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Her Unexpected Cowboy His Ideal Match The Rancher's Secret Son

Debra Clopton Arlene James Betsy St. Amant



Love Inspired brings you three new titles for one great price. available now! Enjoy these uplifting contemporary romances of faith, forgiveness and hope. This Love Inspired bundle includes Her Unexpected Cowboy by Debra Clopton, His Ideal Match by Arlene James and The Rancher's Secret Son by Betsy St. Amant.

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Her Unexpected Cowboy Debra Clopton

COWBOYS OF

Falling For The Cowboy

Rowdy McDermott has a plan. Stay on the straight and narrow, help the foster boys on Sunrise Ranch and forget about love. The last thing he expects is his pretty new neighbor falling literally into his arms. Lucy Calvewrt is glad the handsome cowboy broke her fall, but isn't ready for the feelings he's stirring in her heart. She's heard rumors about his past, and is steering clear from the kind of man he used to be. With a little help from his boys, can Rowdy show her that people—and hearts—can change?

Cowboys of Sunrise Ranch: These

men have hearts as big as Texas.

"No need to thank me," Rowdy said.

"You're the one helping me. Saving me from the wrath of Nana is a good thing. If there is one thing she prides above all else, it's that her boys are gentlemen. And I have to admit I have sometimes been her wayward grandson."

Lucy smiled. "I'd hate for you to admit you're helping me remodel my barn because you're a nice guy." And he might be. But that didn't stop her from being wary...not so much of him, but of the way she reacted to him. "Me a nice guy?" He looked skeptical, and a grin played across his face. "I don't know about that."

The man's personality, like his eyes and his smile, sparkled and drew her in.

Just because she found a man attractive didn't mean she was going to unlock her heart, trust him and eventually marry the man.

He was her neighbor being neighborly. End of story.

Right.

Books by Debra Clopton

Love Inspired

*The Trouble with Lacy Brown *And Baby Makes Five *No Place Like Home *Dream a Little Dream *Meeting Her Match *Operation: Married by Christmas *Next Door Daddy *Her Baby Dreams *The Cowboy Takes a Bride *Texas Ranger Dad *Small-Town Brides "A Mule Hollow Match" *Lone Star Cinderella

*His Cowgirl Bride

†Her Forever Cowboy †Cowboy for Keeps Yukon Cowboy *†Yuletide Cowbov* *Small-Town Moms "A Mother for Mule Hollow" **Her Rodeo Cowboy **Her Lone Star Cowboy **Her Homecoming Cowbov *††Her Unforgettable Cowbov ††Her Unexpected Cowbov* *Mule Hollow *Men of Mule Hollow **Mule Hollow Homecoming

††Cowboys of Sunrise Ranch

DEBRA CLOPTON

First published in 2005, Debra Clopton is an award-winning multipublished novelist who has won a Booksellers Best Award, an Inspirational Readers' Choice Award, a Golden Quill, a Cataromance Reviewers' Choice Award, RT Book Reviews Book of the Year and Harlequin.com's Readers' Choice Award. She was also a 2004 finalist for the prestigious RWA Golden Heart, a triple finalist for the American Christian Fiction Writers Carol Award and most recently a finalist for the 2011 Gayle Wilson Award for Excellence.

Married for twenty-two blessed years to

her high school sweetheart, Debra was widowed in 2003. Happily, in 2008, a couple of friends played matchmaker and set her up on a blind date. Instantly hitting it off, they were married in 2010. They live in the country with her husband's two high-school-age sons. Debra has two adult sons, a lovely daughter-in-law and a beautiful granddaughter—life is good! Her greatest awards are her family and spending time with them. You can reach Debra at P.O. Box 1125, Madisonville, TX 77864 or at debraclopton.com.

Her Unexpected Cowboy

Debra Clopton

Put your heart right, Job. Reach out to God.... Then face the world again, firm and courageous. Then all your troubles will fade from your memory, like floods that are past and remembered no more.

—Job 11:13, 15–16

This book is dedicated to all those making a new, fresh start with their lives. May God bless you and keep you as you make a change in your life.



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Dear Reader

Questions for Discussion

Excerpt

Chapter One

Rowdy McDermott closed the door of his truck and scanned the ranch house that had seen better days. Carrying the casserole he'd been sent to deliver, he strode toward the rambling, low-slung residence. He'd always liked this old place and the big weathered barn behind it-liked the rustic appearance of the buildings that seemed cut from the hillside sloping down on one side before sweeping wide in a sunny meadow. There was peace here in this valley, and it radiated from it like the glow of the sun bouncing off the distant stream

cutting a path across the meadow.

This beautiful three-hundred-acre valley was connected to his family's ranch. Rowdy had hoped one day to make this place his own, but the owner wouldn't sell. Not even when he'd moved to a retirement home several years ago and Rowdy had made him a good offer. He'd told Rowdy he had plans for the place after he died.

Four days ago his "plan" had arrived in the form of the owner's niece, so Rowdy's grandmother had informed him, at the same time she'd volunteered him to be her delivery boy.

He knocked on the green front door, whose paint was peeling with age. Getting no answer, he strode to the back of the house, taking in the overgrown bushes and landscaping as he went. Years of neglect were visible everywhere.

A black Dodge Ram sat in the drive with an enclosed trailer hitched to the back of it. He'd just stepped onto the back porch when a loud banging sound came from the barn, followed by a crash and a high-pitched scream.

Rowdy set the dish on the steps and raced across the yard. The double doors of the barn were open and he skidded through them. A tiny woman clung to the edge of the loft about fifteen feet from the ground.

"Help," she cried, as she lost her grip

Rushing forward, Rowdy swooped low. "Gotcha," he grunted, catching her just in the nick of time. He managed to stay on his feet as his momentum forced him to plunge forward.

They would have been okay if there hadn't been an obstacle course's worth of stuff scattered on the barn floor.

Rowdy leaped over cans of paint and dodged a wheelbarrow only to trip over a pitchfork— They went flying and landed with a thud on a pile of musty hay.

The woman in his arms landed on top of him, strands of her silky, honeycolored hair splayed across her face. *Not bad. Not bad at all.* She blinked at him through huge protective goggles, her pale blue eyes wide as she swept the hair away. A piece of hay perched on top of her head like a crown.

"You *saved* me," she gasped, breathing hard. "I can't believe it. Thank you."

"Anytime," Rowdy said with a slow drawl, forcing a grin despite feeling as if he'd just lost a battle with a bronc. The fact that there was a female as cute as this one sitting on his chest numbed the pain substantially.

Those amazing blue eyes widened behind the goggles. "I'm sorry, what am I thinking sitting on you like this?" She scrambled off and knelt beside him. "Can you move? Let me help you up." Without waiting for his reply, she grasped his arm, tugging on him. "That had to have hurt you."

He sat up and rolled his shoulder. "Hitting the ground from the loft would have been a harder fall. What were you doing, anyway?"

Leaning back on her heels, she yanked off the goggles.

Whoa— Rowdy's pulse kicked like a bull as he looked into her sparkling eyes.

"I was knocking a wall out with a sledgehammer. It was a *splendid* feeling —until the main beam gave way and I *flew* over the edge like a ninny." A nice blush fanned across her cheeks. "Talk about feeling silly—that'll sure do it. But I am so grateful you were here. For a short person like me, that was a long drop. And that you got to me so *quick*. How fast are you, anyway?"

She talked with the speed of light and Rowdy had a hard time keeping up. "Fast enough, but clearly not as fast as you talk." He chuckled.

"Ha, it's a curse! I do tend to rattle on when I've been saved from sure disaster." She stood up—which wasn't all that much farther from the ground.

Rowdy wasn't real sure she was even five foot, and knew she wasn't when he stood up and looked down at her. At only six feet himself, he towered over her by a good twelve inches...which would make hugging a little awkward, but hey, he could overcome.

"I'm Lucy Calvert." She stared up at him and held out her hand.

Lucy. He liked it. Liked more the tingle of awareness that sparked the moment he took her small hand in his. When her eyes flared, as if she felt the same spark, his mind went blank.

"Rowdy. Rowdy McDermott, at your service," he said as his pulse kicked up like a stampede of wild horses.

"Rowdy." She slipped her hand free and tugged the edge of her collared shirt closed. Her smile faltered. "I think I may have heard my uncle mention you—I think he said your name fit you." The disapproval he detected in her voice snapped him out of his infatuated fog as regret of the life he'd led twisted inside his gut. What exactly had his old neighbor said about him?

"It fits, but in all honesty, I'm trying hard to mend my ways."

"Oh." Her blue eyes dug deep. "What were you here for before I literally threw myself at you?"

"Food," he said, feeling off balance by the way she studied him. "My, um, my grandmother made you a casserole and I'm the delivery boy."

"How sweet of her." She laid her hand on his arm and his pulse kicked again. "And of you for bringing it over." Rowdy wasn't sure he'd ever been called sweet. He looked down at her hand on his arm as that same buzz of electricity took his breath away. She turned, hips swaying and arms pumping as she headed toward the exit and left him in her dust.

"Tell her thank you for me," she called over her shoulder, keeping her steps lively without looking back.

Rowdy followed.

"Can I ask what you were doing up there knocking out walls in your barn?"

They'd made it into the sunshine, and what had appeared to be her dark blond hair glistened like gold in the sun. She was getting better by the minute. "I'm starting my remodel job. I'm making an art studio up there and a wall was in my way."

"So you knocked it down. Do you do that with everything that gets in your way?" That got him the smile he was looking for. Trying to put her more at ease, he tucked his fingers into the pockets of his jeans and assumed a relaxed stance, putting his weight on one leg.

"I like to hope I do."

"Really?"

Her brows leveled over suddenly serious eyes. "*Really*. That happens to be my new life motto."

"Sounds kind of drastic, don't you

think?"

"Nope. Sounds good to me. It felt quite pleasant actually—" she scowled "—until I flew over the edge of the loft." "The little woman has anger issues," he teased.

"This little woman has a *lot* of anger issues."

Rowdy knew a lot about anger issues, but would rather not discuss them. Trying to figure out a change-of-topic comeback, he caught a movement out of the corner of his eye.

"Uh-oh," he groaned, looking where he'd left the casserole. The oversize yellow cat had ripped through the foil and was face-first in the Cowboy Goulash. "Nana isn't going to be happy about that." Even so, Rowdy was grateful for the distraction from the conversation as Lucy raced toward the cat, arms waving.

He owed the hulking orange cat bigtime.

* * *

"No!" Lucy yelled, tearing across the yard with the troubling cowboy on her heels. She was not happy with her reactions to the magnetic man. Not only had he saved her, he'd taken her breath away. And she didn't like the air being sucked out of her. Nope. Not at all.

What was more, the fact that he—that any man— could do that to her was

shocking.

"Bad kitty," she admonished Moose when she reached him. The cat had adopted Lucy four days ago when she'd arrived. Now the moose of a cat—thus his name—looked up at her with a goulash-orange smile, then promptly buried his head in the noodles again. "Hey, how much can a hairy beast like you eat?" Lucy asked, pulling him away from the pan as his claws dug in, clinging to the wood.

"Shame on you. Shame, shame." Lucy was so embarrassed. "Honest, I feed him. I really do."

Rowdy chuckled. "In the cat's defense, Nana's food is pretty irresistible."

Lucy's gaze met his and her insides did that crazy thing they'd been doing since the moment she'd found herself in his arms.

"I would have loved to find that out for myself," she snapped.

He gave a lazy, attractive grin. "Don't worry, Nana will be coming by soon to invite you over for dinner. She figures you need to feel welcomed, but also she wants to introduce you to our wild bunch over at Sunrise Ranch. We can be a little overwhelming for some."

His odd statement stirred her curiosity. "And how's that?"

"So you don't *know*. You're living next door to a boys' ranch."

"A boys' ranch—what do you mean exactly?" Envisioning a bunch of delinquents, Lucy felt her spirits plummet.

"No, no, I didn't mean to make you worry. They're good kids. We have a foster program of sorts. There are sixteen boys ranging from eight to eighteen who call our family ranch home. They've just had some hard knocks in their lives and we're providing a stable place for them to grow up. Speaking of which, I need to run, they're waiting on me." Grinning, he started backing away. "No more flying, okay?"

Lucy laughed despite feeling off-kilter

and uneasy. "I'll keep that in mind," she said, and then he was gone. The unease didn't leave with him.

After the betrayal and nightmare she'd been through with her ex-husband, she was stunned by the buzz of attraction she'd felt toward her new neighbor.

Especially since he'd admitted being a reformed rowdy cowboy. Reformed needed to keep her distance. Fuzzy warm feelings or thoughts of cozying up to cute cowboys hadn't crossed her mind. Even to feel attraction at all was startling to her. Then again, the man had swooped in and saved her from breaking her neckmaybe that explained away the attraction.

The thought had Lucy breathing a little easier. She'd come here to find the joy again. Joy in her life and in her painting: things she'd lost and desperately needed to find again. She was praying that God would help her and show her the way. What she wasn't praying for was romance, relationships or attraction. She'd learned the hard way that there was no joy to be found there.

None at all. Nope, this ole girl was just fine on her own, swan diving out of the hayloft and all.

* * *

The day after he'd caught her falling out of the hayloft, Rowdy drove up Lucy's

driveway again as Toby Keith played on the radio. He had a ranch to run and horses that needed training, so what was he doing back here?

Making sure she wasn't dangling from the roof. He chuckled as the thought flashed through his mind.

Stepping out of his truck, he looked up at the eaves just to make sure she wasn't doing just that.

All clear; nothing but a rooster weather vane creaking in the breeze.

Looking around, the first thing he noticed was a large pile of barn wood a few yards from the barn. It was after five and, by the looks of the pile, she'd been busy.

He had work to do, but he hadn't been

able to get his new neighbor off his mind. True, he couldn't get those pretty eyes out of his head or that cute figure he sensed beneath that oversize shirt she'd been wearing, but mostly he hadn't been able to stop thinking about her over here ripping her property apart all by herself.

He shouldn't have left the day before without offering to help, and that he'd done just that had bugged him all night. He'd been taught better by his nana; buying the property for himself had vanished with Lucy showing up. And though he hated that, he didn't hold it against his new neighbor- Well, maybe a bit. But that shouldn't have stopped him from helping her.

He was headed toward the barn when Lucy came out of the back door carrying an armload of Sheetrock pieces. She wore her protective goggles again and another long-sleeved work shirt. Her jeans were tucked into a pair of lowheeled brown boots. How could a woman look that good in that get-up? He must be losing his mind.

Tucking a thumb in his waistband, he gave her a skeptical look. "So I'm thinkin' you have something against walls."

"Yup." She chuckled as she strode past him to toss the load in her arms on the pile with the other discards. "I like open space. Don't you?" "Yeah, but you do know a house has to have some walls inside it to hold the roof up?"

She paused. "I've left a few."

"But have you left the right ones? Maybe you should hire some help. I know some contractors who could do this for you. Safely."

She stared at him for a moment, a wrinkle forming above her goggles. It suddenly hit him that she didn't look like she was in a good mood.

"Did you have a reason for stopping by?"

So he was right. "I just dropped by to check on you. Make sure you weren't dangling from high places." The crease above her goggles deepened. "Actually, I've managed a whole day without mishap. Of course, there was a tense moment when I climbed up on the roof and lost my balance walking the peak."

His blood pressure spiked even as he recognized she was teasing him—so maybe she wasn't in a bad mood after all. "I'm glad you're teasing me."

"Had you there for a moment, though." "Yes, you did."

She smiled sweetly. "The thing is, Rowdy, I just met you yesterday, and while I am very grateful that you saved my neck, I really don't know you. And that being the case... Well, you get what I'm saying?"

Get out of my business. Okay, so maybe she was in a bad mood twinkling eyes and all. He was losing his touch reading women. That was an understatement. He hadn't read Liz right at all. Not until her husband had shown up and punched him in the nose had he suspected he'd gotten involved with a married woman. His stomach soured just thinking about it.

Looking at Lucy, he held his hands up. "You are absolutely right." He planned to leave it at that, get in his truck and hit the road; after all, it wasn't any of his business. The problem: Rowdy was known for not always doing what he was supposed to do. He'd suffered from the ailment all of his life.

"But you don't know what you're doing."

The words were out of his mouth before he could edit them.

Lucy's eyes flashed fire his way before she spun on her boot heels and strode back into the house, leaving him standing just off the porch.

Clearly the woman did not want to hear what he had to say. Any man with good sense would get in his truck and head home to tend to his own business. There was sure no shortage of it and that work was what he'd promised himself and the Lord he was going to do for the next year. But what did he do?

He followed her. That's what.

Right through her back door and in the direction of a sledgehammer beating the stuffing out of a hunk of wood somewhere inside the house.

All the while telling himself he needed to mind his own business. He had a well-thought-out plan for his life —he was done jumping off into relationships impulsively. He'd given himself at least a year to be completely single. He'd made the deal with the Lord —no attachments—and he'd almost made it.

So what are you doing?

Chapter Two

Leave it to her to get a nosy, *arrogant* cowboy for a neighbor!

What was his problem? Who was he to come here and question her intelligence? Did he really think she'd be stupid enough to knock out the walls that held her house together?

Lucy swung the sledgehammer and took unusual pleasure when it hit the two-by-four stud exactly where she'd aimed—where it connected to the wood on the bottom of the frame.

She'd been startled to walk outside and find him standing there looking all masculine and intriguing... Why did she keep thinking of him like that? Since the fire-since Tim's betraval-she'd been around men, some even more handsome than Rowdy McDermott. But she'd not given them a second thought, other than to acknowledge that she was done with men. When a woman learned she'd been married to the poster boy for

extramarital affairs, those scars weren't easy to heal.

Why, then, had she thought about her new neighbor off and on ever since he'd left the day before?

Maddeningly, he'd been the last thought she'd had going to bed and the first upon waking. Swearing off men had suited her. She swung the sledgehammer again, feeling the point of impact with a deep satisfaction. God forgive her, but she knew visualizing Tim every time she swung was not a good thing. Yet it was the best satisfaction she'd had since that woman had walked into her hospital room and exposed the lie Lucy's life had been.

Lucy swung again, harder this time. Her hands hurt with the jarring impact as the hammerhead met the solid stud.

No. She did not appreciate the cowboy showing up and causing her to realize just how much she longed to be able to trust someone. And why was it exactly that Rowdy McDermott had her thinking about trust? She would never trust a man again.

"Well, I guess that answers my question."

Lucy jumped, so caught up in her thoughts that she hadn't heard Rowdy come into the room.

The humor in his voice was unmistakable.

"What is that supposed to mean?" she snapped. She hadn't really expected walking away from him would make him leave. So it really didn't surprise her that he'd followed her inside. After all, he had already proved he was nosy.

"You don't like walls. And you need help."

Of all the nerve. "If you must know, I

planned to hire help." She yanked off her protective eyewear with one hand and set the sledgehammer against the wall getting the thing out of her hand might be the smartest thing. "And again, *if* you must know, I was enjoying myself too much to do it."

He'd stopped smiling at her angry outburst, looking a little shocked. Now that infuriatingly cocky grin spread again across his features, like a man who knows he's charming.

Well, he wasn't to her.

"Stop that," she blurted out. His grin deepened and his eyes crinkled at the edges. He was fighting off laughter—*at her*!

"So you're angry with someone, and

knocking out walls satisfies a need inside of you. I get it now. For a little thing, you really do have a lot of anger issues."

Her jaw dropped and she gasped. "Of all the—"

"How about if I help you out?"

"Do *what*?" The man had pegged her motives somewhat correctly at first guess. Yet if he only knew of the anger issues buried so far back inside her, he would not be grinning at her like that.

"Hire me—I'm cheap and will work just to watch the fireworks. You put on one entertainingly explosive show."

"This is outrageous," she huffed. Crossing her arms, she shot daggers at him—he'd think explosive. "I bet you don't get many dates, do you?"

He chuckled deep in his chest and her insides curled like a kitten in response. "We aren't talking about my love life. We're talking about me helping you out."

Lucy could not get her foot out of her mouth. She should never have mentioned anything to do with dating. Talk about getting into someone's business!

"Well," she faltered, still stuck on that chuckle.

"Look, like I said yesterday," Rowdy continued, "my nana is going to have you over to dinner next week and if she finds out you need help and I didn't do the neighborly thing and help you, believe me, it won't be pretty. So help a fella out and put me to work."

Despite everything, Lucy found herself wanting to smile. But the past reared its ugly face—this was so like Tim.

How many times had he cajoled her into doing something he wanted? *Too many*. The fist of mistrust knotted beneath her ribs.

"I'll think about it," she said, having meant to tell him no. She repositioned her goggles.

He frowned. "Fine. I'll let you get back to your work, then."

Irritation had his shoulders stiff as she watched him leave. She almost called out to him, but didn't. She'd given in to Tim too many times in her life. Why did men believe women were supposed to just stop thinking for themselves whenever they were in the picture?

Lucy wasn't going down that road again. The screen door slammed in the other room, and a few seconds later she heard his truck's engine rumble to life. Drawn to the window, she watched him back out onto the hardtop. But he didn't leave immediately. Instead, he sat with his arm hooked over the steering wheel, staring at the house. Though he couldn't see her, she felt as if he were looking straight at her.

She stepped back and he drove off. Her heart thumped erratically as she watched him disappear in the distance. *It's better this way.* It certainly was.

Then why did she suddenly feel so lonely she could scream?

* * *

"Women," Rowdy growled, driving away. "They drive me crazy." She could just knock her whole house down for all he cared. He had things to do and places to be and being the Good Samaritan was obviously not his calling. It was his own fault—he should have minded his stinkin' business.

After only a short drive down the blacktop road, he turned onto the ranch, spinning gravel as he drove beneath the thick log entrance with the Sunrise Ranch logo overhead.

Dust flying behind him, he sped toward the ranch house in the distance, its roof peeking up over the hill that hid the majority of the ranch compound from the road.

The compound of Sunset Ranch had been divided into sections. The first section was the main house, the ranch office and the Chow Hall, where his grandmother, Ruby Ann "Nana" McDermott, ruled the roost. For sixteen boys ranging in age from eight to eighteen the Chow Hall was the heart of the ranch. But Nana was actually the heart

Across the gravel parking area, the

hundred-year-old horse stable stretched out. Most every horse he'd ever trained had been born in the red, wooden building since the day his grandfather had bought the place years ago. Beside the horse stable stood the silver metal barn and the large corral and riding pens. Making up the last section was the three-room private school the ranch provided for the kids. It sat out from the rest of the compound, within easy walking distance, to give the kids space from school life. This was home.

Rowdy pulled the truck to a stop beside the barn. He slammed the door with the rest of the disgust he was feeling just as his brother Morgan walked out of the barn.

"What bee's in your bonnet?" Morgan asked.

Rowdy scowled. "Funny."

"Obviously something is wrong."

All the McDermott brothers were dark headed, square chinned and sported the McDermott navy eyes, but Morgan was the brother who most resembled their dad—steadfast. Respectable.

Rowdy had always lived up to his more reckless looks—good-time Rowdy. That had been him. But he'd turned a corner and was trying hard to be more than a "good time." And that misconception irritated him the most about Lucy turning down his offer to help. It was almost as if she saw his past and chose to bypass trouble. As if she'd decided in that moment she couldn't trust him.

The thought pricked. Stung like a wasp, to be honest.

If she couldn't trust the man who caught her swan diving off the hayloft, then who could she trust?

And why did he care?

Morgan crossed his arms and studied him. "Nana tells me you met our new neighbor yesterday. Does this have something to do with her?"

"No. Maybe. Yeah."

"So what did you do?"

"I saved her from breaking her neck falling out of her hayloft, Morg. And I offered to help her do a little remodeling."

"I see. So that'd mean she must be good-looking."

"Yeah, she is," he growled.

"Then why are you so agitated? She's single, from what Nana said."

"She turned me down."

Morgan blinked in disbelief. "Turned *you* down. You?"

It was embarrassing in more ways than one.

"I don't think that's ever happened before." Morgan started grinning. "And did you actually save her from falling out of the hayloft?"

"Stop enjoying this so much, and yes, I did, and it's not like I asked her out." He knew Morgan was just giving him a hard time. That was what brothers did. He'd never missed an opportunity where Morgan and Tucker were concerned. So much so that he was due a lot of payback from both brothers. He gave a quick rundown of catching Lucy the day before. Morgan's grin spread as wide as Texas.

"So you really didn't ask her out?"

"Are you kidding? No."

Morgan cocked his head to the side, leveling disbelieving eyes on him. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Crazy, isn't it? I'm not saying I'm not going to. But my days of rushing into relationships are done. I told you that." "Yeah you did, but it's been over nine months."

Rowdy wanted on a horse. Needed to expel the restless energy that suddenly filled him. "I wasn't kidding when I said I was done with women for at least a year. I'm trying to be a role model for the guys."

It was true. Rowdy might not have known he'd gotten involved with a married woman, but then he hadn't really asked enough questions, and he sure hadn't been any kind of role model. After this last fiasco, God had convinced him that he needed to change his life.

"You're doing it, too. What you need is to find a woman like Jolie, who has her priorities straight," Morgan added.

"True, but I'm not ready right now. And besides, if Lucy won't let me help knock out some walls, she's most definitely not going to say yes to dinner and a movie."

"True," Morgan agreed, clapping him on the shoulder. "Speaking of dates, Tucker's here helping out with practice because I've got a date. And Jolie is a whole lot prettier than you."

"Tell that beautiful lady of yours I said hello," he called, then headed into the stable. He breathed in and the scents of fresh hay and leather filled him. Horses nickered as he passed by.

He grabbed a saddle and entered the stall of the black quarter horse he was

working with. He spoke gently to Maverick as he saddled him. Just the motions of preparing to ride calmed him and helped him think.

Lucy said she had anger issues. It didn't fit, but she'd said it. He hadn't seen anger, though. When their eyes locked, he saw fireworks. And there lay the problem.

He had a fondness for fireworks even though the fondness had gotten him into more trouble than he needed. Thus the reason he was trying to mend his ways.

Fireworks burned—he'd learned that the hard way.

Leading Maverick out of the stable, he

headed toward the corral and the sound of whoops of laughter. His behavior hadn't been anything to be proud of and certainly nothing for these boys to look up to. Rowdy was changing that. No one had said it would be easy.

And living his lifestyle down was going to be the hardest of all, he suspected. The boys' laughter rose on the breeze out in the arena as he approached. This was what he needed to concentrate on. These boys and the ranch.

"What's up, Rowdy? Thought you'd skipped out on us." Eighteen years old, Wes gave him his wolfish smile as he rode his horse over to the arena fence. "Nope, just running late." Rowdy hooked his arms on the top rail and surveyed the action. "Did I miss much?"

"There was a runaway wagon a few minutes ago when Caleb lost his grip on the reins and the horses took over." Wes chuckled, his blue eyes sparkling with mischief. He was one of the natural leaders of the group. Stocky and blond, he always looked as though he was ready to have a good time. Too good. He had a recklessness about him that reminded Rowdy of himself. All the more reason for Rowdy to make a good impression on the teen.

Rowdy had a suspicion Wes had been sneaking around riding bulls behind everyone's back. Bulls were the one rodeo event that was off-limits for the ranch kids to participate in. And purely Rowdy's fault from when he'd been a teen. Because of his many close calls with bull riding, his dad had set the rule —no bull riding at Sunrise Ranch.

"By the glint in your eyes, I'm assuming it was pretty entertaining."

"It was awesome." Wes hooted. "I never knew your brother could ride like that. Tucker did some pony tricks getting the horses to stop."

The sheriff of Dew Drop, Tucker didn't spend as much time on the ranch with the boys as Rowdy, Morgan and their dad, Randolph. But when it came to riding, Tucker could hold his own. "I'm glad Caleb was okay." He glanced out into the arena and saw Tucker talking to a group of the younger kids.

"He's fine. Didn't even shake him up." Wes spit a sunflower seed in the dirt and continued grinning.

Rowdy suddenly had an idea. It might not be a good idea, but that was yet to be seen. "Wes, I need you and Joseph to help me with something in the morning. Can you do it?"

"Sure thing. What are we going to do?"

More than likely make Lucy madder than a hornet. "We're going to do a little yard work and y'all can make a little pocket change." "Sweet. When do we start?"

"Sunup."

"Sounds like a plan to me." A group of the boys over by the chutes called for Wes. "Showtime. I'll tell Joseph." Giving his horse a nudge, they raced off at a thundering gallop.

Rowdy watched him and the horse fly across the arena as one. When it came to riding. Wes was the best. He was a natural. Rowdy had a feeling the kid would ride a bull just as well. Though it was against the rules, Rowdy hesitated to say anything until he knew for certain. Wes was courting trouble...but then so was Rowdy if he went through with his plan in the morning.

What was he thinking, anyway?

The woman didn't want his help. She needed it, though, and for reasons he didn't quite understand he felt compelled to follow through—despite knowing he needed to steer clear of her.

He had a feeling he was about to see some major fireworks tomorrow...but he'd rather take that chance than do nothing at all.

Chapter Three

The morning light was just crawling across her bedroom floor when Lucy opened her eyes. She'd been dead to the world from the moment she'd fallen into bed late last night, and she stared at the ceiling for a moment, disoriented.

The ache in her arms brought clarity quickly.

And no wonder with all the manual labor she'd been doing for the past week. The muscle soreness had finally caught up with her last night. Caught up with her back, too. She'd always had a weak lower back and sometimes after a lot of stooping and heavy lifting, it rebelled on her. That moment had happened when she'd taken her last swing at the long wall in her living room —a muscle spasm had struck her like a sledgehammer.

It had been so painful she'd been forced to stretch out on the floor and stare at the ceiling until it had eased up enough for her to make it upstairs to bed.

She'd had plenty of time to contemplate her situation and the fact that she really had no timeline to finish her remodel. She could take all the time in the world if she wanted to. Uncle Harvey, bless his soul, had made sure of that.

He was actually her grandfather's

brother, whom she'd lost as a young girl. He had been in bad health when her world had fallen apart, and hadn't lived on the ranch for a couple of years. But he'd told her this was where she needed be. And he'd been right. She'd known it the moment she'd arrived. She was making the place her own and searching for her new footing at the same time.

And yet, things had changed when Rowdy McDermott had offered to help her. She watched him drive off, and her conscience had plucked away at her.

To prove that she'd made the right decision turning him away, she'd gone at her work with extra zeal...but the pleasure she'd felt had disappeared. Drat the man—he'd messed up her process.

He'd had no right trying to take over her work. *He was only being a good neighbor*. The voice of reason she'd been steadily ignoring yesterday was louder this morning. Had she judged him wrong? She didn't like this distrust that ruled her life these days.

Sitting up, she had no control of the groan that escaped her grimacing lips. "Hot shower, really hot shower." She eased off the bed and walked stiffly toward the bathroom.

She'd wash the cobwebs out of her mind, the dust out of her hair and the pain out of her muscles. Then maybe she could figure out what she needed to do about the problems her good-looking neighbor was causing her.

She'd told him she would think about his offer. But did she really want him here? And he'd already shown that he thought his way was the best way. Did she want to fight that? Because she wasn't giving up control of anything.

The niggling admission that she might be in over her head and needed help on this simmered in her thoughts. The realization that she was allowing distrust of men—all men—color her need for real help bothered her.

Shower, now! She needed a clear head to sort this out.

Twenty minutes later, feeling better,

she padded down to the kitchen. The shower had helped her spirits, but she knew that today her back was going to give her fits if she did anything too strenuous. It needed a break. Her mind needed a break, too. She couldn't shut it off....

When a gal wasn't quite five feet tall, she grew used to people assuming she was helpless because of her size. Too weak to swing a sledgehammer.

It was maddening. More so now since her husband's betrayal had left her feeling so pathetically blind and weakminded.

Too weak to realize my husband was cheating on me.

The humiliating thought slipped into

her head like the goad of an enemy. Not the best way to start her day. She was going to miss not knocking out a wall and the satisfaction it gave her.

People's lack of faith always made her all the more determined to do whatever it was they assumed she couldn't do.

Glancing down at her wrists, she could see the puckered skin peeking out from the edge of her long-sleeved Tshirt. She knew those scars looked twisted and savage as they covered her arm and much of her body beneath her clothing. The puckered burn scars on her neck itched, reminding her how close she'd come to having her face disfigured...reminding her of her blessings amid the tragedy that had become her life two years ago.

She hadn't felt blessed then, when she'd nearly died in the fire that had killed her husband.

And learned the truth she hadn't seen before.

Reaching for the coffeepot, her fingers trembled. There had been days during the year she'd spent in the burn center that she'd wished she hadn't survived. But it was the internal scars from Tim's betrayal that were the worst.

Those scars weren't as easy to heal. But they made knocking walls out a piece of cake. She'd just overdone it. Easy to do when there was enough anger inside her 105-pound frame to knock walls down for years.

Each swing made her feel stronger. She might have lost control of her life two years ago, but thanks to her dear uncle thinking about her in his will, she was here in Dew Drop, Texas, determined to regain control.

On her terms.

And knocking out walls was just the beginning. Just as Uncle Harvey had intended. He'd recognized that she was struggling emotionally and floundering to find meaning in it all after finally being released from the hospital.

Walking to the sink, she flipped on the cold water and looked out the window

as she stuck the pot under the spray. Two young men were carrying fallen tree branches to her burn pile!

Lucy jumped at the unexpected sight and sloshed water on herself. Setting the pot down, she grabbed a dishrag and wiped her hands as she headed for the door. *What is going on?*

She stormed out onto her back porch and caught her breath when Rowdy stepped around the corner.

"You," she gasped. "I should have known. What is going on here?" This was what she was talking about control. "Just because you saved me doesn't give you the right to just disregard my wishes—"

"Look, I knew you needed help. I just

brought the fellas over to pick up a few limbs for you."

Teens, not men, watching them from the burn pile, clearly uncertain whether to come near or not. They could probably see steam shooting out of her ears.

"They've cleaned up a lot. We've been at it since about six."

"Six!" It was eight-thirty now. How had she not heard them?

"We tried to be quiet so we wouldn't wake you."

Her mouth fell open. What did he think he was doing?

"You were quiet because you didn't want me to know you were here." His eyes flashed briefly. "I wanted to surprise you."

"You just can't take no for an

answer."

He stared at her, his jaw tensed, and a sense of guilt overcame her. Guilt. He was the one who should be guilty.

Right?

She was glaring at him when his gaze drifted to her neck and it was only then that she realized she hadn't pulled on her work shirt yet over her long-sleeved Tshirt.

He was staring at the scar. It licked up from the back of her neck, out from the protection of her hair, and curled around, stopping jaggedly just below her jawline.

"You've been burned." There was shock in his voice.

"Yes." Turning, she went back into the house to get the work shirt draped over the kitchen chair. Her hands shook as she slipped it on. Rowdy barreled inside behind her.

"Lucy, I'm sorry we startled you like we did. You have every right to be angry."

Angry? She could barely think, she was so embarrassed. Striding to the living room, she grabbed for her sledgehammer, and without putting on her goggles she took a swing at the wall. Her back and shoulders lashed out at her, forcing her to set the hammer down immediately. She was being ridiculous and she knew it. Why was she so afraid to let Rowdy help her?

The man was obstinate, that was why. Arrogant even, by showing up here to work anyway.

"I'm sorry about that burn. It looks like it must have been terribly painful." She met his gaze and gave him a quick nod. Her scars were something she didn't talk about. Especially the ones on the inside. "It's fine now," she said bluntly. She hoped he'd take the hint and not continue this line of talk.

"Look—" he shifted from boot to boot and scrubbed the back of his neck in a show of frustration "—you need help and you know it. You said yesterday that you would think about it. I was just trying to let you see that the guys were good kids and hard workers. They could whip this yard into shape for you in no time. And they'll do it for free. C'mon, give them a chance. Give *me* a chance."

As aggravating as it was to admit the man had charm. And there was no way to deny that she needed help. She couldn't go through life shunning all men. That was unrealistic. The fact he'd seen a portion of her scars ate into her confidence, and that was maddening. It did not matter what the cowboy thought of her.

It didn't.

"Why not?" she heard herself saying.

"It looks like you're going to be over here every day bothering me anyway. But just for a few days. And I'll pay you." *Lucy! What are you doing?*

A slow smile spread across his face. "There you go. That wasn't so hard after all, was it?" he said, reaching for her sledgehammer. "No pay needed for me, but if you want to pay the boys, that's fine. I was going to pay them for today myself."

"I'll pay them for today."

"No, I said I would-"

"Look, Rowdy," Lucy said, in her sternest voice. "If they are going to be over here, then I'm paying them. It's either that or this deal is off." They stared at each other and she got the distinct impression that he didn't "get" her in the same way that she didn't get him. But she was taking back control of this situation, or she wasn't having any part of it.

"Okay, have it your way."

"Good."

"All righty, then, stand back," he warned.

Lucy felt her body automatically obey, and watched him swing the heavy sledgehammer as if it was a plastic toy. The muscles in his forearms strained with the strength he put behind the swing. The hammer met the same spot her swing had barely dented and instantly the wood cracked beneath it. She brought her hand up and touched the base of her throat where her heartbeat raced.

After three more swings along the base of the studded wall, it broke free. It would have taken her all day to do that!

"I see what attracts you to this." He looked over his shoulder at her with a teasing light in his eyes. "I kinda like it myself."

"Yeah, it does kill a bad mood, doesn't it?"

He laughed at that and they stared at each other. Tension radiated between them.

"Okay," she said at last. "Thank you for helping me. I did need it." "No need to thank me." His smile widened. "You're the one helping me. Saving me from the wrath of Nana is a good thing. If there is one thing she prides above all else, it's that her boys are gentlemen. And I have to admit I have sometimes been her wayward child."

"Say it ain't so," Lucy mocked.

"Yeah, but I'm gonna make points when she finds out about this. So I guess that means I'm still the wayward child, since I'm really doing this for myself. Does that make you feel any better about letting me swing away?"

"Much better. I'd hate for you to actually admit that you're doing it because you're a nice guy." And he might be, even if he was a little nosy. But that didn't stop her from being wary...not so much of him, but of the way she reacted to him.

"Me, a nice guy." He looked skeptical, and that grin played across his face. "I don't know about that."

The man's personality sparkled and drew her like his eyes and his smile, stunning her once again.

Had she truly thought she was going to go the rest of her life not finding a man attractive?

Of course not.

That her neighbor just happened to have qualities that, regrettably, reminded her that she was still a woman, meant nothing. Absolutely nothing.

* * *

She was still telling herself that when Ruby Ann McDermott, Rowdy's grandmother, showed up at her house midmorning bearing welcome-to-Dew-Drop gifts: a basket loaded with homemade fig and strawberry preserves and green tomato relish, along with several small loaves of banana-nut bread to freeze and take out as needed, she informed Lucy.

Ruby Ann had long silver hair pulled back in a ponytail and strong features like Rowdy, along with those deep blue eyes the color of a twilight sky. She held her tall frame ramrod straight, with an elegance about the way she moved.

Two friends came along with her. The first of them, Ms. Jo, owned the Spotted Cow Café in town. Lucy had met her the day she'd first arrived. She'd had supper at the cute café after spending the day unpacking. Ms. Jo's piercing hazel eyes seemed to take everything in from behind her wire-rimmed glasses. She wore her slate-gray hair in a soft cap of curls. Lucy felt a kindred spirit, not just from the fact that they were close to the same height. She liked the older lady's spunk and hoped her own personality would be similar when she was nearing seventy.

Ms. Jo brought along a coconut pie that looked so mouthwateringly

delicious Lucy could barely keep from diving in the instant Ms. Jo placed it in her hands.

Mabel Tilsbee, the other member of the welcoming committee, owned the Dew Drop Inn. The towering, largeboned woman with shoulder-length black hair spiced with just a few strands of gray handed over a tray of cookies that were clearly overdone. "There's no need in me even pretending to be the best in the kitchen when the county's best are both standing here beside me. I gave it a whirl, though." She winked. "I got distracted and baked these a little too long. But, if you like coffee, they're real good dunkers."

Lucy laughed and felt instantly at home with these ladies. "Thank you all so much for coming by," she said, leading them into the kitchen. They eyed where a wall had obviously just been knocked out.

Ruby Ann's hand fluttered at the construction area. "Rowdy told me at breakfast this morning that he helped you do this. And that he and some of the boys will be helping you out for a little while."

"Yes, ma'am, he did." It was all Lucy could do not to smile at the thought of Rowdy's brownie points. She decided to help him out. "He's doing a great job. I worked almost two days knocking a wall out of the hayloft and half the morning just getting this wall to budge. He had it down within an hour. It was quite humiliating."

That got a chuckle from everyone.

"All my boys are strong and know how to work," Ruby Ann said.

"That's the truth." Ms. Jo's eyes sparkled with mischief. "Handsome, too, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes, he is." She couldn't deny the obvious. "I was just about to have a coffee break when y'all drove up. Please join me. I suddenly have lots of great food to choose from."

"You know, hon—" Mabel gave her a nudge with her elbow "—that's a *great* idea. I'll slice the pie." Lucy headed for the cups. This move was getting better by the day.

Mabel took the knife she handed her and sliced the pie and one of the loaves of banana-nut bread, instantly filling Lucy's kitchen with mouthwatering aromas.

She filled four mugs with coffee and in a matter of minutes they were all gathered around her kitchen table laughing and talking between bites.

An hour later, with an official invitation to dinner the next evening, she waved goodbye and was smiling as she watched her new friends drive away.

Her mother called this Nowhere, U.S.A., but to Lucy, this small town felt like home.

Turning back, she surveyed the lowslung ranch house. Three days ago, overgrown shrubs had threatened to obscure it, and one of the shutters had needed to be straightened. Not so since Wes, Joseph and Rowdy had stepped in.

Ever since she'd awakened in the hospital to discover the truth about her life, she'd been adrift and searching for something. Only her faith that God was beside her had gotten her through. And her God-given stubbornness.

From his perch on the porch railing, Moose purred, and even that from the ornery tomcat felt like a welcome—after all, he'd picked her.

"Yes, big fellow," Lucy murmured,

lifting him up and hugging him, "I do believe us two strays have found our home."

Rowdy McDermott's image plopped right back into her contented thoughts, settling in like a sticker poking through a sock.

Pushing the irritating worry aside, she headed inside to reread her home-repair guide on plastering a wall. She might have trust issues by the wagonload, but she was not a chicken.

She would not allow her fears to send her running.

She'd taken her first step toward starting over, and this was where she was making her stand.

Dew Drop was where Lucy Calvert took control of her life again.

Chapter Four

"Excuse me, ma'am. But you want me to do what?"

Rowdy's lips twitched as he watched tall, lanky Joseph staring down at Lucy with a look of complete confusion. Always ready to please, the kid usually wore an affable grin, but right now he looked almost in shock. On Saturday Lucy had talked to them in-depth about what she wanted the yard to look like and they'd done a fantastic job. But they hadn't been inside the house.

For example, they didn't know until now that Lucy had a thing about walls.

That the only good wall to her was a torn-out wall. He tugged on his ear and watched the show, enjoying every minute of it.

"I want you to take this sledgehammer," Lucy said, "and I want you to take a whack at this wall. It's fun! Believe me. It's freedom in a swing."

"Oh, I believe you," Joseph said. "It's just you already knocked out that wall over there, and I wasn't sure I was hearing you right. I mean, this one's a perfectly good wall and all."

Wes was champing at the bit to swing the sledgehammer. "Knock that dude down, bro. Or I'll do it."

Lucy chuckled. "I want this house opened up. It's too closed in. I like big airy rooms with lots of light. And, fellas, I've got to tell you that your Texas manners are perfect. Y'all have about ma'amed me to death. But you can call me Lucy from here on out. Got it?"

"Yes, ma'am—I mean, Lucy," Joseph complied, taking the sledgehammer and grinning as he looked from it to the blue wall. "I guess I can give this a go."

"Oh, yeah." Wes rubbed his palms together gleefully. "Swing away, Joe."

Rowdy's shoulders shook in silent laughter as Joseph pulled his protective eyewear down, then reared back and swung. A large hole busted through one side of the Sheetrock into the next room. It didn't take any more encouragement after that. The two teens started taking turns whacking away at the long wall that separated the living room from the den. The wall Rowdy had knocked out had been the divider for the kitchen and living room. What had once been three small dark rooms was now going to be one large space. He had to admit it was going to look good when it was all over with.

If she didn't knock *all* the walls out. The thought had him smiling and he almost said something to set her off, even though he knew she was leaving the load-bearing wall.

"Those have got to be the sweetest boys," she said, walking over to him. "Thank you for suggesting they come help me out. I think Joseph thought I had a few screws loose or something."

"He's on board now, though." Rowdy was curious about Lucy. She was an artist, though he'd yet to see any sign of art anywhere. He suddenly wondered about that. Her house was still loaded down with boxes and the walls were bare. Probably a good thing while she was stirring up all this dust. But was there more to it? His brothers had always called him the curious one. And his curiosity was working double time on Lucy.

As if sensing he was watching her, she turned her head and met his gaze with eyes that held a hint of wariness. She looked at him often like that and it added to his curiosity. Why?

She lifted her hand to her collar and tugged it close. He'd noticed she'd done this several times before, as if selfconscious about the burn scar on her neck.

He'd wondered about the scar and what had caused it. It was obvious that whatever had happened had been painful.

Being self-conscious about anything was at odds with his image of Lucy.

"Your grandmother came by this morning with her friends. They're a great group." She waved toward the counter loaded with pie and cookies. "I have all kinds of goodies in there left over if you and the guys want to take a break."

That made him laugh. In the background the pounding grew steadily, and then something crashed and the boys' whoops rang joyfully through the house. "As you can hear, I'm not doing anything, so if you mean there's pie in there from Ms. Jo, then I'm all in."

She'd started smiling when the boys started whooping. She was one gorgeous woman.

"There's pie. And, by the way, I put in a good word for you."

She headed into the kitchen and he followed. She wore another of those oversize shirts, hot pink today, and he began to think it was an artist quirk or something. The collar brushed her jaw and the sleeves covered half her hands, they were so long. And still, as dwarfed as she was in all that cloth, he remembered the feel of her in his arms

that first day.

She might be small, but Lucy Calvert was all woman.

She turned suddenly and he almost ran over her. Automatically, he wrapped his arms around her, lifting her instead of mowing her down.

"Sorry about that." He set her on her feet and she immediately put distance between them.

She gave a shaky laugh. "I'm so short it's easy to miss me."

"Hardly. No one would miss you." His frank assessment of her appeal had her swinging away from him to reach for a pie. She lifted the cover, her shoulders stiff as she did so, and he realized she didn't like him flirting with her. "I just wasn't watching where I was going," he added, trying to ease the tension that had sprung between them.

She'd started slicing pie with a vengeance. "Will you ask the boys what they'd like to drink with their pie, please?" she asked, as if he hadn't spoken.

He stared at her back for a few minutes, confused by her reaction. "Sure," he said, and went to get the guys.

What had just happened?

* * *

Lucy arrived at Sunrise Ranch with the pit of her stomach churning. She knew a lot about the ranch now, since working with Wes and Joseph. The teens had been fun to be around and had worked really hard. She'd been glad she hired them and got to watch their excitement over being destructive. And they'd been so polite doing it.

Even now the thought made her smile.

If it hadn't been for their constant exuberance, she didn't know what she'd have done when she'd found herself in Rowdy's arms once more—one minute she'd been fine and the next his muscled arms had swept her off her feet and his heartbeat was tangoing with her own.

She'd overreacted. Panicked. She'd forgotten how wonderful it felt to be held by a man.

Forgotten the feel of another heart beating against hers.

What she *hadn't* forgotten was how complete betrayal felt and that had driven her, shaken and babbling, out of his arms and across the room.

He probably thought she was crazy. Well, that made two of them.

Letting the excitement of meeting her neighbors take over, she parked beside the house like Ruby Ann had instructed her to do. Kids were everywhere. There were several across the way in the arena riding horses, including Joseph and Wes. Three younger boys were taking turns trying to throw their ropes around the horns on a roping dummy in front of the barn. They stopped to watch as she got out of her truck and immediately, ropes dragging, they headed her way.

"You must be Lucy," the smallest boy said, arms pumping from side to side as he raced to beat his buddies. His plump cheeks were pink and dampness suffused his face. Obviously he'd been outside for a while and his oversize widerimmed cowboy hat hadn't completely shaded him from the sunlight. "Yes, I am. How did you guess?"

"I heard Rowdy say you were kinda short. And you ain't much taller than me."

Ha! "True. I can't deny that you are almost as tall as me."

"I'm B.J., by the way. I'm the youngest one here, so I'm supposed to be short."

The other two crowded close. Almost the same size, one had brown hair and brown eyes, and the other was blond haired with blue eyes. They looked around nine years old and were almost her height.

"I'm Sammy and this here is Caleb," the brown-haired one said. "We heard you let Wes and Joseph knock down walls in your house. We been thinking it would be mighty fun to do. We're pretty strong. Show her your muscles, Caleb."

Immediately all arms cocked to show small bumps that would one day be muscles and truly did have some definition to them despite their young ages.

Vitality radiated from the three of them in their oversize hats, jeans, boots and B.J. with his leather vest. They could easily go on the cover of a greeting card.

"So how's the roping going?"

"Good, you wanna come try?" B.J. asked, taking her hand in his damp, slightly sticky one. "It's real fun. I ain't got it all figured out, but Caleb here, he's pretty good."

"I am, too," Sammy said, looking put out that B.J. hadn't said so. "I might be the newest kid here, but I been working real hard and almost got Caleb caught."

Lucy laughed at the competitiveness as she allowed B.J. to pull her across the gravel to the metal roping dummy. "I'll try it. But I'm not promising much."

Wes and Joseph rode up to the fence with a slightly younger kid with coalblack hair, blue eyes and a crooked grin. The skinny teen looked amazingly like a younger version of Elvis Presley, whose old movies she'd loved as a kid, watching with her mother. It was one good memory she had of time spent with her mother.

"You made it," Wes called over the rail.

"Your house didn't cave in yet, did it?" Joseph's soft-spoken teasing made her smile. He had been so skeptical about taking a swing at the wall, but in the end he'd been a wall-knocking maniac just like Wes. It was easy to see Wes lived on the edge—much like she'd picture Rowdy at that age. But Joseph, he was a gentle soul.

"No, it's still standing. At least when I left."

