. “How long has this show been on?”

“I dunno. A couple of months, I guess. The kids at school watch it all the time. Now it’s on every day after lunch, since school’s out. And there’s all kinds of Storm Ryder

Super-Morph stuff you can buy. Billy Petarski has a Storm Ryder tee shirt and a Storm Ryder action figure. Kyle Raerdon's got the Storm Ryder Bolt Cannon that you can buckle on your arm, and if you put batteries in it, you can press a button and the end glows blue like there's a ball of lightning in it. Then it shoots like Storm Ryder's cannon. But it doesn't really shoot lightning – just a plastic blue ball with white squiggles painted on it. And there's the Alien Fire Ant Queen action figure too. She shoots green goo out of her mouth that's supposed to be acid spit.”

Another nauseating image of dripping, melted green-cheese sandwiches popped into Gayle's head. Her stomach rolled, but she ignored it and forced a smile. “You seem pretty caught up in all this Storm Ryder paraphernalia. Why haven't I heard about it before now?” She ran her hand through her son's silky blond hair. “I thought you and I agreed we would watch a few episodes of new shows together, to make sure there was no excessive violence.”

Stevie cast a repentant downward glance. “I know, Mom. But you were always at work when it came on, and Mrs. Henley said it would be okay if I watched it. I just sort of forgot to tell you about it.”

“You just *sort of* forgot?”

He shrugged, then offered eagerly, “Storm Ryder's not a bad guy. You know how I used to be afraid of storms? Well, I'm not anymore – at least, not as much. Storm Ryder says nature's powers can be used for good. He controls lightning and makes it work for him, and he fights crime and evil aliens, and helps people. And he talks to kids and tells them to do the right thing. Here, watch!”

Just as the last commercial finished, Stevie grabbed the remote control and turned up the volume. A blast of blaring trumpets bombarded Gayle's ears, followed by the deafening crack of thunder. A loud booming voice announced, “Storm

Ryder!” as a valiant music score accompanied the appearance of a techno-metal-clad muscular man wearing a face shield, standing before a backdrop of twisting tendrils of blue lightning. Just as Gayle feared, he wielded some kind of bulky, nasty-looking space gun fastened to his forearm. “I don’t know about this, Stevie.”

“Just watch it, Mom. Storm Ryder really is a good dude. And I’m old enough to know the difference between real and fake stuff on TV. Storm Ryder’s just fun to watch ‘cause you know he’s gonna beat the bad guys, even though that doesn’t always happen for real.”

As more commercials dominated the television, Gayle stared at her son. His wide gray eyes were glued to the screen like any typical young boy’s would be, but she knew what he’d just said was a very grown-up revelation for a seven-year-old to make. She hoped some of what she’d tried to teach him about the danger of gratuitous violence had soaked in, despite all the negative reinforcement he received elsewhere.

When his father was alive, he’d been careful never to display arms or military memorabilia in front of Stevie, outside his fascination with aircraft. Steve, a military-trained pilot, had joined the Air Force for the thrill of flying. The more unusual the craft or flight situation, the better he liked it. Military might and the attendant economic, technological, and political issues of armed conflict were never discussed in front of Stevie.

Gayle knew Steve had done that more for her benefit than for Stevie’s. Arriving home from school to find both her parents dead by her father’s pistol, she’d been left with permanent mental scars and still suffered occasional nightmares. If she’d come home earlier, her father might have shot her too. Combat flashbacks affected not only veteran soldiers, but also their family members.

She wanted Stevie to grow up believing violence wasn’t the only choice in life. She wanted him to grow up just

like his father – a not like his Uncle Jack. But after Steve’s death, Jack began spouting nonsense about Stevie needing appropriate male role models other than her ‘nerdy, weak-wristed psychologist pals and social-worker buddies’ at the VA hospital.

“Love is fickle and war is hell,” Jack had said. “A man is a man is a man. We’re ruled by testosterone. It’s the nature of the beast, and you can’t change that. I’m married, but I’m still going to be swayed by the sight of a beautiful woman.” Like that was a legitimate excuse for his atrocious behavior.

“Shades of aggressive behavior are going to rub off on Stevie,” he warned, “whether or not you keep him away from Dad and me. If you forbid him to play with toy guns, he’ll pick up sticks and pretend they’re guns. He’s a boy. Someday you’re going to have to let him grow up and be what he’s going to be. You can’t protect him from the world and himself forever.”

Knowing Jack, she was more determined than ever to insulate Stevie from his macho maxims, in the hope it would prevent Stevie from becoming ballistic like his uncle. When they’d first started dating, Steve had told her about Jack’s hateful and physically abusive behavior when the two of them were growing up. Yet Neal, their Air Force colonel father, allowed it, as if believing a little brotherly roughhousing would toughen them up and ‘make men out of them.’ Now Jack was a ‘lifer’ like his retired father, and a prime example of male-superiority and world-power policies. He took what he wanted, and damn the consequences. Jack’s lack of redeeming qualities left a hole the size of a small asteroid, which he’d filled with envy and sibling rivalry. Gayle shook her head, marveling at how different Steve had turned out.