"We want to help, too, please," Sammy said, reiterating what B.J. had said earlier. "Wes was telling us about how you just told them to beat that wall to smithereens and we all want to take a whack at it."

Everyone started talking at once, and Lucy found herself in the midst of a huge discussion on why the younger boys should get the chance to come knock out her walls.

"Whoa, guys." She called a time-out with her hands. "I have no problem with more help. We'll set it up with Rowdy. How does that sound?"

It wasn't long before Rowdy rode up on a horse with a couple of other menone was an older cowboy with snowwhite hair introduced as Pepper, the horse foreman, and the other was Chet, the Sunrise Ranch top hand. She'd learned from Nana's visit that Rowdy was the cattle-operation manager and quarter horse trainer. It was easy to see that Rowdy was a hands-on kind of cowboy, dusty from whatever he'd been doing out there on his horse. Lucy's fingers itched with the desire to paint him and his friends as they'd looked riding in from the open range.

She'd been struck by the Old West look of Rowdy in his chaps and spurs. And those deep blue, dangerous eyes as they glinted in the sunlight.

Chet and Pepper led their horses into the barn and he dismounted.

"I see the boys are making you feel at home."

"Very. They're a great bunch."

They all began talking at once and she loved it. Their excitement was contagious.

"What are y'all practicing for?" she asked them.

"The ranch rodeo. We got to get good so we can help our teams," B.J. said, holding his coiled rope in the air like a trophy.

As she was not sure what the difference was between a ranch rodeo and a regular rodeo, the kids explained that at a ranch rodeo there were events done with teams. The younger ones began telling her about their roping skills and asking if she'd ever mugged, or roped, a calf. Their questions were coming faster than paintballs from a paintball gun and she was barely keeping up.

Rowdy had crossed his arms, grinning at her as he rocked back on his boots, enjoying her induction into his world.

"Lucy," Ruby Ann called from the back porch of the house across the parking lot. When Lucy turned her way, she waved. "Could you come here and give me a hand?"

"Sure, I'll be right there." She smiled at the boys and realized a couple of extras had appeared from somewhere, maybe from inside the barn. There were boys of all heights and sizes everywhere. It was going to be a test of her memory skills just to get them all connected with their names. "If you'll all excuse me, I'll see you soon."

"We've got to wash up and put horses away, and then we'll be joining you," Rowdy explained. "Nana gave the house parents a date-night pass, so you get to hang with all sixteen boys and the rest of the family tonight."

Lucy did not miss that he was including the boys in the "family." It touched her deeply. As much as she was struggling with certain aspects of being around him, this was one more glaring declaration of his being a nice guy.

Ruby Ann held the door open for her and smiled as she entered. "It's so good to have you here. Met the crew, I see." She enveloped Lucy in a welcoming hug, then led the way down the hall past the mudroom and into the expansive kitchen. "Did I ever! I'm in love."

"I know, they'll just twist your heart and hook you in an instant, won't they?" "They're amazing."

The scrumptious scent of baked bread and pot roast filled the house, if her nose was correct. The tantalizing scents had her stomach growling. These scents were similar to those of her grandmother's home back when she'd been alive.

"Dinner smells amazing, Ruby Ann." "Thank you. Now take a seat, and, for goodness' sake, call me Nana. You're going to hear it chanted all through the evening by my boys."

"Nana it is." It felt comfortable and right to call her Nana. She loved that Nana called them her boys. "Is there something I can help you with?"

"I love a woman who pitches in. You can peel these grapes for the fruit salad, if you don't mind."

"Peel the grapes? Sure," she said, shocked at the request. She'd never even thought about someone peeling grapes, much less doing it herself.

Nana chuckled. "I'm just teasing. I've already peeled the grapes. But you can slice up these strawberries for me if you don't mind." Relieved that Nana had been teasing, she sat down and took the knife Nana held out to her.

There was food everywhere. "This is amazing. How did you ever learn to cook for a group this large?"

Waving the spoon she'd been stirring cheese into a mountain of mashed potatoes with, she chuckled. "I talked to a caterer and she gave me some formulas. Now it just comes naturally. Kind of like I expect painting comes to you. Right?"

Lucy remembered the first time she'd walked into a local art studio and picked up a paintbrush. She'd been ten, and her mother had wanted to encourage her drawing ability. Lucy had loved the scents that filled the studio, linseed oil and turpentine, and the instant she'd held that brush, everything in the world had seemed suddenly right.

It had been a long time since she'd had that feeling. She smiled. "Yes, you're right. My painting is from instinct, though I had some formal training when I was young."

"I read about you, you know. Looked you up on the Net." Nana's wise eyes settled on her as she spoke.

Lucy knew if that were the case, then she knew about the fire. "You did?" she asked, trying to keep her voice steady.

Nana studied her. "You had a hard time of it. I'm sorry. How are you doing now?"

"I'm okay," she said, trying to figure out where to direct the conversation. It wasn't as if she hadn't thought that someone could check her out online. After all, she was an artist with a bit of success. A rush of sound broke into their conversation as the back door opened and one after the other of the boys streamed down the hall and through the kitchen. She wasn't sure how all of them would fit in the house.

As if reading her mind, Nana said, "We usually eat in the Chow Hall, but tonight is special, we're having a guest. So it may be a tight squeeze."

Laughter and banter filled the room as

Rowdy ushered the boys into the den. His brother Morgan and his wife, Jolie, arrived and Rowdy introduced them. Not that she'd needed the introduction—their resemblance was too similar. Morgan, like Rowdy, had Nana's direct navy eyes.

"Morgan and my dad run the business side of the foster program and the ranch. Jolie has been our schoolteacher since the beginning of the year."

"I can't wait to see some of your work." Jolie's wide smile reminded Lucy instantly of Julia Roberts, especially with her auburn hair and her expressive eyes. "I envy an artist their abilities. I'm a klutz with a brush in my hand."

"I won't believe that until I see it." Lucy had the distinct impression that this lady could do anything she set her mind to. And quickly she learned it was true when Morgan told her Jolie was a champion kayaker. It was easy to see his pride in her accomplishments. Tim had always seemed threatened by her success. His greatest wish had been for her to give up her work.

Lucy was so thankful that she hadn't done that.

Looking at Morgan and Jolie, she had to admit that she envied the bond between them. Their mutual respect spoke volumes.

They all talked about her work some

—that it was in galleries and that she also sold prints. She wasn't Thomas Kinkaid or Norman Rockwell, but she was blessed to have some recognition, giving her the ability to paint full-time.

It wasn't long before they were all helping carry the large platters of food to the huge table in the dining area. There were so many of them that card tables had been set up to help accommodate them all.

While they were setting the table, Rowdy's brother Tucker showed up. Introductions were made and she knew before they told her that he had been in the Special Forces. There was just something about the way he carried himself. He still wore a very closecropped haircut she could see when he removed his Stetson and hung it on the hat rack. Rowdy's hair was more touchable, run-your-fingers-through-it type. Where both Morgan and Tucker had serious edges to their expressions, Rowdy's was more open, and—she searched for the right word—*light* was all that came to mind. Rowdy's eyes twinkled as he wrestled on the couch with B.J. and Sammy. His infectious laughter had Lucy wanting to join in.

She brought her thoughts up short, realizing that she was comparing Rowdy's attributes with his brothers'. She had no reason to do that.

No reason and no want to.

Frustrated by her thoughts, Lucy marched back to the kitchen in search of a plate of food to carry. She needed something constructive to do. What was wrong with her, anyway?

Chapter Five

Dinner was a loud affair. But with that many boys crammed beneath one roof, it was to be expected. Rowdy enjoyed watching Lucy's reactions to the wild bunch. She handled herself pretty well for a newcomer. Then again, how he was handling himself *was* the question, as he found himself sitting next to her.

He could tell Nana had her eagle eyes trained on them and wondered if she sensed the undercurrent.

He tried to hide his acute interest in Lucy. After all, he'd sworn off women for a while. And she was sorely putting

that commitment to the test. What was that verse that kept popping into his mind -"Test me, oh Lord, and try me." The Lord was doing a bang-up good job of it, and that was for certain. When he got home he was going to find out what the rest of the verse was so he could figure out a nice way to tell the Lord He could lay off. Lucy sitting next to him, at a crowded table, their elbows practically rubbing together, and smelling of something fresh and sweet- Refusing temptation had never been his strong point. He had always gotten low marks.

His dad said the blessing, having come in just before the meal was ready, and Rowdy talked to the Lord and expressed his concerns. When he opened his eyes and glanced to his left, Lucy was looking at him—and for a second he got the feeling she'd been talking to the Lord just as fervently as he had about being forced to sit with him.

* * *

"You're an artist," Randolph said, after he finished blessing the food. It was more a statement than a question. "And you're tearing out and making a studio. How's that going?"

Rowdy had the feeling she'd been trying hard not to look at him up to this point.

"I'm getting all the ripping out done first before I start the rebuilding, though."

"Hopefully she's gonna leave some walls, but it sure is fun knocking them out," Wes called from his seat at the card table with Joseph and Tony.

"I'm leaving the major walls," she chuckled, and the sound had him fighting not to lean in closer to her.

"What do you paint?" Caleb asked, his big blue eyes full of curiosity.

"Well, I paint whatever catches my eye—people, flowers, whatever. But I'm known for roads and landscapes."

"You paint those yellow lines on the roads?" B.J. asked excitedly, and Rowdy was pretty certain the little kid thought that would be the greatest job in the world. Eight-year-olds saw the world in their own way.

"Not exactly. You see, I paint a road in a landscape." When it was clear he didn't understand, she added, "You know the gravel road that cuts through the pasture at the entrance of the ranch? Well, I'd paint something like that, when the bluebonnets are in bloom. Or the doves lined up on the telephone lines."

His brows crinkled up and Rowdy had to hide a chuckle.

"Why would you want to paint a road like that?"

She smiled, making Rowdy want to smile, too, because he was enjoying listening to her.

"Because I'm infatuated with them. I

love roads and love pictures of roads that make people want to know where the road leads."

"But we know the one in the pasture leads here to the ranch," Sammy interjected, sitting up in his chair.

"But the first time you came here, did you know what was just over the hill? I mean, you could see the roof of this house, but didn't you wonder what the rest was going to look like? Weren't you curious what you would see once the car reached the top of the hill? Wasn't there a sense of wonder?"

"Yeah," Wes said, his voice trailing low. "I was hoping there would be a horse and, sure enough, there was one tied to the arena saddled and ready when the social worker stopped the car. It was awesome."

Lucy placed her elbows on the table and leaned closer. "Yes. That's what I love about a picture of a road—it lets the person viewing it dream their own story. Everyone who looks at a picture of a road sees and feels something different."

Rowdy got it, and his curiosity was ramped up to view her paintings. He liked the way her mind worked.

"I was hoping I'd find a place where I wouldn't be sent away." Tony's words rang through the silent room.

"And you found that, didn't you?" His expression eased. "I found my family."

"And we are so glad you did." Nana said what everyone else was thinking.

"I think it would be neat to paint a picture," Sammy said. "Can we see some of yours sometime?"

"Sure. I'd love to show you when I get some unpacked. I don't really have much, though. What I've painted recently is at the galleries. But I've got to get busy because they are waiting on me to turn new work in. There's an important show coming up and I need something in it."

"I'd like to see some myself," Rowdy said, more than ever wanting to see her work.

"Sure," she said, their eyes meeting.

Tearing his eyes away from hers, he gave his undivided attention to his pot roast. He liked his neighbor, it was true, but he had horses to train, boys to coach for the upcoming ranch-rodeo benefit and a cattle business to run at the same time. He had committed to helping sassy Lucy Calvert do a little remodeling, but that was it.

For now, anyway. He'd had the tendency to date women who were drama queens—partly because they were usually really good-looking and that seemed to be his downfall—not that he was proud of any of it, but he couldn't deny it. Maybe this attraction he was feeling toward Lucy was because she seemed to be the complete opposite of that.

He'd made a commitment to himself and the Lord. Women were off-limits. Until the Lord showed him the right woman, he wasn't making a move. No matter what.

"Lucy, I've been sitting here thinking and I've just had this crazy idea," Jolie said, leaning close to the table in her excitement and taking the heat off of Rowdy. "Would you consider teaching the boys a brief art class? Just a class or maybe two a week for five or six weeks?"

Startled by his sister-in-law's proposal, Rowdy swung his head to the side and saw that Lucy was just as

startled. Then her eyes lit up as if she'd just been plugged into an electric outlet.

"I'd love to do that!" she exclaimed. He held in a groan and knew right then and there that he was in trouble. "But you have your hands full of projects," he protested before he could stop himself. Every eye at the table slammed into him and he knew he should have kept his stinkin' mouth shut.

Test me, oh Lord—there was no denying it. None at all. God obviously got a real kick out of giving exams.

* * *

What had she just done? Lucy toyed with the collar of her shirt. She'd just

committed to teaching the boys of Sunrise Ranch art lessons. The very idea sent shock through her, but excitement at the same time. She was going to teach an art class. And she was going to do it for these boys. It hit her suddenly that maybe this was what she was looking for. What she needed right now, a way to make her feel as if she was making a difference her way of giving something back. Of paying it forward, so to speak.

This was her shot. It would be great! "Whoa, there, you mean we're going to have to *paint* pictures?" The shock on Wes's face equaled that of being told he was going to participate in a ballet and it brought her excitement up short.

Cowboys obviously didn't do ballet

or painting.

Joseph's eyes widened with worry, too. And with the two obvious leaders of the group balking at the idea, looks of excitement began giving way to looks of skepticism.

"Some of the greatest artists in the world are men," Lucy assured them, suddenly really wanting to do this. "Western art is a fantastic art form and I'd love to see if we have any future talent in this room with me."

Jolie jumped in to help. "Fellas, you'll have fun with this. Lucy and I will figure out projects you will enjoy. I promise."

Wes got a twinkle in his eyes. "I think

if we have to paint, then Lucy needs to have to help us in the wild-cow-milking competition."

Excited chatter and agreements erupted about the room. Rowdy joined in the laughter beside her.

Well, she could have a good time, too. "Sure, I'd do that. I can learn to milk a cow."

Nana had been fairly quiet during the conversation, clearly enjoying listening, but now she chuckled. "Lucy, you're a good sport and true Sunrise Ranch material. But, to be fair, I think someone needs to explain the whole concept to you before you commit."

"That might be a good idea," Morgan agreed from across the table. "Jolie loves this sort of thing, but not all women do."

Instantly the competitive side of Lucy lit up. She might not be as tall and athletically built as Jolie, but she was certain that she could milk a cow. How hard could it be? "I'm sure it will be fun," she said.

"It is," Jolie told her. "Still, Wes, maybe you should explain this since it was your idea."

"It's a blast," the blond mischief maker said. "There's a team of five and one of them is the 'milker' and one is the roper. While the other team members catch and control the wild cow, the milker gets the milk, then runs it to the finish line. It's a hoot and a half."

"Yeah, a hoot and a half," B.J. echoed. "You gonna do it?" His big dark eyes were wide with wonder and expectation.

Though Lucy had sudden qualms about the wild-cow part, she swallowed her trepidation and nodded. "Sure I am. I'm game for anything."

From the end of the table, Randolph joined the conversation. "For safety's sake, I'm going to venture in here and require you to have some experience under your belt before you jump out there and try it. Rowdy can be in charge of that. What do you say, Rowdy?"

Lucy's spirits sank like the *Titanic*. Suddenly she wasn't so sure about this great idea. She'd already allowed Rowdy to help with her construction. She'd realized tonight that she wasn't comfortable being in his company overly much. The man made her nervous—he affected her in ways that she'd rather not think about. Now this....

"Sure," Rowdy said beside her. "We'll figure something out."

It hit her that he didn't sound all that enthusiastic about the idea, either. As she turned to him, her arm brushed his. Tingles of awareness like an expanding spiderweb etched across her body.

"Good," Randolph said. "In that case, I'll look forward to seeing you in the competition." "Sure." Lucy's voice was as weak as the smile she mustered up.

How had this happened?

B.J. tugged at her sleeve and she turned to him, glad to have a distraction from Rowdy. "We're gonna have fun." He dragged the word *fun* out for miles.

Lucy liked his positive thinking, but she wasn't so sure about that anymore.

Chapter Six

She'd awakened thinking of the man as if she had nothing else on her mind. She padded barefooted straight to the kitchen and the strong pot of coffee that she'd set to automatically brew this morning.

Yawning, she grabbed an oversize red cup from the cabinet and filled it almost to the brim. Taking a sip of the strong black brew, she let the warmth seep through her, then loaded it with three teaspoons of sugar—one more than usual for the extra shot of energy she would need before attempting to plaster a wall today. She took another sip, sighed then headed outside to drink it on the porch. She loved the quiet of the morning.

She'd come here to clear the air and move on with her life. Knocking walls out and spending her afternoons carrying the wood to a burn pile had empowered her. True, her back ached—and she'd had a very near miss with disaster-but since arriving in Dew Drop, she'd had a blast. And now she'd found something else to do that would be fulfillingsomething she needed so badly.

Still, she knew it would take time away from her own painting, which she really should get busy on as soon as she finished renovating. But she would make time for the art classes. They might actually help her regain that spark of enthusiasm she'd come here searching for.

She needed inspiration desperately.

Needed something to motivate her to pick her brushes back up.

She'd come here determined that if she got her studio just right, the joy would return. And she was still trusting that it would.

What about the cowboy?

There he was again, the big white elephant in the room. What about him?

Her cell phone rang, saving her for the moment.

Digging it out of her pocket, she glanced at the caller ID. So maybe she was wrong, she'd rather deal with the cowboy than her mom. Bracing for drama, she pushed the touch screen to accept the call.

"Hi, Mom."

"Have you lost your mind?"

"Not the last time I checked." Lucy concentrated on keeping her tone light, having long ago grown numb to the melodrama.

"Then why are you living at that dump in the middle of nowhere? You've come a long way, Lucy, after what that jerk did to you." Lucy held back a retort. Her mother had no room to call names, having put Lucy's father through basically the same thing that Tim had put Lucy through, only her mother had been an open book. But Nicole didn't see the two as the same thing; everything she did felt justified in her mind.

"Mom, we've been through this. I want to be here. I'm loving it."

"Your father should have stopped this

"I'm twenty-six years old and plenty old enough to make my own choices." *Without being dragged through guilt trips and hysterics.*

There was a long, exaggerated sigh on the other end of the line. "I never said you weren't capable of making your own choices." Nicole's voice dripped with emotion. "But what if *I* need you?"

And there was the whole gist of the conversation. Lucy fought off her own

exaggerated sigh. "Mother, you are forty-seven years old—"

"Forty-four," her mother corrected. Nicole had shaved off three years of her age a few years back. Just knocked them off and somehow didn't think anyone would notice. It wasn't worth arguing over. "The thing is, Mom, I moved here to start fresh. I am going to be fine and so are you. After all, you have Alberto."

"There you go again not paying attention to me. His name is Alonzo and no, I don't have him anymore."

Her mother was destined for unhappiness. The one good man she'd ever married had been Lucy's dad, and Nicole had kicked him to the curb years ago. And when Lucy's dad had had the audacity to fall in love and remarry and be *happy*—Nicole had made it her life goal to try to make his life miserable.

Lucy had been the pawn her mother used most of the time in that quest. As a girl Lucy had suffered because of it and trusted no one with her heart until Tim. A bad move on her part—he and her mother were two of a kind.

"Mom, did you have a reason for this call?" Lucy asked, not happy about being reminded of what she wanted so much to escape.

She was ready to get to work and be done with this bad start to a good day.

"There you go being negative. Can't a mother just call to check on her child?" Sure she could, but then Nicole

wasn't a normal mother. There was always a reason for her call.

"Yes, she can." Lucy waited.

"Well, there is one thing," Nicole said, as if suddenly thinking of something. "Now that I've got you on the line. You still have your condo in Plano, right?"

"Yes." She hadn't put her condo on the market yet, wanting to make certain she wanted to stay here in Dew Drop.

"Great, then I'm sure you won't mind if I stay at your place for a while. I've moved out of Alonzo's place and..." *So that was it.* "Yes, Mother. That will be fine. You know where the key is." And that was that.

Her mother made a quick ending to the call after she'd gotten what she wanted. Lucy held the phone for a minute, staring at it as she realized her bond with her mother was as blank as the screen. There was a time when she'd longed for more, but then she'd faced facts and knew it would never be more than it was now.

Standing, she looked about her new property. Her sweet uncle had wanted her to find that missing link here on this property and among the folks of Dew Drop. And maybe with her neighbors at Sunrise Ranch. He always had been a perceptive man.

Breathing in the fresh air, Lucy headed toward the barn to find her sledgehammer—the hunk of metal had become her new best friend and she was smiling as she walked along.

Moose appeared, weaving between her feet and arching his back as he rubbed his furry orange body against her leg.

"You and me, Moose," she said, bending to tickle him between his ears. She had things to do. There was no time to waste on areas of her life she had no intention of opening up again.

Here she might have to figure out how to maneuver around her new neighbor, but her mother had just reminded her of the circus her life could be back home and what her uncle had known or hoped she would find on this property.

She could deal with a certain happygo-lucky cowboy if she must in order to keep her feeling of contentment. Her mother could have Lucy's condo for all she cared.

* * *

What had he been thinking?

Stalking to the burn pile, Rowdy carried the guts of yet another wall that Lucy had decided needed to bite the dust. At this point he'd begun to really worry about the woman's brain. This wall wasn't connected to the living room/kitchen area or he would have put his foot down. This wall happened to be on the upper floor of the house between two small bedrooms that she'd decided needed to be one larger room. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that the woman liked open space.

Or, he had begun to wonder, perhaps she really did just love to knock out walls. Maybe it was a disorder of some kind.

"Calamity Lucy's at it again," Wes said as he walked up. "I'm thinking we're going to have to talk her into leaving something standing in there or her house is gonna fall right on top of her."

"He might be right, Rowdy. Aren't

you worried?" Joseph asked. "I mean, that's three walls. And I think she has her eye on the one beside her bedroom downstairs. I think I heard her muttering something about closet space."

Rowdy tossed his armload on the pile, stripped off his gloves and rested his hands on his hips. "I know it seems crazy, but it is her house, fellas. And to her credit, she hasn't knocked a wall out yet that would cause the house to cave in." For that he was grateful. He didn't tell the guys, but at the rate she was going it was only a matter of time before those were the only walls left, and then...who knew?

Wes rubbed his neck and squinted at

Rowdy in the sun. "I guess it's good we're here to talk her off the ledge if she decides to get really crazy with the sledgehammer."

The kid had been ambling around nursing what looked to be a sore hip and a sore neck. Rowdy wondered again about whether he was bull riding. He'd asked about the hip and Wes had said he'd had a run-in with a steer. Logical answer...and maybe not the lie Rowdy suspected it was.

If his dad or his brothers suspected anything, none of them were saying. Maybe it would be better just to turn his head the other way and leave it be. As soon as the school year ended in six weeks, the kid was free to do as he pleased per the state. In all truth, he could do it now, but thankfully college was in Wes's plans.

Sunrise Ranch didn't cut the foster kids loose when the state did. Once they were here at the ranch, they were family and treated as such. Wes and Joseph were both graduating with scholarships to college. Joseph was heading off to become a vet and Wes was looking at an education in agriculture.

Rowdy pushed the thoughts away. He was probably worried about nothing. Looking at his watch, he saw it was nearing time for rodeo practice. "Hey, why don't y'all head back now? I'll go see if Lucy is ready to start practice tonight and be there soon. Tell Morg for me, okay?"

"Sure thing, Rowdy." Joseph nodded toward the house. "I think she might be a little worried about it."

Rowdy gave the kindhearted teen a smile. "I'll make sure she knows we're all going to take good care of her."

"I have a feeling she's tougher than she looks," Wes said. "Did either of you glimpse that burn on her neck?"

So they'd seen it, too. Since he'd seen it the other day, he was aware of it. He'd caught glimpses of it when she was busy working and forgot to tug her collar tight.

"I wondered if y'all had noticed," he said.

Joseph nodded. "I don't think she wants people to see it, though. Kind of like Tony not wanting to go without his shirt."

It was true. Tony had been badly mistreated by his parents before the state took him away from them and brought him to the ranch. His background was like nothing any kid should have to go through and he had scars to prove it. Bad scars that made Rowdy's stomach curl thinking about them.

"Maybe we can keep this between us, then," he said, immediately getting agreement from them. "I appreciate it, guys."

They headed toward the ranch truck as

he headed toward the house. When he heard the distinct whack of a sledgehammer, he picked up his pace.

What could she be tearing out now?

Wes and Joseph's laughter followed him as he took the porch steps in a single stride and pulled open the screen door. Calamity Lucy they were calling her—he had to agree at this point. The woman had to stop. Getting her out of this house and involved in something else, even if it was wild-cow milking, was just the thing she needed.

Chapter Seven

"Okay, that does it. Put the sledgehammer down."

Lucy spun at Rowdy's irritated growl. "What do you think you're doing?" she gasped when he grabbed the tool. She hung on to the handle with all she had.

"I'm stopping you from destroying your house. Do you realize this is the *fourth* wall you've knocked out? Five, if you count the one in the barn."

"I can count, you know," she snapped. "And it's *my* house," she added indignantly, yanking hard on the sledgehammer. The irritating man yanked right back, slamming Lucy up against him with only the hammer between them.

"Let go, Lucy."

She glared up at him. "I will not!" The man had been working for her all afternoon and she'd been trying not to think about how every time he looked at her she forgot all about not wanting a man in her life.

Holding the handle with one hand, he covered her hands with the other. The work-roughened feel of them caused goose bumps on her arms.

His lip twitched at the corners as he stared down at her. "You sure are pretty when your eyes are shooting fireworks. I'm kinda growing fond of it." She couldn't breathe. She couldn't

move. What had this man done to her?

One minute they were staring at each other, and then he lowered his head and kissed her. How dare he....

Goodness... The dreamy chant began ringing through her head as his lips melded with hers.

You're a fool, a fool, a fool, the small voice of sanity began to scream. Tearing her lips away from his, she put footage between them. "Why did you do that?"

His brows had crinkled together over teasing eyes. "I've been wanting to do it from the first day you dropped into my arms. And you know it. I've seen you looking at me, too." Her jaw dropped. "You don't have a clue what I want. Or don't want." That he had her pegged did not make her feel good. "I don't want a man. I don't need a man. And certainly not one who kisses me right out of the blue like that." *Well, it had been nice*— She told the voice in her head to take a hike!

Rowdy stared at her as if she'd grown two heads or something. "Look," he said at last. "I kissed you. I'm sorry. I told you I was trying to mend my ways and you're right, I went and kissed you and I shouldn't have."

"Aha! So you freely admit that kissing women is a regular pastime for you. It just goes to show you that men are all despicable." The words just flowed out in a rush. "And another thing," she flung at him when suddenly it hit her that he was still looking at her as though she'd clearly lost her marbles.

She swallowed hard and prayed for the floor to open up and swallow her. How horribly embarrassing.

The clock on the wall in the next room could be heard in the silence that stretched between them.

"Are you okay?" Rowdy asked gently. She couldn't look at him as she nodded.

"I'm really sorry. I overstepped myself and you're right. I was way out of line. It won't happen again."

He was actually apologizing to her.

What a concept. When had Tim ever done that? Only when he'd wanted something...or when she'd figured out he'd done something he hadn't wanted her to find out about. The sleaze.

"Look." Rowdy held up his hands in surrender. "I'm not sure what your problem is, but if it will make you feel better, I'll leave." He turned to go and it was then that she realized she'd been glaring at him the whole time.

The man had to think she was a complete loon.

Stomach churning, she ran after him and caught him on the porch. The sun hung low on the horizon behind him. "Rowdy, wait. I might have overreacted."

At her quiet words he halted and turned back to her. "Maybe. But, hey, if my kiss drove you to it, then I guess that's a good thing. Only I get the feeling what's going on here goes a whole lot deeper than my kissing. Right?"

She owed him, so she nodded. "It's a long story."

"Look, I have a feeling you're not comfortable sharing whatever it is with me. Especially now. But how about getting out of the house to practice for the rodeo?"

She had to shut down the sudden impulse to spill everything to him. Working with him was one thing confessing to him was another. But she had made him feel terribly bad—at least it seemed that way—and she had signed on for this wild-cow milking. "Okay, that sounds like a plan," she said.

He waved a hand toward his truck. "In that case, your chariot awaits you. And I promise to stay on my side of the truck, behind the steering wheel."

Feeling more foolish than ever, Lucy pushed her hair behind her ear, contemplated changing her mind and then followed him to his truck.

* * *

"First things first. Do you know how to milk a cow?"

Lucy blinked blankly at him, and

Rowdy took that as a no even before she confirmed what he'd figured out.

"Um, I can't say that I've ever had the need to know how to milk a cow."

Rowdy was having trouble concentrating. He shouldn't have kissed her. Hadn't meant to. He was a yahoo, a buffoon, an idiot. That was for certain. He'd swallowed the woman up as if she was sweet tea on a hot afternoon, and then he'd lost his mind in the process. He just didn't think straight around her. He knew that now.

The thing was, he liked Lucy and he couldn't seem to do anything but want to get to know her better. But if he'd thought there was something bothering her before, he knew it was true now. Not that he was God's gift to women or anything, but she'd responded to him and then shoved him away as though he was Jack the Ripper.

What was her story? Something had happened to cause this leeriness.

She had a mistrust of men. And he wanted to know why.

The best way to do that was to get to know her, and teaching her to milk a cow was one more way to do that.

"So this isn't a milk cow." It wasn't a question but an observation on her part. She bit her lip—he fought to focus—and she studied the mama cow in the holding pen. "Aren't mama cows dangerous?" "Yes, they are when their calf is around. They're not to be toyed with, and you need to know what you're doing so you can get in there and get out. Okay?"

She rolled her gorgeous eyes. "I'm thinking this is the craziest stunt I've ever agreed to."

He chuckled. "I hope so, because it is kind of crazy."

"Then why are you allowing the kids to do it?"

"They're ranch kids. Other kids skateboard on rails and jump bikes over holes and ramps. Ranch kids get in the arena with cattle."

She crossed her arms tight and glared at the cow that stood contently in the pen. He knew as well as she did when she started after the cow's udder things would change in an instant.

"Look, I don't want you to get hurt. The thing is the older teens know what they're doing. This isn't for little kids. You have to remember, one will have her head, and one will control her tail and one will be helping the boy holding the head. I'll be helping you get to the udder. They'll have her stretched out and it won't be as dangerous as it could be. You just have to look out for her feet, and I mean it. Watch them. Now I'm going to call the boys over and we're going to demonstrate."

"Fine. You do that."

He almost chuckled at the way she

was fighting her fear. He'd learned that she wasn't one to back down. Rowdy liked that. Respected it.

* * *

"Okay, you need to hold your hand like this, like you are going to shake my hand."

Lucy watched Rowdy hold his hand out with his fingers together and his thumb slightly separated from them. She copied him, trying hard not to think about the kiss. But it was a little bit distracting — Okay, it was a lot distracting.

She held her hand as he was and then looked skeptically at him. "Then what?" "Then you grab here at the top," he explained. "No pulling like you see in the movies. Just clamp it between the fingers and push gently upward. Milk will come. Remember, in the

competition, you need a few drops."

How hard could it be?

"And then you run."

She glared at him. "Thanks. Thanks for letting me get myself into this. If the boys don't want to paint, then I wonder why I'm doing this?"

"Sometimes even if a boy is curious about trying new things, he needs an excuse to do it. Painting isn't the most macho thing for these guys to do, so you getting in the ring with this cow gives them the excuse because you called their bluff. Get it?" She did, actually. "Yes. So now I know." And she couldn't back down even if everything in her warned her to run now. As she looked at Rowdy, her stomach felt off-kilter and she wondered if the warning was for her to run from him instead.

"So do we have a regular milk cow somewhere that I can practice on?"

He chuckled. "Sorry, we're not in the milk-cow business. You're going to have to test it out on Betsy Lou here."

"Why does this not surprise me?"

"Hey, Wes, Joseph, y'all come on over." He'd sent the boys to practice with Morgan on the other end of the arena and now, at his call, the entire group came running. It looked as though she was about to be the show for the day.

Morgan rode his horse over behind the boys. She liked Morgan—he seemed to be a rock, and as steadfast as they came. She had a feeling—just from all the responsibility that he carried on his shoulders—that if a man could be trusted, Morgan McDermott would be that man. Rowdy's boyish grin tickled her memory.

Could Rowdy be trusted?

No. He was too reckless. Too goodtime Rowdy. Not that anyone had told her this, but she knew in her heart that he was. Tim had had that same look. His smile came too easily and it teased too often.

The boys who weren't on the team climbed to the top of the arena rails. They looked so cute sitting up there. Wes, Joseph and Tony climbed between the rungs and sauntered her way.

"We'll take care of the cow," Wes said, looking cocky, and Lucy believed he would.

"We're going to let you learn here in the small pen. So I won't have to rope her, the boys will just grab her and then I'll move into place and tell you when to make your move."

She nodded. "Gotcha."

"Okay, then, let's get this party started. Fellas, it's all yours." They whooped like she'd learned they were prone to do, then dived at the cow so fast it didn't have time to make a break for it. Wes grabbed the head and Tony joined him. Joseph grabbed the cow's tail. They all grinned at her as the cow let out a "Maaawwww" that sounded like a battle cry.

"Let's go. Follow my lead and watch out for the back leg. I'll get the milk first, so watch closely."

Was he kidding? She kept him

squarely between her and the cow as she crept behind him. He whipped out the jar that was supposed to hold the milk, and as she watched he raced into the danger zone and reached for an udder. It was *udderly* unbelievable. *Funny*, *Lucy*, *you're a real riot*.

"You do it like this," he called, bending toward the moving target. The boys were holding the cow, but she was bigger than them and not standing still. Rowdy displayed the milk in the clear jar as he moved back beside her.

"Piece of cake. You can do it."

"Yeah, go for it, Lucy!" the kids called from the fence.

Praying she didn't lose her lunch, she was so nervous, Lucy grabbed the jar and headed toward the cow with Rowdy beside her. "Piece of cake, my foot," she quipped, making herself smile for the kids. Hunching down, she reached toward the udder. When she slipped her hand in, the cow moved as she grabbed hold and milk shot her in the face.

Spitting and blinking, she scrambled to hang on. The cow bellowed and sidestepped, taking the boys with her. Lucy didn't let go, but lost her balance and fell forward, hitting the cow in the belly before planting herself face-first in the dirt! The cow bucked, kicked its leg out then stepped on her arm. Then her shoulder. Pain seared through her and Lucy would have screamed but her face was plastered two inches deep in smelly arena dirt.

Chapter Eight

This was not how it was supposed to go. Rowdy put himself between Lucy and the cow. The boys let the animal go and it sped to a corner at the far edge of the pen. Rowdy knelt down just as Lucy lifted her face out of the dirt and spat.

"This is *disgusting*," she croaked.

"Yeah, you're right. Sorr—" Rowdy's words stuck in his throat. The sleeve of her shirt was ripped and flapped open as she sat up, exposing her arm. The skin, as far down as he could see, was puckered and angry, disfigured terribly in spots. His gaze locked on her burn scar and he couldn't tear his eyes away. Suddenly seeing him looking, she snapped a hand to her arm and pulled the material closed the best she could.

Beside them, Tony stood stock-still, staring at her arm. Even though she now had it covered, it was clear Tony had glimpsed what lay beneath the cloth.

Rowdy moved to her side and helped her as she tried to stand up, not at all sure what to say. Her collar hung loose at her neck and the other scar was visible beneath. Without thinking of his actions, he reached and gently tugged the collar close to her neck like he'd seen her do so many times. Her eyes met his and there was no missing the pain shimmering in their depths.

"Thank you."

He nodded, his voice still lodged in his throat with the knot from his stomach. "Hey, guys, I think Lucy's been a good sport about this. We're going to call it even. Right?"

"R-right," Wes said. His blond brows dipped together and his expression revealed that he, too, had glimpsed the gruesome burn on Lucy's arm. "You just tell us where to show up for art class and we'll paint a road that no one will be able to forget."

That got a smile from Lucy. "We're going to start painting tomorrow. I talked to Jolie yesterday. But—" she grimaced, clearly in pain as she continued to grip her arm "—I'm going to compete in the rodeo just like I promised, so don't think I'm not going to hold up my part of the agreement. But right now I need to go home."

Rowdy shot Morgan a glance. "I'll be back."

"Don't worry about us. Make sure she's okay," Morgan said, frowning with concern.

"Yeah." Rowdy jogged after Lucy, who was already almost to his truck. He barely made it there before she did and pulled open the door for her. Without a word, she climbed in and stared straight ahead as he went around to his side. "See you fellas later," he called to the younger ones who were craning their necks from their perches, clearly worried.

"Tell Lucy she done good," B.J. called.

"I'll do that." Rowdy hopped behind the wheel and had them heading back toward her place within seconds.

She continued to stare straight ahead. When he glanced worriedly at her the second time, she swallowed hard and he wondered if she was fighting tears. If so, what did he say?

"Are you hurt? Those burns on your neck and arm look like they were painful." What an idiot. Clearly they'd been painful.

"They're well now. I think my

shoulder is going to have a good-size bruise."

Her voice was soft. He had never been so glad to get to a house in all his days. He practically spun gravel turning into her driveway. He was out and around to her side of the truck before she had time to even think about opening the door herself.

"I'll see you tomorrow," she said, and headed toward her house, still holding her shoulder.

"Hey, I don't know what kind of men you're used to being around, but I'm not just going to drop you off alone after I got you stomped by a stinkin' cow."

She spun around. "I'm fine. I don't need your help."

What was with this woman?

"Of all the stubborn—" Rowdy stared at her, then marched past her to her front door. Yanking it open, he held it as she glared at him. "After you."

"Fine," she snapped, storming past him and through the door. "I'm going to wash my face and change my shirt—if that's okay with you?" Her eyes were like spikes.

"Fine with me. I'll be right here when you get back, and then we're going to talk."

Her brow shot up to her hairline. "Fine."

"Fine," he snapped, too, and watched her storm away. All the while his head was about to bust imagining all the different things that could have caused such a burn on her neck and arm.

Every one of those scenarios was too painful to think about.

* * *

They'd seen her arm. The look of horror on Tony's face had cut to her core. The kid had almost looked as if he could feel her pain.

Drats and more drats. Her scars made people uncomfortable.

She stared at herself in the mirror. It had taken a while for her to be able to do it without cringing, herself, so how did she expect others to not react the same way?

The brutal burn ran ugly and twisted from her neck down her right arm and torso. It wrapped around her rib cage and covered the majority of her stomach. The memory of the house caving in on her swept over her, and the scent of burning flesh made her nauseated. Reaching for the clean shirt, she pulled it on. The traumatic memory faded as she buttoned the buttons with shaky fingers.

Rowdy had seen the scar before and not said anything. Today, he'd looked into her eyes and pulled her shirt closed so no one else would see it. He'd saved her from the curious stares of the kids for the most part. Tony, and maybe Wes and Joseph, had seen her arm. He'd kept them from seeing more.

She had the feeling that this time he was going to ask questions.

Not sure if she was going to answer his questions she walked from her room and rounded the corner into the kitchen/construction site. Rowdy was leaning against the counter with his back to the sink and his scuffed boots crossed in front of him as he stared at the spot where she would be when she rounded the corner. She stopped. Her stomach felt unsteady...or maybe that was her feet. And her arm throbbed like a fifteenhundred-pound cow had stepped on it.

As soon as he saw her he pushed away from the counter and yanked a chair from the table. "Here, have a seat." She sat because she needed to. He reached for a bottle of pain relievers that he'd obviously dug from her cabinet. Popping the top off he poured two into his hand and held them

out to her. "You're going to need these."

She took them, because he was right. Then she accepted the water he held out to her.

Once she'd washed them down, he took her glass and set it on the counter, where he resumed his original pose leaning against it. His deep blue eyes rested on her.

The man really made her nervous. "You were a good sport out there." Not what she'd been expecting. "I still think y'all are crazy, but I'm going to do it."

"You don't have to. In the boys' book, getting out there and trying was all they needed."

"A deal is a deal."

They stared at each other and the clock ticked on the wall over the stove. "I guess you're wondering about my scars."

"I am. But if you want to tell me it's none of my business, I understand. You just seemed sort of—" He raked his hat from his head and ran his fingers through his straight dark hair. She could tell he was struggling with the right words. He didn't know that there weren't any. She wanted to tell him it was none of his business but...he'd seen her arm. And her neck. Still, accepting them was one thing, but for her to talk about them was an entirely different one.

"Our house burned down. We were sleeping and didn't realize it until it was almost too late." Her heart rate kicked up and she rubbed her sweating palms on her jeans, while trying to control her breathing like the therapist had taught her. "The fire was hot and the smoke was so thick when we woke. Tim shook me awake, and we were crawling to the window when the roof caved in and burning wood rained down on top of us..." She hadn't told this much of the

story to anyone but her therapist. "It was — I woke up in the hospital and they told me Tim hadn't made it."

She hadn't been able to talk about the moments of pain before she'd lost consciousness. Blinking back tears, she rubbed those that had escaped and were rolling down her cheeks. "I didn't know anything about Tim's affairs then," she almost blurted out, but didn't. She'd believed he'd died loving her. Even after she knew that was a lie, she wouldn't have wished death on him.

"I'm sorry." Rowdy came and pulled a chair out so he could sit facing her. He clasped her hands with his and squeezed gently. "That's tragic. All of it." She nodded, closing her eyes. "Yeah,

especially knowing I killed him."

Chapter Nine

"You killed him? I don't believe that," Rowdy blurted in reflex. He didn't know her well, but she hadn't killed her husband. No way.

She looked away, toward the window that could be seen past the breakfast bar in the front room. "It's true. The fire started in my studio with some oily rags."

Guilt was etched in her features when she turned back to him. "That may be the case, but you didn't start the fire. Things happen. I'm sorry you lost him that way." He could tell she took what he said with a grain of salt. She looked to be around twenty-five or twenty-six. About his age.

She'd been through a lot for her age. He didn't know a lot about art, but he thought he knew making money in the art world was almost impossible. So there was one more thing to be curious about.

"You must have loved him very much." His heart ached for her—having lost his mother at a young age, he knew the pain that went with losing someone you loved.

She lifted a shoulder in a slight shrug. She stood suddenly. "Hey, thanks for bringing me home. But I need to get some things unpacked for art class tomorrow." "Sure," he said, knowing a dismissal when he heard it. "You're sure you're okay? Do you need anything?"

She shook her head. "Nope. Really. I'm good." She had begun walking toward the door the moment she'd started speaking. He followed like a puppy being sent outside. She opened the door and held it for him. He ignored the urge to touch her as he walked past. He'd been pretty harsh earlier, and now he felt like a heel.

She didn't follow him onto the porch. "Take another couple of those

painkillers before you go to bed," he said, as if the woman didn't know how to take care of sore muscles. "I'll do that. Good night."

Before he got his good-night out, she'd already closed the door. He stared at it, stunned. Something tugged in his chest. And he wondered for the umpteenth time what had happened to Lucy Calvert. There was more to this story. He felt it to his core.

He didn't feel right leaving. He raised his hand to knock but let it hover just in front of the door before pulling back. Turning away, he strode to his truck and left.

Lucy had a right to her privacy.

* * *

Lucy couldn't believe she'd opened up

to Rowdy about the fire. She'd had to catch herself before she said too much. And yet she'd admitted the part that tormented her. Yes, she was angry at Tim for what he'd done. But to know that she was responsible for a person losing his life... It was unthinkable.

And then there was the scene at the burn center. His girlfriend blaming her and the horrible things she'd learned that day.

Lucy poured herself a glass of iced tea and drank half the glass, suddenly feeling parched as a desert. Then, forcing the thoughts away, she headed to the back room where she'd stored her canvas and paint supplies. It was time to think about something positive. Teaching the boys to paint appealed to her. She'd never thought of teaching before, but with this wild bunch, she was certain it was going to be an adventure.

And that was exactly what she needed.

Did it matter that they'd seen her scars? She would see tomorrow. Tony would have time to let the shock of seeing them ease and they'd move on. No big deal.

No big deal.

Rowdy's soft gaze touching hers as he'd pulled her collar closed slipped into her thoughts. The man had been nothing but kind to her since she'd arrived—bossy and nosy, too, but kind. Her lips lifted thinking about him. Why was a guy like him still single? The question startled her.

She had come here so angry at Tim. At herself. And here was this handsome cowboy who wouldn't go away. Of course, she could say he was just being neighborly...but that kiss had nothing neighborly written in it. Tracing a finger along the edge of an unfinished canvas, she remembered his kiss, and the feel of it came surging back and almost took her breath away.

No, neighborly was not what she'd call that kiss.

Chemistry, yes. Very much so.

And it had been a very long time since she'd felt anything like that. For two

years her life had been full of pain, inside and out. Her extensive burns hadn't been a simple fix.

God had been good to her during that time. She didn't think she could have made it through without Him, but God hadn't been able to fix the anger inside of her. He hadn't been able to fix the mistrust that ate at her.

But tonight, she'd talked to Rowdy. Opened up to him in a way she hadn't been able to do with anyone since she woke in the hospital, other than her therapist at the burn center.

She'd trusted Rowdy enough to do that.

The very idea was a breakthrough for

her. Maybe God had brought her here for that reason.

Taking a deep breath, she began assessing supplies she would need tomorrow. Jolie had taken the list of paints she'd need to the art store in the larger town eighty miles away and had promised to pick up some canvases, too. Despite feeling nervous about tomorrow after all that had happened today, she went to work gathering the rest of the things she would need.

So far life here at her new home hadn't been anything like she expected, not quiet time spent alone rehabbing her house and her soul— Nope, not that at all.

Rowdy, she had to admit, was the

most unexpected. Trepidation filled her again when she thought about having opened up to him. She hadn't told him about the scars on her body. Had let him think the scars on her arm and neck were all there was. Why had she done that?

She knew why she hadn't said anything about Tim's cheating for so long. It was embarrassing. But was that why she'd kept silent about the scars?

* * *

"Tony, dude, you saw how bad they were, didn't you?" Wes, Tony and Joseph were sitting out under the crooked tree back behind the schoolhouse. They'd agreed to meet there after practice, after seeing the scars on Lucy's arm. The younger boys hadn't been close enough to see them.

Tony nodded. "They were bad. Like angry welts."

"Like yours," Joseph said, looking sad.

Wes knew Joe had a tender heart. It was one of the reasons he was going to make a good veterinarian. Wes wasn't as tenderhearted. He got plenty mad when he thought about his life, but he stuffed it deep inside of him and for the most part enjoyed his life here on the ranch. He felt lucky to be here. Looking at Tony, he knew his life could have been rougher. At least his parents had just left him on the steps of the welfare

office. They hadn't tortured him like Tony's parents had.

They hadn't tossed gas on him and struck a match.

"Yeah, like mine. I wonder what happened to her?"

"I don't know, but she's hiding them," Wes said.

Tony looked down, rubbed his hand on his thigh. "It's easier that way," he said, real quiet. "People look at you funny. Y'all know it. Y'all've seen the look on people's faces the first time they see my back. It ain't worth it. I totally get why Lucy covers hers up."

Wes did, too. It was true what Tony said about people getting all shocked

and horrified at the sight of his back. His back looked like roadkill. He didn't hardly ever go without his shirt.

They were all quiet for a few minutes. It was hard to say anything after something like that.

"I'm just glad you didn't die from it." Joseph was the one to speak.

"Yeah." Tony took a deep breath.

"Truth is, till I came here to Sunrise Ranch, I kinda wished it had...you know. Killed me." He swallowed hard and chucked the rock he'd been holding as far as it would go.

Wes figured he had it good compared to Tony, but then he still didn't get why a kid had to go through all the junk the world had to offer sometimes. Tony smiled and changed the subject. "Did—" He started to say something, then stopped. "Did you see the way Rowdy looked at her?"

"You mean with the goo-goo eyes?" Wes grinned.

"I saw it," Joseph said. "It's pretty clear he's into her. I mean, I could tell that when we were working at her place."

"Yeah, I know," Tony said. "But did you see how he didn't care about the burns?"

Wes shot Joseph a glance. They stopped grinning.

"Not everybody's going to freak over your burns, either, Tony," Wes said, hoping he was saying the right thing.

"Yeah, maybe." Tony shrugged,

looking as though he didn't believe it.

Wes's fist knotted up and he had to knock the anger back in its dark hole. "You hold your head up, dude. It'll happen."

"Yes, it will," Joseph added.

Wes sure hoped so. He wondered if Lucy had the same thoughts as Tony. "Maybe Rowdy will fall in love with Lucy, you think?"

A grin spread across Joseph's and Tony's faces.

Yup, that would be the cool...and it might make Tony feel better about himself. That would be the coolest of all. * * *

"Y'all did great today," Lucy called, forcing her voice to sound upbeat as the kids streamed through the schoolhouse door like a herd of wild mustangs. Several shot thanks over their shoulders, but nearly pushed the others down clamoring to get away.

Lucy sighed, watching the last one escape. Her shoulders drooped; it had not exactly been the day she'd planned.

"They love working cattle, so don't let their stampede out of here get you down," Jolie said, coming up beside her. "You did great, and I think they enjoyed themselves." "Like a trip to the dentist."

Jolie chuckled. "It wasn't that bad. And remember, they're boys. When you get more to the actual painting part of the class things will get better."

"Well, at least there's hope." It was true that today she had to spend time teaching a little theory. Not much, but she had to explain the different art forms, the brushes and mixing the paint, etcetera.

"I'm pleased. They need a little Art 101 and it's just a wonderful thing that you showed up right here beside us. God just works everything out. It's a wonderful thing to watch."

It was Lucy's turn to chuckle. "I'm not

so sure the fellas would agree."

"They don't have a clue what's good for them." Jolie winked and then began straightening desks. Lucy did the same. "So how's the remodel going?"

"Pretty good. I think we've got all the walls knocked out that I can possibly knock out."

"Well that's a good thing. I overheard something about Calamity Lucy the other day. We're studying women of the West right now and so they have heard stories of Calamity Jane. I think they were beginning to fear the house was going to fall in on you."

She shook her head. "Crazy guys. I do admit that I kind of fell in love with certain aspects of swinging that sledgehammer. There's a lot of clearing of the head that goes into that swing."

Jolie sat on the edge of the desk as her smile bloomed wide. "Speaking of Rowdy, how's that going?"

Had they been speaking of Rowdy? She thought they'd been speaking of her house and clearing her head. Suddenly uncomfortable with the conversation, Lucy bluffed. "What do you mean?"

"C'mon. There's something there. I saw it the other night. It's okay. I can tell you he's a good guy."

"First of all, I'm not looking for any kind of guy right now. Just so you know. But also, he told me he's trying to mend his ways. That's a red flag to me. I bet he's very popular." *With the ladies* went unsaid.

"And I'll be one of the first to say he needs to mend his ways. Especially after..." Jolie's words trailed off and her eyes dimmed.

Lucy didn't want to pry, but couldn't help herself. "What? After what?"

Jolie bit her lip. "I shouldn't have said that. Rowdy is a great guy. I've known him since I came here at age ten, when my parents were house parents. He didn't take his mother's death well. He got into all kinds of trouble-reckless stuff. My mom used to say it was as if his mother dying young made him think his life was going to end early, too, so he might as well live fast and furiously.

He almost got killed trying to ride a bull that the best bull riders in the country had trouble riding. It stomped him—it was terrible. It scared Randolph to death." Jolie shook her head. "Anyway, I know we all want the best for him."

Jolie had changed what she'd been about to say, but hearing about Rowdy as a grieving boy tugged at Lucy's heart. Still, why had Jolie thrown out the "especially after" comment, then backpedalled like an Olympian?

Whatever it was, she'd already figured out it couldn't be good or Jolie would have had no reason to withhold from her.

"Rowdy just needs someone who can

help mend the heart of that boy he once was. By the way, I want to say how sorry I am. I read the article about the fire." Her eyes softened. "I'm sorry you lost your husband and were so badly burned. A terrible thing. I guess me pushing you about an interest in Rowdy is probably way off base right now. Forget I said anything. I'm just glad you're here and agreed to teach art to the guys. Working with them will bless your soul."

Lucy tried to figure out what to say, but in the end she said nothing. Just that the boys already were getting to her in a good way, and then she'd gotten out of there as fast as she could.

She had very nearly let her defenses

down where Rowdy was concerned. The thought plagued her all the way home.

There was something behind Jolie's remark. And it had a big red stop sign painted all over it. And yet, she thought about that boy who lost his mother and dealt with it by living hard and recklessly, and her heart ached for him.

Chapter Ten

Driving back from Bandera a few days after Lucy had told him about her husband, Rowdy had a lot of time to think. He'd been unable to get her off his mind. He'd had to make the almost fourhour trip to hill country on the spur of the moment to finalize the buying of a horse he'd been working on for weeks. The trip had turned into a two-day affair and he was anxious to get home.

Morgan had relayed to him that the first two art classes had been exactly as they'd all thought they'd be—met with strong opposition. "If it had been us being forced to lift a brush at that age, we'd have been moaning just as loud," he'd told Morgan.

"You'd probably have skipped out and found you someplace to hide out there holed up under the stars where you always used to run," Morgan had accused, and been right on target.

Still, that being said, he hoped the boys weren't making Lucy feel too bad.

He had to admit that after hearing her story—or at least part of what he suspected was a story with more to it he was glad Jolie had asked her to teach the art class. It opened up a reason for her to be at the ranch some. He knew that what he and the boys could do at her house was not going to last much longer. They'd already knocked out every wall that could be knocked out and the hedges were all trimmed and the yard cleaned up. He enjoyed being around Lucy. He couldn't deny it.

He was supposed to be cooling his jets, and here he had gone and kissed the first woman since "the bad move of the century." The only good thing he could say about that—other than the fact that he'd enjoyed it more than any kiss he'd ever experienced in his entire life—was that at least he'd kissed a good woman. A really good woman.

Not that every woman he'd ever dated had been bad—they were just not what he was looking for anymore. He was digging himself deeper and deeper. He was a shallow jerk.

It was as much his problem as it had been theirs. Until Liz.

Liz was in a realm all her own, and if there was one good thing he could say for her, it was that at least knowing her had set him on a different course. He still felt for her family and what she'd put them through. And he knew that when and if he ever married, he was taking no chances on a woman like Liz standing across from him saying "I do."

Like his dad had said, there was always a positive to every situation. You could learn from the bad ones and if you didn't, then the blame for that sat squarely on your own shoulders.

Rowdy had learned and learned well. His dad had also told him once that living hard wouldn't bring back his mother. Wouldn't right the wrong he'd felt done to him when she died. They'd created the ranch as a haven for lost boys, boys who had no one and yet Randolph sometimes worried that Rowdy was the most lost and alone of all the boys who'd come to the ranch. Rowdy couldn't do anything more than just look at his dad that day, because he'd felt his words were true.

Staring at the night flashing by, Rowdy wasn't sure why his thoughts had gone there. He didn't like excuses, didn't like thinking that he had been unable to deal with the feelings of loss that had coiled inside of him for so long. He'd been angry on the inside—hiding it as best he could—finding relief in his reckless ways.

Much as he suspected Wes was doing. For Rowdy, everything had come to a jolting halt when he'd been confronted by Liz's husband. It was as if icy cold water had been poured over him, startling him awake.

He'd known then he wanted to change. He'd gone down on his knees and asked the Lord to forgive him. To change him. And that change was in process.

He just hadn't refined the process yet. Bad habits were hard to break. Especially when a gal like Lucy fell into his arms.

He smiled thinking about that first meeting. She'd surprised him from the beginning, and every day he wanted to know more about her.

Not far to go until he'd be driving past her place. It was late, but if her lights were on, he might stop in.

Once again, maybe he was getting ahead of himself.

Patience had never been a strong suit of his.

So he'd play it by ear. It was eleven o'clock, anyway. She was probably snug in bed with the lights off. The best thing he could do was drive on by and let her be. * * *

Lucy stared at the sketch she'd just finished of how she wanted the studio to look. The barn was sturdy and the concrete slab made it all the more workable to have an art studio here in the loft. Sitting on the edge of the loft with her legs hanging over instead of her body this time, she studied the floor below. There were possibilities for that space, too...if what she'd heard at the Spotted Cow Café today had been any sign. Both Mabel and Jo had voiced a desire to learn to paint. They'd said they had a lot of friends who would enjoy an art class one night a week-maybe even

two.

Possibilities. She let her imagination open and saw the loft as her personal studio with the first floor set up as an art classroom. The idea wasn't something she'd even thought about until Jolie had asked her to teach the boys. What a disaster that was on the verge of being. But if she was actually offering art classes to people who wanted to take them, and were excited about it— Well, that was really appealing to her.

As far as the guys, she was feeling like a failure, despite Jolie assuring her they'd come around.

Ha!

The crunch of tires, then headlights flashing across the open barn doors,

alerted her that someone was pulling into her driveway. She glanced at her watch. It was after eleven-thirty.

Who would be coming to her house at this late hour?

And what was she doing out in the barn this late alone? Her door was even unlocked and every light in the house was on. *Hello*—

She'd not realized how late it was. She'd gotten lost in her drawing. Pulling her legs back from the edge, she stood and went to the window to peek out and see who was out there.

Rowdy!

What was he doing here so late? She'd been relieved when he hadn't shown up to work two days ago. The boys had relayed the message that he'd had ranch business out of town. It hadn't made her happy that her first reaction had been to feel let down that he was gone. She'd kicked that out the door in an instant and been more than happy not to have to see him for a few days. It gave her time to think. Time to take control of her circumstances again.

She'd called a contractor and set up a meeting for tomorrow.

Rowdy got out of his truck, stretched and then, looking better than she wished he did, he strode to her back door and knocked on the screen-door frame.

Drats!

He waited, looked at his watch then

turned and glanced toward the barn. She knew he couldn't see her and she didn't move. But then she realized that maybe since it was so late, there was an important reason he was out there.

"Rowdy," she called, pushing the window open and waving. "I'm up here. Is everything all right?"

"Lucy! What are you doing out there at this time of night?"

Okay, so maybe she should have let him stand out there all night. "I'm working. What are you doing?"

"Looking for you?" He was steadily heading toward her. The barn's spotlight showcased him all the way. He looked up as he got closer. "Mind if I come up?"

Yes. "No," she said instead. Walking over, she sat back down on the edge of the loft and let her legs dangle as she watched him stomp up the stairs.

When he made it to the floor he came and sat down beside her. Too close for comfort, his shoulder brushed hers. Butterflies came out of nowhere and attacked her stomach. There were just some things she was finding out that she couldn't control. Butterflies were one of them.

Drat and double drat!

* * *

God had been having an excellent day

when He'd created Lucy Calvert.

Yessiree, it was true. He'd also been on a let's-torture-Rowdy kick.

He'd missed her.

There, he admitted it. Staring into those amazing eyes, he knew there was no use trying to deny it.

"What did you say you were out here doing? Working?" he asked as the sounds of the night settled in the stillness between them. Through the open barn doors, crickets chirped and he could hear the coyotes in the distance, so far off their lonesome call almost blended with the night.

She nodded, picking up a sketch pad on the floor beside her. She handed it to him. His fingers brushed hers as he took it. "This your studio?" he asked, trying not to send any signals that would put a wall up between them.

She'd had her hands folded together in her lap, and now she just nodded. This had been a bad idea on his part. But to be true to the path he'd committed to with the Lord, he was keeping his distance.

Looking into her eyes, he knew he was a fickle soul. That had always been his problem where women were concerned. But if he didn't want to run Lucy off, then he now understood he would have to move slowly. She was different than any woman he'd ever known. He yanked his gaze away from hers and stared at the drawing. He sent up a prayer for help.

Because he did have good intentions.

"Yes. I drew it up and kind of lost track of time. The contractor starts on Monday."

She'd hired a contractor. He'd known this was coming, had thought as much earlier, but he knew that meant his time here was done. He hadn't realized it was going to hit so hard. "So you're kicking me and the boys out?"

"Y'all have been wonderful, but a girl can't wear out her welcome. You have a job to do and the guys have enough on their hands with school, ranch work and preparing for the rodeo."

It was true.

"Besides, I only agreed to let y'all help for a short term. And my agent really needs me to get busy."

True again.

"You're sure this doesn't have anything to do with me grabbing you like a jerk and kissing you?"

She stared up at the rafters for a moment, engrossed in the moths playing in the lamplight as she stalled for time.

"Maybe some. But you have been nothing but great to me since the moment I moved in here. It's me. There's—" She stopped speaking and took a deep breath.

He waited.

"I didn't tell you the whole story the other day."

You haven't told her the complete story, either. "Look, about that. I need to say something here," he said.

She shook her head. "No. I need to tell you something first. I think you deserve to know so you understand."

His gut burned with the need to come clean. It was as if once he'd realized Lucy deserved to know, he needed to get it out. But ladies go first. "Okay, then you first."

"I've told you that my husband was having an affair when he died. It's hard to think about, much less talk about." Lucy's expression was so mingled with anger and sorrow he wanted to put his arms around her and comfort her. But he couldn't move.

He caught himself before blurting out that her husband was an idiot. "Who in their right mind would do that to you?" He finally said what he'd been thinking ever since she'd first told him about her husband's cheating.

She wrapped her arms together across her midriff and held his serious gaze with one of her own. "Tim Dean Calvert, that's who."

Tim Dense Calvert. "So were you still together when the fire happened?" he asked, wanting to know more—he'd felt from her first revelation that there was more to this story. She'd said they were asleep. So she'd overlooked the affair. That didn't strike him as the Lucy he knew.

"I didn't know. I found out afterward."

"Afterward. So were you having problems?" What was he pumping her for information for? *Did you love the guy when he died*? The question slammed into him and he held it back.

"Not as far as I knew. Well, some. Things had gotten tense. But you know, that happens." She took a deep breath and stared at the clouds as if seeking her next words. "I woke up and found I was in a burn center and my husband was dead. I was grieving when...the next day a woman came to my room."

He didn't like the way this story was going at all.

Her eyes glittered. "She was bitter and blamed me for the fire that had killed the man she was in love with. She told me about the affair and that Tim had planned to leave me for her. I mean, honestly, how could I have been so blind?" She took a deep breath but he couldn't find words.

"Once I got out of the hospital, several friends came to me and told me they'd known of Tim's infidelities. *Infidelities*. As in more than this woman. But they hadn't known how to tell me...so they'd said nothing."

Rowdy started to speak but she picked

back up as if once she'd started talking she couldn't stop.

"I haven't looked at anything the same since. So many things came to light about the real Tim that I had to take a good hard look at my life. I think I knew deep in my heart something wasn't right, but I just hadn't wanted to face it."

The look on her face told him she'd begun to question herself in that time. He couldn't even imagine how horrible that had been for her. Burned as bad as her neck and arm were, and the pain she must have been in both physically and emotionally. And that was before being confronted by the other woman.

"Unbelievable," he said at last. "That

explains the walls." It all made perfect sense now.

And he was toast.

She shivered though it wasn't cold. "Yes, it's been two years and I'm still angry. But coming here has been good for me. And those walls, though great therapy, haven't been completely satisfactory in ridding me of the anger. Or my other issues."

"Other issues?" *Please, Lord, don't let her have gone through something else.*

She looked almost apologetic.

"You've been nothing but nice to me, but I can't get past the broken trust. I don't know that I'll ever trust a man to get close to me...ever. I think you should know that since I reacted so badly the other day."

Burned toast. Rowdy rubbed his jaw, completely understanding Liz's husband trying to break it with his fist. Rowdy would have found great satisfaction in breaking Tim *Dense* Calvert's jaw.

"And now that you know, you'll understand why I'd like you to not kiss me again."

His blood was rushing in his head so fast he was dizzy. "Sure," he managed. Any chance he might have thought he had with Lucy was gone. Period. If she found out about what he'd done, she'd probably hold it against him. "Now, what were you going to tell me?"

"Aah, I... It's not important." God forgive him but he couldn't tell her. Not right now. She suddenly looked tired, defeated and he just couldn't add more on top of that—at least that was his excuse to keep his mouth shut.

"Then I think I'll call it a night."

"Yeah, me, too." He needed to get out of there.

He stood up and took her hand, tugging her up and away from the edge, not taking any chances she was going to tip over. There was that same electrical voltage sparking from her to him but he played cool, letting go the minute she was safe.

They walked one behind the other

down the steps and across the yard. His mind was racing and guilt kept trying to suffocate him. "I'll see you later," he said, stopping at his truck.

She turned and walked backward a few steps. "Yes. Later. Good night."

And then she spun around, hurried up the steps and disappeared through the door without another glance.

Toast. How had he ever been so stupid? He had a horrible feeling that the best thing that had ever happened to him had just walked out of his life.

Chapter Eleven

The music was already playing when Lucy walked into the side door of the church—a rustic-looking building set on a hill overlooking the town. She'd been planning to visit ever since she'd arrived, but had found herself dragging her feet. Today she knew she needed to be here. Dew Drop had a couple of churches, but Nana had told her this was where they worshipped, and so she'd come to visit. She'd stayed home the first couple of Sundays in town, settling in. It was a lame excuse, she knew, but since her life had turned upside down,

she'd only gone to church sporadically. She'd had anger issues to deal with. She wasn't angry with God, but with Tim. She was determined to put that all behind her. She prayed that God would ease the knot that had buried deep in her heart.

The interior of the church was different from most, also rustic looking with concrete floors and cedar walls.

Mabel and Ms. Jo were the first to greet her.

"Lucy, it is good to see you here." Mabel hunched down and engulfed Lucy in a hug. The overpowering scent of magnolias clung to Lucy even after Mabel let go of her.

"You'll learn to run when you see her

coming," Ms. Jo said, eye to eye since they were both less than five foot. "Mabel, she's blue. Do you see that? One of these days you're gonna let loose of someone and they're gonna already have gone to their heavenly reward."

Lucy chuckled, trying to breathe past the magnolia fumes stuck to the white blouse she was wearing with her slacks. "I'll live, so rest easy that it won't be me," she said, tugging her collar close, making sure it was in place. "I'm glad to see y'all." It was so true. They'd been so nice coming out to the house and welcoming her.

"Then come on over here and sit with us." Mabel locked her arm through Lucy's and started walking her toward the pews that were set in rows. Lucy almost had to run to keep up with Mabel's long strides.

"Dragging the poor girl around like a rag doll," she heard Ms. Jo grunt.

Mabel ignored her as the band of men with guitars up on the platform stood and began strumming. "We've been hearing good things from Ruby Ann, haven't we, Jo?" Mabel pulled Lucy into a pew in the middle section.

"Said Rowdy's become a regular over at your place." Ms. Jo pushed her round glasses up on her pert nose, her intelligent eyes seeing right through Lucy —or at least that was how it felt. "That's what she said, all right. He's a wild one, but worth taming, if you know what I mean."

Lucy wasn't sure she wanted to know. And she was about to say there was nothing personal between them when the band let loose with a foot-stompin' version of "I'll Fly Away."

Ms. Jo went to clapping and Mabel did, too-thankfully she'd let go of Lucy's arm. Now that she was settled, she realized that the band consisted of Mr. Drewbaker Mackintosh playing a guitar. His pal Mr. Chili Crump was getting after it on a fiddle. There were a couple of other young cowboys playing guitars that she didn't recognize. The lead singer, though, she thought worked

for Sunrise Ranch.

With Mabel and Ms. Jo settled in enjoying the music, Lucy relaxed. She looked around and saw the boys lined up in two rows. B.J. was sitting beside Rowdy, looking at her. He lifted his hand and gave her a small wave.

She smiled at him, then went back to watching the band. She didn't want Rowdy to catch her looking at him. The last thing she needed was for him to think she was staring at him. He sure did look nice in his crisp burgundy shirt and starched jeans. Her gaze wandered back to his direction when the band started playing George Strait's "I Saw God Today."

Ms. Jo caught her looking and

grinned. "Don't you just love Cowboy Church? A little traditional mixed with our cowboy culture. That George is telling the truth in this song. All you have to do is look around to see God's working miracles everywhere."

Lucy did not know exactly what to think of that statement. She had a feeling she was talking about more than the song itself.

When the band ended and the preacher stepped up to the podium, she had to force herself to concentrate and not let her mind wander across the aisle to Rowdy.

She'd opened up to him about Tim. It wasn't something she talked about. But

once she'd started telling him the whole ugly story, she couldn't stop. Maybe it was simply because she'd made him think the kissing freak-out she'd had was his fault, when she'd known it really wasn't. And maybe it was because she was attracted to him and he was attracted to her and he needed to know the boundaries. It was only fair.

She was facing things straight on now, or at least looking at life with her eyes wide-open. No more sleeping on the job for her. She did not need a man in her life. She didn't need the headache of always looking over her shoulder. She had Tim to thank for that.

Her gaze slid to Rowdy again. His dark hair lay smooth at the nape of his

neck and almost touched his collar— What was she doing?

Lucy yanked her gaze away and stared at the preacher. She concentrated on what he was saying.

"...Psalm 147 says, 'He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.""

Lucy couldn't move; the words were so relevant for her. As if the Lord had been listening to her heart.

But it wasn't that easy for wounds to heal.

Beating down walls was far easier than letting go. Her gaze shifted back to Rowdy, who had yet to glance her way as far as she could tell. She'd told him to leave her alone when it came to a relationship. Made it perfectly clear and he'd agreed on the spot. Her wounds were too deep to completely heal. Just too deep...

* * *

Sunday after church, the arena was full as the boys practiced for the ranch rodeo. He wasn't sure if Lucy would show up, given that she'd been kicked during the first practice and then there was the uncomfortable situation he'd put them in with the kiss. And then there was his past and her past and the fact that there was not going to be any meeting in the middle.

Their situation ate at him. He hadn't been able to get the fact that there seemed no solution to help their relationship out of his mind. He'd gotten up before daylight and started riding the new horse just because riding and thinking went hand in hand for him.

But it hadn't helped him much this morning. Lucy was a hard woman to figure out, and she'd been through more than any woman should have to go through.

He let her have her space at church that morning. He was glad she was there. When the service was over, he'd stopped by where she was talking to the boys and reminded her of practice in case she wanted to come. He'd had to force himself to look at her. After the preacher's sermon about wounds and how God could mend the brokenhearted, he'd started praying that He would do this for Lucy. But he knew it would take time. And even then with his past, there was no hope.

They'd been practicing for about thirty minutes and there was no sign of her. He hated it, that he'd made her uncomfortable...that he'd messed his life up and that the consequences of his past stood between them like a mountain.

"Lucy's coming!" Sammy called, riding his horse over to the fence and waving his coiled rope in the air as Lucy's black Dodge pulled to a stop beside the arena.

Rowdy's chest felt like a steel band had just clamped down around it, and he forced himself to hold back. Morgan rode up beside him.

"Looks like it's your lucky day," he said, smiling.

"Yeah, I wish. She's out of my league, bro."

"Well, that's true, but sometimes that doesn't matter. Jolie picked me."

He knew Morgan was trying to make him feel better, but Morgan hadn't done the things he'd done. Morgan had always been a hardworking class act—yeah, he'd been irritating as all get-out growing up, but it was true. Rowdy had been the wild child, living recklessly and choosing unwisely. He was just thankful that God hadn't let go of him through all of his prodigal-son days.

Regret was a hard companion, though, and despite having his life on track, it trailed him like a bloodhound.

Lucy was smiling and kidding with the boys as she climbed to the top rail of the arena. She wore her long-sleeved shirt and her stiff collar. Her beautiful hair cascaded around her shoulders. Her smile was contagious.

Feeling like a stack of horseshoes was stuck in his throat, he rode over and forced a grin. He might not have a future with her, but he could be her friend. "So are you here to watch or are we going to have another go at it?" Okay, not the best word choice.

"I'm here to milk a wild cow." There was challenge in her eyes. "That was the bargain I made with the fellas."

"We don't want you gettin' hurt." Wes came out of a holding pen where he'd been helping B.J. learn to wrestle a small calf. "Ain't that right, little dude?" he asked, scrubbing B.J.'s head with his knuckles. B.J. grinned and twisted away, laughing as he ran over and climbed up the fence to Lucy.

"We don't want you to get hurt, but if I can learn, I know you can, too. It's fun. You should just seen me take that calf over there down. I mean, I locked him in a headlock like Wes just done me, and that dude came right off his feet. You should try that."

Lucy had started smiling halfway through the boy's excited words. He was standing on the rungs with his hands on the rail behind him, grinning at her. She smoothed his hair out of his eyes and Rowdy's admiration of her went up yet another notch. She got that these boys craved love from the adults around them. The small kids especially needed the attention of the women who were in their lives.

That he was jealous of her gentle touch was understandable. Only a fool wouldn't want to get close to Lucy, so at least he recognized that he had grown smarter over the past little while.

"You know," he said, a thought hitting him. "B.J. has a good idea. Learning to wrestle a calf would be good for you. It would help you with your reflexes and make you more comfortable being around the cattle."

She looked at him for the first time. He felt the spark of electricity that arched between them all the way to the tips of his boots.

"I'll do whatever you cowboys think I should. You may make a cowgirl out of me yet."

"It won't be hard," Joseph said, grinning affably. "If you just change your sledgehammer skills over to cowboy'n, you'll leave us in your dust."

That got hoots, and she made a cute face at them all.

"Then let's get to it," Rowdy said, needing action rather than sitting in the saddle mooning over what he couldn't have.

* * *

Climbing from the top rail, Lucy felt glad. Sitting there trying not to stare at Rowdy had been hard. But the boys were so sweet and she was determined to make them proud of her.

Wrestling a calf sounded perfect. At the moment, she had so much pent-up frustration about the entire situation that her life was in she could probably milk a wild cow and wrestle a bull at the same time.

Of course, she thought a little late, after she was already in the pen with the calf and Rowdy, that she was doomed. Goodness, her senses were in overdrive standing there beside him.

"Okay, I'm going to hold him. What you need to do is lock your elbow like this." He held his arm crooked to illustrate.

"Like Wes had me," B.J. called. "You just don't give the calf a knuckle to his noggin."

Lucy laughed despite her nerves. "Okay, I'll remember that."

"Once you have him like that, lean

back and he'll flip with you. A bigger calf is going to be harder but if you put your determination into the elbow lock and twist he's going to do just what you ask."

Looking up, she got lost in his eyes. Her throat cramped and she couldn't speak. She nodded instead and ripped her gaze from his and back to the calf.

"I can do this," she said, accepting the challenge. Wanting the challenge. "I don't need you to hold him."

"Show him you're the boss."

A roar of agreement went up from the boys gathered tight around the pen. She laughed hesitantly and shot Rowdy a glare. It was his fault after all. The man smelled of leather and something so tantalizing she wanted to lock him in a neck hold. What was she thinking? "I've got this."

He grinned and waved an arm. "Go for it," he said, backing out of the way to lean against the fence panel, arms crossed and a too-cute-for-words expression on his face.

She took a step toward the calf and suddenly there was no standing still. The animal bolted toward the fence, faked left then turned right. She went left and landed in the dirt. A roar of laughter erupted behind her. Gritting her teeth, she was up in a second. The animal might be small but it was quick. Something bigger might have been easier than this. But she was not going to let it get the better of her.

It raced past her again and she grabbed its head, tripped and was suddenly being dragged around like a rag doll. How embarrassing was that?

Letting go, she was once more on the ground looking at the underbelly of the calf as it jumped over her. Rolling over, Lucy managed to grab its tail as it flew past and off they went. Hanging on, her ears ringing, her teeth chattering, she spat dirt as she sought to pull her feet around and get them back under her. She almost had her feet under her when the calf kicked a hoof back—Lucy let go in reflex and the foot missed her by a

breath.

"It's okay, Lucy. You got nothing to be ashamed of."

She glanced at Sammy with his skinny face and big brown eyes. "Honest. I didn't know how to do that, either, 'bout six months ago."

"Thanks, kiddo," she grunted, pushing up from the dirt. Rowdy reached down and took her elbow, helping her up.

He was grinning. "You've got gumption, that's for sure."

"Is that what it is?"

"Yup. It's a respect builder. And you've just earned some stripes." He winked at her and suddenly Lucy felt ten feet tall.

As she looked around at the fence

Wes and Joseph gave her a thumbs-up. Tony followed and then all the boys copied all the older guys.

Taking a deep breath, she pushed her hair out of her face. "I guess Rome wasn't built in a day."

"Nope." Rowdy let go of her elbow, his hand coming to cup her chin. Her heart kicked. "You have dirt—" He gently brushed his fingers beneath her right eye.

All the air in the universe stalled at his touch. "Thanks," she said breathlessly.

He let his hand drop, looking suddenly as if he'd just been caught stealing money from the benevolence fund. "Sorry. I forgot," he said for her ears only, and stepped away. *Forgot what*? Oh...*that*.

So had she!

Chapter Twelve

The diner was crowded Monday morning as Rowdy and Morgan made their way inside.

He'd come to town to pick up feed and met Morgan coming out of the post office. They'd decided to stop for a piece of pie—it was hard to pass up and Rowdy needed to talk to Morgan anyway.

Weaving their way to a table, they shook hands with several regulars as they went. Drewbaker and Chili were sitting at the first booth. They had the *Dew Drop News* spread open over their coffee mugs.

"Hey, hey, McDermotts," Drewbaker said, pointing at his plate of pie with his fork. "Try the chocolate. It's extra nice today. Jo was feeling particularly generous with the cocoa when she whipped these together."

Chili nodded as he stuffed a forkful of it into his mouth. "Good stuff," he mumbled.

"I'm convinced." Morgan chuckled.

Rowdy looked back at Chili as they slid into the booth at the back. "Don't choke on that." The older man hiked a brow and plopped another forkful into his mouth in answer.

"So what's your poison?" Edwina the waitress asked, coming to stand beside

their table. "Food or dessert first?" Edwina had the coarse voice of gravel in a grinder and the dry humor to match. "No 'how do you do' or anything?" Rowdy teased. "My feelings are hurt."

"As they should be. This smile of mine has been known to cause men to faint," she drawled. "I finally understand why all three of my ex-husbands just lay around the house during our years of matrimonial torture—they'd passed out from my smile. And all that time I mistakenly called them lazy no 'counts."

Morgan and Rowdy both grinned. Edwina hadn't had the best record with men. At least she could joke about it. "You're probably right. No need to smile on our 'counts," Morgan said.

"Yeah, I've got horses to ride when I get home," Rowdy added. "No time for passing out, so it's just as well you keep your frown firmly planted downhill."

She tugged her pencil from the crease of her ear. "You two always were the smarter ones— Well, I take that back. Rowdy, you've still got some catching up to do. But I'll tell you what. If I decide to tag a fourth husband to my belt, I'll give you first shot. How's that sound? And Tucker already turned me down, just so you know."

"Well, Ed, that sounds like a plan. In the meantime I'll have coffee and a piece of the chocolate pie the boys recommended. And I'm wounded that you made the offer to Tucker first."

"Hey, he's the law around these parts. It was just smart thinkin' on my end. But he's passin' on my beauty. Morgan, what about you?"

"Ed, are we still talking marriage or pie?"

She gave her lopsided grin that took up most of one side of her face. "You're taken already, so we're talking pie."

"Then I'll have the same as Rowdy." "Back in a jiffy."

When she was gone Morgan asked, "So what's the story with you and Lucy? If I had just suspected something was going on, it was made perfectly clear in the pen with the calf yesterday." Rowdy leaned in. "I messed up. I kissed her."

There was a heavy pause as Morgan let the words sink in. "So that's it. It's plain you two have a connection."

"It was a stupid thing to do. She's had it rough and—" he shifted uncomfortably "—with my past, when she learns of it, I won't be her fondest friend. As it is, she's had it so rough that trusting a man is the last thing she's going to do and one who just hauls off and kisses her? Big mistake." He kept his voice low. There was no way he wanted anyone else hearing what he had to say. Talking about this in the diner was a mistake. "I'm impressed."

Rowdy was not in the mood for jokes, and the glare he shot Morgan said as much.

"Hey, I'm serious. You obviously have some good emotions going on for Lucy if you're this concerned. That's a good thing."

"I'm not so sure about that. I'm supposed to be changed—to be moving slowly where women are concerned and here I up and kissed her."

Edwina walked up with their pie and he leaned back again and tried to look relaxed.

She gave him the eagle eye as she placed the plate and his coffee in front of him. "You look like you ate a porcupine while I was gone."

"You got that right," he said, giving her a halfhearted smile.

"Eat this pie and all your troubles will disappear. If they don't, take it up with Ms. Jo." She shook her head and walked away to bring words of wisdom to the next table.

Rowdy cut a big bite of the chocolate pie and let the rich flavor give him some comfort as he mulled over the situation.

Morgan did the same. After a few minutes, Morgan said, "Don't beat yourself up. Women are just hard to read sometimes. But there's something going on here, or it wouldn't matter to either one of you. Give it time. You're making progress, and don't forget that." Rowdy drank his coffee, his mind tumbling over itself thinking about Morgan's words. Progress. Was he? He hoped so.

But there were some things even progress couldn't help.

* * *

The contractor had started working on her studio and had informed her that the barn had good sturdy bones. He'd have the loft finished in a couple of weeks.

Wonderful!

Or at least it should be, but she wasn't in the best of moods. Lucy hopped to her feet. She had to get outside; a walk would do her good. There was only a mild breeze blowing across the endless pastures as she started walking. Moose pranced behind her, stalking grasshoppers along the way.

The sky was a gorgeous ceruleanblue, the clouds perfect for painting. Despite her foul mood, the walk seemed to clear out some of the negativity and she was not quite as down as she made her way back up the hill thirty minutes later.

To her surprise, Tony was sitting on her back porch playing with Moose, who'd abandoned her not long after she'd started the walk. When he saw her, Tony jerked to his feet. "Hi, Lucy."

"Hey, yourself," she said, feeling better just seeing him.

He looked nervous, she realized. "Is something wrong, Tony?"

He sat back down on the porch and Moose curled against his side. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure." Lucy sat down on the other side of Moose.

"I saw your scars the other day."

Lucy took a long breath. She'd never talked to him and Wes and Joseph about seeing her scars. "I thought so."

"You know I have them, too."

The words took her by surprise. "I'm sorry, I didn't know."

He was such a handsome kid and he now pinned serious eyes on her. Pain was shining in them. "My parents...

Anyway, I've been thinking about it and watching you. And I figured out you're not comfortable with them. Me, either, just so you know."

She didn't know what to make of this. Why had he come? She looked around to see how he'd gotten there and spotted a horse tied to the fence. It was almost hidden by a huge oak tree.

"It's been bugging me, and I had to come make sure you knew you weren't alone."

Lucy blinked back the threat of tears. Tony was concerned for her. How bad were his scars? she wondered. And she was afraid to know how he got them, realizing that he'd almost said something about his parents. Surely not from them?

"Thank you for your concern. I'm so sorry you've suffered, too. And you're right that I'm shy about them. They-" She started to say they made people uncomfortable, but how could she say that without telling him his scars did the same? The thought of this kid being handicapped by the fear of others seeing his scars just didn't sit well with her. She couldn't do it, so she changed her words. "I was burned two years ago."

"I was ten—when I came here and it stopped."

Lucy's stomach turned. It stopped.

What did that mean? He stood up. "Anyway, just came by to say that I enjoyed your classes." Lucy's heart clutched. "You did?" He nodded and gave her a half grin. "Don't tell the fellas, though. You know —" he shrugged "—I was thinking it might be cool to paint something on the ranch. There's some pretty places here. I figure some of the others might like that, too."

She smiled and suddenly felt like crying with happiness. "Thanks for telling me, Tony. About everything. And I think I can get us to paint a ranch scene."

He nodded, ducked his head and

headed for his horse, and within moments was riding across the pasture toward the ranch.

Lucy watched him go. "Moose," she whispered. "I have an art class to prepare for."

And she had questions that needed answering.

Hopping in her truck, she headed down the road toward Sunrise Ranch, feeling so sorry for Tony but also like the sun had just risen. She knew how to get the boys' attention now. Classes were going on over at the school; Jolie's cranberry-colored Jeep sat out beside the building. Lucy parked her truck in front of the Chow Hall and met Randolph coming out the door.

"Hi, Lucy. Everything going good?"

"Hi, I was looking for Nana. Is she around?"

Randolph looked apologetic. "Sorry, she went grocery shopping. Is there anything I can help you with?"

Rowdy's dad was a handsome man with a great smile, like him. He had silver temples and coal-black hair otherwise. From what she'd learned of him, his wife had passed away before her dream of opening the ranch up as a foster home became reality. Randolph and Nana had worked hard to make her dream happen and, all these years later, he was still devoting his life to better the lives of all the boys who had come and

gone. And he'd never remarried. For all the trust issues she had, she couldn't help but admire him.

"I bet you can. I'm sure you've heard that art class could be better, but I have an idea about that. I need some places on the ranch where we can take the guys and let them paint in the open. Something really great to hold their attention. Can you give me some suggestions?"

"I think that's a great idea." He looked thoughtful for a moment. "But the man for this job is Rowdy. Why don't you head over there through the stable to the round pen? He's working a horse. Rowdy knows this ranch better than all of us. He can show you some spots and then you can go from there." It was inevitable—once again Rowdy was the answer. And besides, she needed to talk to him about Tony.

She'd tried for the past few days, since the roping, to not think about him but she hadn't succeeded. He'd snuck into her thoughts every time she let her guard down.

"Thanks, I'll head over there now."

"He'll fix you up," Randolph said, and headed toward his truck.

Lucy crossed the yard and walked into the stable.

"Hi, Lucy," Walter Pepper called from inside a stall where he was brushing down a black horse.

"Hi, Mr. Pepper. I'm looking for

Rowdy," she said. He grinned and pointed toward the doors on the other end. "Thanks."

The scents of hay and feed tickled her nose as she went, and the anticipation of seeing Rowdy tickled her stomach.

The round pen was just out the back with Rowdy inside astride a beautiful horse. Tan with a black mane, the animal was as handsome as the cowboy riding him.

As he concentrated, Rowdy was at an angle to her, and while she could see his face in profile she knew that he hadn't seen her. She leaned against the side of the stables and watched, mesmerized.

The horse made a quick maneuver forward, then cut left, then right. The

movements would have tossed Lucy out of the saddle and straight into the dirt. But Rowdy was almost like a part of the horse, and not only stayed in the saddle but in control.

Lucy knew enough about quarter horses to know in a real-life situation there would be a calf or cow breaking for freedom. The horse was trained to cut in front of it and get it to go where he wanted it to.

She knew Rowdy had made a name for himself in a competition setting with several of the ranch's quarter horses. Unable to help herself, she'd looked him up on the internet and had been stunned to see how successful he was. He'd never mentioned that. Never said anything other than that he ran the cattle operation of the ranch.

She wasn't sure how long she watched him before he saw her. And her heart betrayed her when it jumped the instant his gaze touched hers across the round pen railing.

Beefing up her determination, she gave him a small wave. "Hey."

He walked the horse over to where she stood. "This is a surprise. I hadn't expected to see you."

"Yes, well, I need your help." *Keep it about the boys. This doesn't have to be personal.* "I need you to show me some places you think the boys would like to

try to paint."

He just stared at her for a minute. "Okay," he said at last. "Give me a minute and then we'll load up."

The butterflies that had been hibernating since she'd last seen Rowdy came alive—and the way her pulse was pounding it felt as though each one of them was working a sledgehammer.

"Sure, sounds good." She managed to hold her voice steady despite the construction site her insides had suddenly become.

Truth was, turning around and running back to her place sounded much better. Much safer.

Much, much safer.

Sunrise Ranch was made up of ten thousand acres, and they leased another ten thousand from surrounding landowners. It wasn't the King Ranch by any means, but it was a manageable size and a beauty.

He'd offered several options when he and Lucy had first climbed into his truck. The river, the valleys— What did she have in mind? She'd said for him to show her his favorite places because places that touched one person would touch others.

There was nothing personal in her voice when she said the words. It was business. Sure. At least she was speaking to him. That was a positive. She might not want him to kiss her, but she didn't seem to mind being around him. That was good for now. He didn't know how long that would last.

"There will be lots of things to see on the way to the spots I've got in mind," he'd said. "So if you see something you like, just let me know and we'll stop and check it out."

She had a camera with her. And a sketch pad. She'd nodded and they'd been on their way. Neither had said much since then and it had been a good twenty minutes. He was afraid of opening his mouth too soon and her telling him to take her back to her truck. At least this far out it was a safe bet that she'd not want to try walking when he made her mad.

Not that he was going to do that intentionally. Nope, he was keeping this conversation as nonrisky as possible.

She'd been sitting over there hugging the door, as rigid as a T-post. But now her shoulders had relaxed and she had settled back into the seat a bit. It was hard not to relax when driving across the ranch. The ranch had always given him a sense of peace. Even when he was at his most reckless, after he was in his teens and the anger at his mother's death had steeped for a few years, riding the ranch had been the place where he could think. Where he could almost feel God's touch.

It was that peace and beauty that his mother had loved. That she'd wanted to share with less-fortunate kids. He knew that was why he'd found comfort roaming the land his mother had loved. The kids... Back then they had been a major issue for him. He'd been a kid who'd lost his mother, and then suddenly he was forced to share his beloved ranch with other kids. At first he'd had trouble. Thankfully, he'd gotten over that within a year.

"This is gorgeous."

He almost jumped when she spoke. "Yeah, I think so."

"This is a great time, too—all these spring flowers in bloom. After the

drought two years ago, I love seeing them again."

"Me, too." The drought had not only stressed the ranch out financially with the lack of grass but had also forced a sell-off of livestock in order to trim expenses down to a minimum. But the damage it had done to the land had been hard to stomach. Thankfully this year there had been a decent amount of rain and the wildflowers were a sign that things were on the mend.

"Stop!" she exclaimed as they rounded a curve on the barely visible ruts they called a road. In front of them, the road made a wide arch and then disappeared over the ridge. Wildflowers of a variety of colors with vivid splashes of pink and yellow jumped out at them.

Overhead, an eagle soared.

"You have eagles." She scrambled from the truck and started shooting photos in rapid fire.

Rowdy stayed watching her as she moved in front of the truck, then across to the side, taking shot after shot.

He wished he had a camera. Then, remembering he did, he grabbed his cell phone and started snapping pictures of her.

When the eagle soared over the ridge and finally disappeared she turned, smiling as wide as the eagle's wingspan, and came back to the truck and climbed in.

Rowdy's heart hammered like the staccato of a horse racing across a wooden bridge. She was beautiful. *Whoa, boy!*

"Yeah," he said, his voice tight. "Let's get over that ridge and see what you say."

"I say that's a wonderful plan. I'm dying to know where this road goes."

Roads. Right. She painted roads.... He knew what was on the other side of the ridge, but for a moment he wondered where this road led, too. The one he and Lucy were on together. Maybe there wasn't any hope for him, but like Morgan said, he was making progress. Their road led somewhere.

"I love this spot," Lucy said a few minutes later, as she looked out over the rugged terrain. Once they'd topped the ridge, the wildflowers had diminished but the road turned into gravel, and the soft pink of buttercups and wild lavender verbena trailed through the scattered rocks along the road that sloped downhill to the base of a rocky ravine. Like a wall before them, the ravine rose up, and at the top a gorgeous, huge dogwood was in full bloom. Mid-April was the perfect time of year, and the dogwood wouldn't last long. Beauty was fleeting. But not for Lucy; he knew her beauty, her goodness, radiated from the inside.

He wondered if she even realized how beautiful she was. He wondered if she worried about her scars. He wished he could help her see that they didn't matter.

"It is breathtaking and manly. It might appeal to the boys. Can we transport art class out here tomorrow?"

He jerked his mind back to what she was saying. "Sure. Whatever you want."

"This is just to encourage them. We'll start out with background and slowly build from there with each lesson."

"Sounds good to me. I can't say I've ever painted, so I don't have a clue." "Then you should join us."

He relaxed against the fender of his

truck, watching her, and shook his head. "I'm not an artist. I want to see your work, not mine."

"You might surprise yourself. There could be a masterpiece or two inside of you."

He grinned. "I don't think so. My place is on the back of a horse."

"And you do a beautiful job of that. I enjoyed watching you work with that horse earlier."

That she'd said that pleased him. "Thanks."

She smiled, gave a nod and then, as if realizing suddenly they were staring at each other, she looked up at the dogwood. "I love what a dogwood stands for," she said. "God's love is so deep. My grandmother used to always tell me that the white color represented Jesus's purity. The four leaves represented His hands and feet and the burgundy indents on each leaf represented the blood He shed for us." She looked at him then, strong yet gentle.

"My mom used to tell me something similar. I think that's one reason this is the perfect place for the boys to paint."

She smiled. "They need every reminder we can give them that they are not only loved by us, but by God."

Rowdy's heart was banging again. This time it was because she got it. She got everything about Sunrise Ranch and the mission of it. "Yes. Exactly." She sobered suddenly. "Rowdy, Tony came to see me this morning. I don't know if he skipped class, but if he did, I hope he didn't get into trouble. He needed to tell me something."

"He's a good kid. If he felt compelled to come see you, I know it was for a good reason. He won't be in trouble."

"Good. He—he came and told me he was burned, too. He told me he didn't want me to feel alone." She shook her head and swiped a tear from her cheek. "How could parents hurt their child like that?"

Rowdy wanted to hug her so badly he could barely stand it. "It happens every day," he said, his voice gruff. "It makes me furious, but I've come to realize that here on this ranch we can help heal their hearts. This is where *I* can make a difference. And that helps me. You're making a difference, too. Tony doesn't talk about his past much. So I know your scars are tough for you...but God just used them to touch a kid."

Her eyes filled with tears and she shook her head. "No, God used that beautiful, brave kid to touch me, too."

Chapter Thirteen

Using a few two-by-fours nailed together, the men constructed several easels for the kids' canvases, and Lucy watched as they loaded them in the back of the truck. Rowdy had hooked a trailer to the truck and threw some hay bales on it, and the boys were ready for a hayride across the ranch.

Lucy was pleased that the boys seemed more excited about the whole process.

"You mean I'm gonna get to paint a rock today. Not a flower?" B.J. asked the question with the serious eyes of an eight-year-old. As if painting a flower would give him cooties.

Jolie and Lucy both laughed at his seriousness. A rock rated very highly on his radar.

Lucy couldn't help reaching out to tousle his hair. "Yes, you will be able to look at the landscape I've chosen and focus on a rock if that's what you'd like to paint the most."

"All right!" he yelled, doing a jump and running off to grab Sammy's arm and give him the great news.

Jolie reached for another canvas to load on the trailer. "Kids—the funniest things make them happy."

"I know," Lucy agreed, carrying the case with the paint to the trailer. "I'm

thrilled this outing is making them more excited."

"They just love being outside. And besides, they really were worried about you after you got kicked by that heifer. And then when you came back and held your own with that calf, you should have heard them talking about how you wouldn't give up. They like you, Calamity Lucy."

Lucy rolled her eyes. "They're really calling me that?"

"Just in teasing," Wes said,

overhearing her comment. He was helping Rowdy load a cooler full of drinks. "Your house just barely missed imploding. One more wall and poof, down it would have come."

"I have to agree," Rowdy said. "The boys were thinking of confiscating the sledgehammer."

Lucy rolled her eyes. "Y'all are crazy. Jolie, they knocked out five walls. There are at least five still standing." She laughed.

Nana came out of the Chow Hall, followed by Joseph and Tony carrying another large ice chest. They'd already loaded one just as big.

"There's enough food in those two chests to serve an army, so you should be okay. And the third one Wes and Rowdy brought out is packed full of water and sodas."

Lucy went over and gave her a hug.

"Thanks, this is going to be a good day."

"Me and the girls are champing at the bit to do this. Have you thought any more about offering us old fogies art classes?"

"I have, and the contractor started yesterday. The place is going to be finished very quickly. It's nothing elaborate, more a rustic-cottage style. And if y'all are really interested, then I'd love to start a class and see how it goes."

"Wonderful! I'll tell the gals. They are going to be excited."

"I'd be interested, too," Jolie said. "It would be a great girls' night out."

Lucy was touched. "I'm getting more excited by the minute."

"Okay, load up," Rowdy called.

Morgan and Randolph had come out of the office.

"Have a good time," Morgan called to the boys. He slipped his arm around Jolie's waist and hugged her to his side. "This was a very good idea."

"Yes, I think so. Lucy's a gem for doing it."

"My pleasure."

Randolph had been talking to the boys who'd rushed the hay wagon. "Settle down when the trailer is in motion. I don't want any of you falling off and getting hurt."

Every one of the boys listened to him and stopped their good-natured pushing and shoving.

Rowdy grinned. "That's more like it. Okay, let's go paint us a rock." He shot a wink at B.J., who giggled and pumped his arm in the air.

Jolie and Lucy climbed in the truck with Rowdy and, since Jolie beat Lucy to the truck and claimed the backseat first, that left Lucy in the front seat with Rowdy.

Thoughts of him had hovered in the background of her thoughts since yesterday, and she wasn't pleased about that.

He'd agreed not to kiss her anymore and clearly had taken his hands-off promise seriously. But yesterday when she had gotten emotional talking about Tony, she'd wished he had folded her in those strong arms of his and held her close. Instead, he'd remained firmly where he was, and though his words were comforting, his arms had stayed locked tightly across his chest.

What was wrong with her? She'd gotten what she wanted, so she should be relieved.

But she wasn't. So far today he'd stayed on the fringes as they'd gotten everything loaded up. She thought he'd say he was dropping them off and coming back later to pick them up. But that wasn't so. Jolie had wanted one man out there with them since they were going to be a good distance from the compound. With this many crazy boys, they needed a man along.

Lucy was in agreement, but had half hoped Morgan would be the one to go. Or one of the many cowboys who worked at the ranch. But no, it was Rowdy and she was stuck.

Stuck in the middle of so many conflicting emotions, she felt dizzy.

She didn't want to put herself out there. She didn't want to put herself at risk again in a relationship. No matter how much she was beginning to wish she could each time she looked at Rowdy McDermott. "It looks like a fat tick sitting on a pile of mud," Wes said, standing back and staring critically at his painting.

Rowdy had to agree with the kid. He hid a grin.

"Now, Wes," Lucy said, coming to stand beside the teen. "You've actually got some very good undertones in this. Now you need some variation of tones. Listen, guys. Brown is not simply made up of brown. If you'll look over there at that rock cluster for a minute, I'll explain again. See the way the sun glints off it? It looks lighter in that spot, right?"

Wes grunted what Rowdy took as a yes. And others agreed.

"To get that take your brush and dip it

in the light ochre color, that's the yellowish color that I had you place on your palette. Then add it onto the rock like this." She demonstrated a quick dash on the rock and suddenly there was a little definition to Wes's tick.

"Hey, that's weird how it looks better."

Lucy chuckled, looking up at Wes. "It's really fun to see how different colors create what most people look at and see as a single color. That rock is made of lots of tones. Now you try it. Wipe your brush and add another tone. Mix a couple of tones together to make a completely new shade. Go have a closeup look at mine and see the various strokes."

Excited calls for help had her moving to the next kid, and she gave him her undivided attention. Rowdy enjoyed watching her in action.

Lucy was kind, and her goodness came across when she was dealing with the kids. He still couldn't understand her husband. How could a man do that to such a wonderful woman? It went against everything Rowdy believed in. He might not have dated wisely before but he could honestly say he believed in marriage. When he married, he'd be committing for life. And he was going to be looking for a woman of good character when he fell in love.

"You sure are in deep thought," Jolie

said, coming to stand beside him.

"Hey, Pest, I'm a deep thinker. Haven't you figured that out after all this time?" He nudged her arm playfully. Jolie had grown up with them ever since she was about ten. And he'd been calling her Pest from day one.

"I totally have. So you like her a lot, huh?" She always had been too perceptive.

"What's not to like? But I'm afraid my past might be too much for her to handle. And with good reason. Some mistakes aren't fixable."

"Everyone deserves a second chance. You certainly do."

He slid a skeptical eyebrow up. "I don't know. Maybe, but it may not be

something Lucy can accept. After hearing her story, I get it."

"You're all right, brother-in-law. Maybe time can merge your stories." She started to walk away, then turned. "She told you her story and that counts for something. Don't forget that. She shared some things about her past that she doesn't just share with anyone, so that's a good thing. Remember anything worth having is worth being patient for." Patience. It was going to kill him.