“Pay attention, Mom! You’re not watching.”

Gayle blinked her eyes and focused on the wild action displayed on TV. True to Stevie’s description, Storm Ryder

was overly helpful and moralizing. In the midst of a heated battle with energy-hungry aliens who looked like fluorescent Easter eggs, Storm Ryder stopped to help an elderly lady across the street. Later, he found time while returning to his hideout to reprimand a mouthy teenager for making fun of a puny schoolmate.

The most impressive techno-wizardry occurred when Storm Ryder prepared to ‘ride the storm.’ With his back to his TV audience, the actor playing Storm Ryder stepped inside a transparent tubular chamber. Shedding a black hooded robe to reveal bleach-blond spiked hair and a tanned, oiled, muscle-bound body wearing only skintight silver trunks, the soon-to-be Storm Ryder was then transformed by a crackling charge of blue-white lightning that enveloped and saturated the chamber. Muscle bulked into the hard angular metal of a futuristic armored bodysuit and – *voilà!* – Storm Ryder was in business.

Exiting the chamber, the mutated Storm Ryder then turned to reveal a mirrored visor and helmet that exposed only his mouth and chin. Positioning himself on a round platform with arms extended, he endured another jolt of artificial lightning that saturated his body and enabled him to rise upward through a raw skylight in his underground hideaway. Very theatrical. Gayle could understand how small children would be impressed. Even she was intrigued on a basic gut level while witnessing the transformation of that overly beefed male body.

After the half-hour program ended, she found herself facing a minor dilemma. The show presented conflicts that depended on physical fighting for resolution, but also offered important suggestions for acceptable behavior in other situations. Besides the blatant commercial merchandising, being kind to others seemed to be an important underlying message. She realized the contrived danger and violent action were attention-getters to keep young viewers riveted long

enough to absorb the ethical lessons presented throughout the show. She didn't want Stevie becoming morally desensitized by watching excessive violence, but neither did she want to squelch his spark of enthusiasm for this fictional TV character. He had showed little interest in anything else since his father's death.

"I'll tell you what..." She stood and turned off the television. "Before you watch that program again, I'd like you to write a little paragraph about what it means to you and why you feel it would be beneficial for you to continue watching it."

"Oh, Mom!" Stevie catapulted up from the couch. "You always make me tell how I feel about stuff. How come you won't let me just watch TV and have fun like other kids?"

"Because I care about what you think and do."

With a huff he flung out his arms and let them drop back, slapping his hands against his wildly patterned shorts. "But I already *told* you what I thought of the show before we watched it. And, anyway, school's out. Why do I have write stuff like it's homework or something?"

Gayle mussed his golden locks. "Because I'm the mom and I said so. And just because school is out for the summer, that doesn't mean you can stop thinking and learning and practicing your scholastic skills. If you want to see Storm Ryder again, do the paragraph. I'm going wash up the lunch dishes."

As she walked toward the kitchen, she heard Stevie grumbling. She stopped and turned. "What did you say?"

Bravely he looked up at her. "I said that if Uncle Jack was here, he'd say it was okay for me to watch—"

"What Uncle Jack might think or say has no bearing on this discussion, young man."

"Yeah, I know!" Stevie shot back with cocky confidence. "How come you won't let me talk to him or Aunt

Marcia? They keep calling, and you keep telling me not to answer the phone when you're not here. But you don't answer it when you *are* here. How come you won't let me see anybody or do anything I want?"

"Stevie, it's not that simple. I—"

"You're always telling me to make friends," he interrupted, his voice growing louder and more defiant, "but I won't ever make any friends if you won't let me play with other kids because they're too mean. I want to pick my own friends and play games they play. I don't want to be a goofy nerd!"

Gayle rushed toward him. "Honey, being smart and careful doesn't mean you're a nerd. You're very intelligent, like your daddy. I just want to make sure—"

"So what if Daddy was smart? He was in the Air Force. He flew fighter jets and did war stuff!"

"I know, Stevie, but—"

"If he was still here, he'd let me do what I want, and not worry about stupid TV shows, and just let me figure stuff out for myself. And we'd be back where we used to live, so I could play with Jase and Josh, and you could go shopping with Aunt Marcia and do cookouts at their house like we used to. And he wouldn't tell Uncle Jack to get lost!"