* * *

Lucy was happy that the day was going so well. At noon they paused, and she and Jolie opened the ice chest and pulled out the lunch that Nana had so carefully created. The woman knew how to feed the masses, that was for certain. There were thick roast turkey sandwiches, sandwich bags full of homemade brownies and pound cake, plus chips and dips and cut vegetables. The woman thought of everything. And no telling how many hours she'd spent preparing the fare for "her boys," as she called them all.

"Your grandmother is amazing," Lucy said, when Rowdy came to stand by her and watch as the boys raided the open ice chest like ants.

"Tell me something I don't know. She loves it. Lives for it actually." He looked thoughtful. "It's kind of weird, but this was my mother's dream, and when my dad took up the flag and carried it, Nana just took to it like it had been her destiny all along. God has a plan, doesn't He?"

Lucy stared at him, dumbfounded. "Yes, He does."

He looked a little uncomfortable. "Do you want to take a walk over there and eat on the trailer?"

The boys were sitting around on the ground with Jolie and asking her some questions about kayaking. The trailer was empty. "Sure," Lucy agreed.

He grabbed a couple of sandwiches and a couple of waters, then handing one each to her, they walked over to the trailer.

They both concentrated on opening their sandwiches and taking their first bite.

"Delicious." Nana could cook. The sandwich nearly melted in her mouth, it was so tender and juicy.

He just nodded and took a bite himself.

After a few minutes spent enjoying half the sandwiches, he nodded toward the paint setup. "This is good for them. Jolie had a great idea. Thanks for doing it."

She took a deep breath, studying the boys, then turned to him again. "They are so funny. And I'm loving it. You know, what you do is wonderful, also. Teaching them to work cattle and have fun at the same time. It's a good thing, Rowdy. You said the other day that this was where you could make a difference and it's true. You are." She meant it, too. Rowdy's attitude, his ability to lift the boys up with his teasing banter and his ability to be one of them was a gift.

He didn't say anything for a moment, just looked at her thoughtfully, and she wondered what he was thinking. "Thanks, that means a lot."

She thought for a moment he was going to say something else, but then his lip quirked up on one side and moved into a tight smile as he rose. "I guess we'd better join the group. They look like they're getting restless."

It was true, Sammy had just slipped a handful of dirt down Caleb's shirt and a dirt fight was in the making. "Yup, you definitely need to step in on that," she said, and followed him as he strode toward the "fun" breaking loose.

He'd been about to say something before duty called—and as she followed him she couldn't help wondering what it had been. There was more to Rowdy than met the eye—more than the goodtime cowboy— and she was certain of that.

Not that it changed anything.

Over the next week Lucy spent time getting the house cleaned up. She had the floor people come out and look at the floors that needed replacing because she'd ripped the walls out, and they were coming back at the end of the week to lay the new floors. Thankfully the contractor had come into the house and spent one day finishing the wall openings that she'd made. Her house was coming together.

Sitting at the breakfast bar and sipping a cup of coffee, she had her computer opened and was studying the photos she had taken of the ranch. She had a problem—she needed to find new places to paint. Her fingers were finally itching to work. It felt so right—like a long-lost friend returning.

The gloom that had hung over her past

few paintings had disappeared and the sun had finally come back out for her.

Pausing on one of the photos she'd taken, she saw that she'd captured Rowdy's contagious come-play-with-me smile. The man just oozed charisma. She didn't even remember snapping the picture, but she'd been shooting rapidfire clicks and there he was. She took a sip of her coffee and studied the photo.

Instantly, her pulse skittered. When he looked at her, Lucy couldn't explain the feelings that swept through her.

Sunshine.

Warmth, and excitement. Not to mention that she lost her train of thought and her good sense at the same time. The small voice in the back of her mind warned that he—that men couldn't be trusted. And yet he'd done nothing to make her think otherwise. In fact, she'd moved to the outskirts of Dew Drop and found herself immersed in a male-dominant area. Men were everywhere, and if they weren't men they were boys, teens and nearly men.

And they were all good to her.

How could she hold Tim's sins against them?

Her finger tapped rapidly on the counter beside the computer as frustration set in. She couldn't help the fear that gripped her when thinking about letting a man have the power to hurt her like that again. Standing, she snapped off the computer and walked outside. Moose was sitting on the corner of the porch railing cleaning his paws with his tongue. He stopped and stared at her with green eyes as if assessing her.

"Hey, Moose, don't judge me," Lucy snapped, and headed out to see the progress of her studio. It had only been a week, and yet the contractor was making good time. His crew of four guys worked like ants, each with a job to do, and they were getting it done. Which was great because Margo, her agent, had been leaving messages. She had to have something new soon. The art show of the year was coming up and she needed to

have something in it. True, but until now she'd not wanted to think about it.

Mac stuck his head out of the large window that they'd already installed on the side of the loft. "Hey, Lucy, got a second to come up here?"

"On my way." Taking a big breath, she headed to the studio and banished thoughts of Rowdy right out of her mind.

Walking into the barn, she stared toward the loft area that only extended out over half the ground floor. The wall was almost finished that would close it off from the downstairs except for a large window that would enable her to look out over the first floor. Hurrying up the stairs, she pushed open the door and stepped into her new studio. "What do you think?" Mac asked. He

was a large man with a jovial smile.

"Give me a couple more days and she's all yours."

"Are you kidding me? It's only been a week."

"We buckled down and since I brought the men in from the other job that stalled out on us, we were able to double up on the work. You'll be painting in here next week. If that's okay with you."

"It's more than okay. I can hardly wait."

The floors were white pinewood planks they'd laid then stained and sealed. Overhead they'd left the rafters open. The focal point was the large window on the outer wall of the barn, allowing her a gorgeous view of the house and valley. It let the much-needed light stream into the room. On the back wall was a cabinet with storage for her supplies. And then there was the wall space for showcasing her work as it was being finished.

"This is fantastic." She gave the man a hug and he blushed.

"I'm going to have to see some of your work. I may want to buy my wife a present."

"I need to get crackin' and get some subject matter."

"Boy, you live near some of the prettiest country in these parts."

"I know. I've been exploring some." She told him about teaching the boys art lessons and he was impressed.

"You've got the best showing you the place. Rowdy was always exploring growing up. He spent days at a time camping all over that ranch. He knows every nook and cranny, that's for sure."

A few minutes later Lucy was in her car heading to the ranch. If Rowdy was the best to help her find the unique beauty of the ranch, then she was going to ask him to show her around some more. After all, they were neighbors, and they were just going to have to put this thing between them aside.

He was doing his part. She had to do

hers and stop thinking about him all the time.

Maybe the more they got used to being around each other, the easier it would be.

Sure it would. She was ready to try, anyway. And the need to paint gave her incentive to overcome anything.

Even Rowdy.

* * *

Rowdy was mounting his horse when Lucy drove into the yard. Mixed emotions slammed into him at the same time. He was glad to see her, but at the same time seeing her sure made it hard on a guy who was trying keep her off his mind.

"Hi," she said, hopping out of her truck.

He tugged on the cinch of his horse. He knew good and well it was just fine, but it gave him something to do. Lucy wore large black shades that hid her eyes and he regretted the loss, but at the same time not seeing those eyes helped him.

"No art class or wrestling class today." He hadn't meant his words to sound negative. "What's got you out and about?"

"I need more scenes. Places that inspire me to paint. And I was wondering if I could impose on you again and ask you to show me around some more?"

He concentrated on his saddle.

Patience and progress. She was torturing him.

"Sure," he said, finally looking at her. She and God were determined to make this hard on him. "I'm riding over to check on the branding and you're welcome to ride, too. There's some places not too far that I could show you. Plus, I don't know if you're into a Western branding scene, but you'll sure see one."

She tugged her shades off, exposing those killer eyes. "That sounds great. But I'm not the best rider in the world. I've done it a few times but that's it." "Cupcake will work great for you." She was going riding with him. The idea had him smiling even if he was going to have to be on his best behavior. "I'll go saddle her up and be right back."

"I'll get my stuff together."

"Stuff?"

"My camera."

He nodded. "Oh, right. Be back in a minute."

He had Cupcake saddled and ready in a flash and led the old horse out of the stable. Lucy stared at the big horse. "She's big."

"And easygoing. This is a beginner horse. You'll be fine. I promise." She nodded and he wondered if she was going to trust him. When she touched Cupcake's soft neck and spoke sweetly to the horse, he knew everything would be all right. Everything but him.

Lucy had to have Rowdy help her get into the saddle. She was far too short to get her leg up in the stirrup. He lifted her effortlessly and she grabbed the saddle horn and threw her other leg over the saddle. Rowdy had to give her a little shove so she could get up there and sit straight. Otherwise she'd have been hanging off to the side.

"Thanks," she murmured once she was settled. Hanging on to the saddle horn, she tried to look more confident than she felt. It had been a very long time. He looked up at her, his hand resting on her leg.

"You sure you're okay?"

"Uh-huh," she said, seeing something deep in the depths of his eyes that touched a dark corner of her heart. It shook her. "I'm fine."

He nodded, pulled his hand away and headed to his horse. In a graceful, fluid movement he stepped into the stirrup and swung his leg over the horse's back. He settled into the saddle as though it was as comfortable to him as sitting down or standing up.

Lucy would have gone home if she could have gotten off the horse by herself. What had she been thinking? It was as if the man was irresistible to her. How could that be?

"Okay, let's go." He and his horse took off as she took her reins. She tugged on them, then clicked her tennis shoes on Cupcake's sides to try to get the horse to follow Rowdy, who was already turning the corner at the arena.

"Come on, Cupcake. Don't make me look like an idiot." When the horse didn't move, she started making clicking noises and gently urging the horse with her heels again. "Yah," she said. "Giddyap."

Rowdy rode back to her. "You haven't done this much?"

"That's what I told you," she said irritably.

"Behave, Cupcake," he scolded the

horse, and gave a gentle slap to the horse's rump. Cupcake started walking. Rowdy walked his horse beside them as they slowly started moving.

Lucy could feel the sting of embarrassment on her cheeks. She was probably as red as the horse stable.

They rode across the pasture in silence and over the incline. In the distance she could see a large group of cattle and a lot of horses and cowboys. There was a group bent down, working the branding irons, but from this distance she didn't recognize any of them. She wasn't sure if they let the boys out of school for something like this or not. "Are the boys down there?" she asked at last.

"Yeah, they love to help with the branding. Jolie works with them to get their assignments done in a situation like this. Working on the ranch is a little different. We feel it gives the boys a sense of pride to join in and these boys need all of that they can get. Some are really beat down when they get to us. Their self-esteem is in the cellar and this helps boost them up."

"I think it's great. The entire situation is so inspiring. It makes me want to paint them."

He gave her a sidelong glance. "I think that's a good thing. Speaking of, when are you going to show me some of your work?" He seemed insistent on seeing her work; she fought the smile that nearly burst to her lips. "My studio is almost done. Mac pulled in some extra help and cut the process in half. I'll have some paintings up then. Not that I keep many hanging around. Most are in the gallery in Austin and the gallery on the River Walk in San Antonio."

"I'll see what you have and maybe when I'm near I'll stop in at one of the galleries." He smiled, and she smiled back.

"You don't have to do that."

"I know, but I want to."

She didn't know what to say and suddenly looked as if he'd said

something wrong.

"Hey, Mac is a good guy. I knew he'd do a good job for you. He's spent a lot of time out here," he said, suddenly wiping away the personal direction the conversation had taken.

She realized she didn't like the wall between them but she'd asked for it. "He told me. He also said the same thing your dad did, that you were the guy to show me the ranch."

"I'm your man. When it comes to seeing the ranch," he added quickly. "I tended to spend a lot of my rebel years camping out here alone any chance I got...and sometimes when I should have been in school."

They'd almost reached where the

branding was in progress and she regretted it.

"So you came out here to be alone?" she asked over the lowing of fifty or so cattle.

"Yeah, I didn't take my mom's death all that well and then I had trouble sharing the ranch, at first, with a bunch of kids I didn't know or want to know."

So he'd been angry. "Life isn't always fair, is it?"

"Nope, but you would know all about that, wouldn't you? I got nothing on you. Or these boys here."

"Lucy!"

Lucy tugged her gaze away from his and searched for who was calling out to her. She spotted little B.J. waving from where he was carrying a branding iron to the calf a couple of cowboys were holding down.

"Watch me," he shouted. And then he branded the calf.

"He looks ten feet tall," she gasped. "You're a regular cowpoke," she called to him.

His smile was wider than he was. "I got the *moooves*," he mooed, making Lucy laugh.

"That kid blesses my soul."

Rowdy chuckled. "Yeah, he does that."

"I need to take pictures. Will I be in the way?"

"I'd rather you try to do it from the

horse—unless you get the hankering to come down and help with the branding."

"I'll stay right here and, now that Cupcake has warmed up to me, I'll move around a little, too. Thanks for bringing me."

"Any time," he said, tipping his hat as he headed over to where the action was.

Reaching for her camera hanging from around her neck, she started snapping shots. She couldn't stop herself from letting the first shot be of Rowdy.

After all, he had brought her out here.

Chapter Fourteen

"I see you brought your friend," Tucker said, tugging his aviators down to let Rowdy see the questions in his McDermott-blue eyes.

Rowdy squinted through the haze at him, since the sun was over Tucker's shoulder and he hadn't worn his shades. "She's taking pictures—looking for subject matter for her artwork."

"That's why she just snapped your picture."

Rowdy's brother liked to kid. "Yeah, right."

"I'm serious. She pointed that camera

straight at you as you rode off. Believe what you want, but the pretty lady got you on that camera of hers."

It was all he could do not to look over his shoulder. Or not to let the pleasure show from knowing Lucy had taken a picture of him. Maybe she wasn't as immune to him as she wanted to be. The idea gave him a shot of hope. One he knew he wanted more than anything he'd wanted in a long time.

* * *

Lucy was having a great time. She had quickly realized that cattle branding made for great photo opportunities. She had Cupcake trotting on the outskirts of the group so that she could get different angles and different facial expressions of the boys' faces as they worked. It was wonderful. One minute their faces were serious with concentration, then they were throwing their heads back and hooting with laughter at some joke someone told—usually that someone being Rowdy. The man was like a lightbulb even in the bright sunlight. He was so good with the boys.

Lucy's heart thrilled at the thought of capturing these images on canvas. It was a very welcome feeling, one she'd missed greatly.

Wes's cockiness reminded her of Rowdy. Joseph was so soft-spoken yet tenacious and Tony, the quiet one, shot her shy looks when he thought she wasn't watching him. And then there were the younger ones, so many of them so thrilled with being a working cowboy. All of the boys looked up to Morgan, Tucker and Rowdy.

They'd been working for about two hours when Rowdy pulled his hat from his head and slapped it across the front of his jeans. Dust rose about him and, just as he looked her way grinning, she snapped a shot that captured the pure essence of the man.

Her heart was thudding, and she lowered the camera, grabbed the reins and urged Cupcake to move on. She didn't need to look at Rowdy anymore– he made her stumble.

Made her stop thinking straight.

She decided it was time to head back to the barn and let Cupcake be free and, since they were all busy, she didn't bother them as she headed back toward the barn. But Cupcake had different ideas. Halfway to the crest, the goofy horse took off at a teeth-jarring trot, heading for the open range.

What was wrong?

"St-stop," Lucy chattered, bouncing on the saddle like a ball bearing on corrugated tin—through her jostling she saw bees. Cupcake, having seen them, too, or felt them, made an awful whinny noise and went from a jaw-breaking trot to a gallop. Lucy didn't even have time to yell. Off they went toward the horizon, with Lucy leaning forward, clinging to the saddle horn. Her camera swung from around her neck, slapping the poor horse on the side and probably making matters worse by scaring the poor animal.

She didn't know much about a horse, but she knew the huge horse must have been stung by the bees—or had decided it was getting away, and quicker than Lucy wanted. Miraculously, Lucy was managing to hang on, but she didn't know how long that was going to last.

* * *

Rowdy had already taken off after Lucy

when she'd started back toward the stable. He hadn't meant to stay at the branding so long, but she'd been busy taking pictures, so he had lost track of time until he'd caught her riding off. The instant Cupcake had started trotting, he'd known something was up. He knew the old horse was in distress about something. He'd urged his horse into a gallop immediately.

He'd shortened the distance, only to see Cupcake shoot to a gallop, with Lucy clinging to the saddle horn as they disappeared over the horizon.

Praying and riding hard as he topped the hill, he was not sure what he'd find on the other side. Lucy was still in the saddle. She might be small, but she'd managed somehow not to fall off, though she'd slid so far to the right, he didn't think she'd last much longer. He finally rode up beside her and could reach out for her.

The minute his arm started round her, she turned her head. "Rowdy!" Her eyes were wide with fear.

"Let go. I've got you."

Without hesitating, she did as he asked and he swept her onto the saddle with him. She turned instantly and threw her arms around him, clinging to him as he pulled his horse to a halt.

"It's okay. I've got you," he said into her silky hair, breathing in the scent of her and feeling her heart thundering against his.

She nodded her head against his neck but didn't let up on her hold on him and in that instant he knew he didn't want her to. He knew with all his heart that if it were up to him, he would never let her go.

Rubbing her hair gently with his hand, he just let the moment be. In the distance, Cupcake continued galloping.

"B-bees," Lucy mumbled, answering his question about what had come over the gentle horse.

"They'll do that. But you're okay now."

He half expected someone to ride up behind him, but when no one did, he

knew that she'd been out of their sight range when the horse had acted up. He was glad he'd been watching and gone after her, or she very well could have been in trouble and no one would have known.

He sent up a prayer of thanks to the Man Upstairs.

Lifting her head, she gave a shaky smile. "Thanks, cowboy." Her voice was as shaky as her smile. "I thought I was done for—or heading to the border."

He chuckled. "You've got skills, Lucy Calvert. You held on longer than I expected. Might be some Calamity Jane in you after all." "Ha, only by the grace of God." "True. But I didn't want to say so." They laughed and it felt as if they were the only two people in the world. Rowdy had to do everything in his power not to kiss her—or even appear as though he was thinking about it. But, boy, was he.

He cared for Lucy. More than he'd ever cared for a woman. And he wasn't sure what he was going to do about it. When she found out what he'd done...she wouldn't have anything to do with him. She'd never, ever trust him.

His heart started thundering.

Lucy's gaze feathered over his face like a caress—she probably wasn't even aware how she was looking at him or what it was doing to him. When her eyes stopped on his lips he bit back a need to crush her to him and kiss her, to feel the softness of her lips against his. He halted his thinking.

He had to be honorable.

If he wanted even the most remote shot at a future with Lucy—and he did then he had to step carefully and move slowly. He could not mess up again. Lucy had to trust him before he ever thought about kissing her again.

Then tell her about what you did!

"I'd better get you home," he said. He couldn't tell her. Not now, not until the time was right.

When is the time going to be right?

His horse stirred beneath them, reminding him they weren't moving. There was a creek not too far away and he saw Cupcake halt on the bank and begin drinking water.

Wrapping an arm around Lucy, he held her lightly as he urged his horse forward. The sky was darkening ahead of them, but he figured the rain would hold off for a couple of hours.

"Where are we going?" Lucy shifted and studied the pasture ahead of them.

"To that line of trees up ahead. There's a stream there. I thought you might want to see it."

She nodded, but didn't say anything. Within minutes they were there. "Oh," she gasped. "This is beautiful." He pointed. "When the setting sun is filtering through those trees, it takes on a golden hue."

As if on cue, the dark clouds parted and the sun broke free for a few seconds. Light streaked through the trees and the creek came alive with a lively glow.

Automatically his arm tightened around Lucy's waist.

She turned to look at him and he knew it was time to get off the horse.

It was either that or he was going to kiss her, no doubt about it.

* * *

Weak-kneed when her feet touched the

ground, Lucy tried not to wobble as she headed toward the water's edge, putting distance between her and Rowdy. The knowledge that she trusted him swept over her like the warm glow that had just burst through the dark clouds.

That trust changed everything about her since waking up in that burn center, alone, scared and scarred.

When her heart had been closed up tightly, she hadn't thought much about her body. She'd just been grateful to be alive and that her face and hands had been spared. But now, in an instant of discovery and recovery she'd become aware... What would a man—Rowdy think of her scarred body?

What would a husband think of the

sight of her?

The thought was almost more than she could bear. She wrapped her arms about her waist and prayed for the images to fade away from her mind. For God to give her answers.

She felt exhausted and emotionally drained as Rowdy came up behind her and gently tugged at her hair.

"Penny for your thoughts," he said.

She closed her eyes, but couldn't trust herself to speak.

Rowdy walked down the creek, putting distance between them. He seemed restless—bothered. After a minute he swung back around. "I have to say something." His tone startled her. "Okay."

"I, um... Look, there is no easy way to say this. I rushed kissing you before because that's what I do. That's what I've always done. If I see something I like, or want, I go for it. No waiting patiently for me. I just go for it. And where women are concerned, that's always been the way I operated." He paused, looking uncomfortable as he tugged at his collar.

She knew he had a wild background. But hearing him talk about his...love life brought the wall back up around her heart. She hadn't even realized it had just fallen down.

"Lucy, I'm changed."

Anger that she'd let her guard down crushed over her. "You kissed me the other day out of the blue. How is that 'changed'?" The memory of the kiss surged through her as if it had been only a few seconds since he'd planted his lips on hers.

His eyes filled with distress. "I know. But—I honestly went a little crazy when we were fighting over that

sledgehammer. And I didn't know your story then. I've tried to prove that to you since you shared your story with me."

She hugged herself tighter. Locking her heart down tight. "Yes. I see that. But—"

He came to stand in front of her. The

gurgling stream's soothing song only played the tension that was suddenly between them. How could she have even thought she could trust a man who had been with so many women?

"I'm trying to change. I have changed. I haven't dated...for about a year. I'm working at not just jumping in—I've committed to the Lord not to be that man anymore."

But how could she trust that this was true? Lucy's mind filled with the deceit that Tim had pulled off and she'd never even suspected.

Staring at Rowdy, she didn't think this could get any worse. But she was wrong....

"You need to know the rest of my

story, too," he said, glancing at his boots before meeting her eyes. "I got in trouble about ten months ago when I got mixed up with a married woman—"

Lucy gasped. "A married woman." "I didn't know."

"How could you not know?"

Contempt rang in her words at his excuse. Lucy couldn't believe what he was saying.

"I didn't know her well enough before I— Well, you know. Before I got involved."

Completely disgusted, she spun toward Cupcake. She wanted out of here. Away from him, and if that meant getting back on that horse then so be it. She'd walk away if she had to she was so mad at him.

"Lucy, I'm changed. I am."

She glared over her shoulder at him. "Ha! You kissed me before."

"Yeah, I know. But-"

"Nope, can't do it." Cupcake looked up from where she'd moved and was now eating grass, but didn't spook as Lucy took the reins in her hand. She stretched to reach up and grab the saddle horn, but Cupcake was too tall for her to do it on her own.

"Hey," Rowdy snapped, coming to stand beside her. "I'm trying to talk to you. To tell you that I'm trying to change. That I'm working at not just jumping in Lucy swung around and jammed a finger in his chest. "Do you even have any compassion for the spouse? For what you put him through?"

"Yeah, even after he busted my nose I felt bad for the guy. But that didn't change anything. And until he showed up, I was clueless."

"Yeah, well, clueless hits both parties and it's not a good feeling."

"Look, I know I'm a jerk. I'm sorry it happened to you but I don't date married women."

"How do you know? If you didn't even take the time to get to know your, your lady friends, then how do you know this was the only one? And besides, I'm sure that excuse made the husband feel okay about the whole incident." She felt tears leak from the edge of her eyes and brushed them away. He looked defeated suddenly and she hardened her heart as he raked his hands through his hair.

"You have a point," he said quietly. "I'll help you up and take you home."

She nodded in agreement, so ready to be gone. Swiping at her face with her fingertips, she turned toward the horse and let Rowdy lift her up so that she could get her foot in the stirrup.

"I can make it back on my own," she said, and turning Cupcake around, they were off at a slow pace. No bees were in sight.

It wouldn't have mattered anyway.

She was so numb she wouldn't have felt them even if they'd swarmed her.

* * *

Rowdy just stood there and watched Lucy ride away.

Telling her the truth had been a really bad idea. Worst idea of the decade aside from his involvement with Liz.

He'd known he was doomed the moment the confession came out of his mouth. But regardless of the churning in his gut, he'd known that he had to come clean. And despite the look of accusation that had crept into Lucy's eyes, he'd forced himself to be honest even as he realized it was going to cost him all of Lucy's respect.

It hit him that she probably felt as foolish as he had when she'd learned that her husband hadn't been faithful.

Her tears glistening on her long, dark lashes had finished him off, making him feel every bit the dirt-bag that he was.

Lucy was better off without him. As she disappeared over the ridge, he knew she deserved so much more than him.

Truth was, if they hadn't had this conversation—or attempted to have this conversation—he might have continued to let himself believe that she could actually have been the one he was waiting on.

Suddenly bone weary, Rowdy walked over and stared at the creek. And he

started praying.

Chapter Fifteen

Rowdy McDermott was a womanizer just like Tim had been.

Men could not be trusted.

Oh, they were fine if you just didn't get personal with them. And she'd already gotten far too personal with Rowdy. She'd planned all along to keep him at arm's length, but the man had forced himself into this new life. That was the thing that really had her angry.

It wasn't as if she'd asked him to come around.

No, he'd manipulated her. Toyed with her.

Her worst mistakes seemed destined to repeat themselves on an endless loop. She was thankful that the ranch appeared deserted when she got back to the barn. Walter Pepper called, "Hello," from the end of the barn when she rode in. Thankfully he seemed busy with a horse. He told her to just tie Cupcake to the stall and he'd take care of her.

Since Lucy had no idea what to do to take care of the horse anyway, she gladly agreed and ran to her truck. She couldn't get home soon enough.

Painting was the answer—she needed to work, needed the release painting had always been for her up until the aftermath of Tim's betrayal and the fire had stolen it from her. Thank goodness the studio was almost done. Thank goodness she had a renewed passion for the work and the release it offered her.

Whether she was painting anything saleable didn't matter—she was as mad as she'd ever been.

Where had all these problems come from? She'd arrived here with one goal —to get rid of the anger eating up inside. The wall destruction had helped, or so she'd thought. But she knew now that it had only been a temporary fix. The anger was like a living thing eating away inside of her. Hearing Rowdy confess that he, too, was a womanizing fool had relit that fire to a blazing inferno. Men!

Of course, she knew infidelity wasn't completely limited to men. Women had the same dysfunction. Her mother had proved that—over and over.

Her dad had moved on. He was extremely happy with his new wife and Lucy was happy for him. He deserved to be happy. Still, what her mother had put them through had ended Lucy's childhood.

She was so thankful she and Tim hadn't had children.

At least there was that.

Pulling her paint box from the storage box, she saw the picture album beneath it.

Lucy hadn't realized she'd packed it.

She just stared at it in the bottom of the box. Her fingers trembled as she lifted it out. She knew what was inside. Pictures of the lie she'd lived.

If the burn pile had been going, she'd have walked straight out the door and tossed the album in the fire.

Instead, she sat it against the wall. She was moving forward, not back. And pictures of her and Tim had no place in her future. Whatever good times they'd had were wiped away the day his "female friend" had walked into her

room at the burn center and spilled her story.

Funny, Lucy thought it was supposed to be the victim who took revenge. But it had been the opposite way in her story. Of course in Rowdy's story, it was as it should be. The spouse got the lick in or she should say the fist. Good for that guy.

* * *

"What's gotten into you?" his dad asked a few days after he and Lucy had had their fight. They were separating calves out to take to the cattle sale and his dad had decided that today would be a good day to get out of the office. Rowdy had a feeling it was to look over his shoulder. His next statement proved him right.

"You've been hard to live with and work with the past few days, so the men have said. What's bothering you?" Yeah, he was ornery. That was for certain.

Why had he agreed to help Lucy milk a wild heifer?

After they'd parted ways, she'd shown back up for practice because the rodeo was coming up and she was determined to keep her end of the bargain.

"The stubborn woman wants to milk the wild heifer. And I'm afraid she's going to get hurt."

Randolph moved with his horse as it danced to stop a calf from escaping back to the group of cattle they'd just taken it from.

"You'll take care of her. The guys

will control the calf."

Rowdy scowled and his dad laughed. "You and I both know those cows we put in there aren't range heifers. They are going to be more scared than wild. Wes, Tony and Joseph will have no trouble."

Rowdy stared out across the pasture. His dad was right, but he still didn't like it.

"How deep are you in?"

At his dad's question, Rowdy met his gaze. There was concern etched in the creases around his eyes.

"Deep." There was no use denying what he knew his dad could see. He was in love with Lucy Calvert.

A smile flashed across Randolph's

face. "Lucy's a good match for you. Your mother would be pleased."

His heart tightened as he thought about his mother—of all the years he'd longed to make her proud of him. He took a deep breath and held his father's gaze. "It's not that simple. Let's get these in the pen and then I'll tell you about it."

They worked with Chet, their top hand, and the other ranch hands getting the calves into the holding pen. When they were done, Rowdy and his dad loaded their horses up in the trailer and then rode back in the truck together.

"So what's really got you twisted in knots?"

Rowdy raked his hand through his hair

and let out a breath before confiding Lucy's background. It wasn't his story to tell, but his father was a man of great integrity.

"You're not going to just walk away from this?" Randolph asked when he was done.

"I don't want to, but Lucy has already been through enough. She doesn't need me and my messed-up background reminding her of what her no-good husband did to her. The man took away her ability to trust. If she stays like she is, she could end up alone for the rest of her life."

"I'm alone and managing fine. But I'm twentysomething years older than she is, I figure. So I'd hate to see that happen.

Are you going to let it happen?" "What can I do?"

"You can help her learn to trust again. You can start by being there for her." "She's barely speaking to me now." "Then what do you have to lose? If you're serious about this new walk with the Lord, then you have to do this because of the man you've become. Not the man you were. You made a mistake. The difference is you've changed and are holding yourself accountable for your actions now. That's all you can do other than keep proving yourself trustworthy."

"You're sure you're ready for this tomorrow night?" Nana asked Lucy. They were in the Spotted Cow Café or, as the men and the boys liked to call it, the Cow Patty Café because of the painted brown spots gone wrong on the concrete floor.

Lucy stared at a dancing-cow figurine sitting on the table. It was one of an abundant cow paraphernalia collection that practically hid the walls of the café, there were so many. "I think so. All I have to do is get a drop of milk. The fellas are going to take care of the cow." "Yeah, but who is gonna take care of you?" Edwina slapped a hand to her hip.

"I've seen those cow-milking contests.

Grown men fall underneath the animal thinking for some reason it might be easier to milk the cow lying on their back while getting stomped on." She shook her head. "No, sister, this is not a good idea. And to think I took you for an intelligent sort the first time I saw you."

Lucy chuckled. "Edwina, I am not going to get stomped on. Rowdy told me not to go for the bag until he gives me the go-ahead. So rest easy, I'm not getting thrown under the cow."

Edwina made a face that clearly said she didn't believe it, and then left to take an order from a herd of cowboys on the far side of the café.

Ms. Jo had come out of the kitchen and heard the last half of the

conversation. "Ed get you straightened out?" she asked, sliding into the booth beside Nana.

"No, but she gave it a good try," Lucy said.

The diner door was yanked opened and Mabel came hustling inside. "The Dew Drop Inn's been busier than an ant colony today," she declared, squeezing her large-framed body into the booth seat beside Lucy.

"With all these ranch-rodeo teams arriving, this should be a good weekend for the town."

"Café's been swamped, too." Ms. Jo fanned herself. "The pie baking's been going nonstop." Jolie came over from the jukebox just as Blake Shelton started singing

"Austin." "I love this song. It's an old one but just makes me think of happy endings," she said.

Mabel had taken Jolie's spot, so she pulled up a chair.

"Speaking of happy endings." Mabel turned her full attention toward Lucy.

Now, Mabel was a good size bigger than Lucy, and she'd effectively trapped Lucy in the booth. There was nowhere to go.

"Look, I know y'all are all hoping that something happens between Rowdy and me, but it's not going to."

Ms. Jo's eyebrows squeezed together and a V formed above her glasses. "You cannot tell us you don't like that goodlooking cowboy."

Everyone started talking at once about how right they were for each other. After they'd all quieted down, she told them her story. She couldn't believe she'd held it in so long.

"Of all the horrible things." Mabel's voice was gentle as she threw an arm around Lucy and gave her a hug. "That brings back memories."

"Tell her, Mabel," Jolie said, and everyone echoed her.

Ms. Jo gave Mabel a nod. "If anyone knows how you feel, it's Mabel. She didn't have a fire, but she got a raw deal."

Lucy was curious now. She knew that

Mabel had never been married.

"I was in love once, a long time ago. Paul was a handsome cowboy with a smile that could turn girls' insides to jelly. I knew better than to be foolish enough to fall for the man, but sometimes a heart will do what a heart wants to do and there's nothing you can do about it."

"Tell me about it," Edwina said as she passed by. "I've done fell for three men and not a winner in the bunch." Shaking her head, she kept right on moving toward the kitchen with a new order.

"On this I have to agree with Ed. Paul took my heart and then he decided mine wasn't enough and so he took a few more on the side. Deception is a tough thing to overcome." Her usual jovial good humor was gone. "After I discovered what he'd been doing, I gave him 'what for' every which way I could. That poor man thought his life was in danger. It was. But I decided breaking him into pieces wasn't going to help ease my pain any, so I watched him ride away. And I can tell you losing the desire to trust another man like that is a shame."

Lucy wrapped her hand around Mabel's and gave a supportive squeeze. Mabel slipped her hand out and covered Lucy's and continued talking. "There are times when I do regret that I let him take that away from me." Jolie looked sad; her beautiful green eyes misted. "I almost did that to Morgan, and it is the regret of my life that I hurt him when I chose my career over him and left. God had a plan for us, but if I hadn't come back, there was a very good possibility he might never have married."

Lucy was shocked by both stories. She wasn't sure what to say. "I'm glad it worked out for you and Morgan, Jolie. Mabel, what happened to Paul? Did you ever see him again?"

She tucked her hair behind her ear and shook her head. "Never did. Never wanted to. I've been happy for the most part. I have my mission trips that I'm called to do and I have my Dew Drop Inn and believe me, folks do drop in." Her eyes sparkled. "That place keeps me busy. God's been very good to me. And to be honest, I have no problem with men in general. There are men in this town whom I trust with all my heart. Those McDermott men are four of them. Don't mean I want to fall in love with any of them, though. There's not anyone I want to fall in love with—I'm too old now anyway. But I'm telling you, girl, you need to think long and hard about letting your heart harden up like you're doing."

"You know, that's right," Nana said at last. "Rowdy is my grandson and I love that boy dearly. And I'm not making excuses for him, but he took his momma's death hard. He has a lot to offer a woman and I think the woman who wins his heart is going to be a very blessed woman."

Lucy suddenly felt as though she was being ganged up on. And she wasn't sure what to think about that. It wasn't as if they were trying to fix her up. They just all thought so much of Rowdy that she felt the pressure tenfold to decide that she was wrong.

"It's something I don't know if I can do. Honestly, I do have feelings for him. I think that's why I'm so mad at him."

At her words all eyes lit up like Christmas lights. "Hold on. I'm just saying that's why this is so hard. Because he's very lovable. And I am not saying I'm in love. I'm saying— Oh, I don't know what I'm saying! I'm about as confused as a woman can be."

Mabel patted her hand. "There, there. We'll just pray that God's will be done. You just try to keep an open heart."

All the way home, Lucy thought about that. How could she keep an open heart when she was terrified of doing exactly that?

She hadn't told them the truth, either. The whole story. Just like she hadn't told Rowdy. Ever since she'd begun to have these conflicting emotions concerning him, she'd found herself lingering in front of the mirror and staring at the burns that covered her body. It was more than she could ask of any man.

She could barely look at them herself.

Chapter Sixteen

The night of the wild-cow milking had arrived. She'd practiced two more times since she and Rowdy had fought and they'd made it through the practice by communicating with the kids more than each other. It had been awkward for both of them.

But tonight it would be over, and there were just a couple more weeks of art class and after that, they could steer clear of each other.

Was that what she wanted?

One minute. And then the next, no. All she knew for certain was that

tonight she was going to milk a wild cow and not get herself killed. That was her agenda.

The stands were full when she, Wes, Joseph, Tony and Rowdy joined the other wild-cow milkers.

"Go Sunrise Ranch Team!" came vells from the stands, from boys who were screaming at the top of their lungs. Everyone in the group turned to search the stands. Not hard to find, the other thirteen Sunrise Ranch kids stood in the middle, waving and jumping with excitement. Sammy and B.J. held a sign with the word Go painted above a yellow sunrise.

Behind them sat Nana, Mabel, Ms. Jo, Morgan and Jolie.

Tucker, on duty, had wished them luck as they'd passed him on their way into the pens. And Randolph was standing on the other side of the gate at the opening of the arena with some of the ranch hands. She wondered if they were there in case they were needed. That worried her, despite knowing the paramedics were there.

"Y'all've got a cheering section," Rowdy said from where he sat on his horse.

Tony's half grin hitched upward. "All the ranch hands are hanging on to the railing down there, too, with Mr. Randolph. You know they're going to be yelling when it's our turn." "I'm glad we drew first," Joseph said. "I'd be nervous if we had to wait until the end."

"Me, too," Lucy finally added. She'd been trying to calm the butterflies in her stomach but had finally given up. She was nervous and there wasn't anything that could be done about it.

She met Rowdy's smile with a weak one of her own.

"You'll be fine. Just remember to let us get the cow stopped and then I'll give you the okay to dash in and get the milk."

"She's got it in the bag," Wes said, his confidence sounding far higher than anything Lucy remotely felt.

The PA broadcast the start of the

wild-cow milking and Lucy froze. Then to her dismay, the gate opened and they entered the arena. Well, they did, but she almost didn't follow until she forced her feet to move.

From inside the arena, the grandstands looked huge. The boys were grinning and waving at the crowd as if they'd already won. Wes became a clown. His eyes danced as he whipped his hat from his head and waved it at the crowd. He pumped his hands up and down to get the crowd to roar—it was as if he were born for this. Joseph and Tony just grinned beside him. They were all too cute.

Rowdy looked especially nice tonight in his red shirt, black hat and signature grin. She wished he'd stop flashing that distracting grin around! Of course, him sitting like a champion himself on one of his champion horses, looking ready to shine as he did, was distracting, too. And not just to her. Lucy had no doubt that every female in the stands had absolutely no idea there were three kids and a lady in the arena with him.

He turned his horse and trotted back to her side. "How are you doing?"

That he'd thought of her put a catch in her heart and, looking up at him, she suddenly felt breathless and young and free...as if none of the heavy burdens of her past was hanging over her. "I'm good, thanks for asking." He leaned down in the saddle, his expression intent. "Good. Now, I'm compelled to remind you—do not get within reach of that heifer's legs until I'm in position between you and her back leg. Is that clear?"

He was worried about her. She nodded. "Clear."

Sitting up, he looked satisfied with her answer. She couldn't grasp what she felt but...watching him, her heart felt full.

Wes turned to her—leaving his adoring fans for a moment and making Lucy smile. "The dude down there on the end standing inside that white circle of lime is who you race to with the milk." She nodded. After she got at least a drop of milk into the small jar in her hand, she had to run to the man in the circle. The hard work of the team didn't count if she failed in her task. She prayed that she didn't fall down and spill the milk. The boys had done their part painting their pictures; now she had to do her part.

Joseph grinned at her. "Don't be all worried. You're going to do us proud."

"That's right," Tony added, coming to stand beside her. "You look as nervous as me."

She wanted to give him a hug but it would probably have embarrassed him. "Let's do this," she said instead, winking at him. He responded with that grin that had her heart turning over for the kid who'd been so mistreated by the parents who were supposed to love and protect him.

The announcer introduced them as the Sunrise Ranch team, then called out each of their names, and they stepped forward and waved. When their heifer entered the arena, people went wild. A lump lodged in Lucy's throat as the heifer stared at them-clearly wary. Rowdy pulled his rope from the saddle horn and readied it. When the clock started, he rode out toward the animal and the kids followed him into the center of the arena. He twirled the rope above his head, then sent the loop flying. It landed with ease over the heifer's head. Rowdy

wrapped the rope around the saddle horn and his horse stepped back as the cow tried to run, but the rope pulled taut and the boys were already on the run. She went right behind them.

The cow dodged one way, but the boys moved with it, anticipating where it would go. Lucy would have gone the opposite direction! Wes dived right in, fearless as he grabbed the cow by the neck and locked his arm around it like she'd been taught on the small calf that day. Joseph grabbed the cow's tail and dug his boots into the ground. Tony moved to help Wes. With the cow sort of under control, Rowdy came off the horse and headed toward the flank. Lucy's adrenaline was revved up and she

prayed she could get the milk.

The boys grinned at her, even Wes, though he was gritting his teeth with the effort he was using to keep hold of the animal. Rowdy motioned for her to take her turn. She raced in, or at least she thought she raced in, but the cow chose that moment to try to throw its head up and drag the guys. Wes and Tony held on, Rowdy pushed the animal and Joseph leaned back so far that his seat was also dragging in the dirt as his heels bit into the ground. Lucy looked from Wes to Joseph, not sure what to do, but they got the animal almost still again. Rowdy gave her the nod again as he planted his back against the leg that

could potentially lash out and nail her.

Lucy gritted her teeth and dived. She was going to get the milk this time.

Holding her hand like she'd been taught, she made contact, and even when the heifer moved back she held on. She pushed, then squeezed. The animal moved. Lucy went down in the dirt but kept milking. From her prone position looking up, she saw a trickle make it into the glass jar.

"I got it," she yelled, excitement overwhelming her. Rowdy was laughing when he reached down and hauled her off the ground and set her on her feet. "Run, Lucy, run," he said, and she did.

It seemed like miles to the man in the circle, and halfway there she saw the

people in the stands in front of her stand up. She made it to the man, winded but with milk in the jar. They'd done it. She spun around but her heart stalled when she saw the heifer run over Tony, trampling him in the dirt.

Cows and steers running over people was a common occurrence in any rodeo; it was part of it. But Lucy hadn't gotten used to it and her stomach dropped and she started running.

Tony didn't jump up and grin. Rowdy was beside him by the time she made it, and the other boys had gathered around. Tony's shirt was ripped wide-open in the back. And to her relief he sat up just as she reached them. She was breathing so hard she thought she might pass out right there in the arena. He grinned at Rowdy.

"Take it easy. Your arm's not looking so good," Rowdy said, seeing a deep gash that was bleeding. Rowdy touched a bruised spot on Tony's lower back, and when he touched it, the boy flinched. But it wasn't the bruise that had Lucy's attention, it was the scars that riddled Tony's body.

Lucy's stomach lurched and it was all she could do not to lose its contents in the dirt right there in front of everyone. Dear Lord, Tony had told her he had scars, but not like this. She hadn't imagined they would be like this.

Hadn't imagined they would be worse

than hers.

Her gaze met Rowdy's and he seemed to read everything in her face, because he said, "Hold on." Tony thought he was talking to him and nodded, but Lucy knew he was talking to her. She nodded, too, and couldn't stop nodding. It became compulsive and she had to will her head to stop before the boys realized how shaken she was.

"We're going to take you to the hospital and have this bruise checked out. I don't want you having an internal problem and us not knowing it."

"Aw, it's okay," Tony said, wincing as Rowdy helped him to his feet. The crowd cheered as Rowdy and Wes helped him out of the arena. The on-site doctor met them at the gate along with Randolph. They had Tony sit down. The paramedic looked him over and agreed with Rowdy that X-rays made sense as a cautionary measure.

"You did it, Lucy," Tony said, grinning up at her from his bench. The kid was tough. Her throat ached with the need to cry.

"I did," she said instead, forcing her voice to hold steady. "But it was because of you fellas. That cow didn't stand a chance."

"Let's get him to the hospital," Randolph said, and they headed out of the gate. Lucy followed close behind. Morgan and Jolie met them at the waiting room of the small hospital in Dew Drop. Nana and Tucker had stayed back with the ranch kids at the rodeo. It was agreed that the hospital didn't need fifteen rambunctious kids swarming the small waiting room.

They were right, the hospital was very small, but then Dew Drop wasn't a metropolis and they were lucky to have the place.

Randolph, Morgan and Rowdy all went into the emergency room with Tony. Jolie and Lucy sat together and waited.

Jolie watched them disappear through the door. "There is one thing these boys know when they come to Sunrise Ranch -they are loved."

Lucy nodded. She was still shaken about what she'd seen and ashamed that she hadn't realized when she was talking to Tony how badly he'd been injured. "What happened to Tony? I mean, with those burns. He talked to me about them, but I had no idea they were that bad. I talked to Rowdy, who said Tony's parents were responsible, but I didn't realize ... "Her voice trailed off.

"I'm sorry." There was compassion in Jolie's voice and she leaned forward. "He had been burned with cigarettes for years and no one noticed. It's horrible to think that. But when his parents tossed gas on him and then a match when he was ten, he was taken away from them. From what I've been told, he had second-and third-degree burns and it took numerous skin grafts. I'm sure with your arm and neck that you understand the pain he went through."

The air had gone out of the room as Jolie spoke. Lucy felt small suddenly. Fury and anguish welled inside of her for what Tony had endured. "How," she rasped, looking down at her hands clenched in her lap, "could parents do such a thing?"

Jolie clasped her hands with her own. "It's a wicked world we live in. I can't understand, either. But Tony is alive and well and loved. And though it's been tough, what he went through, he's been on the ranch from the day he left the hospital almost four years ago. And that has been a blessing. I cried when I read his background, but I've watched him for months now, and he's one of the most well-adjusted kids considering what he's been through. Though, just like you, he doesn't like to show his scars."

Lucy sighed. "We talked about that. It's easier not to let people see them. Easier not to have to answer questions. Or to see pity on their faces."

"That's what Tony has said."

Rowdy and Morgan came out of the room and walked over to where they were. Both Jolie and Lucy stood the minute they saw them.

"What did they say?" Jolie asked.

"He has a deep bruise, but his organs are all fine, so that's a blessing. Dad's with him finishing up and they'll release him in a few minutes."

Jolie hugged Morgan. "Wonderful!"

Rowdy placed his arm across Lucy's shoulders and gave her a gentle hug. "You okay?"

She was grateful for his touch. "Yes, I'm relieved and happy that Tony wasn't hurt seriously. But I really need to talk to you about something."

"Sure." Concern etched his face. "We'll head out if y'all have it under control from here," he said to his family. "We do," Morgan said, a rock if there ever was one. "You did good out there tonight, Lucy. I hope this accident didn't shake you up too bad. We try to protect the boys as best we can, but the truth is kids could find a way to fall off the porch and get hurt."

"I know. I get it. Y'all do a great job with the boys."

"Some folks don't understand. But we don't allow them on bulls. Dad draws the line there, so even living the cowboy way has limits at Sunrise Ranch. Much to Wes's dismay."

She'd figured out by small things he'd said that Wes wanted to ride bulls.

She went in and gave Tony a hug, a really gentle but long one, and then left, telling him she would see him back at the ranch. She and Rowdy walked out to the parking lot and he held the door of his truck for her and placed his hand at her elbow as she hoisted herself into the tall truck. Sometimes being short just got old. And then she had to admit that sometimes it had its advantages. His hand on her elbow was one of those times.

After he drove them from the parking lot, he swung through a drive-through and bought them both something to drink. Lucy hadn't even realized how much she needed the sugar in the soda until it hit her system.

He looked at her with kindness in his eyes. "Better? You were wilting on me." His concern did funny things to her heart.

"Thanks, I did need this. Is there somewhere private we can talk?"

"Sure." He drove out of town and headed toward the ranch and her house. But he continued on past the turn and Lucy watched the scenery go by. She tried to calm the nerves trying to talk her out of what she knew she had to do.

After a while he turned and went through an entrance with the Sunrise Ranch brand.

"This is another entrance to the ranch. It's connected to the original ranch, but would be a long ride as the crow flies on horseback. We usually drive over with horses then unload when we're working cattle." She felt as though his explanation was meant more to fill the dead space floating between them than to inform her of where they were.

The moon shimmered on the white rock road and bathed the countryside with a pale glow.

He stopped beside a pond with the moon reflecting off the water. A huge tree hung out over the water, and there was a narrow pier.

"See the owl, there, sitting in the tree?" He pointed and, sure enough, Lucy saw the owl watching them, his eyes glowing yellow in the headlights. "You spotted him quickly."

"Out here, you just have to keep your eyes open. This place is alive with

animals. But that guy right there has been hunting out of that tree for years."

She smiled at him despite her nerves. She took another sip of her soda. Rowdy rolled down the windows and turned off the engine. Leaning his back against the door, he studied her.

"What did you want to talk about?"

She looked away, toward the water.

"I hadn't realized how extensive Tony's burns were."

"I didn't understand that. After we talked..."

"I know you assumed Tony had told me. But he didn't show me. I could not have imagined the extent even if I'd tried."

"I'm sorry. That was why you looked

so pale out there."

She nodded. He gripped the steering wheel with one hand and his knuckles grew white in the darkness. "When I saw your burns, I thought of Tony. He feels a bond with you because you have that in common."

Lucy sat her soda in the cup holder and rolled a strand of hair with her fingers, thinking about where to begin.

"I haven't been completely honest with you."

He looked startled. "That's okay."

She shook her head. "No. It's not. I've been hard on you and—" There seemed to be no air in the truck and yet the windows were open. "My burns aren't just on my arms and neck as I've let everyone think. Seeing Tony tonight hit me hard." Her voice cracked and she had to pause to get it back under control. "You see, until now, I've told myself I was okay, blessed that my face had been spared-and I am. I think that's why this is especially hard for me to admit that I'm so ashamed of my body that I haven't told anyone that the burns on my arms extend over most of my torso ... " She couldn't say more.

His eyes shadowed and in the moonlight they glistened, and she could almost believe tears were there in their depths. She took a deep breath, torn by whether he was repulsed by what she was telling him or feeling compassion. Her heart of hearts said compassion, but she was uncertain how even that made her feel.

Her throat felt raw.

He looked away and studied the pond; his Adam's apple bobbed. "You—" he started and then stopped. "I can't stand the thought of you suffering like that."

"I didn't suffer long. I was knocked unconscious soon after the ceiling caved in. The recovery was...difficult. So bad I wished at times I hadn't lived."

Rowdy got out of the truck instantly and was at her door within seconds. Without ceremony he yanked it open and pulled her into his arms, crushing her to him. "I know you'd rather I not touch you

-" his voice was muffled in her hair

"—but I can't stand the thought of you in so much pain."

He was holding her tightly, her toes barely brushing the ground, and Lucy's arms had somehow locked around his shoulders. She trembled as tears that had long ago dried up tried to break free at his heartfelt words and the earnest way he held her.

The owl's woeful hoot sounded, cutting through the silence. Lucy pulled herself together, very aware of the man embracing her.

He inhaled deeply and then lowered her to the ground and stepped back.

Almost as if he had willed himself to do it. Lucy's heart was thundering and, though she wished with all her might that things could be different and that his arms were meant to hold her, she couldn't let herself go there.

"I didn't mean to get personal." He looked almost bashful. "But I didn't kiss you."

She laughed despite the mood over the moment. "You did very well. I needed a hug in the worst way. Thank you."

"You're welcome, anytime. Why did you share that with me?"

His question surprised her. She walked over to the pier, tested it with her foot then walked a few feet onto it. Staring down into the water, she found the moon looking back at her. Rowdy followed her, waiting at the end with a hand on each railing of the narrow pier.

"I'm not sure, really." She turned and leaned against the railing, crossing her arms. "I just saw Tony's scars and suddenly I didn't feel authentic. And I knew that in order to feel like I wasn't being dishonest that I had to be open about my burns."

"It's no one's business."

"True. But, still, I felt like I needed to tell someone...that I needed to tell you."

Lucy wasn't sure why she'd wanted him to know. But suddenly she was afraid. Had she told too much? Had she shown him too much of her

heart?

Chapter Seventeen

It was all Rowdy could do not to blurt out that he loved her. He'd had to hold her when she'd looked so shattered telling him about her burns. He'd known for certain in that instant that what he'd been thinking was true. He'd fallen in love with this beautiful woman and the reality was she would never be able to love him.

Sure, she'd confided in him. That gave him hope, but he knew deep inside that she'd never be able to give her heart to him.

"I'm ashamed of the burns," she

whispered, blinking. She held his gaze for a second, and then with a shuddering breath looked away. "I worry—"

"One day you'll fall in love, Lucy. You'll find a man you can love." It wouldn't be him, but someone she could believe in. Someone honorable, and upstanding. "And when you do, your scars won't matter to him. If that's what you're worried about."

They don't matter to me.

She looked lost to him standing there. "I think I'm ready to call it a night," she said, walking to where he stood. "Thank you for listening."

He followed her to his truck and helped her up into the cab. "Thanks for listening to me," she said again. "I just needed to talk."

"Anytime." What else could he say? He asked himself that all the way back around to his side of the truck. There was a ton of stuff he wanted to say, but nothing he could.

Silence filled the truck as he drove back toward home. "You did good out there, by the way," he finally said.

"You're a good teacher. Not that I'm planning on making a habit of it. That was most likely my last rodeo competition."

He grinned. "Quit while you're on top."

She laughed. "Something like that, anyway."

It felt good to hear her laugh. She amazed him.

When he pulled into her driveway, Moose was sitting on the cab of her truck, watching them.

"No, don't get out," she said when he started to open his door. "I'm fine. Thanks. I fell apart a little, but I feel much better now."

"Lucy, thanks for trusting me with your story. It meant a lot to me that you did that."

She paused before closing the door. "Rowdy, you've been nothing but good to me. I'm so sorry if I've been unfair to you. You said you didn't know that woman was married and I believe you. I admire that you've changed your life."

He watched her go, wanting to go after her. Bowing his head, he prayed that God would help Lucy with the struggles she was trying to face alone.

* * *

"You should ask her out."

Rowdy looked over the top of the horse he was brushing down and looked at Wes.

"Seriously, dude. We—" he pointed from himself to Joseph and the fourteen other culprits gathered around "—know you're interested in Lucy. It's plain to see."

"That's right, Rowdy." B.J. stared up

at him. "We like Lucy. She done helped me paint a rock and everything. I like her and I know you got to, 'cause you ain't stupid."

Rowdy's jaw dropped and he looked at the older boys, wondering who was responsible for B.J.'s word choice.

Wes fessed up. "Hey, you're not stupid and we all know it."

"We also see you looking all funny when you look at her," Sammy added. "Ain't that right, Caleb?"

Caleb nodded his blond head. "We've seen you do it."

"Yeah," B.J. spoke up again. "It's kinda like you ain't slept in days and days. Your eyelids get droopy."

"Okay, who has been talking to this

kid?"

B.J.'s brows scrunched up. "I got eyes, Rowdy. I'm almost nine years old. I know about things."

Wes and Joseph were almost hunched over holding in their laughter on the other side of the horse. Rowdy planned on having a man-to-man talk with them later.

"Look, Rowdy." Tony stepped out of the group, his face a work of concern. "Lucy, well, she's special. And we like you a lot, or we wouldn't be saying this. This is serious stuff. She's new around here and we noticed she doesn't date. She's too young to be sitting at home all the time." "Hold it. You guys have been listening to Nana."

"True," Tony agreed. "But still. You know you like her and she deserves to go out on a real date. And you used to be gone all the time on dates and you never go now. So it'd be good for both of you."

Rowdy wanted to deny it all, but, truth was, taking Lucy on a date was a great idea.

"You ain't chicken, are you?" B.J. asked.

"No, Short Stuff, I am not chicken."

Tony and the other boys started highfiving each other and Tony reached across the horse, holding his hand up. Rowdy gave him a high five.

It occurred to him later that the little sneaks had become proficient at getting adults to fall right into their traps.

First Lucy with the cow milking, and now him.

He chuckled, thinking about what easy prey he'd been.

Now the hard part. Getting Lucy to agree.

The smart thing would be to let the boys do their magic.

But this was *his* date. And he'd do the asking.

He just hoped Lucy didn't do the rejecting.

This was heaven on earth. It truly was. Lucy sat on her stool in front of her canvas in the center of her new studio with the awesome light shining through the windows. The painting had come at her fast and furious. Two days she'd been at it almost nonstop. That was how it was with her. When inspiration struck, there was no stopping it. She had to get it out onto the canvas

Stepping away, she picked up her coffee and walked to the wide windows that overlooked her valley. Her sweet uncle. How had he known this place would be so perfect for her?

Turning back, she stared at the canvas. It was a scene of the calf branding. The colors were vivid, bold. And though there were many in the picture, she hadn't been able to help herself-Rowdy was there, bent on one knee with his hand on B.J.'s shoulder, as the focal point. His features lit up the canvas-the softness in his eyes, the generous spirit coming full force to the scene was what would draw every eye to him. Just like it did in real life.

Lucy wasn't one to brag about her work. There had been a time when she brushed off compliments. But her agent had been the one who pointed out that her ability was a God-given talent and when she belittled it, she was telling God He hadn't done well by her.

Now she recognized it for what it

was. And she thanked Him for blessing her with the ability.

Times like this, though, when she looked at a painting and recognized that she couldn't have done it without God's hand on her shoulder, were the moments that she was awestruck. She had feared to never feel that again.

She'd read an interview with an author once who said that there were times when the author would read something she wrote and she would go back and double-check her original manuscript thinking that an editor had switched the words because she couldn't remember writing something so profound. The author would be shocked when she'd realize she had indeed written the words and knew that God had given her the words.

That was how Lucy felt now.

"Lucy."

Rowdy! Like a deer in the headlights, she stared at her painting and then at the stairs. The door was open and his spurs clinked with each step up the stairs.

He'd wanted to see her work. But she hadn't meant for a picture of himself to be the first thing of hers that he saw.

Frantically she set her coffee down and was about to grab the painting and do what? Throw it in the closet?

"Hey," he said, before she could do anything.

"Hey," she said, moving in front of the

painting. Like he wasn't going to see the three-foot-by-four-foot canvas behind her.

He looked around appreciatively. "This is great, Lucy."

She couldn't help but smile. The room was long, the walls painted a fresh yellow, the color that inspired her. His attention was snagged by the large painting hanging on the wall closest to him. It was one of her rather stormy days, darker than usual and yet there was something about it that still appealed to Lucy. Most of the others hanging were not her usual signature style. On the wall at the end of the building was the single painting that she had from her days

before the fire. It was a pale blue sky with two vivid bluebirds playing chase between the trees as a road curved past the tree and around the bend.

It was to that painting that Rowdy moved. "This is beautiful," he said.

His praise touched her. She moved over beside him and crossed her arms as she looked at the painting. "I painted that years ago-one of my first that I felt was saleable. I gave it to my dad-told him the bluebirds in the picture were to signify bluebirds of happiness. All the joy I wished for him in his life. After the fire, he and my new stepmother brought the painting to me during my recovery and said they wanted me to have it so that the bluebirds would remind me that I would be happy again."

She felt very self-conscious when Rowdy turned to look at her. There was no denying that she had feelings for Rowdy. Lucy had known as she painted him that, though she didn't want to face it, she was falling in love with him. And she didn't know what to do about it.

"You are, aren't you? Happy again?"

Oh, what a loaded question. She nodded. "I am, Rowdy. I have my hangups. But I am. And much of that is because of being here." She wanted to say *because of you* but she couldn't. She was confused about her emotions where he was concerned. And yet she knew that if she just released the fear holding her back and gave him a chance ...

Her thoughts stalled as he reached suddenly and lifted a strand of hair from her shoulder and rubbed it between his fingers, studying it as if it held the secrets of the universe.

Had he almost touched her cheek? Longing for his touch further confused her.

His eyes met hers, and she prayed he couldn't read the longing in them. His lips curved into a smile. "I'm glad," he said, and let go of her hair.

"Is there a reason you came by?" she asked, wishing her voice didn't sound so breathless. But goodness, the room seemed twenty degrees hotter than it had and her cheeks were burning.

He strode back to the center of the room and the painting she'd been working on. It happened so quickly that she was still standing with her feet anchored to where she stood. From her position she couldn't see the painting. only his face as he viewed it. He studied the painting intently. And then he raised his eyes and looked at her over the top of the canvas.

"This is unbelievable."

The warm rush of satisfaction filled her. "I was inspired."

She didn't say by him. She hoped he didn't realize that he was the focal point of the painting.

"You put me in this painting."

"Yes." She decided to play it cool. "What was going on between you and B.J. in the photo captivated me. I couldn't help myself. You're very paintable." There, she'd taken the personal emphasis off of it and put it in professional terms. He looked back at the painting and she wished she knew what was going through his mind.

"B.J. and the boys will be blown away like I am."

She smiled broadly. "I do love to blow people away. I want them to feel loved, though." The words were out before she could stop them.

"I think they will."

He'd said it casually, not seeming to

take her words to mean she wanted him to feel loved, too. And that was a good thing. Right? She didn't want to mislead him. Didn't want him to think she was playing games with him.

He dragged his hat from his head and tugged at his ear as she'd seen him do a few times.

"Okay, time for me to come clean. I came over here because I wanted to see if you'd have dinner and maybe a movie with me this weekend?"

If he'd walked over and kissed her she wouldn't have been more surprised. "You're asking me on a date?" He nodded, still holding his hat. She noticed he had a death grip on it, and that

simple knowledge got her right in the

center of her heart.

"But I—"

"Look, Lucy. Truthfully. I'm just going to lay it out here for you. I don't want to scare you. But I-I care for you. I'm trying to do everything you ask of me, and that includes keeping my distance. but I know that you know in your heart there is something between us. And I'm just asking for a chance. I know I've royally messed up in my past. And I've asked God to forgive me. All I'm asking is for you to give this connection we have a fighting chance."

Her hand came up and she toyed with the collar of her shirt. She was unable to speak or think past the reasons bombarding her that this was a terrible idea. She didn't want to do it. She didn't want to risk her heart. But she knew in her heart of hearts that she wanted so much to give "them" a chance. He'd messed up. But he had respected every boundary she'd put up since the kiss. Didn't he deserve something from her? "Okay. I would like that."

Chapter Eighteen

So I hear you have a date."

Lucy blinked in disbelief at Ms. Jo as she dabbed paint on the canvas. This was their first official Gals Night Out Paint Class, as they'd officially called it, and to her surprise she had over half a dozen students. Including Mabel, Ms. Jo. Nana and Jolie. The other three ladies were friends of theirs and just as chatty as they could be. Despite the fact that everything wasn't completely set up, they'd decided to get together anyway.

And it had been a fun night. They'd had refreshments and she'd walked them through painting their first still life—a beautiful bunch of grapes she'd set on a platter and focused a spotlight on so that there would be shadows and highlights.

No one was painting masterpieces yet, but they were having a great time and Lucy had actually been happy that for a little while she was being distracted from the fact that she'd accepted a date with Rowdy for the next evening.

And now Ms. Jo had just opened her love life up for group discussion. An internal groan threatened to burst out of her and expose her real fear.

"Yes, I am." She managed to sound calm. Amazing since she was a little bit freaked out about the whole thing. "Jo, you weren't supposed to say anything about that," Mabel said. It was an odd turnaround that Mabel was getting onto Jo, when it was usually Ms. Jo keeping Mabel in line. "Ruby Ann shared that with us in strictest confidentiality."

Ms. Jo dipped her chin and looked over the rim of her glasses. "It's all over town, Mabel, in case you haven't noticed. I've been sitting here debating if she should be forewarned and decided that yes, it is our duty to let her know."

Nana looked worried. "It wasn't meant to get out. The boys ganged up on Rowdy and gave him the push he needed to ask you out. They convinced him it was the thing to do."

He'd asked her out because the boys talked him into it.

"Now, don't even start thinking he asked you out because the boys wanted him to." Jolie read her mind. "You know as well as all of us that he's been dying to ask you out, but wasn't sure it was the thing to do."

"Well, I heard Drewbaker and Chili discussing it on the bench out by the newspaper office," Vergie Little said, waving her brush.

Sissy Jackson and Bea Norton nodded their heads.

So everybody knew she was going on a date. The room burst into chatter about how nice it was and that she needed a night out and that Rowdy was a changed man.

Jolie didn't say much and Lucy said less. What else was there to say?

If she wanted to, she knew she could use this as an excuse not to go out with Rowdy. She could claim that he shouldn't have told everyone. Different reasons for calling off the date made themselves known to her as she listened to the gals cheer that she was finally going to have a night out like a young woman should.

And the truth was, she agreed. She could let Tim cause her to become a hermit or she could step out and force herself to have a life. She was not a chicken.

Never had been and never would be. She wouldn't let herself.

And though she'd forgotten it for a while, that meant she had to fight the fear about going out with Rowdy.

She had to fight, to back it down or, like Mabel had reminded her again, the regrets would be hard to live with.

Rowdy deserved for her to give this a chance. Scars and all.

* * *

On Saturday evening at six o'clock Rowdy stood outside Lucy's back door, a bouquet of fresh spring flowers gripped in his hand. It had taken him almost thirty minutes at the florist to decide which to buy. He'd wanted all of them but knew that would be a little crazy. But that was how he felt about Lucy.

Rubbing the back of his neck, he took a deep breath and knocked on the door. He hoped she hadn't been looking out a window and saw how nervous he was. He had to be calm, cool and cautious. He could not mess this up.

But ever since he'd realized she'd painted his likeness on that canvas with such detail that even the emotion in his eyes had shown, he knew that Lucy Calvert was not only the most talented artist he'd ever seen, but she also just might care for him deep down. That scared her, and with good reason.

He'd prayed long and hard and he knew that the outcome of this night could very well be the most important of his life.

The door opened and he almost dropped the flowers. "Wow."

She took his breath away. For the first time since he'd known her she didn't have a work shirt on. Though she did have a long-sleeved blouse, it was shimmery silky material in a rich gold tone and she had a colorful scarf draped about her neck. She had hidden her scars without resorting to a bulky work shirt. She had skinny jeans on with strappy high-heeled sandals. She was at least

five-two in the heels and it made him smile.

"You look gorgeous," he added to the *wow* he'd blurted out in pure reaction.

She bit her lip then smiled almost shyly. "Thank you. You, too— I mean, not gorgeous—handsome."

They both laughed and his nerves eased with the laughter.

"These are for you." He held the flowers out to her and she took them almost eagerly.

"How lovely. You shouldn't have," she said, but he could tell that he'd chosen right. And that she was pleased.

"Come in, let me put these in water and then I'm ready."

He followed her into the kitchen and

watched as she filled a vase from a cupboard, then arranged the flowers, taking time to make them look great. It was amazing what a difference she could make just by pushing and pulling a few flowers here and there. The artist in her was evident in more than her painting. "Okay," she said, turning to him.

"They are beautiful and I'm ready."

But was he? Praying he wouldn't mess up, he held the door for her and they were soon on their way.

* * *

It was a lovely evening. The sun was just beginning to set when Rowdy opened the door of his truck for her. He held out his hand and the fiery orange sky lit the world behind him as Lucy took his hand. It felt as explosive as her emotions. His eyes were dark with what she thought was worry. She'd been watching for his arrival. How could she not, with her nerves jingling like they were? And she hadn't missed the hesitancy in his posture and the anxious expression on his face as he'd knocked on the door. He'd been tense since she opened it...other than when he'd almost made her blush by his appreciative appraisal when he first saw her.

He was as uptight about the date as she was.

"I'd better hold on tight or you might topple off those heels of yours," he said, squeezing her fingers gently and eyeing her sandals.

There he was, her happy-go-lucky guy.

Her guy?

"I haven't had any reason to wear heels since I've been here," she said with a smile, suddenly feeling a small semblance of ease between them. "But I'm quite steady on my feet in them."

"Too bad," he said, still holding her hand as he placed his hand on her waist to help her as she stepped up into his truck. "I was hoping you'd need my assistance all evening."

Her heart was fluttering as she sat in the seat, eye level with him and so very near. "I'll probably need it. After saying that I'll probably twist my ankle or something."

"Not on my watch, sweetheart." He tugged her seat belt out and stretched it around her and clamped it in place, meeting her gaze as he leaned over her. "You're safe with me. Heels or no heels."

She could not breathe as he withdrew, closed her door and strode around to slide into the driver's seat. Yup, that sunset didn't even compare to the intense emotions at war inside her as he pulled out onto the blacktop and headed toward wherever.... She didn't even know where they were going and she didn't care. Tonight she felt alive, and beautiful in his eyes—she wasn't allowing herself to think about her scars. Not tonight. Tonight she was a regular woman on a regular date.

Yet she took that back as she looked over at Rowdy's profile. This could never be considered a regular date. Nothing with Rowdy could ever be considered regular. He was special and she knew it.

* * *

Rowdy had seriously contemplated where to take Lucy to dinner. It had to be nice. It had to make her feel as special as he thought she was and it had to be romantic. He was going to make sure she knew this wasn't just two friends going out for a burger.

He finally decided on a little Greek place off the beaten path in River Bend. After the hour it took to reach the larger town, they'd both relaxed a little and were talking and laughing about the antics of the boys. The boys were always a safe subject.

The hostess seated them in a quiet corner of the restaurant at a table for two. Soft music played in the background, candles flickered at tables in the dim light. Lucy's smile of appreciation was all he needed to know he'd chosen right.

"This is nice. I love the atmosphere." She talked about the unique color of deep green on the walls, how the rich hardwood floors combined with it and about the chandeliers hanging overhead made from tree branches. "I think they were going for romance in the outdoors," she said softly. "It's really a neat place, though descriptions would never do it justice."

He chuckled. "You've done a good job. I like the atmosphere, but the food is excellent."

"I would have never taken you for a guy who would eat anything other than steak. Greek. Who would have thought it?"

"Hey, that's stereotyping. Cowboys enjoy things other than steak and potatoes."

"So I see. And I like that very much." By the time their meal had come and they'd nearly finished, he and Lucy were having a good time. Lucy's eyes sparkled in the candlelight and she'd even flirted with him a few times. It hit him full force that this was who she'd been before her husband had stolen her ability to trust.

When she laughed at something he said about the boys ganging up on him to give him the courage to ask her out, he couldn't help reaching across and tracing the back of her hand with his fingers.

"I'm so glad they convinced me to see if you would accept a date with me," he said, turning serious. "I'd convinced myself there wasn't a chance."

She flipped her hand over so that she was holding his hand. "I still can't believe I said yes. I am so glad I came."

As she said the words that reached inside him like warmth from a flame, she looked up, distracted. He turned his head to see if the waitress had come back with their check, but his heart went cold when he saw Liz approaching, her gaze locked on him like a target at a shooting range.

Chapter Nineteen

"Rowdy, I saw those amazing shoulders of yours and that black hair and knew instantly it was you."

Lucy had known the woman was coming their way on purpose. Even the distraction of Rowdy's hand holding hers hadn't prevented her from seeing the way this woman zeroed in on Rowdy. She was an amazing creature tall, willowy, with hair so blond and so shiny it caught every flicker of light as it framed one of the most beautiful faces Lucy had ever seen.

She'd yet to look at Lucy and had eyes

for only Rowdy, who, Lucy noted as he'd drawn his hand from hers, looked a little pale beneath his tan. His eyes had darkened with—anger or appreciation? She wasn't sure. But though he didn't say anything, she felt the tension in him even across the table.

The beautiful woman gave a sultry pout that Lucy figured a man might find attractive. She herself would look silly even trying such a move. Lucy decided with a quick judgment that she didn't like this woman.

Something curled inside Lucy as the woman's predatory gaze flickered over Rowdy. At the calculated way she flicked a strand of champagne-colored hair from her shoulder. Even the way she stood was a pose to bring attention to her figure as she crowded Rowdy's personal space.

"I've missed you," she said, perfect hands toying with the silk tie at the low neckline of her blouse.

Lucy sat very still, her gaze shifting to Rowdy. Why was he not saying anything? His gaze was locked on the woman and a muscle in his check flinched.

"I have nothing to say to you, Liz," he said at last.

Liz, as he'd called her, gave a soft laugh. "Not so fast, handsome. You need to know I'm divorcing Garret. So no more of that messy situation. I'm a free agent and I'd love to see you sometime. You have my number."

The moment she realized who this was, Lucy went cold inside. Liz turned and walked away, letting her hand slide casually to her back pocket—another calculated move to draw attention as she strolled away. Rowdy didn't watch her leave; instead, he was looking straight at Lucy.

Despite the anxious way Rowdy was eyeing her, she couldn't speak. So many things were running through her mind. This was the kind of woman he'd dated. This was the married woman he'd had the affair with. What a horrible creature she was, and this was the woman—the *type* of woman—that Rowdy had found attractive.

She was beautiful, but— "I'm ready to leave," Lucy said, barely able to look at Rowdy.

He motioned for the waitress, who quickly brought them their check, and within minutes they were out the door and in the truck. It couldn't have been fast enough for Lucy. Her stomach churned and she was almost afraid she was going to be ill.

What had she been thinking? How had she let herself fall into this pit?

Rowdy didn't say much. He was, it seemed, as upset as she was. Halfway home he pulled off the road into someone's pasture entrance and put the truck in Park.

Rubbing the crease that had formed across his forehead, he sighed. "That couldn't have gone more wrong if I'd have written it in a book. Lucy, I know you've got all kinds of bad things going on inside your head right now. I'm sorry that happened. But I'm more sorry I ever got involved with her."

Lucy looked out the window into the darkness. What could she say?

"Talk to me, Lucy."

"About what?" she snapped. Anger that had been coiled inside of her broke loose. "I should never have let this happen. I should never have let my guard down."

"Lucy, I'm not the same stupid guy I

used to be. I'm not."

She turned toward him. "It doesn't matter. Don't you see I can't do this—us? *I* can't do this. Please take me home."

* * *

Rowdy had died and *not* gone to heaven. That was for certain.

Tucker and Morgan had come out to his house, a small place that he'd taken over after he'd moved out of the big house. It was hidden in the woods, and it worked as a great place to hole up when he wanted to be alone.

And he wanted to be alone.

"What's going on?" Tucker asked,

finding him on the back porch where he'd been nursing a strong cup of coffee and a sour mood.

"Now, why would you think there was anything wrong?" he asked, sarcasm thick as the yaupon growing in the woods around them.

Morgan shot him a concerned look. "You didn't show up at church Sunday or work yesterday. And Jolie said that when Lucy came to teach art, she looked about as gloomy as a stormy night."

"The boys noticed, too, and kept asking her how your date went," Tucker added. Even the fact that his brother had driven out here said he was worried, and Rowdy knew it. How many times had his brothers had to come get him out of trouble when he was growing up?

"Oh, yeah, and what did she say when they asked her that?" He had his elbows on his knees and was studying the planks between his boots.

"She told them it went fine. But no one believes her."

"She's not doing fine," he muttered. "I messed up and made her feel bad." Sitting up, he looked at his brothers. He'd never felt as terrible and low as he felt now. He'd spent time praying and venting and wishing he'd taken back ever pushing Lucy to go out with him. And he said as much to his brothers. "Her lousy husband left her with a tremendous amount of emotional scar

tissue. The last thing she needed was a man like me thinking there was anything but heartache that I could offer her."

Morgan placed his hand on his shoulder. "Rowdy, you don't need to be talking like that. You have a lot to offer Lucy, or any woman, for that matter. You've made some mistakes, but who of us hasn't one way or the other? You've changed."

"Yes, I have, but I'm no good for Lucy. Lucy needs a man who has been a rock from day one. A solid man she knows she can trust."

Tucker pulled up a chair and sat across from him, looking him square in the eye. "It's not for you to say what kind of man she needs. God knows the man she needs and as far as I can tell He's put you in her life. Now, whether He's put you in her life to be the man she's to end up with, I can't say, brother. But I can tell you that He didn't put you in her life by accident."

Rowdy grunted cynically. But Lucy falling out of the hayloft and into his arms flashed across his mind.

Tucker ignored him. "What you're going through right now is going to come into play one way or another. What I want to know is, are you committed to see it through? When I was in Iraq I didn't need men beside me who were in halfway. I needed commitment even though we had no idea what the outcome was going to be. Do you love her?"

Morgan yanked a chair up and crossed his arms. His hiked brow posed the same question.

Rowdy nodded slowly, mulling over what Tucker had said. Tucker wasn't a man of a lot of words. Rowdy set his coffee on the side table and sat up. "I do," he said aloud. He'd made a commitment to God that he was going to wait for his direction in his life. He'd made more mistakes along the way where Lucy was concerned, but she hadn't just dropped in his arms for nothing.

Rowdy was certain of that.

"Then the question is, are you going to see this through, wherever it goes, even if it's not in your favor?" Morgan finally spoke and Tucker nodded as he talked.

"I've been so caught up in the fact that I wasn't right for Lucy that I never even stopped to consider if God had a different reason for me being here for her." His mind was suddenly churning. He told his brothers about Liz showing up and how it had affected Lucy.

"She barely spoke to me after that. And just wanted to go home. Then she told me she couldn't see me anymore."

"And you gave up, just like that?" Tucker asked. "That's not the guy I know."

"Hey, I changed, remember?" Morgan shook his head. "Rowdy, just because you changed doesn't mean you roll over and play dead. God's not going to do all the work, you know."

Rowdy scowled at his brothers. "Hey, why are y'all still here, anyway? I've got somewhere to be." He stood up and strode through the house and straight to his truck.

"It's about time," Tucker called after him.

And Morgan's, "We'll be praying for you both," was the last thing he heard before he slammed his truck door closed and revved his engine.

It was time to see his girl....

Lucy couldn't help but worry that she'd hurt Rowdy. She'd been so upset after the date that she'd not said much, and she'd left him in her driveway in a very unkind way.

Just as he had done from the moment she'd told him about Tim and her burns, he'd again done as she wished. He'd not tried to kiss her and he'd kept his hands to himself. He'd been nothing but kind to her. And all that he'd asked of her was to give this, this *thing* between them a chance.

And then this Liz person showed up and made her...what? Jealous? Feel inferior in a physical way?

Liz, as horrible as she was and as

much a soul that Lucy knew needed the Lord in her life, had shown Lucy that Rowdy deserved so much more than either she or Liz could offer him.

By Tuesday morning Lucy knew she had to talk to Rowdy. Pulling up to the ranch, she looked around for Rowdy's truck but she didn't see it. She learned from Jolie and the kids on Monday during afternoon art class that no one had seen him on Sunday and he hadn't shown up at the main ranch compound at all on Monday.

Lucy hadn't shown up for church on Sunday, either, and felt guilty about that, but she had been too upset.

As she looked around now, her spirits plummeted further because she'd felt

compelled to talk to him. Not feeling like seeing anyone else, she turned her truck around in the parking lot and headed back home. In her rearview mirror, she caught a glimpse of Tony coming out of the barn, leading his horse. But she didn't stop. She was in no shape to talk to anyone right now. Except Rowdy.

Once she made it back to her house, she slammed out of her truck and walked to the barn. She pulled open the double doors and didn't bother to close them behind her. Her boots clattered on the steps as she jogged up to her studio. She had every intention of trying to paint, but Rowdy stared back at her from his painting and all she could do was stand there and stare back.

She loved him.

It was as clear in the painting as anything she'd ever known in her heart. She'd painted the picture with love and she hadn't even recognized it until now.

Closing her eyes, she let the realization pour over her and she tried to absorb what it meant for her. Nothing.

How long she stood there she wasn't sure, but she tried in every way to convince herself that her falling in love with Rowdy was a blessing sent from God to help her heal. But it wasn't, and there was no use trying to convince herself of the fact.

"Lucy, are you up there?"

Rowdy!

Her heart jumped into her throat and she panicked. He was here! "Yes," she said, stilling herself for a very hard conversation. But it was one that needed to be started and finished. She would not walk away from this again. Rowdy deserved to know her heart.

His steps were quick as he, too, jogged up the stairs. She was startled when she saw him. He hadn't shaved and a five-o'clock shadow roughened his jaw. He stopped inside the doorway for the first few seconds. Lucy fought the need to wrap her arms around him and tell him she was so sorry.

To tell him that she trusted him and

that she knew he was a changed man. That everything he'd shown her of his character had been that of a man of integrity.

"Lucy, I've come to say my piece." He crossed to stand just a step away from her. "You're a stubborn woman. And I've realized that I've been letting you have your way just a little too much."

What?

"I'm a changed man. I have messed up and messed up some more and I'll mess up in the future, I can promise you that. But I can promise you that if I give you my word about anything—and I mean anything—I'll come through with it. I'll never lie or cheat on you. I've never done that with anyone, even before I made a commitment to God that I was changing the way I lived. So you can rest assured that with a good woman like you —the woman I love—that I'd be a man of integrity till my dying breath."

Lucy's temper had spiked at the highhanded way he'd started off, but that anger had diffused like a popped balloon.

"I believe you," she said. And it was so true. "You are not Tim. Tim was never the man you are and I've come to realize that as I thought about this for the past few days."

He'd said he loved her.

Lucy closed her eyes and let the

bittersweet knowledge seep into the dark places of her heart. Tears threatened and she backed them into a corner knowing this was not the time to cry *or* to be weak. And it was most positively not the time to be selfish.

Touching his cheek, she smiled at him. "I treated you badly, Rowdy. So badly, and I am so very sorry for that. You are so special. But you have this all wrong. I was upset the other night because..." She couldn't tell him she was jealous.

"Because I realized when I looked at Liz that you deserve so much more. More than she or I could give you."

His brows met and his head cocked as if in question. He started to speak and she shook her head. "Please, I need to finish." She pulled her hand away and took a deep breath. "When I said I couldn't do this, I was

saying that *I* can't. Not because of anything you've done. I just can't do it. Beneath this shirt is a body so scarred that even I have a hard time looking at it. I don't have it in me to share. As a wife, I'd feel so inferior."

"Don't talk that way," he snapped, letting his eyes fall to her work shirt. "I don't care what your body looks like. Lucy, I love you. The fact that you have scars doesn't matter to me. They would only remind me of the strength and courage you've shown in the face of great adversity. You are beautiful to me, mind, body and soul."

She hardened her heart against what he was saying. She refused to let her guard down. "No, Rowdy. I'm damaged beyond repair in my mind and I can't—" A crash downstairs halted her words. Rowdy spun around and started for the stairs just as the nicker of a horse sounded and then hooves pounded on hard ground.

Running to the window, Lucy felt sick when she saw Tony galloping across the pasture like wolves were chasing him.

"Rowdy, it's Tony. He must have heard what I said."

"Come on." She raced down the stairs and didn't ask questions as she jumped into his truck. She held on as he backed out of the driveway as if they'd been shot out of a cannon.

"Where will he go?"

Rowdy didn't say anything. He turned into a drive a few yards down the road that led into a pasture of the Sunrise Ranch and drove over the cattle guard and into the pasture that stretched between her house and the ranch. Lucy studied his profile as they bounced over that rutted gravel road. They hadn't gone far when he detoured to another road and spun gravel, fishtailing to make the direction change. He was angry.

Everything about him radiated anger as they charged over the pasture in pursuit of Tony. All she could think about were the scars on Tony's body. And the pain her words must have caused him.

She started praying. In the distance she glimpsed him, riding low as he and the horse practically flew up one hill and disappeared over the other. In the distance she could see the stable.

"He's going home."

"Yes. He's going to the stable," Rowdy said tersely, sounding as though he'd known exactly where Tony would go. "The place he feels safe."

Lucy snapped her head to stare at Rowdy. His curt words had been matterof-fact. "How do you know that?"

"When he first came to us, that was

where we'd find him when things got too hard for him to handle. He'll go into a stall."

When they reached the yard, Lucy was shocked to see the boys climbing out of the arena with looks of concern and curiosity on their faces as they headed toward the stable. Tony's horse was standing alone at the entrance, breathing hard. But Tony was nowhere to be seen.

Rowdy bailed out of the truck in an instant and she followed.

"Stop, guys. Let me go in by myself," he commanded Wes and Joseph, who were almost at the entrance but had stopped when they saw Rowdy.

"He was flying when he rounded the arena and charged through here," Joseph said.

"Flying," Wes echoed, spitting a sunflower seed. "What's wrong with him, Rowdy?"

Lucy walked past them without answering. "Let me, Rowdy. I did this. I need to fix it." Without waiting, she walked into the barn and started down the center of the alley. About halfway down she saw a stall gate slightly ajar. Tugging it open, she stepped inside. Tony was sitting in the corner—his knees drawn up and his arms folded over them with his head down.

After all the pain this kid had suffered, she'd just caused him more. It was unbearable to her. Foolish, foolish woman.

Swallowing the lump in her throat and praying for the right words—something she'd been sorely lacking of late—she sank down beside him in the soft hay. "Tony. I'm sorry."

"It's nothing but the truth," he said, not looking up. He swiped his face on his shirtsleeve. "I came to tell you that I met a girl." His words were muffled against his arm.

Normally for a kid of fifteen, this would be no big deal, but Tony didn't talk to girls much. He was shy around them and she knew exactly why, just as most of the fellas did. His burns.

"I think that's wonderful," she said, but he shook his head. "I know you worry about your scars."

His head shot up and he glared at her. "I heard what you told Rowdy."

Shame suffused Lucy. *I'm damaged beyond repair in my mind and I can't*— "I was so afraid," she said, aching inside with regret. "Oh, Tony. It's complicated."

"Yeah, it's easy to tell me one thing and believe another. You made me believe God would have a woman out there when I grow up. And for her my scars wouldn't matter."

"Everything she said is true," Rowdy said, entering the stall. "There will be someone out there who won't care. Who will love you with all their heart." He was talking to Tony, but Lucy knew he was also telling her.

"But the key will be whether you love that woman back. Because that's going to be the tough part, Tony. You'll have to love that person, too, because even if she doesn't have physical scars, she'll have warts of some kind. We all do. She'll have messed up. She won't be perfect. But if you love her enough to trust her with your heart and your scars, and to trust what God has done for you, then you have nothing to worry about."

Tony was looking from Rowdy to Lucy.

"Is that how you feel about Lucy?" Rowdy gave him a smile that melted her chilled, ashamed heart. He nodded. "I love Lucy, scars and all. Especially with her scars. But the question is, how does she feel about me?"

Tony and Rowdy were both looking at her.

"Don't let your scars stop you, Lucy," Tony said, trying to give her courage. "Do you love him?"

Lucy nodded. How could she not after everything he'd just said? "I do love you, Rowdy."

The words were soft, but they were sure. She held her hand up, and he took it and tugged her to her feet.

"Can you trust me with your heart and your scars? And to love you always?" She knew she could. "Yes. I already do."

A to-die-for smile flashed across his face and he pulled her into his arms—a sense of home sweet home swept through her at the ironclad strength that wrapped around her.

"Then you'll marry me?" he asked, looking deep into her eyes.

"Yes. Oh, yes, I will," she said, and with the words her heart opened wide. Tony scrambled to his feet behind them and raced from the stall.

"They're gettin' *married*?" he shouted gleefully as he went.

Lucy laughed. "He's going to be okay."

"And so are we," Rowdy said. "You

asked me not to kiss you again. But do you think you could make an exception and I could kiss you this once?"

Oh, how she loved this man. Touching his cheek with her palm, she drew his head toward her. "Would you kiss me forever, please?"

And that was all the encouragement he needed as Rowdy's lips met hers with a sigh. "I thought you'd never ask."

"Hubba, hubba! That's what I'm talking about," Wes said, and Lucy and Rowdy jerked apart to find all the boys crammed against the stall railing, peering at them. "Hey, don't stop on our account," the teen said, holding up a hand. "Come on, fellas, let's give these two lovebirds some space." And with that, sixteen smiling faces backed up and followed their leader out of the barn.

"Now, where were we?" Rowdy asked, his eyes twinkling as he slipped an arm beneath her knees and swung her up and into his arms.

Lucy wrapped her arms around his neck. "Right where I've belonged from the first moment I met you," she said.

"There you go, talking some sense now," Rowdy chuckled, and kissed her again....

* * * * *

Keep reading for an excerpt from BAYOU SWEETHEART by Lenora Worth.

Dear Reader,

I'm so very thrilled that you joined me for *Her Unexpected Cowboy*, book two of my new Cowboys of Sunrise Ranch series! I hope you enjoyed your visit with the McDermotts and all the boys on the ranch and their friends in Dew Drop, Texas.

This book was very special to me because it deals with the scars, both emotional and physical, that Rowdy and Lucy were dealing with in their lives. I believe we all have scars of some kind, and they are challenging to come to terms with sometimes.

I was compelled by Rowdy's challenge to change his life. This is a

challenge many face, and their strength, conviction, courage and inspiration to do so inspired me to write this story. I pray that if you have committed your life to the Lord and are looking to make a change, that you trust the Lord, focus on Him and take His lead in your new path. Pray that He will guide your steps and put people in your path who will help and encourage you. Realize, too, that sometimes changing means leaving some friends behind and building new and healthy relationships. Building a personal relationship with Jesus Christ is the relationship that matters the most.

I love to hear from readers. You can reach me in any manner of ways! You can find me on Facebook at facebook.com/debra.clopton.5, Twitter @debraclopton, and Goodreads, too. My website is

www.<u>debraclopton.com</u>. Or if you prefer good old snail mail, you can reach me at Debra Clopton, P.O. Box 1125, Madisonville, Texas 77864. God bless you in all you do! Until next time, live, laugh and seek God with all your hearts!

Deha Cloton

Questions for Discussion

- Rowdy had made a lifechanging decision when we first met him. Why did he make this decision?
- 2. Lucy had lived through not one, but two life-changing experiences when we first met her. What were they?
- 3. Lucy and Rowdy met when she literally fell into his arms. Neither one of

them was looking for a romance, but they felt the instant attraction that sparked between them. Have you ever had a lifechanging opportunity that arrived in God's timing and not yours? How did you handle it?

4. Lucy was still dealing with the emotional scars left over from her husband's betrayal. The remodeling of her home was cathartic to her—she found she loved knocking out walls. When you are feeling blue, do you believe physical release can help you better than sitting and worrying?

5. Tony believed no one would ever love him because of his scars. How did his friends help him? How did he help Lucy?

6. When Rowdy began to fall

in love with Lucy, it was confusing to him because he had vowed not to begin a relationship for a year, as he waited to meet the woman God chose for him. But he was strongly tempted to break his vow. Has something like this ever happened to you in any area of your life? How did you deal with it?

7. Rowdy was trying to leave

his checkered past behind him and live a better life. But it seemed that Lucy saw his imperfections and instantly didn't trust him. Why do you think her view of him mattered almost instantly to Rowdy?

8. As with Rowdy, when someone commits to changing their life and reforming their lifestyle, is it an easy thing? Sometimes living down your past is the hardest thing of all, but setting goals and seeking friend and family support is a good thing. Who were Rowdy's supporters?

9. How did Lucy hurt Tony? Tony said it was easy to tell someone else how to accept themselves, but it wasn't so easy to do if it's you who needs to accept the scars. Did Lucy realize she wasn't trusting God like she thought she was?

10. Did it take courage for Tony, Rowdy and Lucy to all deal with their scars? Do you have the courage you need to deal with your scars?



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Chapter One

A woman danced in the rain in his garden.

Tomas Delacorte stared out the big upstairs window of Fleur House, oblivious to the coming storm. Instead, he watched the graceful woman as she lifted her face to the clouds and laughed, her long ponytail trailing around her shoulder like a flower vine, her hands out, palms up, as if she were saying a prayer. Her colorful tiered skirt was as bright as the various containers of flowers surrounding her. She had kicked off her sandals and now danced with

barefoot abandon in the freshly mowed grass that sloped down to the bayou.

This must be Callie Moreau. The landscape lady.

He inhaled a deep breath. A sensation passed through his chest like a fresh wind and stirred up the dust inside his heart, causing it to beat a little faster. Causing it to warm and open and absorb. The change almost hurt—the pain of wanting was overwhelming.

She danced. And he fell in love.

He wanted to go out there and dance with her.

He wanted to be that joyous, that happy...just once in his life. But for him, that would be impossible. For him, love didn't work. Just a silly reaction to an unusual sight.

A clap of thunder brought him out of his daydream.

The woman stopped dancing and gazed up at the sky.

Then she turned and looked at the window where he stood.

And into Tomas's eyes.

* * *

Callie dropped her head and hurried to the long covered terrace at the back of the huge mansion, her wet clothes and hair making her shiver. Digging into the big tote bag she'd left on the porch, she found her phone and dialed her sister Alma's number. "He saw me," she said when Alma answered. She had to catch her breath. She'd hurried too fast.

"Who saw you?"

Callie heard the blur of voices echoing over the line along with the sound of a cash register dinging another dollar. Alma was at the Fleur Café, as usual. And it was lunchtime.

"The man. The owner. Tomas Delacorte."

"So *you* saw him? What does he look like?"

"I only got a glimpse before he disappeared. But...tall, dark, handsome. And dark, intense eyes. Visions of Heathcliff with a little bit of Mr. Darcy thrown in."

"Heathcliff? As in *Wuthering Heights*? That Heathcliff?"

"Yes. That Heathcliff. I think he's bitter and lonely. He must have loved someone and lost them. Brooding. Yes, definitely brooding."

Alma giggled. "Oh, so you know this from a brief glimpse? Tell me more."

She could picture Alma sinking down on a bar stool, her grin reflecting in the aged mirror that ran the length of the counter. "Yes. I was in the garden and it started raining and...I looked up and there he was, staring at me as if he'd just walked out of the pages of a historical romance novel."

"Were you doing the rain dance

thing?"

Callie twirled her wet ponytail. "Uh, maybe. Is that bad?"

"No, no. Not bad at all. I'm sure he enjoyed watching you do that silly dance."

"He was watching. I mean, I *felt* him watching. I saw him at the window." Callie went into panic mode. "What if he fires me?"

Alma laughed. "For dancing in the rain? That's not grounds for firing someone."

"But...I wasn't actually doing my job."

"You can't dig dirt in the rain."

"Mr. Tall, Dark and Brooding might

think differently."

Callie turned at the sound of footsteps and saw the very man she'd been talking about standing there staring at her.

Again. "Uh, gotta go."

She put away her phone and wiped a hand across her wet hair. "Hello. I'm Callie."

"And apparently I'm Mr.—what was that?—Tall, Dark and Brooding."

Callie's wet skin chilled with a hot blush. She couldn't speak. So she just stood there.

He stepped closer, giving her the full view. Nice, expensive suit, dark sleek hair that curled over his collar in a rebel way. The bluest of blue eyes with dark brows that slashed across his forehead in a perpetual brooding way. Midnight eyes would be cliché. Ocean maybe, but only the deepest, bluest of oceans. Disturbing blue. Yes, disturbing oceanblue eyes.

Disturbing blue brooding eyes that stayed on her like a spyglass searching for interlopers. Glinting. He was definitely a glinter.

Callie's blush crept like kudzu over her and through her. "I'm sorry to disturb you. I'm the landscaper. I mean, I'm here to work in the garden, to...redo your yard. Nick Santiago hired me."

"I know who you are," he replied, his voice as rough as aged cypress bark. "I saw you out the window." He kept staring. "And I'm pretty sure you know who I am—my real name I mean."

"You're Tomas Delacorte. Nice to finally meet you."

He nodded but didn't return the acknowledgment. "You're wet."

"I'm so sorry," she repeated, wishing she could turn into rain and just wash away. "I was—"

He put his hands in the pockets of his trousers and frowned. "Dancing. In the rain."

She didn't have anywhere to put her hands. "Uh, yes. It's kind of a thing I have...."

The rain turned into a full-blown storm with lashing sheets of water and wind that made her shiver. Callie put her arms against her midsection to ward off the chill from her wet shirt. Maybe these goose bumps weren't from being wet. Maybe this was because of *him*. He glinted at her without moving.

She turned. "I should just go."

He lifted one hand and motioned her toward him. "Come inside out of the rain."

Not used to being ordered, good looks aside, Callie formed her own frown. "I need to get back to town."

"Not in this storm. Come inside. I insist."

When she stood there, frozen and wondering how to get away, he walked a step closer. "Please. I promise I won't lock you in the dungeon."

"You have a dungeon?"

He laughed—almost. And she fell in love. Almost.

Oh, what a beautiful, chiseled face he had. She imagined what it must look like when he truly laughed. What a lovely smile he'd have. Callie decided he probably didn't smile very often. The glint in his eyes changed to a sparkle for just a brief second. So she took this as a rare gift and enjoyed it.

But...she couldn't be in love with him. She'd keep this instant crush to herself. It was the shock of finally meeting him after weeks of speculations, after weeks of her vivid imagination taking over her brain cells. *Get over that*, she told herself. You don't know this man. You don't even need to know this man. You are content with your life, and you have Elvis.

Elvis, her big mutt of a dog, would probably scare this straight-out-of-amenswear-magazine man right out of Fleur. Maybe not scare, but annoy. This man looked like he could become annoyed very easily. And she, Callie Moreau, was known to be the annoying type—the friendly, always sunny, always positive type. So was her dog. Luckily, she'd left Elvis back at the nursery since she'd planned to come and do a quick inspection and then get back to town. She'd been so excited about

finally being able to get her hands on the massive, overgrown garden that surrounded Fleur House.

This might not work out so well, after all.

He motioned to her again then pointed toward the big French doors. "We have a basement, but...I'll have Margie and Eunice make you a cup of tea." He frowned. "Isn't that what women love a good cup of hot tea?"

"This woman does." She marched toward the open, waiting door. "And I'm starving. Do you have anything to eat?"

* * *

"I have a cook," Tomas said, irritated

that she had somehow invaded his private space, even more irritated that he'd let her do it by inviting her inside. "And a maid. I'm sure they can feed you something."

"And they could both be on break and probably watching their favorite soap opera." Callie shook her head and smiled that breathtaking smile. "I don't need any help. I—we—don't live like that around here, *Lord* Delacorte."

The sting of that comment pricked his solid armor. He walked to the door off the kitchen and called out, "Margie? Eunice?" Then he pivoted back to Callie. "You don't approve of me having a cook and a maid?"

"Not my business." She pointed to the

big, industrial stove. "This kitchen is amazing. Brenna told me it was lovely, but it goes beyond that. It's

so...beautiful. Not as fancy as I expected. A good working kitchen. Every woman's dream."

Tomas had to admit it was refreshing to find such a down-to-earth woman. A woman who brought this kitchen to life. But her iridescence was too bright. So he covered his awe with gruffness. "Do you want some tea or not?"

She gave him an exaggerated frown, then toughened her voice. "Yes, but I can make it myself."

Was she mocking him? The cook and her sister, the housekeeper, both bustled into the room. Hired help, but more like family, they looked at Callie, smiled, then turned to him. "Tomas, did you need something?"

Tomas held up his ringing cell phone but answered Margie before he took the call. "Tea and food, for our guest."

"Hi," Callie said, smiling. "I'm Callie and I can make my own tea. Iced or hot, either way is good."

"Nonsense," Eunice replied. The two women started chattering away as they went about serving Callie.

Tomas nodded to Margie and Eunice, then turned and left the room. But he couldn't help but eavesdrop on the feminine introductions and laughter coming from the kitchen. Not used to the echo of such joy, he shut his office door with a bang.

He didn't like the feelings this colorful, full-of-life woman evoked in him. He didn't have time for such feelings. Used to controlling everything and everyone, Tomas got the impression he'd never control Callie Moreau. Besides, he had work to do. Taking over a major company was never easy. Soon he'd be the most hated man in town.

Callie Moreau would hate him, too. And that would be that.

A few minutes later, a knock at his door brought his head up. "Yes?"

The door slowly opened and Eunice stuck her head in. "I've brought lunch

and...Callie wanted a word with you."

Before Tomas could protest, Callie was in, holding a lunch tray, and Eunice was gone, the door shut.

Callie's smile looked tentative, but he saw the hint of empathy in her pretty gray-blue eyes. "We had grilled ham and cheese. I brought one for you."

"I don't like grilled ham and cheese."

"Really? I thought everyone loved grilled ham and cheese sandwiches on a rainy day. When was the last time you had one?"

He sat back, memories swirling around him like the mist hitting the big windows. "It's been a long time."

She set down the tray on the edge of his massive desk. "Then this is going to

be a good day."

He nodded, turned sarcastic. "In more ways than one, apparently."

She blushed, fussed with his napkin and water glass. "I hope the weather lets up. I have a lot to do. I love the rain, of course. But I want to make your garden a stunner. I need dry earth and sunshine for that."

Tomas prayed for rain all day, then changed his mind and prayed for sunshine. He didn't want her to go, but he certainly didn't want her stay. "You need to talk to me?"