She reached out to him, but he shied from her, spun away, and ran down the short hallway to his bedroom. She stood alone in the living room, stunned. Stevie had always been a bright, intuitive child, but at that moment she realized he was more grown-up and possessed more adult insight than she imagined. What he said was right on target. She overprotected him – and herself – under the guise of a part-time psychologist and concerned parent looking out for her son's welfare. Instead of making things better for both of them, she made them worse by uprooting him from familiar surroundings and taking away opportunities for him to make

his own choices and learn from them. She couldn't believe she was that shortsighted.

With a huff she walked down the hall into Stevie's room and found him lying face-down on his twin bed. "Stevie, I'm sorry. You're right. I haven't been dealing with things very well for a long while. Can we talk?"

As he sat up on his bed, she glanced around the small room she'd taken pains to make similar to his bedroom back in Provo. His slate blue bedspread depicted aircraft from every phase of aeronautics and matched the valances on his window. Model airplanes, assembled by his father when he was a boy, hung from the ceiling in a daunting array. Reference and picture books of aircraft filled a red wooden bookshelf. Posters of jets covered the walls. Framed photos of Stevie's father in his flight suit, smiling, holding him and hugging her, lined Stevie's red wooden dresser.

A year ago Gayle had suggested Stevie change his bedroom decor. The mere sight of an aircraft was a painful reminder of Steve's crash, and the photos of him depicted as vibrant and full of life were too much for her to bear. But Stevie insisted on keeping everything exactly as it was before his father died. He may have lost his father but seemed determined not to give up the memory of him. She had to pointedly ignore the pictures whenever she entered her son's room.

Sighing, she sat down on the bed beside him and put an arm around his shoulders. For his age he was of average height, but she was sure he would someday sprout up to become a lithe and tall man like his father. She could see so much of Steve in him now.

Hugging him, she patted his knee and confessed, "I know I haven't been fair to you. But try to understand that I never intended to hurt you. I wanted only what I thought was best for you."

Stevie sighed. "I know, Mom. You have a hard time trying to take care of me by yourself. And I guess you get lonesome too, 'cause you miss Daddy. Maybe everything would be better if I wasn't around."

"Don't say that, sweetheart, because it's not true!" She squeezed him harder to drive home that point. "It would be impossible for me if you weren't here." Touching his chin, she turned his face toward her. "It *has* been hard since your father died. And I do get lonely. But you're not a burden. You're my son, and I love you more than I can possibly tell you. I know that sometimes, when I do things, it may seem to you that I'm not doing them in your best interest. But really I am. You don't see that now, but someday, when you grow up and have children of your own, you'll understand."

"Are you ... are you ever gonna get married again?" he murmured. "Danny Wilkes's mom and dad got divorced, and his mom got married again. Danny's stepdad hates his real dad, and he won't even let him talk to him on the phone. He says it's for everybody's own good."

She grimaced. "I would never let something like that happen. I hope you know that."

Stevie screwed up his face and looked away. "Then how come we have to forget Daddy? You always want to put all his pictures away, and we never talk about him. I miss him! I keep waiting for him to walk in here like everything's okay. But he never does. And I know he won't." He sucked in a deep breath and exhaled raggedly. "Sometimes I can't remember what he sounded like. And when I look at his pictures, I feel like I don't even know him. I try to remember, but I can't. And then I get so mad, I just want to start throwing stuff!" He glared up at her, his eyes glistening. "How come he went away and left us?"

"Oh, sweetie!" She hugged him tightly. "You know your daddy didn't leave us by choice. His death was a terrible

accident. I never want to forget him, and I don't want you to either."

She kissed the top of his head and closed her eyes, trying to squeeze back her tears, wishing she could somehow take away her son's anguish. But she couldn't, any more than she could relieve her own pain. "I'm sorry. It's been so hard for me to adjust to living without him. All the while I've been trying to put his death behind me, I guess I've been putting pressure on you not to remind me of him. I didn't realize how difficult it was for you, trying to deal with all the changes I've been making in our lives."

"Is that why you don't talk to Uncle Jack and Aunt Marcia, and Grandma and Grandpa Randall? Or go see them? Because they remind you of Daddy?"

Hugging Stevie's shoulders in silence, she said, "It's difficult to explain. I care about your grandparents, your aunt and uncle, and your cousins. And it's true that I've been avoiding them partly because of the memories associated with your father. But sometimes Grandma and Grandpa Randall try to do too much for us. They make it hard for me to say 'no' when I know that's what I need to do. And your Uncle Jack is ... well ... sometimes he's hard to deal with."

Stevie glanced down and twisted his fingers together. "You mean, 'cause he's always trying to kiss you and stuff when Aunt Marcia's not around?" He crossed his arms and looked up at her.