She nodded.

He motioned to a chair.

After she'd settled her skirt and

smoothed her hair, she gave him a direct glance, then produced some papers from the tote bag draped over her arm. "I wanted to show you the grid for the garden. Nick approved everything, but I'd feel better knowing you approve things, too. I'm not used to taking over someone's garden without their input."

He waved that notion away.

"Nicholas sings your praises. I trust his judgment."

She flipped her ponytail. "He has to sing my praises. He's going to be my brother-in-law in two weeks." Then she sat up in her chair. "You live here. I'd like your input."

Tomas stared at the sandwich on his plate, the scent of buttered bread making

his stomach growl. "If you insist."

"I do. It's how I do business, Mr.

Delacorte."

Interesting. Some bite behind all that bright.

"Tomas," he replied. "Call me

Tomas."

"Well, Tomas, eat your lunch and then we'll get to work."

What a bossy woman.

"It's still raining. Why don't you call it a day?"

"I don't melt in the rain," Callie replied, a sweet shyness seeming to envelop her.

"No, I have no doubt there. I think you thrive in the rain. At least it looked that way to me earlier."

"I didn't know you were watching."

"I didn't know when I looked out the window I'd find you down there dancing in the rain."

She pushed the plate toward him, determination taking over her chirpiness. "Eating will get rid of that bad mood." "Who said I'm in a bad mood?"

"So you're like this all the time?"

Tomas thought about that. "Yes, pretty much."

He was rewarded with what looked like a doubtful but challenging smile. Tomas bit into the thick French bread and tasted the rich white cheddar and the salty ham, the spicy-sweet mustard covered with a ripe tomato from the farmer's market in town. Then he glanced over at Callie. "This is by far the best ham and cheese sandwich I've ever eaten."

She giggled. "You need to get out more."

"That's probably true."

If he had this woman to entice him, Tomas might become less of a recluse and more of a social human being.

But, he reminded himself, he had not come back to Fleur, Louisiana, to fling himself into a relationship. He'd come back here to prove something to all the people who'd once scorned him and condemned him. And prove it he would, without distraction. He dropped the sandwich and pushed the plate away, his appetite gone.

What would the lovely Callie Moreau think when she found out the truth about him? When she found out who he really was?

He didn't want that to happen yet. He could control how much she knew in the same way he controlled everything else in his life.

"Let's get on with this," he said in an abrupt tone. "I have a busy afternoon."

She nodded, shuffled her folded papers and came around the desk. "Here's the grid."

Tomas sniffed the floral scent of her perfume while she expounded on

everything from Japanese maples to cast-iron plants.

And he wondered why he even cared about the garden in the first place.

* * *

"So that's how Alma's gumbo got so famous."

Callie grinned over at Margie and Eunice. She remembered seeing them at church when they'd come for the first time a few weeks ago, so she felt at ease with them. After lunch, Himself had gone off to take another important call, but the rain kept falling so she was now back in the kitchen. Would she ever get to dig in that garden? "So what's it like to work for such a scary person?" she asked, killing time with small talk.

"We like him," Margie said. She shot a covert glance to the other end of the big house. "He pays well."

"Okay, that's good. He's generous then?"

"Very," Eunice chimed in. "But we've known Tomas for a long time now. That's why we came to work here. He only asks that we keep things straight and clean. He doesn't mind us taking breaks. And he told us we could take off anytime we had doctor's appointments or things like that." She shrugged. "We hardly know he's around." "Good." Callie twirled her hair, remembering her time with Tomas in his office. The man couldn't wait to get rid of her. "So you're telling me that Mr. Delacorte isn't really that scary?"

Both women went very quiet. Callie wondered if they hadn't heard her. "So?"

"Boo."

She turned to find Tomas standing in the doorway to the kitchen. He'd managed to sneak up on her yet again and while she was talking about him, yet again. When had he managed to walk the whole house without her hearing?

"Oh, hi." She sat still while Margie and Eunice jumped up and pretended to be doing busy stuff. "Is that rain still out there?" And when would she learn to keep her mouth shut?

"Did I scare you?" he asked, ignoring the rain question.

"No. I mean, yes." It was time for her to go home.

He gave her the glint look. "Voices tend to echo through this house."

"I'll keep that in mind."

After the other women beat a hasty exit, he leaned against the counter. "Do I...scare you?"

Callie couldn't fudge the truth. She was known for her sugar-coated bluntness, after all. "Yes, you do. You're different." "In what way?" In a tingling, strange way that messes with my head.

She lifted her hand, indicating their surroundings, and thought of the first excuse that came to mind. "This house didn't come cheap."

Fleur House was a true treasure with its many porches and porticos, the arched windows and terraces and that garden, lush with possibilities. This man had bought it, commissioned Nick Santiago to renovate it and had managed to put a big intricate iron fence around it to keep everyone out.

But all of that added up to a lot of money.

"No, but how does that make me

different?"

"Have you really taken a look at this town? We're hurting. Between storms, oil spills and a bad economy, we're barely hanging on. But you-you seem to have it all together. You get to live in a beautiful, historic home. You obviously have money since you poured a lot into renovating this place. And you're paying me a hefty fee to spruce up the property. So yes, you're different. You don't have to worry about where your next paycheck will come from."

He leaned close to her, his gaze heating her skin. "I am different, but not in the way you think."

Callie took a breath and dug right in. "You want to explain that?"

"No," he said. Then he glanced out the row of kitchen windows. "Oh, look, the rain's stopped."

Callie knew a dismissal when she heard one.

"My cue to leave," she said. Grabbing her tote and her pride, she turned at the back door. "I'll be back tomorrow. Hopefully, the ground will be dry by then. I'll try to stay out of your way."

"I'd appreciate that—you coming back to finish the job *and* you staying out of my way." He nodded, glinted and then turned and walked out of the room.

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ISBN-13: 9781460324592

HER UNEXPECTED COWBOY

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His Ideal Match Arlene James



Taming The Wanderer's Heart

Carissa Hopper's always been strong and self-sufficient. So when the single mom of three finds herself in need, accepting help from the rugged and adventurous Phillip Chatam isn't easy. She knows he's the kind of man she should stay far away from. Still, when his aunts offer her lodging at Chatam House, where Phillip also resides, Carissa can't refuse. Always on the move, Phillip has no interest in settling down. But as he gets to know Carissa's adorable children—and falls for their mother—he realizes that his biggest

adventure will be convincing Carissa to let him be a part of her future.

Chatam House: Where three matchmaking aunts bring faith and love to life.

"Thanks for your help."

"No problem. They were so tired."

"They had a wonderful day, and so did I."

"I'm glad."

Phillip smiled down at her, and Carissa stepped closer. She couldn't help herself. A warm feeling washed over her, and she felt certain that he would kiss her. His copper gaze skimmed her face. Her breath caught in anticipation. But then he turned the doorknob. "If, um, you should change your mind about attending church with the aunties and me on Sunday..."

Disappointment dealt her a crushing blow, but she managed to keep her composure. "I've already told Uncle Chester and Aunt Hilda we'll be going with them."

- "All right, then."
- "About Saturday night, though ... "

"Oh, with my parents here and everything... I'll try, though. Well, good night." "Good night."

He slipped out, closing the door behind him. Carissa tried very hard not to cry. She kept telling herself it was for the best. He wasn't the man for her. No good could come from putting herself in Phillip Chatam's way. But she didn't have to be happy about it, did she?

Books by Arlene James

Love Inspired

*The Perfect Wedding *An Old-Fashioned Love *A Wife Worth Waiting For *With Baby in Mind The Heart's Voice To Heal a Heart Deck the Halls A Family to Share Butterfly Summer A Love So Strong When Love Comes Home A Mommy in Mind **His Small-Town Girl **Her Small-Town Hero

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*Everyday Miracles **Eden, OK †Chatam House

ARLENE JAMES

says, "Camp meetings, mission work and church attendance permeate my Oklahoma childhood memories. It was a golden time, which sustains me yet. However, only as a young widowed mother did I truly begin growing in my personal relationship with the Lord. Through adversity He has blessed me in countless ways, one of which is a second marriage so loving and romantic it still feels like courtship!"

After thirty-three years in Texas, Arlene James now resides in Bella Vista, Arkansas, with her beloved husband. Even after seventy-five novels, her need to write is greater than ever, a fact that frankly amazes her, as she's been at it since the eighth grade. She loves to hear from readers, and can be reached via her website, <u>www.arlenejames.com</u>.

His Ideal Match

Arlene James



Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up.

-Ecclesiastes 4:9-10

For Joseph, who has given this mom plenty of gray hair but much, much delight.

Pride is a sin to which my sons continually tempt me.



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Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

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Chapter Ten

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Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Epilogue

Dear Reader

Questions for Discussion

Excerpt

Chapter One

The wrought iron gate stood ajar, so Phillip Chatam slipped into the leafy courtyard of the Downtown Bible Church of Buffalo Creek, Texas. Here, landscape lighting held back the gathering gloom of this first Thursday evening of June. Behind him rose the sanctuary in all its stylized Spanish glory. Ahead of him, a walkway wound through the trees and flower beds. It was a peaceful place, but had he not promised his aunts-the renowned seventy-five-year-old triplets of Chatam House-that he would attend tonight's

grief support meeting, he would not be here.

When his aunts had politely but firmly insisted that he attend this meeting, he could have told them that they were mistaken in their assumption that grief and fear had driven him away from his occupation of the past several years and into this state of ennui, where he had languished for the past five weeks. Of course, he grieved the deaths of his friends and coworkers in a fall from the mountain in Washington State where he had worked for some time. He had functioned in a daze for at least six weeks after the accident.

The company he'd worked for had brought in professional counselors, and

Phillip, like the other guides and outfitters, had attended his obligatory three sessions. Like the others, he had experienced moments of fear and discomfort on his next climb, and truth be told, he had secretly welcomed such emotions. Guiding tourists on mountain climbs had become old hat. Fear had at least added an element of excitement to the process. The apprehension had rapidly dissipated, however, and he had known then that it was time to move on. But to what?

For eight months he had gone through the motions. The whole time, he'd been looking for the next challenge, the next adventure. In the past, something had always cropped up. This time, though, he hadn't been able to wait on it. This time, he'd started to worry that his lack of enthusiasm for the work was going to get someone else hurt. He'd walked away in the middle of the season, just packed up his stuff and left Seattle for Texas. He'd spent the past five weeks at Chatam House, the antebellum mansion where his aunties had lived their entire lives and the lodestone of the large, far-flung Chatam family.

During that time, his parents had harassed him almost daily about finding a "real" job, and his aunts had worried that he was ignoring his grief. The least he could do, given that the aunties had opened their home to him, was assuage their concern by schlepping downtown to a meeting of the DBC Grief Support Group.

He followed the signs along a hallway and down a flight of stairs to the meeting room in the basement. Soft instrumental music and muted light greeted him as he passed through the open doorway. A pair of older women smiled at him from the counter laden with cookies, coffee and water. His gaze swept the softly lit room, taking in the other occupants. Most were older than him. A boy and girl in their late teens or early twenties appeared to be siblings. Hub, Phillip's elderly uncle and a retired minister, swooped in with arms spread wide in

welcome.

"Phillip! So good to see you." Reaching up to slide an arm across Phillip's shoulders, Hub turned to address the milling group. "My nephew Phillip Chatam is joining us tonight. He's come home to Texas from Seattle."

Most people nodded and offered taut smiles, but the two women at the refreshment table beamed as they carried over napkin-wrapped cookies and a disposable cup of coffee strong enough to anchor a grappling hook. Phillip accepted both with self-conscious nods before dropping down onto the nearest folding chair. About a dozen of them had been arranged in a horseshoe shape. The other attendees quietly took up seats,

leaving several empty, including the one on the end to Phillip's left.

"Let us begin with silent prayer," said Hub.

Everyone hushed. Several moments ticked by while Phillip tried to think of a prayer, finally coming up with, *God, be with the families of those who died.*

It was the same prayer he'd prayed on the day of the accident. He didn't figure it would do much good. It seemed to Phillip that God was too busy to pay attention to him, but it couldn't hurt to send up a prayer now and again.

Someone slipped into the empty chair on Phillip's left, derailing his train of thought and sharpening his senses. Before he could stop himself, he turned his head, just enough so that he could see a portion of a feminine form from the corner of his eye.

A pair of worn but clean white canvas sneakers came into view, followed by the frayed hems of slender faded jeans. A pair of delicate, feminine hands rested in casual but prayerful repose atop one jeaned knee, but that was as much as Phillip could see.

Several long minutes later, Hub said, "Amen."

"We have another newcomer," Hub announced, engaging the latest arrival with a welcoming nod. He reached out a gnarled hand for a gentle shake. "I'm Pastor Hub." He went around the room, naming everyone in order. "This is Phillip, Mr. Edgar, the Lallys, Margaret, Sandra, Miss Clara and Bernice."

Turning to the woman at his side, Phillip smiled and tried not to stare. She was beautiful, in a wide-eyed, elegant way that belied the casual twist of her golden-brown hair and slightly shabby clothing. Without a speck of cosmetics, she took his breath away.

Phillip suddenly wished he had shaved. His brown hair was so dark it was almost black, and the hair on his face gave him a constant five-o'clock shadow, always appearing between shaves. In fact, within three weeks' time, he could have a beard heavy enough to obliterate the cleft chin that marked every adult Chatam and the dimples that his mother so adored.

He unconsciously fingered the deep cleft in his chin now as he took in the generous smattering of freckles across his new neighbor's tiny nose and high cheekbones. Wide, naturally rosy lips revealed neat, white teeth without guite smiling, and tawny hair wisped about an oval face with a delicately pointed chin. She had unusual eyes of a deep velvet blue, thickly fringed in dark gold lashes. She looked young, early to mid-twenties, but wore a maturity that made her seem older. He couldn't take his eyes off her.

She introduced herself to the group in a husky, whispery voice. "I'm Carissa

Hopper."

Phillip shifted in his chair. Feeling like a teen boy with an unexpected crush, he concentrated on his hands. Rough and hard, they were no longer the slenderfingered hands that his mother had once declared those of a pianist or surgeon. He concentrated on a tiny jagged scar on the side of one knuckle where a crampon had sliced his glove as the climber above him had struggled to find his footing.

Shaking himself, he sat up straighter and listened as Hub instructed everyone to tell why they were there. When Phillip's turn came, he cleared his throat and muttered, "Two of my friends and a client were in a rock-climbing accident over eight months ago. They fell when a cliff face suddenly gave way."

The woman beside him displayed no such hesitancy to speak, declaring forthrightly, "My husband was killed almost four years ago when a truck he was working beneath fell on him. I'm here now, frankly, just to please certain family members." She went on to explain, "Times are tough right now. They're worried about me."

Phillip spoke out of the corner of his mouth. "Same deal with me. Here to please family."

If Carissa Hopper thought that this gave them more in common than the others present, she gave no sign of it. Hub began to speak about how tough times could affect grief by exaggerating or covering over it. Those who were regulars to the group offered up personal stories illustrating the point in one way or another. Phillip barely heard them. He was too busy planning how to get to know Carissa Hopper better.

Hub closed the meeting with a few well-chosen words on overcoming grief. "Don't wait for others to minister to you. Do something for someone else," he said.

That made sense to Phillip, but it didn't apply to him. He wasn't sad, just uncertain what to do next. Surely he'd come up with something before his money ran out. A decent accountant, he knew how to make his bucks last, which was why he was currently enjoying the haven of Chatam House. And attending grief support meetings to appease his aunties.

As the session broke up, he rose to follow the lovely Carissa from the room, rehearsing conversational icebreakers in his head.

Before he could catch up to her, however, his uncle laid claim to him. "Phillip, can you help with these

chairs?"

Glancing at the folding chairs being loaded onto a long, rolling rack, Phillip frowned inwardly. "In a minute, Uncle Hub. Be right back." He dashed from the room, only to find the hall empty. Racing up the stairs, he tore through the building, sure he would catch her before she reached the courtyard, but she must have gone another way, for when he pushed through the door, he found himself alone on the softly lit path.

Disappointed, he heaved a sigh. Well, maybe next week.

Lord, he thought, if You're listening, if it matters, I'd like to see that woman again. Please.

In fact, he'd attend more grief support meetings on the chance that he'd see her again. "But I don't want to stay here," nineyear-old Nathan grumbled, glaring at his mother through his wire-rimmed glasses. They were too small for his face, reminding Carissa that he needed to have his eyes reexamined. All the more reason for this visit. She just had to have some uninterrupted work time. Otherwise, she was going to lose her job.

Selling technical service over the phone from home wasn't the perfect job. For one thing, it didn't pay particularly well. For another, when home was a two-bedroom apartment shared by two adults and three children, chaos was the norm, and that made it difficult for her to meet her monthly quota. On the other hand, working from home meant that she didn't have to pay for child care. Still, no quota, no job-which was why she had finally accepted her aunt's offer to babysit. She just hoped that her mother didn't get wind of it. The last thing she needed was for Alexandra to show up, offering her limited, strings-attached services

Carissa looked at the stately building. Chatam House, where her uncle Chester and aunt Hilda lived and worked, was a mansion. Old and elegant, it was fronted by a deep, cool porch supported by majestic white columns, with redbrick walkways and steps. Well, she had no time to moon over tall windows, many rooms and dark, loamy beds bursting with flowers.

"I have to work today, Nathan, and Grandpa's doctor says he needs some peace and quiet so he can rest. You'll have fun with Uncle Chester and Aunt Hilda today."

Holding each of the younger children, Tucker and Grace, by the hand, Carissa led the way around the house. She'd been told to park in front to keep from blocking the carport, or porte cochere, as Chester called it. They stepped off the walkway and into gravel, trudging along beside the mansion and past a bronze Subaru Outback to the side door. While she knocked on the bright yellow door

with the old-fashioned fan-shaped window above it, the kids crowded onto the porch behind her, bumping against big terra-cotta pots spilling over with flowers.

"Hang on!" called a muffled voice after a moment. "I'm coming."

Carissa backed up as far as she could and folded her arms to hide the empty hole in her simple white blouse where the button was missing. The door opened, and a tall man stepped up to the threshold. Make that a *very* tall man.

A smile in place, she spoke as she tilted her head back. "Hello. I'm—"

"Carissa Hopper," he supplied, grinning.

At the same time, she exclaimed,

"Phillip?"

They both followed with "What are you doing here?"

He chuckled. "I live here." While she blinked at that, he thrust his hand forward. "It's Phillip *Chatam*, by the way."

She shook hands with him,

remembering only at the last instant to leave one arm folded across her middle. "I—I didn't realize."

He held her hand in his big, hard one. "You came in late to the meeting last night. I guess Hub didn't say my last name when he introduced us." Pulling free, she grasped her elbows, hiding the empty hole in her blouse and separating herself from Phillip's warmth. "What can I do for you?" he asked, rocking back on his heels.

"My aunt offered to watch my kids today."

"Your aunt?"

"Hilda Worth. Chester Worth is my father's brother."

Phillip Chatam's eyebrows jumped halfway up his forehead. "Chester and Hilda are your family? So, *they're* the ones who sent you to the—"

"Yes," she interrupted. She didn't want the kids to know where she'd been. *Grief* was a word they'd heard too often in their young lives.

"I see. Knowing them, I'm sure they've cleared this with my aunts." "Yes, um, assuming your aunts are the Chatam sisters."

"Yup. And Pastor Hub is my uncle." "Well, that explains a lot."

He flashed a stunning smile. "I'm sure it does." Dropping his gaze, he asked, "And who do we have here?"

Stepping back, she pushed the children forward. "This is Nathan," she said, dragging him in front of her. "He's nine." He shrugged and wiggled out of her grasp. She then placed both hands atop his brother's slender shoulders. "Tucker. He's seven. And last but not least..." Reaching down with one hand, she cupped her daughter's cheek as the

girl's head pressed against her leg.

"This is Grace, who's four."

Phillip gave the children a smile and lifted his gaze to Carissa once more.

Typical, she thought sourly. No man had any interest in another man's children, as she had learned the hard way.

"Well, come in. Hilda's in the kitchen."

Cautiously, Carissa followed him, sweeping the children along in front of her so that they formed a buffer between her and this too-attractive Chatam. She'd long ago decided to keep her distance from such men. Several times since her husband Tom's death, she'd let herself be drawn to men with the same rough masculine appeal as her late husband, only to find herself unceremoniously

dumped as soon as they realized that she wasn't going to settle for anything short of marriage. She'd finally learned her lesson when the last guy had informed her that a man might marry a woman with one kid or even two, but never three. That very day, she had resigned herself to the realities of widowhood and resolved to keep temptation at a safe distance.

If she hadn't been running late, she would never have taken the chair next to Phillip. Only as the brief introductions had been made had she realized her mistake. Those copper eyes, set deeply into a lean, bronzed face heavily shadowed with a dark beard and carved with dimples and a cleft chin, had taken her breath away. Hair the color of coffee and a nose that showed signs of having been broken at some point added the very type of ruggedness that appealed to her. Combined with his long-limbed height-at least three or four inches over six feet—and broad shoulders, he was definitely one of the best-looking men she'd ever met. She'd decided right then to forget all about grief support, no matter what her family said—only to find herself face-to-face with the man this morning.

He led them down the hallway to a swinging door, which he pushed wide, calling out, "Hilda, you have company." A clatter of metal heralded her aunt's appearance in the doorway. Swathed in a damp apron over a voluminous dress made of some small, gray-brown print almost the exact color as her thin, straight, ear-length hair, Hilda exuded the aromas of a bakery.

She reached over the children to envelop Carissa in her hefty arms. Stooping, she did the same with the children, all three at once. "I've set up the sunroom for the kids. But first, how was the meeting last night?"

Phillip Chatam shifted beside Carissa. She felt his interest, and that made this discussion all the more difficult. Managing a tiny smile, she recalled the words that she had prepared earlier in anticipation of this moment.

"You're right, Aunt Hilda. Pastor Hub is a very wise man. I especially liked what he had to say about helping others."

"As a way of getting our minds off our own sorrows," Phillip supplied.

Hilda's narrow gaze sharpened. "You were there, too, Phillip?"

"Yes. The aunties thought I would benefit."

"Seems we were both there at the urging of family," Carissa said drily. "I know it's going to help," Hilda exclaimed, throwing out her arms. Hooking one mighty appendage about each of their necks, she gave both a squeeze. Carissa winced as her head knocked against Phillip's. The wretch chuckled. "Hilda, you're priceless."

The good-natured cook chortled then let them go.

Carissa looked away—and caught her eldest son's disapproving frown. She couldn't think of anything that Nathan did approve of these days, but she couldn't really blame him. Since they'd lost the house, they'd had to move into her poor father's tiny two-bedroom apartment. There was no space for a growing boy to take a deep breath, let alone play. Her father's illness didn't help, either, though he never complained about the noise or chaos. Nathan, more than the other children, understood what his

grandfather's illness meant. It was no wonder he wasn't happy.

She thought of her aunt's and uncle's urgings to get the children into church again and wondered if that would help. They'd gradually fallen away after Tom's death. She had struggled to get an infant and two rambunctious little boys dressed in their Sunday best and out the door week after week on her own, but what was her excuse now that the children were nine, seven and four?

A clock chimed somewhere, bringing Carissa out of her thoughts.

"I need to get to work. Let me help you settle the children."

"This way. This way," Hilda urged, waddling off down the hall. She began detailing the preparations she'd made: coloring books and crayons, games, puzzles, toys. She even had a box of dress-up clothes gleaned from "Miss Odelia's big closet upstairs." Little Grace beamed with delight.

Carissa marched the children into the room, hugged each one and thanked Phillip Chatam for his assistance. Ready to focus on what lay before her, she began to mentally plan her workday as she started back down the long hallway. She just needed one good day without distractions to ensure her job for another month. She knew her stuff; she could sell enough tech support to see her family through the immediate crisis. One good

day on the telephone without three children bouncing off the walls of a toosmall apartment—that was all she asked.

Thanking God for an aunt and uncle willing to help out, she tried not to worry. Hilda could manage three small children, and it was a very large house. Surely they would be all right for one day. With a man like Phillip Chatam around, she dared not risk more, and the same went for grief support meetings.

She didn't need those meetings anyway. Tom had been gone for four years now; emotionally, she'd come to terms with his loss long ago. Aunt Hilda and Uncle Chester were trying to help her prepare for what was to come, of course, but Carissa didn't believe in borrowing trouble. After all, didn't the Bible say not to worry about tomorrow? Each day, according to Matthew, had enough trouble of its own. She could certainly vouch for that. It seemed to her that it was time for things to go right for a change, if only for one day.

Just one day ...

Chapter Two

Tiny Grace Hopper possessed a miniature version of her mother's face, framed by board-straight, light red hair cut raggedly just below her ears. That and her mother's rich blue eyes made for an adorable combination. Phillip couldn't help being entranced, just as he couldn't help being dismayed that Carissa Hopper was the mother of three kids

Children had never figured into Phillip's life. He didn't have anything against them, he just didn't feel any particular need to have them. Plus he knew less than zilch about them, even though his mother was a well-respected pediatrician. Still, he knew cute when he saw it, and Grace Hopper was cute with a capital *C*. He laughed when, upon spying a small basket, Grace hopped up and down, clapped her dainty hands and squealed, "Muffins!"

Her brother, the one *without* the glasses, ran across the room and tore into the ginger muffins with all the finesse of a starving hooligan. Before Hilda could stop him, the older boy did. "Stop it, Tucker! That's rude." "Ginger muffins. Mmm..." Tucker argued, his mouth full of the same. Phillip watched as Hilda quickly parceled out the muffins then shook his

head as she trundled toward him.

"You," he teased, "are a woman of mystery. I know you have a son and daughter and grandchildren, but no one ever said anything about nieces."

The fiftysomething cook waved a hand. "Silly man. Chester's brother Marshall has two girls. Carissa is the oldest." Hilda sobered then, quietly confiding, "No one has a clue where the youngest, Lyla, is. Crying shame. Marshall isn't well. *Lung cancer*," she whispered.

"Sorry to hear that," Phillip murmured.

"I'm going to tell!" The pounding of small feet accompanied the threat. First one small head then another dashed past Phillip and out the door.

"Tucker! Nathan!" Hilda scolded. "You come back here."

Phillip stepped out of the way, but before Hilda could squeeze past him, the boys shot through the central corridor and into the back hall. Huffing, Hilda sent Phillip an aggrieved look that he read too well. Wryly, he went after the boys. They had caught Carissa Hopper before she'd even made it out of the house and were arguing loudly about a stolen muffin.

Phillip broke into a jog as Carissa ordered, "Lower your voices. Now." "He stole my muffin!" "You weren't going to eat it!"

Arriving on the scene, Phillip quickly intervened. "There's plenty for everyone. No need to argue."

The older boy whipped around, snarling, "It ain't none of your business."

His mother gasped. "Nathan Alexander Hopper," she rebuked firmly. "You apologize this instant."

Sullenly, the boy dropped his head, but after a moment he muttered, "Sorry."

"I expect you to look after your brother and sister, not misbehave," Carissa went on. "You know I depend on you."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And, Tucker, you mind your

manners," she instructed the younger boy.

"Yes, Mama."

"Go now, both of you."

After some grumbling, the two boys reluctantly started back down the hallway toward the sunroom. Carissa gave Phillip an exasperated look, as if he were somehow to blame, and spun sharply on one heel.

"Now, wait a minute," he began, piqued.

"I'm sorry," she snapped as he fell into step beside her. "It's just that I *have* to work."

"And that," he said, as they reached the door, "makes *me* the bad guy?" "No," she answered drily, drawing out the single syllable even as she reached for the doorknob.

"Great," Phillip said, putting up an arm to block her way. "Then maybe you'll tell me what sort of work do you do."

"Telemarketing," she answered succinctly, folding her arms but refusing to look at him.

Phillip waited. She glanced up and huffed.

"My husband was a software engineer. He taught me everything he knew. He believed that good computer skills would ensure anyone a job. Unfortunately, in a lousy economy, without the diploma to back up those skills, no one will give me the time of day, even if I can write code better than anyone, which is why I sell tech support over the telephone rather than perform it."

"So you're good with computers, then," Phillip said.

She tossed her head, fixing him with a narrow stare. "If by 'good' you mean I can tear down a computer to its most basic elements, fix any problem, put it back together again *and* write the software that operates it, then yes, I'm good with computers." She parked her hands at her hips. "Now, what about you?"

"Oh," he answered cheerfully, "I can turn on a computer, click a mouse, even type, if you're not in a hurry."

One corner of her mouth curled in a reluctant smile. "I mean, what do you do for a living?"

"Ah. Nothing, at the moment. I used to climb mountains, but I am, as they say, between jobs."

"And I am trying *not* to be," she said pointedly.

He dropped his arm, opened the door and stepped out of the way. She swept out onto the redbrick stoop and went quickly down the steps. He had closed the door behind her before it occurred to him that he hadn't seen her vehicle parked beneath the porte cochere. Suspecting that Hilda had told her not to park there for fear of blocking his car, he hurried through the house to the front door, stepping out onto the deep front porch in time to see Carissa Hopper climb into a battered little minivan with a missing rear hubcap and rusty passenger door handle. She drove away without so much as a wave of farewell. He wandered back into the foyer and leaned against the curled banister at the foot of the marble staircase, thinking about what she'd told him. The sound of a distant crash had him breaking into a run as a plaintive cry rose from the vicinity of the sunroom. It would only be the first of many.

Over the next two hours, Nathan and Tucker would manage to knock over a

table, two chairs and a potted plant the size of a grown man. After the first altercation, Phillip decided to pitch in with the kids. Otherwise, he feared that no one would get lunch. Hilda's husband, Chester, his aunts' houseman, had driven Aunt Hypatia—or Auntie H -into town. Kent, Aunt Odelia's husband, had gone down to his pharmacy to help out his young partner, while Odelia-Auntie Od to her adoring nieces and nephews-was taking a "spa day" in their suite, and Aunt Magnoliaaffectionately known as Mags-was puttering around in the flower beds, as usual. If Hilda was going to get into the kitchen, Phillip had no choice but to

watch over the scamps.

The boys kept him so busy that he didn't realize Grace was missing until they did.

What could he do then but take them to look for her?

* * *

Humming to herself, Odelia Chatam Monroe swanned through the lovely mauve-and-cream sitting room of the suite that she shared with Kent, her husband of almost a year, and on into the purple bedroom, where the silk bed hangings, drapes and spread provided an appropriately romantic theme. They'd waited fifty years to marry, and they meant to enjoy every moment left to them. Pausing beside the antique Queen Anne dresser, she twitched a few gladiolus blossoms in a tall crystal vase into perfect position, before continuing into the enormous fuchsia-and-yellow bathroom to remove the cold cream from her face. After tossing aside the cucumber slices that she'd placed over her eyes, she next applied a judicious layer of makeup on her face. Finally, she removed the curlers from her thick, white hair and combed it out.

True, she was no girl, but Kent thought her beautiful. How she adored him. She took a moment to thank God for blessing her with such a husband in the twilight of her long, happy life before venturing into her closet, her favorite room in the whole house.

She noticed that she'd accidentally left the light on, but the crystal chandelier gave her such pleasure that she didn't dwell on it. Of the many material gifts that Kent had given her this gorgeous suite, the ostentatious ring on her finger, the pool in the backyard, to name a few-the closet was her favorite, for he'd had the walls painted in color-coded stripes so that her eclectic wardrobe could be stored in a somewhat orderly fashion. She did so love clothes. Giggling, she wondered what she ought to wear for lunch. Wouldn't a gladiolus theme be fun?

An answering giggle surprised her. Odelia considered the possibility of an echo, but common sense—oh, yes, she did have some, no matter what others might say—told her that could not be so. For one thing, the racks were stuffed with clothing. For another, the room simply wasn't large enough. That meant she must not be alone.

Looking around, she said brightly, "Hello?"

To her surprise, a little head wreathed in the aqua chiffon of one of her favorite skirts popped out from a row of dresses. "Hello."

For a long moment, Odelia could do nothing but stare. The little one clomped

into view, wearing a pale green knit short set, as well as a pair of Odelia's pumps over her own canvas shoes and anklets. At second glance, she also wore other bits and pieces of Odelia's wardrobe, including a gold belt worn sash-style over one shoulder and a feathered boa.

"You got snappers on your ears," the little one said.

"Snappers?"

"Turdles. Snappers turdles."

Odelia touched her earlobes, feeling her earrings. They had seemed appropriate after her gardening-mad sister had complained at breakfast that a box turtle had been snacking on her rhododendrons. "You mean, snapping turtles, I think." She had forgotten about them.

"Yep. You got 'em on your ears."

"So I do, and you have on my things." Odelia recognized a scarf and a pair of old gloves that she'd given Hilda earlier. Puzzle pieces tumbled into place. "Ah. You're Hilda's great-niece."

The girl nodded. "We're playing dress-up."

Odelia smiled, recognizing a kindred spirit. "What's your name, child?"

"Grace."

"Grace is not a full name," Odelia admonished gently. "For instance, I am Odelia Mae Chatam Monroe."

Frowning, she pressed a finger against

the cleft in her chin. "Or should that be Mrs. Kent Monroe? Mrs. Odelia Monroe?" Hypatia would know. Odelia waved a hand. "You may call me Miss Odelia. Now then, your name? Your full name, if you please."

"Grace Amanda Hopper," the imp said, wobbling in the shoes.

"So, you like to play dress-up, do you, Grace Amanda?"

"Best of anything."

Odelia grinned and clapped her hands. "So do I!"

Just then, a frantic male voice cried out, "Grace! Grace, where are you?" "In here," Odelia trilled.

Phillip arrived, breathless, one boy in hand and another trailing behind with a

scowl on his bespectacled face.

"Thank You, God!" Phillip gasped, rolling his eyes to the ceiling. Slumping against the doorjamb, he huffed out a breath and sucked in another before fixing Grace with a baleful glare.

"Young lady, you scared the life out of me."

"I'm sorry," Grace said contritely, going to take his free hand in hers.

Odelia watched all six foot four inches of her nephew melt like so much marshmallow over a campfire. Interesting.

"Just don't take off like that again," he scolded before looking to Odelia. "I'm sorry. She got away from us." "You are so in for it," chortled the freckle-faced, gap-toothed boy being physically restrained by Phillip.

"No, she is not," Odelia decreed, smiling down at her little guest, "but perhaps next time, she will seek permission before she goes exploring."

"Yes, ma'am," coached the older boy with glasses. Reaching around Phillip, he poked the girl.

"Yes, ma'am," little Grace echoed dutifully.

"Very well," Odelia said, waving them all out. "We'll make formal introductions at luncheon."

As Phillip towed the children away, he said, "I'm not sure what Hilda has planned for lunch."

"Whatever it is," Odelia told him brightly, following their ragtag little group into the sitting room, "I'm sure it will be lovely."

After a season of weddings, they had experienced a tranquil period at Chatam House. First had come the marriage of Phillip's older brother, Asher, and Kent's granddaughter Ellie, whose newborn daughter the family had recently welcomed. Chatam House's gardener, Garrett Willows, and his Jessa had married almost immediately afterward, with Odelia and Kent's wedding following just one month later. Shortly after that, Phillip's oldest sister, Petra, had married Garrett's friend Dale

Bowen.

Two other nephews, Reeves and Chandler, and a niece, Kaylie, had met their spouses here at Chatam House. It had been months since the house had hosted company, however. Then Phillip had arrived, for no apparent reason, and here he remained, much to the disgust of his parents and the concern of his aunts. The boy just did not seem to want to work. Oh, he wasn't lazy; he just had no direction. He seemed to be waiting for some sort of inspiration to strike-or for some grand adventure to present itself.

Hypatia was of the opinion that they had been more than patient with him. Certainly she and her sisters had been praying for him. Watching him now, Odelia couldn't help wondering what God had in store for Phillip. One thing she knew without doubt was that God always had a plan for His children. She suspected that Phillip was about to find that out.

* * *

When Carissa Hopper did not return as expected that evening, Phillip was ready to climb the walls. He had scaled mountains less challenging than dealing with three kids! While little Grace beguiled everyone into getting her way, Tucker treated the mansion like his personal playground, haring off without warning. Nathan, meanwhile, remained solemn, suspicious and openly hostile, especially toward Phillip. It shouldn't have mattered, but it bothered Phillip. People usually liked him. Then again, he didn't have much experience with children. In fact, if anyone had told him that he'd have to work so hard to keep three youngsters from tearing the house down, he'd have scoffed. How Carissa Hopper had somehow managed to shelter, feed, clothe and survive this trio all alone for years was a mystery to him.

Hilda and Chester insisted that it wasn't like Carissa to lose track of time or forget to call, but their phone calls to her went unanswered. Someone— Hypatia probably—alerted Phillip's baby sister, Dallas. She showed up with her short, curly, carrot-red hair held back by a wide headband. She looked a little thin to him but oddly serene. A second-grade teacher, Dallas waded right in, taking control of the children and leaving Phillip free to enjoy his dinner. When Chester came into the dining room immediately after the meal, everyone knew that something was wrong. Dressed as always in a white shirt, black tie, black slacks and black lace-up shoes, Chester looked worried, a hand smoothing over his nearly bald head

"Carissa has been at the emergency room with her father. Now they're back home. I'm going to take some food over to them and try to convince Carissa to let the children stay here for the night."

He and Hilda lived with Hilda's sister, Carol, the aunties' maid, in the converted carriage house behind the mansion. Grace, Chester explained, could bunk with Carol for the night, leaving the small attic room, once occupied by the gardener, for the boys to share.

"Phillip can drive you over to your brother's," Odelia suggested to Chester. "I think you're too worried to go alone." "Be glad to," Phillip said, rising from the table.

Chester didn't argue and merely nodded his head, an indication of just

how worried he was.

They left a few minutes later and drove across town to an older apartment complex that had seen better days. Chester led the way to a ground-floor apartment that opened onto a depressingly bare inner courtyard. It never occurred to Phillip that he might have waited in the car until Carissa opened the door. The dismay on her face when she saw Phillip standing behind Chester left no doubt as to her thoughts on his presence there.

"Come inside," she said unenthusiastically.

The tiny vestibule opened on one side into a narrow living room and on the

other into a dining room, with space large enough for only a small table and two chairs. Both rooms were strewn with toys and packed with boxes and wobbly furniture. The place seemed barely large enough for two people in Phillip's estimation, let alone five.

"How is Marshall?" Chester asked, handing over the bag filled with containers of Hilda's food.

"They wanted to keep him in the hospital," Carissa said, "but he wouldn't have it."

"All I needed was a breathing treatment," grated a raspy voice. Phillip saw a wheelchair roll into view from the dining area.

"Dad, you should be in bed."

Marshall braced his skeletal elbows on the arms of his old manual wheelchair and shook his head, wheezing with effort. "And you should be in a nice three-bedroom brick house in Dallas, but here we both are in this two-bedroom dump. Introduce me to this

young man."

Carissa sighed and beckoned Phillip forward. "This is Phillip Chatam. Phillip, my father, Marshall Worth."

Phillip reached out a large, strong hand. "A pleasure to meet you, sir."

Marshall's thin, veined hand trembled. "You must be a nephew of those sisters, the triplets, that my brother works for." "Yes, sir, I am. One of many."

Marshall waved a hand at his daughter, saying, "Sugar, put that food in the kitchen. Chester, take a load off." He pointed to a dining chair. Niece and uncle traded looks and did as instructed.

"Phillip, I'm dying," Marshall Worth said bluntly, "and this cancer's taken everything I ever had. I'll have nothing but rags and sticks to leave my daughter and grandchildren."

"Daddy," Carissa said, zipping back into the room, "that's not important."

"Chester and Hilda will do everything they can," Marshall went on, as if she hadn't even spoken, "and Carissa's a hard worker, but she barely makes enough to feed them all."

"Daddy, don't worry," Carissa pleaded.

"I can't die without knowing you'll have help," he told her tiredly.

"Daddy!"

"Don't concern yourself, sir," Phillip interjected, leaning down to place a hand on the man's rail-thin shoulder. "She won't be alone or without help. You have my word as a Chatam."

Tears filled Marshall Worth's rheumy eyes, and he nodded with relief.

"Chatams are good people, so if you say it, I believe it," he rasped.

"Believe it, sir. Your daughter and grandchildren will be fine." He smiled. "I'm told that Carissa has strong computer skills, after all."

"That she does," Marshall agreed with a chuckle. "Not much business sense, though."

"Dad!"

"But she's a good mother and a fine daughter," he added, "and she's not hard on the eyes, either."

"You slight her, sir," Phillip said, just to rankle her. "She's a rare beauty."

Her back stiffened, then she relaxed again and swept through the narrow kitchen to the other bedroom. There couldn't be another in the apartment, which meant that she probably shared it with all three of her children. Phillip realized just how blessed he was to have Chatam House as a haven in his time of trouble.

"I'm tired, brother," Marshall said, sounding it. "Help me to bed."

Chester rose and took his brother's chair by the handles, saying, "Afterward, we'll have a word of prayer together. Then I want you to eat."

"I'd like that," Marshall told him, seeming to shrink before Phillip's eyes. "Prayer and Hilda's good food. Nothing I'd like better. Goodbye, young man." Not good-night but goodbye.

"Goodbye, sir."

Phillip stood awkwardly for a moment before Carissa came back through the kitchen. "Walk me to my car?" She didn't want to. He knew it by the way she hesitated, but she couldn't find a graceful way to decline. "All right."

As they strolled along the inner courtyard, Phillip couldn't help noting the buckling concrete of the sidewalk, the overgrown shrubbery, the disintegrating fence around the trash Dumpster and the flaking paint on the metal stairs at the corner of the building. There he paused and turned to face her, his hands tucked into his pockets.

"My aunts want to keep the children at Chatam House tonight. They can stay in the carriage house with Chester, Hilda and Carol. When your father is better tomorrow, you can pick them up and bring them home."

Carissa took a deep breath. "Well," she said, "that might work, except for one thing."

"What's that?"

"My father's not going to be better," she said softly.

Phillip couldn't resist the urge to slide an arm across her shoulders. "I'm sorry," he said.

She slowly slipped out from beneath his embrace, saying, "I'd better go pack a bag for the kids."

He was surprised that she'd given in so easily and wondered if she had done so just because she was anxious to get away from him. The thought pinched in a way he hadn't expected, but he reminded himself that her father was gravely ill. And that he had given his word to a dying man.

He would keep his word. Whether Carissa Hopper liked it or not.

But obviously, Carissa Hopper was not the woman for him. Or rather, he was not the man for her.

She needed a solid, serious,

responsible man, the kind his parents had always wanted him to be. But that wasn't him, had never been Phillip Chatam. And never would be.

Chapter Three

Marshall Worth lapsed into a coma during the night and was transported to the hospital the next day. The children remained at Chatam House, but with Chester staying close by them, waiting for news. Phillip tried to make good on his promise to Mr. Worth and consulted his older brother, Asher, an attorney, on Carissa's behalf. Asher promised to look into the possibility of government assistance for her and her children, then he invited Phillip-and his résumé-to lunch.

Phillip dutifully went along, though he

knew what was coming. Sure enough, his brother had asked a friend with a local accounting firm if he had any openings. It made sense, after all. Phillip was good with numbers. He was good with bookkeeping. He was even good with money. It was the whole idea of being an accountant, someone else's bean counter, in a nine-to-five job that made Phillip's skin crawl. Before Asher could suggest that Phillip apply for a position, Phillip changed the subject to an article that he'd read while he'd sat in Asher's office, waiting for Asher to finish a phone call.

The article had mentioned a new smartphone app that allowed its purchasers to "test drive" possible

employment fields. According to the article, a new field of reality apps allowed people to follow a day in the life of a number of professions, be it a baker, a truck driver, a plumber or a diesel mechanic. The purchase price seemed steep to Phillip, but he supposed it was worth it if it prevented a person from spending the time and money to educate him or herself for a career he or she ultimately didn't like.

Asher listened then unceremoniously informed him that Carissa made just enough money to make her ineligible for government assistance because she did not pay rent. If she could come up with the funds to get into an apartment of her own, then she could qualify for government assistance.

Phillip headed home to discuss the situation with Hilda and Chester, only to find the entire household in the front parlor with Carissa and her kids, all of whom openly wept. Tucker stood at his mother's side, literally howling.

"What's happened?" Phillip asked, already knowing.

Little Grace hopped down off her mother's lap and ran toward him. Phillip instinctively reached down to take her up into his arms. She buried her damp face in the crook of his neck and sobbed. Tucker draped himself around his mother's neck and continued bawling, while Nathan stood stoically, tears rolling unimpeded from beneath the lenses of his glasses.

Hypatia turned a sad face to him from her usual armchair, a teacup in her hand. As always, she could have stood in for the Queen of England, her silver hair styled into a sleek roll against the back of her head, her ubiquitous pearls worn with a tailored silk suit. "Marshall Worth has slipped from this world into Paradise," she announced softly.

"Perfectly healed," Kent added in a gentle voice, his arm about Odelia on the settee.

"A brand-new body," Odelia whispered, encased in a cloud of blue chiffon. "Without pain," Magnolia offered, patting Nathan's shoulder. She had come in without removing the yellow galoshes that she always wore when working in the gardens.

"That's what we have to remember now," Chester said in a tear-clogged voice, putting away a handkerchief. "That's our consolation," Hilda

agreed. She mopped her face with her apron, sniffed and all but wailed, "I should start dinner!" before trundling from the room. Carol followed.

Chester shook his head then said, "She isn't thinking clearly," and he went after her.

A collective sigh filled the air. A

moment later, Nathan jerked away and ran from the room. Carissa calmly set Tucker onto his feet and, after a moment of uncertainty, looked to Phillip. He desperately wanted to open his arms and pull them both in, but he knew what she needed from him, so he lifted his hand to Tucker alone. The boy stumbled into his side and wrapped his arms around Phillip's waist. Phillip awkwardly patted the boy's back, and Carissa quietly went after her oldest son.

When he turned again to his aunts, they were staring as if he'd grown a second pair of arms. All but Odelia, who clasped her beringed hands beneath her double chin and, for some reason, smiled at him as if he'd hung the moon. Carissa and the children stayed the night at Chatam House, not in the building out back where Chester and Hilda lived with Hilda's sister, Carol, but in the main house, in a three-bedroom, threebath suite upstairs that was bigger and far finer than her father's old apartment. The Chatam sisters had suggested it, and Carissa had let herself be talked into it. Partly because she was too tired to argue, but mostly because she didn't think the children ought to go back to the apartment so soon after their grandfather's death. It seemed best to get through the next few days first.

Plucking at the black T-shirt that she'd tucked into the waist of her denim skirt, she sighed and asked, "Do you think this is all right to wear to the funeral home?"

"I think it's fine," Phillip told her, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

She had twisted it into a bun low on her neck, but no matter what she did, wisps escaped. Someday she would have money for a decent haircut.

"Maybe I should tie a scarf around my hair."

"No." He curled a finger beneath her chin and tilted her face up. "You look lovely just as you are."

Despite the luxury of having had a room and a bed entirely to herself, she

was too tired to scold herself for enjoying the compliment. "Thank you."

"Don't worry about the kids," he told her. "I'll sit right here in the suite with them until they wake. Then I'll send them down to Hilda for breakfast."

"I've laid out their clothes."

"Don't worry."

"They can dress themselves."

"Don't worry."

"Uncle Chester says it won't take long." She bit her lip to stop its trembling.

Phillip leaned forward until his forehead touched hers. "Don't. Worry."

But how could she not? Funerals cost money, which she didn't have. Despite her best efforts, tears suddenly streamed down her face. Phillip said nothing, just gathered her loosely against him until she regained control. It would be so easy to lean on him. He had promised her father, after all, that she wouldn't be alone after his death, but she knew better than to hold him to that promise. Phillip had been pledging the support of the Chatams, not him personally. She pushed him away, grabbed her handbag and rushed out of the suite as fast as she could.

Chester, the Chatam sisters and Kent waited for her in the foyer downstairs. What a trio the sisters were, Hypatia all elegance in her silk and pearls, her silver hair expertly styled, Odelia flamboyant in eye-popping prints and oversize jewelry, her shockingly white hair curling with abandon, and Magnolia looking like a bag lady in her moth-eaten shirtwaists, her steel-gray braid hanging over her shoulder. Surprised to find them dressed to go out, their handbags dangling from their elbows, Carissa automatically protested.

"Ladies, Uncle Chester and I can take care of this."

Hypatia shook her elegant silver head. "Your uncle has been an enormous part

of our lives for many years. We would never abandon him in his hour of need."

"Oh, of course."

They did far more than "not abandon" Chester, however. They made suggestions that helped trim costs without sacrificing the dignity of the service, including offering Chatam House to hold the reception at afterward. It shamed Carissa to have to ask the funeral director if he could provide a payment plan, but she had no choice.

"Oh, no, honey," Chester said, slipping an arm about her shoulders. "Hilda and I will take care of this."

"But, Uncle Chester-"

"It's been decided, Carissa. I know he was your father, but he was my brother, and he worried so about you and the children. You have enough to take care of as it is."

Carissa closed her eyes and said a

silent prayer of thanks before hugging her uncle's neck. She didn't miss the small, satisfied smiles that the Chatam sisters traded or the wink that Kent gave Chester. She knew very well where Chester was getting the money to pay for this, but for once she was going to look the other way and be grateful.

* * *

The funeral service took place on Monday morning at Chester and Hilda's small church. Marshall wasn't a member, but he had often attended worship there. Dallas, Phillip's youngest sister, stepped in to watch the children at Chatam House. Carissa hoped to the very end that her sister, Lyla, would somehow get wind of the situation and arrive in time for the funeral, but that didn't happen. Thankfully, their mother didn't turn up, either. Though Alexandra had divorced their father many years ago, he had never remarried, and Alexandra was shameless enough to make a grand entrance decked out in widow's weeds and claim the spotlight. Carissa wouldn't even put it past her to bring along her current husband, a much vounger man, to show off.

After the service, the Chatams hosted a reception at the mansion, catered by a local catering company to spare Hilda the trouble. Dallas brought the children in, clean and dressed. When the children became restless, Dallas took them out again, and they went off without a peep of protest.

The past few days, Carissa had let herself just drift along, going with the flow, but the moment was coming when she must again take a stand and assert her independence. Otherwise, she would wind up letting the Chatams do everything for her. She couldn't help wondering where she would find the energy to do what she must. Glancing around the large but crowded dining room, where the food had been laid out, she set aside her plate, rose to her feet and quietly slipped out of the house to the front porch. An old-fashioned bench

swing hung from the east end of the porch. She kicked off her navy pumps and sat down in the middle of the swing, tucking her bare feet onto the seat beneath her.

Hanging baskets of ivy bracketed the swing, and green lawns sloped away to the street beyond. Her father would have enjoyed this place, but she didn't think he'd ever done more than drive by here. She'd seen a rose arbor on the east lawn and a towering magnolia tree on the west, as well as other trees clustered about the property. Despite the almost suffocating heat, she felt peace curl about her. She closed her eyes and let her head fall back, setting the swing in motion.

Goodbye, Daddy. I'll miss you so much.

She hardly noticed when she slipped into prayer, but eventually, she put her feet on the floor, leaned forward and thanked God sincerely for ending her father's pain.

I don't know why it had to be like this. I don't understand why these things happen, but he was the best daddy he knew how to be, and I thank You for that. I wish I could have him back, but I'm not selfish enough to deny him Heaven. I know he's happy and well and at peace, so just help me and everyone who loves him be happy for him and at peace with our new

reality.

She sat up straight, opening her eyes to find Phillip Chatam standing in front of her. He couldn't have looked any better, dressed in a dark olive-green suit, white shirt and tie, his dark hair gleaming, copper eyes glowing. His shoulders looked broad enough to carry the world, his hands strong enough to hold it at bay. She was tempted to throw herself into his arms and cry like a baby. "You okay?"

She managed to nod.

"Mind if I sit?"

She did. But he was a Chatam, and she owed the Chatams. Grasping the chain holding up the swing, she slid over to give him room. He lowered himself onto the wood slats beside her and copied her previous pose, leaning forward with his forearms braced against his thighs.

"I trust that you already know this, but I've been asked to make certain that the message is delivered. My aunts want you and the children to stay on here at Chatam House indefinitely."

She was so tempted. She told herself that they could stay just one more night, but she knew that if they stayed one more night she would find an excuse to stay another and another and... She dared not start down that path. The crisis had passed. The time had come to get on with her life. She'd been here before, and she knew what she had to do. She had to get up and stand on her own two feet. Right now. So that was what she did. She put her bare feet on the gray painted wood of the porch floor and stood, turning to face him.

"I appreciate everything that the Chatams have done for us, more than I can tell you, but it's time that my children and I went home."

"Is there anything I can do to convince you to stay?"

"The Chatams have already done more than enough. We're going back to the apartment."

"Wouldn't it be easier if—"

"The sooner the better," she interrupted firmly.

Phillip bowed his head and sighed. "I'll bring the car around. We'll leave anytime you're ready."

Turning away, she snatched up her shoes and headed for the door, but once she got there, she paused and looked back. He sat just as he had, his brow furrowed, copper eyes watching her. If only he were not living here at Chatam House, she could stay without the fear that she'd do something stupid, like flirt with him or hope he'd fall for her.

Oh, it wasn't his fault. Why, he hung around here living off his elderly aunts and *still* she couldn't help liking him. Her aunt and uncle tried to make light of it, but even they wondered why he didn't

go out and find a job. Even if Phillip should fall head over heels for her, what good would that do her? She needed a true partner, someone who could at least pull his own weight, but that didn't seem to matter to her heart. No more than it had with Tom, her charming rascal of a husband who had sailed through life from crisis to crisis without a care. Then she'd been left alone with three kids, a floundering business and a mortgage she couldn't pay. Well, she'd learned that lesson. The hard way. And Phillip Chatam was never going to offer to help her. She could still hear her old boyfriend explaining why they had to break up.

"It's not like any man is actually going

to marry you, not with three kids in tow. One, okay. Two, maybe. But *three*? No way."

Shrugging those memories aside, she ran inside to change clothes, pack her bags and get on with this life that God had dealt her.

Unfortunately, getting away proved more difficult than she had hoped. When she came back downstairs in her jeans, she found the Chatam sisters at the door, shaking hands with departing guests. Good manners dictated that she join them, of course, which left no chance of slipping away without explanations to everyone, including her uncle and aunt, who argued that tonight of all nights she

should stay.

Carissa stuck to her guns, however, and finally got the children, along with their luggage and Grace's safety seat, loaded into the Chatam's town car, Phillip behind the wheel. They waved goodbye as the car pulled away from the mansion, Grace blowing kisses and calling out to Dallas, "Bye, bffn!"

Carissa exchanged a puzzled look with Phillip over that, but he merely shrugged, obviously having no more clue about what *bffn* meant than she did.

Despite the short drive, the closer they got to the apartment, the more subdued the children became. Carissa steeled herself and put on a brave face. "It will be good to be home, have our own place again, huh?"

"Grandpa won't be there," Tucker pointed out softly as Phillip parked the car.

"I know," Carissa told him

consolingly, "but tomorrow we'll start clearing out things, and you and Nathan can have your own room. You'll like that, won't you?"

"I guess."

She looked at Phillip and found his jaw clenched tight. "Okay," she said brightly, hoping that he wouldn't point out how much more luxurious Chatam House was than the apartment.

"Everyone lend a hand. Pop the trunk, please, Phillip."

He exited the car and did as she asked. Carissa tried to make a game of it, herding the children to the back of the sedan and assigning totes. They'd accumulated a surprising amount of stuff in their short time at Chatam House. They trudged along the walk, with Carissa in the lead and Phillip bringing up the rear of their little ragtag caravan.

When they reached the apartment door, she found a folded note taped over the keyhole. Quickly removing the small slip of paper, Carissa tucked it into a pocket before Phillip could see it, intending to read the note in private. Whatever it said, she would deal with the matter on her own. Perhaps the short letter contained nothing more than words of condolence. She didn't think so, however, especially when she slid her key into the lock and found that it wouldn't turn.

Carissa tried the key again, but the lock refused to budge. Phillip pushed forward.

"What's wrong?"

"The key doesn't work."

"You sure it's the right one?" he asked, taking it from her and trying it himself.

"Absolutely," she mumbled, slipping the note from her pocket. While he tried to unlock the door yet again, she read the words on the paper, her heart pounding. "Um, I have to speak to the manager." Phillip's head snapped around. "What?"

She made an attempt at a smile. "Would you wait here with the kids? I won't be long."

Pivoting on one heel, she hurried down the sidewalk and around the corner to the on-site manager's apartment. The thin, sixtysomething woman with long, graying hair and thick eyeglasses wore a series of interchangeable knit pantsuits as a kind of work uniform.

She smiled at Carissa and said bluntly, "You must have realized by now that we changed the locks." "But why?" "You can't stay, I'm afraid. You're not on the lease."

"Guests are allowed for six weeks at a time," Carissa pointed out. "We have at least a couple weeks left."

"Not once the legal tenant vacates the property. Legally, we could have put your belongings out yesterday, but given the circumstances, we want to be as compassionate as possible."

Panicked, Carissa tried to think through her options. "Listen, I can continue to pay the rent, if that's what you're worried about."

The manager shook her head. "This is a subsidized apartment intended for disabled tenants, and I have a lengthy waiting list of approved applicants. I'm sorry, but I can't let you and your children stay."

The breath left Carissa's lungs in a rush. She couldn't believe it. The very thing she'd feared most had just come to pass.

Homeless.

She and her children were now truly homeless.

Carissa felt a presence at her back and knew without looking that it was Phillip. She could only wonder how long he had been standing behind her. Biting her lip, she dug her fingernails into her palms to keep from lashing out at him. She turned and coolly said, "You were supposed to stay with the children."

"Nathan is perfectly capable of watching the other two for a few minutes," he replied before asking the apartment manager, "Could you let us into the apartment long enough to pack up some personal things tonight? If so, I'll return tomorrow to take care of everything else."

"What are you doing?" Carissa whispered under her breath.

"Just what has to be done," he answered, proving that he'd overheard everything.

"I'll get the key," the manager said, disappearing inside her apartment. "You can't just take over," Carissa declared, trying to keep her voice low when she really wanted to yell at him.

"I'm not trying to take over. I'm just trying to help," he told her, his copper eyes so soft with compassion that she had to look away. She felt his big hands hovering near her upper arms, but thankfully, he didn't touch her. If he had, she would've crumbled into pieces.

"We'll figure this out, okay? One thing is certain, though. You can't stay here."

She gulped, feeling perilously close to hysterics as the truth sank in. She and her children were actually homeless.

"Dear God," she whispered, closing her eyes. "Help me!"

Chapter Four

"It's all right," Phillip said, slipping an arm about her. "Everything's going to be all right. You'll see. It's going to be a surprise for the kids, though."

The kids. Carissa gasped, looking up. "What are we going to tell them?"

"We'll just say that we talked it over and decided that Chatam House is the best place for everyone after all."

Carissa frowned. We, he'd said.

"They'll want their own things," Phillip went on, "toys, books... Nathan said something about a pillow the other day." "He's had it since he was a baby," Carissa murmured, her mind awhirl with all that had to be done. "It's hardly even a pillow now, more like a pillowcase with some feathers in it."

"Whatever. He wants it, so he should have it with him. Don't you think?"

Carissa nodded, hardly aware of what she was doing. The utilities had to be cut off, the mail forwarded, bills paid.... What were they going to do with the furniture? The door opened behind her, and the manager briskly stepped out.

"Sorry. Phone always rings when you're busiest."

"No problem," Phillip told her. "We appreciate your cooperation."

"Oh, I'm happy to help," she said, setting off. "Wish I could do more, but it's out of my hands, you understand."

Glumly, Carissa fell in behind her. Phillip kept pace, his hand hovering in the small of Carissa's back as if he feared she would turn tail and bolt. The kids were plucking leaves out of the shrubbery and pelting one another when they got back to her father's apartment. The manager unlocked the door but didn't enter.

"I can just wait, if you won't be too long, or you can stop by when you're done, and I'll come back and lock up then."

Phillip looked to Carissa. "Give us

thirty minutes."

"I'll just visit the tenant in 307, then. She always welcomes an unexpected chat. You can pop over and knock on the door when you're done."

"Thank you."

As soon as the manager left, Carissa took the children into the living room and sat down with them, explaining that they wouldn't be staying after all.

Little Grace looked around her before commenting solemnly, "I don't want to stay, not without Grandpa."

Nathan glared at Phillip and declared, "I'm not going back with *him!*"

"We're going in our car," Carissa said huskily, too exhausted to argue with him, "back to Uncle Chester and Aunt Hilda."

Tucker rose and wandered about the room, touching this lamp and that photo. "Grandpa would want us to go," he said sadly. Phillip went over to him and

patted him on the shoulder.

"Your grandfather wanted you to have a safe, comfortable home, Tucker. That's all he cared about."

"I wish he could go with us," Tucker whispered in a choked voice.

"I know," Phillip replied gently, "but his house is in Heaven now."

Tucker glanced around. "It's probably nicer than here."

"Much nicer."

"It's probably even better than

Chatam House, isn't it?" Tucker said, looking up at Phillip.

Nodding, Phillip told him, "The Bible says that where your grandpa lives now, even the streets are paved with gold."

"Oh, that's just a story," Nathan scoffed.

"I don't think so," Phillip refuted blandly. "It's written in the Bible."

"Where?"

"I'm not sure," Phillip admitted, "but we can look it up."

Nathan rolled his eyes to demonstrate his skepticism.

Carissa cleared her throat and said, "Let's figure out what we want to take with us tonight. Okay?"

"Toys?" Phillip suggested, pointing

toward a box labeled in marker with that very word. Tucker brightened noticeably. "And don't forget your pillow," Phillip said to Nathan, who shoved his nose in the air then stomped off in the direction of the bedroom.

Carissa looked around her, trying to think. "I guess I need to pack the dressers."

"Are there any empty suitcases?" Phillip asked.

"Dad probably had a few." She got up and took a deep breath, bracing herself. "Want me to look around for them?" he offered kindly.

Perhaps it was cowardly of her, but she wasn't quite up to looking through her father's things. "Yes, thank you. Through there."

He went off toward her father's bedroom, leaving her to go to the room that she'd shared with the children these past weeks. They had managed to squeeze a full bed, which she and Grace had been sharing, and bunk beds into the small space, along with a pair of dressers. They barely had room to walk, and the arrangement made Carissa feel like a horrible failure, but she'd happily go on enduring it to have her dad back. But no. He walked on streets of gold now, as Phillip had said. She wouldn't bring him back just because she missed him, especially given how he'd suffered at the end.

Phillip arrived with several suitcases and began helping her fill them. He concentrated on the kids' things while she took care of her own. She heard Nathan snap, "Don't touch that!" and looked over to find him yanking a framed photo of him and his dad from Phillip's grasp.

"Maybe you could help with the boxes," she suggested to Phillip, her tone apologetic.

He gave her a quick smile, nodded and left the room. Nathan ducked his head, busily cramming clothes into an open bag. She decided to let the rudeness pass. They were all under a lot of stress at the moment.

When the dressers had been emptied, she got trash bags from the kitchen and filled them with shoes and the contents of the bathroom. Then she returned to the living room to find that the children had stacked up numerous boxes that they wanted to take. Phillip was nowhere to be seen. She nixed several and was arguing with Tucker over another when Phillip wandered out of her father's room, her dad's open Bible in his big hands. He seemed to be reading even as he walked over to the threadbare sofa and lowered himself onto the edge of it.

"I found this on Marshall's bedside table," Phillip said. Flipping a red ribbon, he added, "This passage was marked." With that, Phillip began to read. "The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The twelve gates were twelve pearls. The great street of the city was of gold, as pure as transparent glass." As he read, the children had gathered around him, and he underlined the last part with his fingertip so they wouldn't miss it

"And that's where Grandpa is?" Tucker asked, looping an arm around Phillip's neck.

"I think so," Phillip said. "The Bible says all believers will spend eternity in Heaven. I tell you what—when you all get settled, we'll ask my aunts. They'll know, and they'll be glad to tell us."

Nathan said nothing, just frowned in thought. Phillip replaced the red ribbon and closed the Bible then passed it to Nathan, saying, "Why don't you hold on to this for your mom?"

Nathan seemed surprised, but he folded the Bible tightly against his chest. Phillip calmly rose and rubbed his hands together.

"Okay. Let's get this show on the road."

They packed up both vehicles in a matter of minutes. At the last moment Tucker remembered something he wanted to take with him to Chatam House, so they walked back to the apartment. Inside the tiny coat closet was his grandfather's old cap, one Tucker had worn several times while playing. Tucker smoothed the interior band before flipping the cap onto his head and nudging the bill slightly to the side. When he looked up, tears stood in his big blue eyes. He turned in a circle, looking around the place, and Carissa knew he was saying a final goodbye. Her heart stopped.

Suddenly, Tucker threw himself at Phillip, latching on to Phillip's leg. She knew just how Tucker felt. He wanted an anchor, something—someone—solid and strong to hold on to in a world that suddenly felt rudderless and bleak. Grace let out a little hiccup of a sob and lifted her arms. Without a word, Phillip picked her up and cradled her against his side. While Carissa just stood there trembling inside and yearning for some of that strength, Phillip comforted her children. Worse, she looked at Nathan and saw the same hunger in his face before he turned and stomped off. Shaken to realize that her nine-year-old had more fortitude than she did just then, Carissa brusquely ordered the other children to head to the van with their brother while she went to fetch the manager. As the woman locked up the place, Phillip renewed his promise to return the next day to empty out the

apartment.

"But where am I going to put

everything?" Carissa demanded as they hurried to the car.

"There are attics at Chatam House." She shook her head. She wasn't moving in lock, stock and barrel. If she did, she might never convince herself to leave again, and the Chatam sisters were just dear enough to let her and the children stay on indefinitely.

"Well, I have a storage unit," he told her. "It's barely half-full. You can start with that, and I expect they have empty spaces for rent at the same place. We'll work something out."

She decided that she would spend the remainder of the afternoon making some

calls about new apartments, and if she couldn't find something affordable, well, better that she should take advantage of *him* than his aunts.

"See you at Chatam House," he said, moving toward the town car.

Nathan put his back to the van and folded his arms. Clearly, he didn't want to go back to Chatam House-or anywhere else that left him in close proximity to Phillip. Carissa couldn't blame him. Phillip Chatam was dangerous, not just to her heart but to those of her children. What other choice did they have, though, except to return to Chatam House?

She could take her children to a motel,

but even the cheapest one would drain her meager funds and delay when they could move into a suitable home of their own again. No, as badly as she wanted to avoid Phillip, she had no real choice but to accept the hospitality of the Chatams. Still...she didn't have to be right under his nose, did she?

Carissa thought about that as she drove her children back to Chatam House, and by the time they arrived, she had her argument well planned. The Chatam sisters and Kent were sitting in the formal parlor. Carissa sent the children to the sunroom then asked her aunt and uncle to come in. As soon as they arrived, Phillip explained the situation. Then Carissa spoke.

"We hate to impose on you any further, and the truth is, we'll be much more comfortable with Uncle Chester and Aunt Hilda in the carriage house."

Odelia blinked at that. She'd traded black onyx earrings and pleated, paperwhite linen trimmed in wide black edging for purple amethysts and yard upon yard of floral chiffon. Magnolia, on the other hand, wore the same dark print cotton dress that she'd worn to the funeral; she'd traded her pumps for penny loafers, however. Only Hypatia had not changed a stitch. Still wearing gray silk, matching pumps and pearls, her silver hair twisted into a sleek chignon, she looked as neat and fresh as

she had at breakfast that morning.

"Well," Odelia said consideringly, "I suppose we could have Carol move into the house here to make room for you."

Carissa frowned. She hadn't meant to put anyone out of place.

"Of course, you'd still have to share a room with Grace," Hypatia said.

"And that's with Grace sleeping on the floor," Hilda put in. "There's no room for more than a half bed in either room upstairs in the carriage house."

"Oh, we have bunk beds for the boys," Carissa said quickly.

"They're attic rooms, sugar," Chester pointed out. "The ceiling slopes too much. Bunk beds won't fit. Full beds won't fit, for that matter." Feeling as if she'd swallowed a lead weight, Carissa bowed her head in defeat.

"The master suite is much more suitable," Odelia said brightly. "And Phillip will help you settle in. Won't you, dear?"

"I'll start unloading the car," he replied, before leaving the room.

Chester and Kent got up to follow. Magnolia leaned over to pat Carissa's hand.

"The master suite is best for all concerned," she said. "It's large and airy. You're welcome to set up your bunk beds, if you like."

Carissa nodded, hoping that wouldn't

be necessary, and choked out, "Thank you. You're very kind."

"It's just practical, dear."

A sound from the hallway gave Carissa an excuse to escape. "I'd best check on the kids." Popping up, she hurried away, determined not to cry.

This whole day, which she had started by burying her father, had just been one disappointment after another. It was as if God was determined to force her into close proximity with Phillip Chatam, no matter what she wanted. She couldn't make any sense of it. She couldn't even try.

Tomorrow, she decided. Tomorrow she would take another look at her options and figure out what to do next. * * *

As Hilda went to the kitchen for the tea tray, Odelia settled back against the cushions of the elegant antique settee and lifted her eyebrows at her sisters.

"Still think I'm making mountains out of molehills?" she asked once she could be sure they wouldn't be overheard.

Magnolia sniffed but conceded, "We have seen God move like this before."

"I'm just not certain that Phillip is cut out for a ready-made family," Hypatia said doubtfully.

"You saw the way he reacted with Grace and Tucker in the midst of their grief," Odelia argued. "And they with him," Hypatia admitted, "but that doesn't mean there's a romance developing between Carissa and Phillip. Besides, I'm not convinced that he and Carissa could support those children."

"Mmm, and the oldest boy is none too keen on him," Magnolia pointed out.

"Nathan is none too keen on anyone or anything," Odelia said dismissively, "but he'll get over that. As for Phillip, he's an intelligent man. He'll come up with something."

"He needs to come up with a firm understanding of God's involvement in his life," Hypatia stated flatly. "And I'm sorry, Odelia, but from what I can tell, Carissa doesn't seem to like our Phillip very much."

Sighing, Odelia had to admit that it was true, though how any woman could resist Phillip's charm and masculinity, she didn't know.

"Besides, you're forgetting something else," Magnolia pointed out. She waited until she had the rapt attention of both of her sisters before bluntly saying, "Our brother."

Hypatia winced. "I hate to speak ill of a loved one, but Murdock can be a bit of a, um..."

"Snob," Odelia supplied unhappily.

Murdock and his wife, Maryanne, both dedicated doctors, had initially disapproved of their oldest son Asher's wife, Ellie, and they had actively fought the marriage of their oldest daughter, Petra, to Dale Bowen because he worked as a carpenter. They even seemed to disapprove of Phillip himself because he hadn't chosen a "premium" profession, such as law or medicine. Murdock had even once said that he'd happily settle for banking or education for his younger son, but Phillip had chosen bookkeeping instead then hadn't even gotten a job in the field.

Odelia could only imagine what Murdock and Maryanne's opinion would be of a penniless widow with three children as a daughter-in-law. She hated to think that they might even be petty enough to hold it against Carissa that her aunt and uncle had been longtime employees at Chatam House. She had once heard Maryanne refer to Chester and Hilda as servants. The very term made Odelia shudder.

On the other hand, no one could say that Murdock and Maryanne weren't dedicated parents. They had eventually accepted both Ellie and Dale, and the birth of their first grandchild, Asher and Ellie's daughter, seemed to have softened them considerably. They had both recently retired in order to spend more time with family, and the sisters had noticed a renewed interest in spiritual matters.

"What is needed here is prayer,"

Odelia decided.

"Indeed it is," Hypatia agreed, "for all concerned."

"Prayer," Magnolia pointed out, "is the one thing we might do that can only help and never hurt."

Odelia bowed her head. God's will was always the best answer, but she couldn't help wanting things to work out for Phillip and Carissa together. Perhaps she was just an old romantic, but it seemed like the perfect solution. Carissa needed a husband, and those children needed a father. And Phillip...so far as she could tell, Phillip just needed to grow up. Besides, next to the love of the Lord, the love between husband and

wife was the most sacred and wonderful of bonds. That was a normal thing to wish for one's nephew, wasn't it?

* * *

"This is all too much," Carissa said for perhaps the fourth or fifth time. "This suite is larger than Dad's whole apartment, and moving in here is like taking over someone's house."

Phillip mentally kicked himself for mentioning that the master suite had once belonged to his grandparents and had always been considered the heart of the house.

"But this space was made for children," he pointed out, setting the last of the suitcases in the center of the sitting-room floor. "Hub Senior and Gussie were very happily married and, unlike many of their generation and wealth, they were hands-on parents. Having triplet daughters prompted them to create this suite in order to keep their infants and their nurse close by."

He went on to explain that as the other three children came along, those arrangements proved wise and useful. Even as the children got older and moved into other areas of the house, Hub and Gussie maintained the large threebedroom suite in order to keep ailing or frightened youngsters near, especially at night.

"This is the best space for a family.

Why shouldn't you use it?"

The rest of the house had undergone various renovations over the decades, the latest being Odelia and Kent's private suite.

"I don't know," she said, shaking her head. "Staying here for a few days is one thing, moving in is another."

Tired of arguing with her, he said, "So which of the aunties are you going to annoy, then, Hypatia or Odelia?"

Carissa looked at him with something akin to horror on her lovely face. The smattering of freckles across the bridge of her pert nose extended just far enough across her high cheekbones to be scarcely visible in profile, but when she turned to fully face him, as she did now, it formed a delicate mask, a gossamer veil above which her deep blue eyes frowned.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, if you decide on the small suite, you'll be next door to Hypatia's bedroom, and if you take the east suite, you'll be next to Odelia and Kent's. Of course, here, you're only next to..."

"You," she finished sourly. Then she immediately looked contrite. *"I'm* sorry. I didn't mean that the way it sounded. We don't want to disturb anyone."

Phillip sighed. "Look, the truth is, you won't be disturbing me or my aunts, no matter which suite you choose, but the master suite is the best for *everyone*." Carissa nodded. The children traded uncertain but curious looks. The interchange between Phillip and Carissa had obviously piqued their interest. Carissa noticed, as well.

"Okay. Let's get this stuff put away," she ordered. "Everybody pitch in."

By the time they worked out where to put everything, they were all exhausted, the children especially. Carissa declared that a nap was in order before dinner. Nathan made a fuss, but she insisted. Phillip wandered back into the sitting room, listening to the oddly domestic sounds of shoes hitting the floor, pillows being fluffed, hugs and kisses being traded, even the whines and complaints

of tired, little voices. When Carissa returned, Phillip couldn't help smiling, thinking how sweetly rumpled she looked.

She dropped down onto the sofa. "Thanks for all your help today. I'm sorry we put you to so much trouble."

"I didn't have anything better to do," he replied lightly, waiting for her to invite him to sit.

She rubbed her hands over her face then looked up at him with some surprise, as if she was unhappy to find him still standing there. "Well, good night."

Disappointed, he said, "Good night," and he moved swiftly to the door, more hurt than he had any reason to be. Honestly, how many ways did the woman have to prove that she wasn't interested in him? She'd made it more than plain that she didn't even like him. If he had an ounce of sense, he'd keep as much distance between them as humanly possible. His resolve to do just that almost made it through the door.

Almost.

Chapter Five

Y anking the door open, Phillip walked straight through it, but before he shut it closed behind him, he heard her sniff. It was the barest sound, just a catch of breath and a tiny, liquid burble. He did his best to ignore it. He tried very hard to close the door, but he just couldn't do it. Gritting his teeth, he argued with himself. From the very beginning, the woman had made it clear that something about him rubbed her the wrong way. On the other hand, she'd been under great duress from the moment he'd met her. And today, she'd buried her father. As if to underscore that, she made a soft, gasping sound, and he lost the fight.

Covering the distance to the sofa in three long strides, he dropped down next to her and pulled her into his arms without a word. She dissolved, plastering herself against him to muffle the sobs that she'd tried so hard to keep hidden. As he folded her close, he felt an odd sense of purpose even amid her emotional storm. She might stab him again with that sharp tongue of hers before he finally went on his way, but he didn't much mind, not really. He rather enjoyed her independent, outspoken nature. At this very moment, he didn't think he'd much mind if she ripped him to shreds and handed him the pieces in a

gunnysack.

Phillip put his hand in Carissa's hair. It felt like the softest silk. Stroking it tenderly, he crooned comforting sounds as Carissa wept.

"Shhh, shhh. It's all right, sweetheart. Don't cry."

"Nothing's gone right," she wailed in a tiny voice.

"I know it seems that way, but you're okay."

"I've failed at everything I've ever done."

"How can you say that with those three amazing kids?" he asked, astounded.

"I've failed them at every turn," she

insisted. "I can't even provide a proper home for them."

"What do you call this?"

"Charity!"

"Only until you earn enough money to get into your own place."

"With what? Telephone sales?" she scoffed. "I haven't worked in days." "You just buried your father. Besides, you can't work all the time. Give yourself a break, will you?"

"You don't understand," she said, putting some distance between them. "I was living with my father because I lost our home when my business failed."

Her father had alluded to something like that, so Phillip wasn't surprised. "At least you *had* your own business," he said. "That's more than I've ever had. What kind of business was it?"

She shook her head, but then

explained. "Proprietary software. You know, personalized code, one-of-a-kind stuff for specialized businesses."

"Oh. I didn't realize there was a need for that kind of thing."

"Obviously not a great need," she muttered, laying her head back onto his shoulder.

Phillip pondered that for a moment.

"You're talking about actually creating computer programs from scratch."

She tilted her head, giving him an odd look. "They all use the same language. Only the platforms are different." Widening his eyes, he grinned. "O-kay."

Warming to the subject, she started to explain in detail. "The code is in the pattern. These days you just have to put in the commands—"

He held up a hand. "Don't bother. It's all Greek to me."

Suddenly Grace appeared in the doorway to the little hall that opened off the sitting room and led to the suite's two smaller bedrooms. "Mommy," she said, rubbing her eyes with both fists, "where's the air fixer? I'm cold."

Carissa bolted upright, shrugging off Phillip's arm in one frantic movement. "Uh. The air..." "The thermostat is on that wall," Phillip said, pointing, "but I've found that in this big old house it's sometimes best just to close the vents in certain rooms. I'll take care of it."

"No, no," Carissa insisted, beating him to a standing position. "We're fine. You can go now."

Her pinkened cheeks clearly demonstrated her embarrassment at having been caught sitting with his arm around her, and now she was none-toosubtly dismissing him. Again. He took his time getting to his feet just to let her know that he didn't appreciate being sent away like a neighbor kid who had overstayed his welcome. Her hands fluttering like hummingbirds, Carissa went to escort Grace back to bed, but before she could reach her daughter, Grace ran straight for Phillip. As the girl raised her little arms, Phillip realized that she was about to launch herself. He didn't know whether to hold her off or pretend he didn't understand what she wanted. In the end, he simply caught her and swung her up into his arms.

Grace wrapped herself around him, her arms, legs and wiry little body clutching him. "You forgot my nightnight hug," she informed him, squeezing with all her might.

He laughed, hugging her back. "Here's a super-duper one to make up for it." "Super-duper!" she crowed, all but throttling him.

Carissa started forward, an anxious look on her face. Phillip met her halfway and handed off Grace with a smile and a pat for the girl's soft red head. Turning, he left as quickly as he could then. His heart felt too big for his chest, and he could have sworn that a tiny fist clutched a corner of it.

But what really shook him to the core was how right it had felt to hold Carissa Hopper in his arms, and how easily her problems seemed to become his problems. He'd called her sweetheart, of all things.

Maybe she hadn't noticed. Suddenly,

he didn't want to face her across the dinner table, not after Grace had caught them all but embracing on the couch. He wondered what excuse he might give the aunties for going out and even went so far as to call his older brother, Asher, to see if he and Ellie had plans for the evening. They did, so Phillip called his younger sister Petra next, but it was her and Dale's bowling night. In sheer desperation, he telephoned his baby sister Dallas and offered to treat her to a meal at one of her favorite restaurants in thanks for her help with the kids that morning. She readily accepted, and though he had misgivings, Phillip preferred to risk Dallas's infamous prying than take a chance on sitting down to dinner with Carissa.

He need not have worried. Over their steaks, Dallas chatted about the children, saying that Tucker viewed him, Phillip, as something of a hero, which Phillip found flattering but suspect, and that Grace adored him, which made Phillip smile. He felt a certain fondness for the little girl himself. Dallas admitted that Nathan resented Phillip terribly but advised that the boy would eventually come around. To her credit, Dallas said nothing about Carissa, neither did she ask any questions about a possible relationship between him and Carissa.

Instead, he and his sister discussed his nonexistent job search and the

continuing-education course she was taking over the summer. She warned him that their newly retired parents were going to be spending more time in Buffalo Creek than ever before.

"What makes you think so?"

Dallas smiled. "Asher's daughter, Marie Ella, of course."

Phillip frowned. "What does our niece have to do with it?"

"She's their first grandchild, and the older she gets, the more difficult it seems to be for them to stay away," Dallas answered wryly.

Phillip was horrified. "Surely, you aren't saying you think they'll move here from Waco!"

Laughing, Dallas said, "Stranger

things have happened. But it's only sixty miles. I think they might content themselves with driving up a couple times a week."

"We can only pray," Phillip muttered, and Dallas laughed again.

Phillip loved his parents, but the last thing he needed was his father advising him on career choices and his mother pushing him to settle down.

Dallas changed the subject then, announcing that she was dating someone new. In the next breath, she stated calmly that she sensed it wasn't going anywhere, though she didn't know why. She seemed sad about that but not overly disturbed. Phillip understood all too well. He'd never had a relationship that lasted longer than six months, and the very thought of it made him sad.

What was going on with him and Carissa? He constantly felt the need to know what she was doing and that she was well, and he didn't like that.

He didn't like it at all.

* * *

Thanks to the dumbwaiter in the wall on the landing just outside the door to the master suite, Carissa and the children were able to enjoy a private dinner that evening. Carissa kept things low-key afterward by digging out a board game. After making certain that Nathan and Tucker each won a game and Grace came in second, Carissa allowed the children to watch some TV before starting the process of baths and bedtime stories. This necessitated some unpacking.

However, the children didn't appear inclined to hurry the process. They had lived with unpacked boxes for a long time already at their grandfather's; that apparently felt normal to them. At the same time, they seemed quite comfortable in their rooms, though Nathan complained about having to share a queen-sized bed with his brother

"The Chatam ladies said we could bring in the bunk beds if you want," Carissa ventured carefully, much to Tucker's delight.

"I want a princess bed like yours!" Grace declared, running into the room in a towel while trailing her nightgown behind her. She had been in love with the large sleigh bed in the master bedroom since she'd first laid eyes on it. A genuine antique, the thing scared Carissa. What if she accidentally damaged it? She didn't even want to know what something like that was worth.

"The bed you're sleeping in is just fine," Carissa said, taking the towel to dry her daughter's back before pulling the nightgown over her head and helping her slip her arms through the sleeves. Carissa patted the mattress of the boys' bed, saying, "Hop up so we can read."

"No, I want to read in the princess bed," Grace persisted.

Before Carissa could insist that they all pile onto the bed in the boys' room, Tucker let out a yip and raced out into the short hallway, a giggling Grace on his heels. Nathan rolled his eyes but followed, the chosen book under his arm. Sighing, Carissa went after them. They had made it halfway across the sitting room when a knock came from the outer door of the suite, freezing them all in their tracks. Carissa's breath caught. Was that Phillip come to say good-night? If so, the children would be thrilledunfortunately, so would she.

She remembered him crooning the word *sweetheart* to her earlier that evening when she'd fallen apart in his arms. She was sure he hadn't meant it romantically, but it had been so long since anyone had said anything even remotely romantic to her that she couldn't stop thinking about it.

"Come in."

Disappointment hit Carissa when Odelia Chatam Monroe's frothy white hair appeared around the edge of the door.

"Are we inconveniencing you?"

"Not at all. You're always welcome." She opened the door and came in, her

lime-green caftan fluttering like gigantic butterfly wings. Phillip entered right behind her. Carissa's heart fluttered at the sight of him. Oh, she wished he'd stay away—and was extremely glad he wouldn't, whatever his reasons. She couldn't prevent a small smile of greeting.

He seemed to relax but remained silent as Odelia asked kindly, "How are you bearing up?"

Tucker screwed up his face. "Bearing up?"

"She wants to know how you're doing," Phillip explained with a wink. "It's been a long, difficult day," Odelia said, "with your grandfather's funeral this morning and you not being able to go back to his apartment."

To everyone's surprise, Grace suddenly burst into tears, wailing, "I want Grandpa!"

"Oh, darling," Odelia crooned, even as Carissa went down on one knee to pull Grace into her arms.

Clearly embarrassed, Nathan poked his sister in the shoulder and hissed, "Shut it! He was always old and sick and about to die."

"Nathan!" Carissa scolded.

"We all knew it," Nathan insisted.

"You're right," Phillip said, "but it's still sad."

Nathan folded his arms and looked down.

"Can we stay here now?" Tucker wanted to know, clearly concerned. "For a while," Carissa said

evasively.

"How long?" Nathan demanded. "It doesn't matter," she told him. "I expect all of you to be on your very best behavior, especially while I work."

Nathan scowled, and Tucker frowned.

"Boys," she prompted. "I want your word that you'll be on your best behavior. Otherwise, we'll have to find someplace else to stay. Do you hear?"

Nathan nodded reluctantly, while Tucker whispered, "Yes, Mom."

Carissa gave Grace a squeeze. "That goes for you, too, young lady."

Grace made a solemn face and nodded, then she looked at Phillip and broke into a wide smile, even as her tears sparkled on her cheeks. "I'll be good," she said. "I promise."

Phillip chuckled. "I'm sure you will." Smiling, Carissa dried her daughter's face with her fingertips, as Odelia moved to the sofa and sat down, gathering the boys to her.

"Perhaps, after a day like today, we should all have a word of prayer together."

"Oh. Of course," Carissa said, bowing her head.

She kept her eyes open, however, and saw that her children glanced at each

other in some confusion. Had it been so long since they'd prayed together outside of church or around the dinner table? She promised herself that she would do better in the future. From now on, they would pray together every night. Resisting the urge to glance at Phillip, she listened as Odelia began to pray aloud, thanking God that Marshall was now happy and well in Heaven. She praised God for making it possible for her and her family to have the Hoppers as their guests and made it clear that they were welcome to stay as long as they liked. Finally, she asked that God's will be done in all their lives.

After the prayer, Carissa felt better, and her children seemed to, as well.

Even Nathan seemed more relaxed. As Phillip escorted Odelia to the door, Carissa thought that if he were not in the house, the situation would be very nearly perfect. Then she wouldn't have to worry about this hopeless attraction and these unwieldy emotions leading her into something that could only leave her and her children—brokenhearted.

Odelia took her leave of them, saying that breakfast would be served in the sunroom at eight in the morning. Carissa thanked her and waited for Phillip to go, as well, but he lingered a moment longer.

"Do you have everything you need?" "Yes. Everything." "Dallas will come by to stay with the kids in the morning."

She made an exasperated sound. "You can be very high-handed, you know. I'm used to managing my own children, thank you."

"Okay," he said. "I'll tell her to forget it. Don't get your feathers ruffled. I just thought that since we were going to be busy emptying the apartment..."

Carissa ached to tell him that she could take care of the apartment on her own, too, but she knew the truth. She couldn't move furniture by herself, and she couldn't ask Chester to take off work to help her when Phillip, a much younger man with free time, had already volunteered.

"Yes. Thank you."

He inclined his head. "See you at breakfast, then."

She managed a smile and nodded, wondering if it was possible to choke on one's pride. That thought plagued her for some time, but despite some tossing and turning, she slipped off to sleep and, after a surprisingly restful night, hit the ground running on Tuesday morning.

The first item on her to-do list was to cancel the phone at her dad's apartment and get a private telephone installed in the suite. That required nearly an hour of her time to arrange. Phillip showed up during breakfast in the sunroom. He wore cargo pants, a simple T-shirt and lace-up boots. A bandanna and a pair of gloves had been tucked into various pockets.

Carissa did her best to ignore him while she talked to the telephone company on her cell phone. Tucker and Grace ignored *her* while she snapped her fingers at them as they tried to use Phillip as a jungle gym. Somehow, he still managed to help himself to bacon, eggs, toast, orange juice and coffee. Then he cleaned his plate, tickled Grace and held off Tucker all at the same time. After that, Phillip coaxed the younger kids into eating their own meals, all before Carissa got off the phone. Throughout, Nathan glared sullenly and

picked at his food until he finally managed to clean the plate.

Carissa gulped down her cold coffee and rose to leave, anxious about emptying the apartment, but Phillip wouldn't budge until he'd slapped some scrambled eggs and bacon between two pieces of toast, wrapped the resulting sandwich in a paper napkin and thrust it into her hands.

"Go," he said, then, "Eat on the way." Biting her tongue rather than the sandwich, she headed for the door. The children quickly followed behind her.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Phillip barked, bringing everyone to a halt. "Where are they going?" He pointed to the children. "With us," she answered, frowning. "They can help."

He lifted a hand to the back of his neck. After a moment, he waved a hand. "Fine. Go. I'm right behind you. Just have to stop off and trade my car for a truck."

Sandwich in hand, Carissa herded the children into the minivan and set off for the apartment. By the time Phillip arrived, she'd eaten and gotten the key, as well as a number of empty boxes, from the manager. Thankfully, the manager told her not to worry about cleaning the place after it was emptied, saying that a special cleaning crew would have to be brought in anyway. Carissa unlocked the apartment so she

and the children could begin loading the van.

Phillip had borrowed a pickup truck from his brother-in-law, Dale, who was a carpenter, which made their job much easier. It also helped that most of her stuff was already boxed. Despite a fistfight between Tucker and Nathan, Grace falling and skinning her elbow, a broken lamp and a shattered picture frame glass, they made progress. In fact, they had moved a full load, shifted around Phillip's few things inside the hot metal storage space to make room, unloaded Carissa's boxes and were stacking them when Dallas arrived at the storage unit just before lunchtime.

Looking enviously at the neat

redhead's cool white capris and matching tank top worn beneath a turquoise gauze shirt, Carissa pushed her lank, plain brown hair out of her eyes and tried not to slouch in her baggy cutoffs and gray T-shirt.

"Have you come to help us move?" Carissa asked.

"In this sweltering heat?" Dallas returned, pushing her white sunglasses farther up her nose with a perfectly manicured fingertip. "Actually, I thought I'd go swimming at Chatam House." She pulled the shades down to look over them at the children. "Want to come?"

Both Tucker and Grace started jumping up and down, and even Nathan

yelled, "Yes!"

Phillip mopped his sweaty face with the bandanna and lifted his eyebrows at Carissa. It was only going to get hotter out here, of course, and things would go much more smoothly without the children underfoot. Still, her self-respect warred with her common sense and her concern for her children. In the end, of course, her dignity bowed to logic.

"Do you think you can manage all three of them in the pool by yourself?"

"Not only am I a schoolteacher," Dallas reminded her, "I'm also an excellent swimmer, lifeguard certified." "Please, Mom!" Tucker wheedled. "I'll stay with them until the two of you return, no matter how late," Dallas promised.

"We've already taken such advantage of you," Carissa argued. "You were with them for hours yesterday."

"For which I was amply rewarded with a steak dinner," Dallas replied, smiling at Phillip.

"You were?" Carissa said, her sharp gaze piercing Phillip.

He spread his hands. "So sue me. I wanted steak, and I don't like eating alone." He looked at his sister. "Will you talk to her, please?"

Dallas smiled at Carissa. "Look, I'd much rather take your children swimming than help you move your stuff. So, which is it? Do you listen to me whine and complain all afternoon, or do I get your kids out of this awful heat?"

Carissa gave in. "Thank you so much for taking the children swimming."

Dallas beamed, and the children cheered. Phillip stepped forward to kiss his sister's cheek.

"I'll take Grace's safety seat from the van, if that's all right," Dallas said brightly.

"Whatever you need," Carissa said, handing over the key.

"Let's go, bffn!" Grace cried, tugging on Dallas's arm.

Carissa had forgotten that *bffn* thing. She shared a glance with Phillip, who shook his head and shrugged.

"What is that?" she asked Dallas, but

the other woman just waved it away as she turned the children toward the front of the storage unit.

"Oh, it's nothing. Be right back."

Dallas and the children disappeared, chattering happily among themselves.

Carissa turned to Phillip. "You engineered this, didn't you?"

He reached around for another box and stacked it. "Listen," he said,

"contrary to public opinion, I do understand pride. But *you* need to accept friendship."

Carissa bit her lip and nodded.

"Besides," he went on, "it's way too hot for the kids out here."

He was right, of course. "I know. So,

thank you. Again. Now, let's get to it."

Chuckling, he went to work, pausing only to toss his sister a smile when she returned the van key to Carissa.

"Keep them out of everyone's way, will you?" Carissa instructed urgently as the vibrant redhead again disappeared from sight.

"Don't worry!" Dallas called.

"Relax," Phillip counseled. "Dallas is great with children. She likes them, and they like her. I think even Nathan likes her."

"Yes, well," Carissa admitted, embarrassed. "It's only men who I—" She swallowed what she'd been about to say, that it was only attractive men that Nathan disliked, men who could possibly replace his late father.

Phillip stopped what he was doing, a thoughtful expression on his toohandsome face, then continued working, all the while studiously avoiding her gaze. Carissa did likewise. Whatever the reason for his lack of employment, it wasn't because he was afraid to work. Far from it.

She didn't understand him. She didn't even want to understand him. She didn't want to get that close to him. But he definitely wasn't the lazy bum she'd tried to convince herself he was. Not that it mattered. For whatever else he was, she knew this much about him: Phillip Chatam was heartbreak

waiting to happen.

Chapter Six

Before long, Phillip had all the boxes neatly stacked, and still a good deal of room remained inside the storage unit.

"I think we might just be able to get everything in here," Carissa said. "Your share of the monthly rent ought to be minimal after this."

"My share of the monthly rent is already zero," Phillip told her. "I paid for six months in advance less than six weeks ago."

"And you're not going to let me pay you anything for my use of the space, are you?" "Nope. What would be the point in that? It would just be sitting there empty if you weren't using it."

She threw up her hands, torn between gratitude and irritation. She was finding it increasingly difficult to be irritated with him, however.

"Why did you lease such a large unit, anyway?" she asked as they pulled down the roll-up door and Phillip replaced the padlock.

"I intended to start accumulating some things so I could set up housekeeping in my own place. I thought it would be easier to keep it here until I decided where I wanted to live than to cart it up to the attic at Chatam House. That's why I didn't just stash my climbing junk with the aunties to begin with."

"You were serious about climbing mountains, then?"

"Yep. That was my last job."

"I see. And you quit because?"

"I quit because after some friends of mine were killed in an accident, I no longer felt I could give the job my best efforts."

"Of course. Makes sense."

"It would make better sense if I'd had another job to go to."

"Yeah, there is that. Speaking of which, I need to get this done so I can get back to mine."

"Let's go."

She walked to her van and got inside.

He followed her in the pickup truck back to the apartment, where she went through her father's belongings, boxing up what could be put in storage, setting aside what needed to go to Chatam House and throwing away or stacking for donation everything else. Meanwhile, Phillip broke down the beds, emptied the bookshelves and started hauling out what was ready to go.

Hilda sent Chester over with lunch. Before returning to Chatam House, Chester helped Phillip move a load of furniture to the storage unit, told them to call when they were ready for dinner and reported that the children had napped after swimming and were looking forward to a botany lesson that Dallas had promised them.

"Botany?" Carissa asked as the door closed behind her uncle.

Phillip smiled. "That's what we called it when we went tramping around with Aunt Mags as children. Dallas is going to show them all the shady, secret places on the estate where pirates bury treasure and enchanted princesses hide. The thing is, you have to learn the parts of the plants and their Latin names to hear the secrets."

"Sounds wonderful."

"It is. They'll love it."

"Better that than this," Carissa said softly, glancing around at her father's things.

They ate lunch bit by bit over the course of the afternoon as they worked. More than once, Carissa found herself reduced to tears. She also found Phillip right beside her, ready to distract or comfort her. One time, he had a fresh tissue to offer; another time, he handed her a glass of cool water. Sometimes, he would only pat her silently on the shoulder or squeeze her fingers. Once, he sat down next to her on the floor, held out a container of strawberries that Hilda had sent and bumped his shoulder against hers until she laughed and began to eat. When she came across a stack of greeting cards from her and her sister that their dad had saved over the years,

Phillip listened as she complained bitterly about her sister, Lyla. Then Phillip held Carissa as she wept because she knew that Lyla's absence and long silence must have hurt their dad.

"He's beyond that now," Phillip reminded her. "Perhaps he even understands it."

"Do you really think so?"

"I honestly don't know," Phillip admitted, "but I've always heard that whatever we need to be happy is in Heaven, so if your father needs that..."

She pulled away, drying her eyes on a paper napkin. "It occurs to me that I haven't read my Bible as much as I ought to."

"Hmm. That makes two of us."

"I'm not sure I really know where to start," Carissa admitted.

"Me, either," Phillip said, "but I know who does."

"Your aunts." Smiling, he nodded.

"It's something to think about. But

first..." Phillip waved a hand, indicating the apartment.

Sighing, Carissa turned back to her task.

They wound up skipping dinner. It wasn't planned. They just kept pushing to finish, and by the time they had emptied the apartment, it was past nine o'clock. They loaded her van with the items that she wanted to keep with her and drove them over to Chatam House, where Chester promised to unload them. Then, exhausted, dirty and famished, they grabbed burgers and fries on their last trip to the storage unit and ate them while sitting on the tailgate of the truck with the door lifted on the unit and the inside light on.

"Pathetic, isn't it?" she remarked after scarfing down half her burger.

"What?"

She jerked her head at the packed unit. "My father and I together couldn't even fill one storage unit with our belongings."

"What about me?" Phillip said. "Most of what I have in there is climbing gear that I'll probably never use again. The sum total of my worldly goods is a car, some clothes, two sets of bed linens, a box of dishes, a few books, the aforementioned climbing gear and..." He fished his cell phone from a pocket. "This. I travel light."

"You don't have three children to provide for, entertain and try to make comfortable."

"And it's a good thing. Right now, I can't provide for, entertain or make *myself* comfortable."

"You're doing as well as I am."

He shook his head. "No, I'm not. At least you have a family, and you've done a good job. You sure try hard."

She couldn't help being pleased by his praise. "Thanks, but it was lots

easier before Tom died. Oh, don't get me wrong. He was no businessman. Frankly, he didn't always work as hard as I wished he would or take problems as seriously as he should have, but he always made me feel that everything would work out and...when you come right down to it, two are better than one."

Phillip nodded his understanding and asked, "How did you meet him?"

"He was my high school sweetheart. We married as soon as I graduated, while he was still in college. I worked to put him through, and as soon as he got a good-paying job, we started our family. I was twenty-three when Nathan was born, and I didn't think life could get any better. Turned out I was right. Tom started his own business while I was pregnant with Tucker, and the money got tight right away. Oh, it was still great, but I worried. I wanted a girl, though, and Tom was a more-the-merrier kind of guy, so we had another baby." Carissa misted up, remembering. "Grace was so perfect, a sweet little doll. Tom just held her and cooed at her for hours on end. And she has no memory of him. None. After Tom died, Nathan picked her up and wouldn't put her down. I had to make him let go of her so she would sleep."

"He tried to step into his father's shoes at the very beginning, then."

"Yes."

"How old was he?" "Five and a half."

Phillip blew out a breath, taking that in fully. She waited patiently until Phillip spoke again.

"Do you mind if I ask exactly how Tom died?"

She had expected the question.

Eventually, it always came to this. "Tom was a self-trained mechanic. He was doing a side job to pick up extra money, helping a friend restore an old vehicle. It fell on him while he was working beneath it. We figure he accidentally kicked one of the jacks holding it up." "I see." "Couldn't have happened at a worse time," she went on numbly. "The business was faltering. He'd borrowed against the equity in the house, cashed in his life insurance, emptied the 401(k). I did my best to carry on." She shook her head. "I worked other jobs, too, but eventually I lost it all."

Phillip jumped off the back of the truck. "I'm amazed you held out so long! In this economy, I can't believe you could find a job that pays enough to feed your children, let alone house them."

"I do have some skill," she muttered.