She felt her face flaming. Unable to look her son in the eyes, she smoothed his blond hair in distraction. She'd vowed never to say a word about Jack's clandestine come-ons to anyone – especially not to Steve. She couldn't bring herself to hurt him by revealing how little Jack cared about his feelings. Of course, she'd never planned on their seven-year-old son becoming aware of the situation with Jack. If Stevie knew about his uncle's lechery, who else might? The possibility

froze the blood in her veins. Could Steve have known all along and not said anything because she could never find the fortitude to tell him? Had she caused him needless worry and pain in the mistaken belief that keeping silent about Jack spared him from those very emotions? Had he left this world, secretly suspecting her of infidelity when it wasn't true? She swallowed several times before she could speak. "I wish Jack would learn to behave himself. But he has a hard time doing that."

"Kinda like that big fat bully at school, Wes Drake. He's always pushing kids around and getting in trouble."

She smiled. "Yes, I guess in a lot of ways your uncle is like a big kid who can't control his impulses. But I don't want you to think badly of him. He ... it just happened unexpectedly."

Stevie looked down at his lap again. "I saw him do it more than once. And so did Josh, the last time we were over at their house. Is that why we had to move away?" He looked up again. "'Cause you didn't want Uncle Jack bothering you anymore?"

She bit her lower lip. Minute by minute she realized her son was maturing much faster than she would like. "Sweetie, it's been a problem for a long time. I want you to know that nothing ... bad ... ever happened, even though your uncle wanted things to be different between him and me. I tried everything I could think of to discourage him, short of telling on him."

She tried to ignore the hint of nausea seeping into her stomach. "Maybe I should have told the truth about him. That would have put a stop to it. But I couldn't predict how it would have affected your Aunt Marcia – and your daddy. You know he loved your Uncle Jack, in spite of the louse that he is."

She sighed and stared off at the windows. Steve always saw the brighter side. One of the many things she'd loved

about him was his heart, as big as the sky he lived to fly in. He always tried to do the right thing and give others the benefit of the doubt. She managed a soft smile then frowned when her thoughts returned to Jack. “The only thing I knew to do was put some distance between us and your uncle. I couldn’t say anything to anyone about what was going on – and you mustn’t either. If your Aunt Marcia found out after all this time, it would hurt her very much.”

“Yeah, I know. Me and Josh kinda figured that.” Stevie huffed, then took her hand in his and said with renewed energy, “Listen, Mom. Even though Uncle Jack is kinda bossy and doesn’t always act right, and sometimes he’s a real jerk, I sorta miss him and wanna see him. I don’t think he’d act bad if we went someplace out in the open with him. Couldn’t you just talk to him when he gets here? And we could have supper with him like he wanted?”

Gayle reared back and eyed her son. “How did you know he was coming to Fort Wayne?”

Stevie shrugged and picked at the hem of his shorts. “It was still dark when the phone rang, and I woke up and heard you talking.” He looked up like an eager puppy waiting for a treat. “So, could we?”

Hugging him again, Gayle glanced around the room, then fixed her gaze on the photo perched on the red nightstand nearby. Framed in navy blue, the picture showcased her and Steve and young Stevie against the backdrop of a rugged mountain valley. She remembered the day that picture had been taken – had dreamed about it just an hour ago. She and Steve and Jack and Marcia and the boys had gone hiking in the mountains. A beautiful day with crisp, clear weather ... perfect until that evening, back at the house, when Jack made another one of his infamous passes at her. That photo of her with Steve and Stevie represented the last record of unspoiled time the three of them had shared. Two weeks later, Steve died.

Leaning forward, she reached for the picture and brought it to her lap to admire the two-dimensional reminder of a time gone and never to return. She marveled at how young and happy she and Steve looked. Nine years of marriage had changed her, more inside than out. She was still tall, slender, and fit. Her wild mop of thick brownish-blond hair still turned heads and earned her admiring glances, although it gave her styling fits. But she was no longer the loving – loved – wife in the picture. She was a lonely, confused widow who could see no future ahead and couldn't seem to run fast or far enough to escape the haunting happiness of the past.

Instinctively her hand rose to touch the delicate filigree-encased pendant of her necklace, the one memento she had allowed herself to keep close by, to remind her of what she'd once had.

As if entranced, Stevie touched a finger to the photo glass and traced the miniature representation of his father. Tears filled her eyes as she put the picture back on the nightstand. "I'll tell you what," she suggested, forcing herself to sound bright and cheery. "I'll finish the lunch dishes, then we can watch that DVD of home movies of you and me and your dad. How does that sound?"

Stevie perked and looked up at her. "I thought you got rid of it."

"I'd never do that." Smiling, she stroked his hair, then stood. "And when Uncle Jack gets to his hotel room and calls, I'll talk to him. I suppose it wouldn't hurt to have supper with him – as long as you promise to chaperon."

Grinning, Stevie got to his feet and planted his fists on his hips. "If he doesn't behave himself, I'll have a man-to-man talk with him."

Gayle laughed, then swallowed hard as she eyed her son. At that moment he sounded so much like his father with his unassuming reassurance, she almost cried.