"*I* have some skill," he retorted. "You have pure grit." He clapped a hand to the back of his neck, admitting, "You make me ashamed of myself."

"What?"

"I have three degrees. Did you know that?"

"What?" she repeated stupidly, uncertain where he was going with this.

"I have three degrees!" he all but shouted. "And do you know why I don't have a job?"

"No."

"Because I don't want one, that's why, not a normal, nine-to-five kind of job, anyway. I can't bear to be bored, you see. I want the new, the exciting, the different. Why else would I climb mountains?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "I never thought about it."

"Of course not," he retorted. "Why would you? You're too busy doing what you have to do. Me, I've always done just what I've wanted to do." He shook his head and pointed at the stuff in the bed of the truck. "Let's finish this. I want a shower and a shave and a cool bed, and in case you haven't noticed, I usually get what I want."

Carissa could have pointed out that he'd worked hard for no reason other than kindness that day, but she sensed that nothing she could say would be welcome at that moment. Besides, she was trying not to get too close to him. Wasn't she?

Confused, she threw away the trash

from their meal and went to work. Later, she would think about what he'd said. Or perhaps not. Perhaps it would be safer *not* to think about it. Now, if only she could somehow stop.

* * *

Her strength amazed him. Phillip thought about all that she'd told him, and somewhere along the way, he faced an ugly fact about himself: what she'd been through would have broken him. To have a spouse die because of a foolish accident, then to be left in debt with nothing to fall back on while trying to care for three young children? It boggled his mind. He couldn't imagine how

she'd managed to hold on as long as she had. Marshall had said that she was a poor businesswoman, but what else could she have done? Maybe her father thought she should have cut her losses sooner. All Phillip knew was that he was done moping and drifting and waiting for something to happen.

His parents were right. He'd been irresponsible, self-indulgent, immature. He'd played at life, and he didn't know how to stop. The deaths of his friends should have shaken some sense into him, but while he felt sick about what had happened, it hadn't changed anything for him, not like Tom Hopper's loss had impacted Carissa and her children. Tom Hopper was responsible for Carissa's

situation. He'd left her in a terrible mess. Yet, she spoke of him with such...love.

The sound of it in her voice turned Phillip inside out, and that worried him. In an odd way, it also gave him a feeling of hope and purpose. The whole thing was a conundrum that kept him arguing with himself as they unloaded the truck one last time then climbed into the cab for the drive back to Chatam House.

Exhausted, Carissa dropped off to sleep almost immediately. Relieved, Phillip let her snooze. His thoughts were uncomfortable enough without those big, deep blue eyes asking silent questions of him. Her old van sat in front of the great mansion when they arrived. It looked broken and tired, much like the lady herself at the moment. She slumped on the bench seat across from Phillip.

Dallas's little coupe was parked in front of the rusty old van, which told Phillip that his sister was as good as her word. He would owe her big-time for this one, and he didn't mind a bit. However, all he wanted was to put an end to this interminable day.

He parked the truck behind Carissa's van, released his seat belt to slide over and reached out to gently shake Carissa by the shoulder. She let out a soft little snore that pulled a smile from him. Did the woman *have* to be so endearing? Even her fits of temper made him want to hug her.

"Time to wake up, sleepyhead." She shifted toward him, mumbling, "Mmm, five more minutes."

He released her seat belt and slid an arm across her shoulders to steady her, saying with a chuckle, "It's not morning yet, silly girl."

She sighed deeply. "Oh, good. I'm too tired."

To his surprise, she snuggled close, knocking the clip out of her hair. It tumbled down in a twisted rope far longer than he'd realized it would be. He lifted a hand to touch its silky softness, and she slid her arms around his neck.

"Mmm," she whispered, "I've missed this."

Phillip froze, fearing that she was dreaming of her husband, but when she lifted her chin and kissed him, he felt utterly powerless to resist her.

"Carissa?" he asked against her lips.

Her lashes fluttered, and for an instant, her gaze seemed to lock with his. Then her lids shuttered down again, and she stretched upward, propelling herself into the kiss. Phillip folded her close and kissed her as he'd wanted to for some time, if he was to be honest with himself.

Oh, she was sweet, a perfect fit in his

arms. He'd known it would be this way, of course. From the moment he'd first laid eyes on her, he'd known, deep down, that this woman would fit into his arms, into his heart, as no one ever had.

He still couldn't figure out how she could ever fit into his life or vice versa. What on earth would he do with a woman like her, let alone her kids? He was less suitable husband and father material than the man who had left her in this fix. But that didn't keep him from kissing her as if she belonged to him.

Realizing belatedly that his heavy beard must be scratching her delicate skin, that he probably smelled like a goat, that he hadn't told her how beautiful she was, or how unworthy he felt to be holding her like this, he began preparing himself to pull back. First, he mentally put together an apology for taking advantage of her. She had been sleeping and no doubt dreaming of her late husband. He shouldn't have kissed her back. If she hadn't reached for him, looking so sweet, with her sleepy eyes and soft smile...

Suddenly, she shoved away, gasping, an expression of horror on her face.

"Oh, no!"

He'd waited too long. If he'd had to kiss her, why hadn't he called a halt to it a little earlier?

"It's not your fault," he began, but she'd already yanked open the door and run out of the truck. "Carissa, please."

He jumped out and followed her up the walkway, across the porch and through the front door, which she'd left wide open. By the time Phillip got inside, she'd torn past two of the aunties, Hypatia and Magnolia, and was literally sprinting up the staircase.

"Goodness!" Hypatia exclaimed, looking down at him in alarm. "Is everything all right?"

Sick at heart, Phillip closed the front door. What now? Go after her? Apologize? Explain? He couldn't even explain what had just happened to himself, let alone to Carissa. Or the aunts. His heart dropped into his stomach, which promptly turned over. Gulping, he made himself face the aunties, only to find that Dallas had appeared on the stairway above them.

"What's wrong with Carissa?"

He started trudging up the stairs. Weary words tumbled out of his mouth, all true, so far as they went. "She's overtired. And grieving. It's been a long, difficult day. Going through her father's things wasn't easy for her."

"The poor thing," Magnolia said. Hypatia merely looked thoughtful.

"She seemed very anxious to look in on the children," Dallas reported.

Phillip paused beside her on the stairs, suddenly so tired that he could drop where he stood. "I can't thank you enough for today, sis. Having the kids there to go through their grandfather's things was almost more than any of them could bear, I think."

Dallas smiled and patted his arm. "I'm glad I could help."

"I'd hug you, but I'm too filthy." Chuckling, she headed down the stairs. "I'll take a rain check."

"Good thinking." He nodded to his aunts. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to shower and go to bed."

Dallas bade him a good night, as did Hypatia and Magnolia. He went to his room and cleaned up. He should have known that Odelia would stop in as soon as he was done with his shower. Feeling defeated and wary, he dressed and went out to speak to her.

Of all the aunties, she was the one he had always found it most difficult to face as a misbehaving boy. Perhaps she wasn't the brightest of the triplets, but Odelia radiated an innocence and goodness that endeared her to the whole family.

Not for anything in the world would he ever tell her how he had taken advantage of a woman—or how deeply it had hurt to see Carissa's horror when she had realized just who she had been kissing.

* * *

What a heavy beard her nephew had,

Odelia mused. She found it a very manly trait. Her sisters found his scruff untidy, but they were less worldly than she was. She, after all, was a *wife*. Besides, she'd always harbored a secret appreciation for a rugged male, and this particular nephew of hers was nothing if not valiant.

Smiling to herself, she watched Phillip towel his thick, dark hair then smooth it with his hands. She saw his exhaustion, felt his impatience and sensed a good deal more.

"I gather that you've had a trying day, Phillip dear."

He shrugged and reached inside the bathroom to hang the towel. "Tougher for Carissa than me." Odelia struggled to contain her smile. So, he was more concerned for Carissa than himself, was he? "How is Carissa now? I understand that she seemed upset when she came in tonight."

Phillip turned away, but not before Odelia caught the troubled expression on his face. "I, um, haven't talked to her since we got back. I thought I'd give her some time. She's been through so much. Do you know about her sister?"

"I do," Odelia said. "It's no secret."

Her parents had gone through an ugly divorce, after which Carissa had stayed with her dad. Lyla, who was younger, had bounced back and forth from her mother to her father, always feeling that she was being made to choose between them, until she'd run away at sixteen.

"It's been nine years," Phillip confirmed, "and in all that time, there have apparently been only a few cards, none with return addresses. Lyla probably doesn't even know that her father is dead."

Odelia sighed. "How sad."

"And that's just the beginning," Phillip went on, telling his aunt how Carissa's husband had died, leaving her and the children in a financial fix. Odelia clucked her tongue. "And now she's essentially homeless."

"Well, she is not without friends or family," Odelia pointed out. "Be sure she knows you're praying for her." He gave her a limp smile. "I don't think that would mean much to her, Aunt Odelia, and I'm not sure God wants to hear from me anyway."

Her jaw dropped. Not want to hear from him? "God always wants to hear from His children."

"But if God is omniscient, He already knows what we need," Phillip argued. "He doesn't need to hear us bleating about it."

"If? Of course He knows what we need. That doesn't mean our prayers don't matter to Him."

Phillip blinked. "Still, He must value your prayers more than mine. I mean, as Christians go, I'm barely average." "Do you really think that's what matters? That God chooses favorites and only listens to them? Tell me, whose communication would Marshall have most coveted? Carissa, who stayed close to him, or Lyla?"

Phillip reasoned aloud, "Well, he'd have valued Carissa's words because she was so good to be there for him. She stuck by him when Lyla didn't, so he'd naturally have valued Carissa's presence and conversation. But he'd have been thrilled to hear from Lyla because she was his daughter, too, and he had to miss her, so ... "Shamefaced. Phillip blushed. "Both. He'd have coveted communication from both of

them, which means that God must value communication from His wayward children as much as His obedient children."

Odelia reached up to rub her palm against that manly scruff on his cheek. "I think we have been patient with you too long, dear boy." He tilted his head in question, and she dropped her hand, squaring her shoulders. "Tomorrow is Wednesday. I will expect you to attend the midweek prayer service tomorrow evening with us."

Phillip began shaking his head. "Aunt Odelia, I'm not ten years old, you know."

She raised a hand, palm out. "Spare me. Or humor me. Whatever it takes."

She lifted her chin, saying, "You will recall the date, please."

He frowned, then a light dawned in his eyes. "Your wedding anniversary."

"And therefore, you will gift me with your regular attendance, henceforth, at prayer meeting."

Sighing, Phillip nodded. Then he leaned forward and pressed a kiss to the center of her forehead. She barely managed not to wrinkle her nose. Perhaps the manly scruff was not so thrilling as she'd imagined, and perhaps any romance between Carissa and her nephew was wishful thinking. It hardly mattered. The most important thing was that her nephew's eyes be opened to an

important truth.

Perhaps his Heavenly Father would hear from him this very night. And maybe, just maybe, it would be the beginning of an ongoing conversation that would direct the rest of Phillip's life.

Chapter Seven

Sliding the tray of dirty dinner dishes onto the dumbwaiter floor, Carissa marveled again at the old-fashioned but highly useful convenience. The little elevator certainly made life easier in a house this size. She wondered why more homes didn't use them. Then again, how many residences of this size even existed?

After sending the tray and its contents down to the butler's pantry, she intended to quietly gather the children and slip downstairs with them to wash the dishes. As much as she wanted to avoid running into Phillip, she refused to leave the mess for Hilda. It was bad enough that Hilda now cooked for them, along with the rest of the household. She wouldn't make additional work for her aunt by leaving the cleaning for her, too.

She sent the dirty dishes on their way and turned back toward the suite, only to find Phillip standing behind her.

"I need to talk to you," he said.

She'd stayed inside all day just to avoid this very encounter. And to work, of course. Work was the excuse she'd given for not going downstairs for meals and for not joining Dallas and the children in the pool earlier this evening. It was perfectly legitimate. She'd made dozens of calls; she'd even reached her sales quota for the day—and avoided this very encounter. Until now.

"It won't take long," he promised, adding, "I have to leave for prayer meeting soon."

Carissa nodded, trying not to notice how nice he looked cleanly shaved and dressed in slim, dark slacks and a loose, pale olive shirt. Folding her arms, she leaned a shoulder against the paneled wall and noticed that he wore his loafers without socks. For some reason, that made her smile.

"I'm sorry about that kiss," he said softly, moving closer.

Just what every woman wanted to hear from the guy she'd awakened to

find kissing her.

"I shouldn't have done it," he went on in a husky voice, "but you were so irresistible, all sleepy and sweet and mussed." He backed up a step, clearing his throat.

Carissa chanced a glance upward, her heart in her throat. Irresistible? Her? Not on her best day had anyone described her as irresistible, let alone after a long hot day of hard manual labor. Any irritation she'd felt melted away like water droplets on a hot griddle. She tried to find something compelling to say and came up with "Oh."

He took her hand in both of his and said, "I don't want there to be any misunderstanding between us. I like you. I like you a lot." Her spirits literally soared—until he said, "But..."

Yeah, there was always a "but."

She snatched her hand free of his as he explained, "I'm not the right man for a woman like you."

"A woman like *me*?" she said. "A woman with kids, you mean."

"I can't even provide for myself," he went on. "How can I take care of a family?"

It was what she'd expected, of course, but the words hit her a reeling blow, nonetheless.

"Who asked you to?" she snapped. "I know, I know," he said soothingly, "but there's no in-between with a woman like you. There's either friendship or marriage."

"That's right," she told him, lifting her chin.

She barely heard him as he prated on about her finer qualities. Individual words snagged briefly in her mind then floated away: admiration, gumption, *attraction....* She heard the sound of his voice as he denigrated himself. He was irresponsible, selfish, immature. It was all nonsense, so she paid it no heed. Perhaps he wasn't conventional or predictable, but he'd taken responsibility for the needs of her and her children, at least in the short term, with no thought to his own personal comfort. As for immaturity, one man's

maturity was another's tedium. No, what he really meant was that he didn't, *couldn't*, love her. Perhaps because she had too many children. Perhaps because she just wasn't enough for him to get past that.

Gradually, she became aware of an ache in the center of her chest. Shifting, she put her back to the wall and balled her hand into a fist, pressing it against that ache. Finally, she heard him say, "So, friends, then?"

Relieved that he had come to the end of what had been a painful monologue, she nodded dully and managed to reply, "Sure."

He blew out a breath. "Good. I'm

glad."

"You're ready to go. Excellent." Both Carissa and Phillip turned their attention in the direction of the Chatam sister who had arrived on the scene. Odelia stood near the end of the landing at the head of the stairs, her arm linked with that of her husband. She wore an ivory dress and a large fabric flower in her fluffy white hair. A corsage of roses and camellias had been pinned to her shoulder

"We'd love for you to join us, Carissa," Odelia said. She patted Kent's arm lovingly. "It's our first wedding anniversary, and we'll be hosting a little celebration after prayer meeting."

Grinning, Kent touched the tip of his

nose to hers, and she giggled, making the ropes of diamonds dangling from her earlobes swing.

"I—I didn't know," Carissa apologized. "Um, congratulations."

"Thank you, but you couldn't have known. You're all welcome to join us."

"I'm so sorry, but no. I've already bathed the children and gotten them ready for bed. We're just going to clean up our dinner dishes and turn in."

"Oh, what a pity," Odelia said, tilting her head. "Well, Chester said you wouldn't much be in the mood for a party yet. He and Hilda are going to pass on the party and just stop in for cake. I know! We'll see to it that Hilda saves you all some cake."

"That's very kind," Carissa began, thinking that the children would be bouncing off the walls if they consumed any extra sugar. "I try to limit the children's sweets."

"So they'll really love it," Phillip assured his aunt indulgently.

Carissa shot him a look, but he merely lifted an eyebrow. Odelia turned then for the stairs, directing her husband and nephew to follow. "Come along. Don't want to be late."

Phillip gave Carissa a helpless shrug as he obediently trailed his aunt and uncle.

"We'll pray for you, dear!" Odelia called as they disappeared down the

stairs.

Carissa let her head fall back against the wall. She needed all the prayer she could get, if only because she was jealous of an elderly couple celebrating their first wedding anniversary.

* * *

The restaurant in the refurbished hotel in downtown Buffalo Creek provided a sumptuous setting for the anniversary celebration. Phillip toasted his giggling auntie and her beaming husband with a glass of soda and ate anniversary cake baked by Hilda but served by the restaurant staff. Quite a few people did the same, mostly family but also several friends. Phillip surprised himself by feeling like a fifth wheel. Everyone but him seemed to be paired up. Even Dallas arrived with a date, the same guy whom she'd sat next to during prayer meeting, Evan something, who looked as if he'd never done anything more strenuous than tie his shoelaces. Phillip discounted him as a serious presence in his sister's life the moment he met the man, but that didn't make him feel any less alone.

For the first time, he didn't quite know how to go forward on his own. Tonight at prayer meeting, he had found himself silently asking God to direct him. Spying his brother across the room, he wandered in that direction and minutes later had arranged to visit Asher in his law offices again next morning.

"Anything specific on your mind this time?" Asher asked.

Thinking about his conversation with Carissa earlier, Phillip made himself say, "Well, I'm ready to talk about that job now." So he wasn't what she needed right now. But that didn't mean that he couldn't ever be what she needed, not if he worked at it, did it?

Asher didn't exactly smile, but his face lightened. "Okay. I'll see what I can do."

Phillip wandered around the reception for a while longer, until he could hug Odelia and Kent, wish them happiness again and take his leave. He felt ridiculously lonely and as antsy as a beetle on a hot plate. He'd have gone for a long run in Seattle, but it was too hot for that here. He decided to swim laps in the pool at Chatam House, but after he climbed the stairs there, he couldn't make himself walk past Carissa's door.

He saw light coming from under the door, so he took a chance and tapped. She answered the door in her bare feet, wearing baggy shorts and an oversize Tshirt. She'd caught her hair in a loose ponytail just below her left ear, and he wondered why she never seemed to let it down.

"I thought you'd be asleep by now," he said, keeping his voice low.

"I've been working," she said, leaning a shoulder against the doorjamb.

He frowned. "You're making calls at this time of night?" It was nearly ten o'clock.

"No, no. It's a side job."

He shook his head, then his curiosity got the better of him. "What sort of side job?"

She waved him into the room and padded over to the sofa. Sinking down onto the cushions, she lifted a notebook computer onto her lap. He sat down beside her and leaned in to look over her shoulder. The computer screen was gray with white and black characters. None of it made the least bit of sense. "It's just gobbledygook."

"That gobbledygook translates into..." She made a series of keystrokes, and the screen transformed. "This." A sleek website popped up, complete with interactive graphics and pages of information, products and instructional videos. "We're adding widgets, phone apps and such."

"You can do that?"

"When I can get the work, I can do it." He reached around her and scrolled through the site. "This is way cool."

"This is what I do," she said dismissively, closing the laptop and setting it aside.

She put her head back and craned her

neck, relieving strain on her muscles, then covered a yawn with the back of one hand. "Sorry. Long day."

Phillip desperately wanted to put up his feet, loop his arm about her and snuggle, but he got the message. Their fledgling friendship wouldn't support that right now. She wanted him to go.

Reluctantly, he got to his feet, smiled and headed to the door, saying, "I won't keep you."

He was halfway across the room when she asked, "How was the party?"

Stopping, he turned back to answer. "Festive. Very festive."

She clasped her hands atop her knees. Very shapely knees. "Good."

He really should go. Instead, he said,

"Prayer meeting was good." Oddly, he meant it.

"That's ... that's nice."

Suddenly, he needed to tell her what he was thinking, needed to know what she thought. He took a step forward. "I didn't want to go. I just did it to please my aunt. I'm not even sure... That is, do you think God hears our prayers?"

Carissa seemed surprised. "Well, yes. Yes, of course."

"What I mean is, do you think He wants to hear our petty personal problems, our everyday, normal...junk?" She obviously had to think about it. "I —I do. Yes."

"So, then, you think He answers those

prayers, too?"

She nodded, then she bit her lip. "I used to. I mean, I do, but I guess I started doubting. I think I started to wonder if maybe He wasn't really listening anymore."

"I know what you mean," Phillip said, lifting a hand to the back of his neck. "When I was a boy, I didn't doubt that God heard or answered my silly little prayers, but as I got older, I started to wonder why He would bother."

"Why do we stop believing that He hears us?" Carissa asked. "Is it because we get beat up by life and think He's abandoned us?"

"Or do we just get so busy that we kind of forget," Phillip proposed, "and

we start to think that we're small and unimportant and that we don't count?"

"I don't know," she said, "but before long it's like that cousin we lost touch with or the sister we haven't heard from in years."

"I know what you mean," Phillip told her. "You start to think, 'Oh, they don't want to hear from me anymore.' But they do, don't they?"

"I think so," Carissa said. "At least, I think God wants to hear from us."

"Me, too," Phillip said. He hadn't thought so before, but he did now. Tonight, there in that room full of praying people, he had felt a part of something larger than himself and yet distinctly individual, as if God had singled him out.

"Sometimes I do wonder, though," Carissa admitted.

Phillip shook his head, suddenly quite sure, about her, at least. "No. Don't. God does want to hear our prayers. He wants to hear your prayers. I know He does."

"How can you be sure?"

"Because you are important," he told her. "You are important, Carissa. You're one of the most important people I've ever known. And if you ever doubt that, you just go look at those three kids in there." He jerked his head at the doorway to the bedroom hall, as certain as he'd ever been about anything in his life.

She stared at that doorway and smiled. Phillip walked out of the suite and went to his room, aware as never before of all that was missing in his own life. And why was that? Because he'd never had the time for such things before? Because he'd been too selfish and too wrapped up in his grand adventures to think of anything real and permanent?

Or because he simply hadn't met Carissa Hopper yet?

* * *

Asher phoned before seven the next morning to say that he'd set up a job interview for Phillip. Obviously, he'd called in a favor, probably the night before. Phillip obediently put on his best —okay, only—suit, said a stilted prayer and went to meet with the CEO of Sellers Financial Services.

Chuck Sellers was a nice fellow, about Asher's age and type. A businessman and professional through and through, in his mid to late forties, he looked fit and well-groomed, young despite the graving hair, the sort who had graduated college with a ten-year plan and stuck to it. In other words, he was Phillip's opposite in almost every way.

He glanced over Phillip's résumé, and they chatted for several minutes about

mountain climbing, fishing and such things. After a while, Chuck suggested that he might have some "contract work" for Phillip in the future. They shook hands and parted, each fully aware that they had adequately taken the other's measure. Phillip was not cut out for a job with Sellers Financial Services, but because he had the necessary skills and was Asher's brother, Chuck would throw him whatever work he could when he could, just not now.

Phillip's relief was palpable. As much as he acknowledged the need for a job, he thanked God that this particular situation had not panned out. Wandering over to his brother's law office to inform him how the meeting had gone, he found Asher and his assistant fooling around with a smartphone app that they had purchased to facilitate the recording of depositions.

"You have no idea what a leap forward in technology this is," Asher declared, sitting back to film himself.

"You know what would be really sweet?" said the young man currently clerking for Asher. "An app that would telecast live transmissions of court proceedings into classrooms. Think about it. You could sell subscriptions based on field of study, torts, criminal law and so on."

"Think about the obstacles and permissions," Asher replied doubtfully.

"There would be some courts where it would be okay. Enough, I bet. Besides," argued the clerk, "these so-called reality apps are where it's at these days, just like reality TV. Of course, the episodes could always be archived, too. You could build a whole reference library."

Asher considered. "It could work." He shook his head. "But we don't know anything about technology."

"Or anyone who knows anything about technology," his assistant opined.

"I do," Phillip heard himself say.

Both gazes turned his way. "Someone in Seattle?" Asher asked, shifting in his seat.

"Uh, no," Phillip muttered. "She's

here."

"Really?" Asher smiled, the light of speculation in his eyes. "Maybe you could ask *her* what she thinks about our idea."

"Maybe," Phillip murmured, his mind whirring with another possibility.

He recalled watching a video of a friend's climb on his own phone a few months ago and thinking how exciting it would have been if it had been live. He wondered if such a thing was possible. Carissa would know. It occurred to him that a live feed might have made it possible for help to reach his coworkers' party in time to save at least one or two of the climbers in that fall, and the realization shook him. Maybe it

wouldn't have helped, but it could save someone in the future.

"Let me ask you a question," he said to his brother. One question turned to ten as they probed the legalities of Phillip's proposal.

Phillip felt an excitement growing in him that he hadn't felt in a very long time, but he banked it. For one thing, he couldn't be sure of the viability of the idea. For another, something like this required careful planning and study. He saw no point in getting his hopes up until he'd done some solid research and crunched some numbers.

Talk turned, as it often did with Asher these days, to Phillip's niece, Marie Ella. "Why don't you come over tonight and see her?" Asher suggested.

Phillip balked, as he had every other time he'd been invited to get to know his new niece. Children who could walk and talk were one thing; infants were something else entirely. Shamelessly, he pulled out the only excuse he could find.

"Actually, my grief support group meets tonight."

Now that he thought about it, he really should attend tonight's meeting if only so he could urge Carissa to do the same. With her father's recent passing, how could she refuse to go? As predicted, Asher didn't argue.

"Well, I'm glad to see that my little brother isn't above getting some help when he needs it."

Phillip just shrugged.

"Let's say Saturday night, then, shall we?" Asher went on. "I'll invite Dallas and Petra. We'll make it a real family gathering."

What could Phillip do but chuckle and nod?

"Saturday it is," Asher reiterated happily.

Sighing inwardly, Phillip consoled himself with the thought that he'd have tonight with Carissa.

* * *

It was ten against one. Carissa knew it even before Phillip spoke. He had chosen his moment and laid his plan well. She'd come downstairs to fetch the children out of the pool so they could wash off the chlorine before dinner. Hilda and Chester served cold drinks to Hypatia and Magnolia on the expansive redbrick patio behind the great house, while Kent and Odelia paddled around in the big rectangular pool. As soon as Carissa called to the children, Phillip showed up with his sister.

"Dallas can do that," Phillip said, forestalling Carissa as she picked up the towels that the children had dropped at the edge of the patio. "I want to talk to you about tonight." His tone sounded conversational, but his voice was loud enough that everyone could hear. "What about tonight?" she asked, knowing full well what he was going to say.

"It's Thursday," he pointed out, "grief support meeting night."

She immediately demurred. "Oh, the children need me here."

"No, no, I'll stay with them," Dallas put in brightly.

"You should go, sugar," Chester instantly urged, while Hilda nodded.

"Oh, do go, dear," Hypatia implored, her sisters echoing her.

Even the children began to chant, bouncing up and down in the water at the edge of the pool. "Go! Go! Go!" Apparently, they believed that if she went with Phillip, they could continue to swim.

Carissa stood, the entire household against her, and frowned at her children. Then, resigned to her fate, she bent and picked up the towels, shaking them out one by one. It wasn't as if she'd be alone with Phillip, after all. They were going to a meeting. The children began reluctantly wading from the pool. Dallas caught the towels and carried them to the kids, talking brightly about the evening she had planned for them.

Carissa looked over to Hypatia, who sat swathed in a thick terry-cloth robe, her feet encased in pristine canvas slippers. A wide-brimmed straw hat perched atop her head, and large, dark sunshades shielded her face. Magnolia, on the other hand, had prepared for an afternoon poolside by simply trading her muck boots for a pair of sandals.

Neither Kent nor Odelia was so circumspect. He sported a bright Hawaiian print shirt and flip-flops with his dark, knee-length swim trunks, while she wore a fluttery multihued cover-up of organza petals over a bright pink tankini with skirt and surplice top. Her swim cap resembled a pink turban wrapped around an artichoke, which pretty much described her oversize earrings, necklace and bracelet, all of which she wore into the pool. Thankfully, she'd left the pink, kittenheel, open-toed mules poolside, along with a fluffy green towel.

"Phillip," Odelia called, "maybe you'd like a swim before dinner."

Carissa looked at his suit, rumpled now from a full day of wear, and the heavy shadow of his beard. Why did he have to be so very attractive?

"Maybe I will," he said with a blindingly white smile, which he then turned on Carissa. "What about you? Got time for a dip? Dallas will take care of the kids."

Suddenly, Carissa wanted nothing so much as to dive headlong into that cool, aqua-blue water with him, which was exactly why she dared not do it. "No way," she said. "Even with your sister's help, it'll take some doing to get all three of the kids showered and dressed in time for dinner."

"Perhaps you'll join us in the dining room this evening," Hypatia invited, but Carissa put her off.

"Oh, I intend to put the kids straight into their pajamas," Carissa told her. "We'd best eat in our rooms again. But thank you. Another time."

"All right, then."

Dallas herded the children toward the house, Grace holding her hand and chattering happily. Carissa started after them, only to find herself stopped by Phillip's hand on her wrist.

"Be ready about a quarter of seven."

She noted that he didn't ask; rather, he *told* her. Short of making a scene, she saw no option other than to swallow her indignation and go along with him. She gave him a curt nod and pulled away, hurrying after her children.

Behind her, she heard Hilda say quietly that the meeting would be good for her after Marshall's death. Tears sprang to Carissa's eyes, equal parts grief, frustration, anger and gratitude because she knew that these people had her best interests at heart. It wasn't their fault that she'd developed an unhealthy fascination for the wrong man.

Suddenly, she missed her dad so badly that she ached. If only he were still here, then she wouldn't be in this situation, living in the same house as Phillip Chatam. Then maybe she could keep her heart whole.

Chapter Eight

The ache stayed with her as she shepherded the children through showers and got them into pajamas. Dallas helped, primarily with Grace, who treated Phillip's sister like her new best friend, which turned out not to be too far from the truth, as Carissa discovered when Dallas left to eat dinner with her family downstairs.

"Bye, bffn!" Grace called after her. Laughing, Dallas waved and blew her a kiss on her way out the door. "What is this bffn?" Carissa

demanded, parking her hands at her

waist.

Grace just shrugged, smiling

enigmatically, but Tucker supplied the answer. "Best friend for now."

Carissa spread her hands in confusion. "What does that mean, best friend *for now?*"

"It's just till you and Phillip-"

Nathan abruptly launched himself at his brother, fists flying. "You take that back!"

The boys rolled across the floor, pummeling each other. Grace instantly burst into noisy tears. By the time Carissa separated the boys and sent off everyone to bed in sulky shame, the bell was ringing to let her know that a delivery waited in the dumbwaiter. Thoroughly exasperated, Carissa stomped off to fetch the heavy tray. She laid out the meal, trying to make sense of what had just happened. She suspected that Phillip was somehow to blame, but when she tried to question the children over dinner, they all clammed up. Dallas came back up later, so Carissa applied to her for an explanation.

"I'm afraid it's all my fault," she said apologetically. "You know how kids are about that 'best friends forever' thing. I try to avoid that in my classroom with 'best friends for now' because, you know, things change. Kids move. Relationships shift."

"I see." That seemed reasonable.

Smiling, Carissa glanced at the clock on the mantel and saw that she had fewer than ten minutes to get dressed. Or she could just refuse to go to the meeting after all. Without really deciding either way, she headed for the bedroom and quickly threw on a simple sleeveless khaki dress that buttoned up the front, then she stepped into white sandals. She splashed water on her face, took down her hair and brushed it, dabbed on some lip gloss and shoved a white headband into place. That would have to do.

Hurrying back into the sitting room, she found Dallas stacking the dinner dishes on the tray. Carissa went to help her, but Phillip tapped on the door before they had finished. Wiping her hands on a linen napkin, Carissa directed the children to help Dallas with the cleanup then grabbed her handbag and hurried out.

"You look nice," he told her. He had shaved and put on jeans and a light blue button-up shirt. "I especially like your hair."

Her hand went immediately to the long, shaggy strands that hung down her back. She rarely wore her hair down because she hadn't had time or money to see a stylist in far too many months. It needed a good trim and shaping. But such things were luxuries that she could no longer afford. Still, he seemed sincere. She remembered, belatedly, to thank him.

His hand hovered around the small of her back as they descended the grand staircase. That made her nervous because this suddenly felt too much like a date. She didn't know why she'd come with him anymore. Was it because everyone expected it of her, for the grief support meeting or because, despite everything, she *wanted* this to be a date? She very much feared it was the latter.

She must be insane. He had told her, *warned* her that he wasn't in the market for a ready-made family. He'd stated bluntly that he wasn't the man for her. He had apologized for kissing her, and still she found herself attracted to him. For that reason alone, she had no business going anywhere with him. She started to pray silently. She'd been doing that more and more lately.

Lord, don't let me make a fool of myself. I don't know what I'm doing anymore. I need You to guide me.

They reached the foyer and crossed the floor. Phillip opened the door. He smiled down at her, and she walked through it, out onto the porch. The evening heat enveloped her. Phillip followed and shut the door closed behind them. Side by side, they walked down the steps and along the walkway to his vehicle. He helped her into the car and went around to get in behind the steering wheel.

They reached the church within minutes and were greeted warmly by the rest of the group. What shocked Carissa most, however, was how easily she found herself being drawn into the discussion.

"In one way, it was a relief," she said about her father's death. "He had suffered so much. In another, purely selfish way, I can't help missing him. The one person I always knew I could count on was my dad." Phillip's hand squeezed hers tightly. Funny, she hadn't even realized they were holding hands until that moment. She dabbed at her tears with a tissue that someone passed to her and smiled. "Dad wasn't very

demonstrative. Hugs and kisses embarrassed him, but I knew how he felt."

"And he knew how you felt," Phillip assured her quietly.

After a while, talk turned to two women who had lost their husbands in the same auto accident. Their husbands hadn't known each other, but the women had become fast friends, united by their mutual loss.

"The funny thing is how much they had in common," one of them divulged.

"And how much we have in common," the other added.

"One of my friends who died was married," Phillip said. "His wife is a climber. She worked for the same company until she became pregnant with their first child. I used to joke that if I ever met anyone with whom I had so much in common as those two did, I'd marry her. Now all I think about is that she and their two kids were left alone. Mountain climbers are notoriously hard to insure, you know. I'm sure it's been tough for them."

People hastened to assure him that they would have Social Security to draw on, but Carissa felt stung. Had he contemplated marriage at some point? Was that what he wanted, a woman who could climb mountains with him? She couldn't imagine taking such chances when she had her children to consider. After the meeting, as they were walking back to the car, she casually expressed her condolences for his loss. "I didn't realize that your friends had families."

Phillip nodded. "Everyone has a family. Just the one was married, though. No, that's not right. The client was married, too, and I understand he left his family very well provided for."

Carissa swallowed a lump in her throat and nodded. "That's good."

"I didn't really think about it until I met you, frankly."

"Yeah, well, it's been harder for me than I realized it was going to be," Carissa admitted. "Even after the first shock of it, you don't think it's going to change absolutely everything. But somehow it does."

"I'm sure it does. How can it not?"

"I don't know. You just think you're going to keep things as normal as possible for your kids, only normal is never what it was, no matter what you do."

They got into the car and started back toward Chatam House. Thankfully, Phillip changed the subject.

"What do you think about a live-feed phone app?"

Surprised, she queried him on the subject, and they discussed the matter on the drive back. Phillip asked some pointed questions, which Carissa answered as best she could, telling him what she thought it would take to make something like what he seemed to have in mind work.

"So we'd need some hardware as well as the software," he realized. "Would that be terribly expensive?"

"Depends on your idea of expensive," she hedged. "I really couldn't estimate it without doing some research."

"Okay. So, are you too busy to do a little window-shopping tomorrow?"

She blinked at him. "You're serious about this?"

"I'm serious about looking into it." She shrugged. "Well, I'm working tomorrow, so I won't be free until after five."

"Okay." He parked the car in front of the house and killed the engine but made no move to get out. "Where do you think we should go? I don't usually shop for electronics."

She tried to think what was available locally then warned him against buying in person without checking online first. They got into the subject of computers and clones versus name brands. She had no idea of how long they sat there and talked until she suddenly yawned.

"I'm so sorry."

"No, I'm sorry," he said, opening his car door. "I've kept you up too late you and Dallas both."

She checked her wristwatch and was

stunned to see it was almost eleven. "Oh, my!"

They hurried inside to find Dallas snoozing on the sofa in the master-suite sitting room. She sat up groggily when they came in, reported that the children had been perfect darlings, which Carissa doubted, waved off Carissa's effusive thanks and trudged out onto the landing. Phillip told Carissa good-night, promised to see her the next evening and followed his sister out. Carissa looked

in on her sleeping children, turned off the lights and went to bed.

Her last thought was a repetition of her earlier prayer.

Lord, please don't let me make a fool

of myself over that man. She feared that was going to be more easily said than done, however.

Chapter Nine

"Oh, come on," Phillip said, holding open the door of the Buffalo Creek café the next evening. "Even if Hilda held dinner back for us, she'll understand."

Carissa shook her head, but the smile he'd been seeing all evening flashed again. "I just hate to take advantage of your sister like this," she insisted, even as she slipped through the door. "This is the third time this week that she's babysat for me."

He chuckled. "I'll make it up to her, I promise, *after* I eat. Besides, I feel like celebrating. I never dreamed we could find what we need at such reasonable prices."

He felt happy, for no discernible reason. Yes, they'd found the hardware they'd been looking for, but Phillip had felt a quiet delight since he'd awakened that morning. Just knowing that he was going to spend time with Carissa had pleased him, and that pleasure had only grown throughout the evening.

"It pays to do your research," she reminded him as he steered her toward a booth.

"It pays to have an expert doing the research," he countered.

"I'm hardly an expert," she demurred, sliding onto the hard seat.

"That's not what the owner of the

electronics shop said," Phillip reminded her. She deflected the compliment by looking around.

The picturesque diner, tucked into the back room of a dusty second and shop, featured lots of rusted, corrugated sheet metal, salvaged woods and cracked ceramics. A wholesome young waitress, costumed in overalls, her hair tied back with a bandanna, delivered menus printed on brown paper bags and water in pint jars, then trotted off to fetch iced tea while Phillip and Carissa perused their options.

Carissa chose a spinach, cheese and avocado sandwich with a side of fruit. Phillip unashamedly went for a gigantic chicken-fried steak, mashed potatoes, fried squash, cream gravy and biscuits. The food appeared quickly, too quickly to suit Phillip. They'd enjoyed a pleasant and productive time together. Carissa really knew her stuff, and Phillip naturally felt a certain excitement about the project, but what had him smiling, inside and out, couldn't be attributed to some possible phone app.

It was all wrong, of course. Carissa couldn't possibly be the woman for him. She needed a man who could support her and her children, someone like his brother, Asher, or his cousin Morgan, a college professor. Both were professional men with steady incomes. That type made good husbands and fathers. Didn't they?

On the other hand, not long ago his cousin Chandler hadn't been much more than a rodeo bum, and Garrett Willows. the aunties' former gardener, had been an ex-con before his pardon. They had both married and settled down happily. Everyone in the family had thought his cousin Reeves would remain a single father after his disastrous first marriage, but he'd married for a second time and seemed quite delighted with his new wife and family. Then there was his sister Petra and her carpenter husband, Dale. Phillip had expected Dallas to take a walk down the aisle one day but not ambitious, all-business Petra.

He just didn't know what to think anymore. He and Carissa had so little in common, but he felt something with her that he'd never felt with anyone else. He wasn't even sure that he liked it—even when it made him smile. She was just so prickly. He didn't think she even liked him, and maybe that was for the best. He decided to concentrate on the app for now and put the rest aside.

They finished their meal then chatted about the app and what they might do with it. He realized that he'd need to make some phone calls before they went any further. If none of the mountainclimbing guides were interested in wearing the tiny cameras that he and Carissa had found, then what would be the point in designing the application that would allow subscribers to follow the climb live?

Carissa insisted on returning to the house to be sure that the children had gotten to bed at a decent hour, even though Dallas would have made sure they had. They turned onto the drive in front of the mansion at ten minutes of nine. As the car crested the rise, however, Carissa sat up straight and let out a strangled sound. A late-model domestic luxury auto sat parked in front of the walk.

"Looks like the aunties have company," Phillip murmured, confused by her reaction. "Not the aunties," she said enigmatically. She bailed out of the car before he could ask her what she meant, not even bothering to close the door behind her.

Phillip hastily parked, hurried around to close the car door and followed. He found her in the front parlor with his aunts, Kent, Chester and a tanned, fit, blond couple, who looked as if they belonged in Hollywood rather than Texas.

Seated on the antique settee, the woman crossed her long, slender legs, displaying stiletto heels and a skirt both too short and too tight. She tossed a length of thick, golden hair from her slender shoulder with a bejeweled hand sporting long white-tipped fingernails and batted her false eyelashes at Phillip before smiling up at Carissa with frosty pink lips.

"Hello, sweetheart," she purred.

Carissa audibly ground her teeth together before spitting out two words that shocked Phillip to his toes.

"Hello, Mother."

Mother? Phillip had to work to keep his jaw from dropping to the floor. A second, closer look showed him the fine lines that no amount of cosmetics could hide or plastic surgery could erase.

"I'd have come sooner, darling, but I know how busy you are, and then, of course, there was the little matter of locating you."

"My cell phone number hasn't changed," Carissa pointed out drily.

Carissa's mother pursed her too-pouty lips. "What good would a phone call have done? You need more help than that, surely."

Hypatia cleared her throat, looked to Carissa and gently said, "Your mother seems to be of the opinion that she should be allowed to take your two youngest children away with her."

Carissa threw up her hands. "Oh, it's Grace *and* Tucker you want now?"

False eyelashes batted over eyes of such bright blue that they had to be the product of colored contacts. "We only want to help."

"By taking my children? You've been offering to *help* by taking Grace since Tom died. Why is Tucker suddenly part of the plan?"

"Why not Nathan?" Phillip wanted to know, insulted on the boy's behalf. Okay, so the kid could be a tad difficult, but he'd lost his dad, his home, his grandfather. He was bound to be touchy. That didn't make him a problem child.

Carissa's mother turned to Phillip, purring, "And you are?"

Realizing belatedly that it wasn't his place to speak, Phillip shifted from one foot to the other. "Phillip Chatam."

"Alexandra Hedgespeth." She introduced herself with an ingratiating smile. Waving a hand at the strange man standing behind her, she said, "My husband, Leander."

Nodding, Leander Hedgespeth leaned forward and stretched out a beefy hand. He looked to be decades younger than Alexandra, though if he kept frequenting tanning salons, no doubt it would soon be difficult to tell.

Blinded by Leander's professionally whitened smile, Phillip shook hands with the man then stepped back as Carissa baldly stated, "She doesn't want Nathan. Or Tucker. She wants Grace. She always has."

The truth of that was written all over Alexandra's heavily made-up face. She wanted Grace with the same lust that she wanted youth and beauty. Phillip saw it but didn't understand it.

"I love my granddaughter," Alexandra proclaimed grandly. "She's very special. But that doesn't mean I don't love my grandsons, too."

"Oh, please." Carissa frowned and folded her arms.

"You know she'd be happier with me," Alexandra argued. "They all would be." She smoothed her hair with one long-nailed hand, adding, "I just don't have room for all three of them right now."

"And since Grace wouldn't willingly go with you on her own," Carissa pointed out, "you thought you'd take Tucker along to entice her."

"You can't support them, Carissa," Alexandra accused. "Look at you! Reduced to taking charity from strangers."

"She has family here," Chester pointed out testily. "Where were you when the bank took the house in Dallas?"

"I've already told you that I don't have room for more than two guests," Alexandra snapped.

"Oh, and I suppose my brother did?" Chester shot back.

"Well, if you're willing to live like dogs in a kennel..."

"Dad was willing to do anything it

took," Carissa said in a voice trembling with anger.

"Anything but live like he had an ounce of pride," Alexandra grumbled. Odelia gasped, and Alexandra immediately backtracked, saying, "Oh, let's don't argue. I only want to help."

"You're not taking my children," Carissa stated firmly, "so get that idea out of your head now."

"But you obviously can't take care of them yourself."

"Oh, yes, she can," Phillip refuted, stepping up behind Carissa. "She's had some tough breaks, but Carissa is a computer expert, and she's an excellent mother. She's done just fine by her kids —better than most could have under the same circumstances."

"I have to agree," Hypatia said. "Frankly, we expected some upset within the household when Carissa and the children moved in, but we've hardly noticed their presence." She then turned a look on Carissa, adding, "We would actually welcome a bit more interaction."

Carissa bowed her head. "Thank you, ma'am. I'll bear that in mind."

Hypatia shot a loaded look at Phillip and said, "I expect you to remind her."

He opened his mouth then shut it again, settling for a noncommittal nod.

"Well, you can't stay here

indefinitely," Alexandra pointed out.

"I should think that would be for us to decide," Odelia said with great dignity. "I'll only be here until I save enough to get into a place of our own," Carissa declared. "That was always the intent."

"You'd have had an easier time of it if you'd have let me take Grace before," Alexandra declared.

"Never," Carissa vowed. "Grace is my daughter, and she's going to be raised by me. Period."

Alexandra made an exasperated sound. "Well, let me see her at least. Them, I mean. I came all this way can't I at least see my grandchildren?"

Carissa rolled her eyes. "Mother, do you have any idea what time your

grandchildren, most children in fact, go to bed?"

Alexandra rolled her shoulders and lifted her chin. "I only want to *see* them. I'm not going to wake them."

Phillip cleared his throat, leaned in close and murmured to Carissa, quite audibly, "Perhaps she could go upstairs and just look in on them *as she's leaving*."

Carissa frowned but gave in. "Oh, all right. Come on."

Alexandra shot Phillip a pleased, conspiratorial smile as she rose sleekly to her high-heeled feet. She slunk off after Carissa, who paused only to slide Phillip a frowning glance that seemed to ask if he was coming. Surprised, he didn't immediately follow—until he realized all three of the aunties were staring at him in silent rebuke. Bowing apologetically, he set out after Carissa and her mother. Behind him, he heard Odelia offer Leander Hedgespeth a cup of tea.

"Ah, no, thank you," he said heartily, "but I wouldn't turn down something stronger."

At that, Phillip had to pause and look back. His aunties exchanged expressions of confusion before Odelia offered, "A soft drink, perhaps?"

It was Hedgespeth's turn for puzzlement. "Uh, actually, I was hoping..." Leander's perfectly groomed brows rose in tandem the moment he realized that no alcohol would be available. Phillip choked back a chortle and sprinted off after Carissa and her mother. He caught them at the bend in the stairs. Alexandra was quietly haranguing Carissa about Grace.

"You know I can give her everything she wants."

"Children shouldn't have everything they want."

"You know what I mean."

"What I don't know is why you want her. It's not like you wanted me or even Lyla."

"That's not true."

"Couldn't prove it by me."

"Besides, it's not for me."

"Well, it's certainly not for her because you know that Grace doesn't want to live with you."

"She would if you'd stop tearing me down to her."

Carissa rolled her eyes. "You'd be amazed how rarely we discuss you, Mother."

"What about your husband?" Phillip heard himself ask. "How does he feel about raising a child?"

Alexandra stopped dead in her tracks right at the top of the stairs and swallowed, straining her too-taut throat, before she broke into a wide smile, her false eyelashes batting rapidly. "Leander would like to be a father, now that you mention it, and he would be a good one, too. No concerns there."

She stepped onto the landing and swept past Carissa, who hung back long enough to look at Phillip and mutter, "Finally, I get what's going on here."

Phillip could only shake his head. Obviously, all Alexandra Hedgespeth cared about was keeping her much younger husband happy. It was doubtful the couple could easily adopt, given the difference in their ages. Well, he would never allow that woman or anyone else to take Carissa's child from her. Never. He didn't question or examine that determination. It simply was. Clapping a supportive hand on Carissa's shoulder, he followed her onto the landing and

then along the left side of the landing to the master suite in the corner.

As soon as they came through the door into the sitting room, Dallas rose from the sofa, greeted everyone with a nod, shook hands with Alexandra, whom Carissa introduced as her mother, and watched in some confusion as Carissa led Alexandra through the back hallway and into the children's rooms. Phillip whispered that he'd explain later, then he followed Carissa and her mother, while Dallas left the suite.

They went first to the boys' room. Phillip saw that Nathan had constructed a barrier of pillows between his side of the bed and Tucker's, for good reason, apparently. Tucker sprawled over his half of the bed, an arm flung over the pillows so that one hand rested against Nathan's forehead. One of Tucker's legs dangled off the bed. Phillip made a mental note to see that the boys' bunk beds were moved into the room.

Nathan shifted from beneath his brother's hand and opened his eyes. He smiled wanly at his mom, frowned at Phillip, then his face froze like ice as his grandmother trilled her fingers in a little wave. He abruptly rolled over, giving her his back. Alexandra folded her arms irritably. Phillip resisted the urge to pat the boy in approval.

Carissa went around the bed adjusting Tucker's limbs, straightening the covers and whispering in Nathan's ear before leading the way out of the room. Alexandra followed and, as usual, Phillip turned to bring up the rear. To his shock, Nathan suddenly shot upright in the bed, reached across his sleeping brother and snagged Phillip by the back pocket of his pants. Too stunned to do anything more than look down in surprise, Phillip stared openmouthed.

"Don't let her take Grace," Nathan pleaded in a whisper. "Please. Hide her if you got to."

Phillip blinked and let a hand fall on the boy's thin shoulder. "Don't worry. Grace isn't going anywhere. Your mother would never allow it." "She might not be able to stop it. We got no money."

"She's not by herself," Phillip assured the boy. "She has all of us Chatams behind her now. Your family will not be broken up. I promise."

Nathan looked vastly relieved, but as he sank back onto his pillow, his arms folding behind his head, some of his old contrariness reasserted itself. "You don't really got anything to say about it, though, do you?"

"Then why did you ask me for my help?" Phillip countered quietly, turning away. He glanced at Tucker, amazed to find the boy still sleeping peacefully. Even in sleep, he looked like the charming little scamp that he was.

"Don't worry," he said to Nathan before slipping from the room.

By the time Phillip made his way to Grace's room, Alexandra was sitting on the side of the bed with the girl in her lap. Either she had not been asleep, either, or had awakened easily. Carissa seemed none too happy about the situation, but Grace appeared pleased enough to see her grandmother, whom she called Lexi.

Alexandra made a great fuss, hugging Grace and petting her hair. She talked about buying pretty dresses and dolls. Once she asked, "Would you like that, sweetheart?"

Grace smiled and nodded

enthusiastically, but Phillip had the feeling that Grace was indulging her grandmother rather than the other way around.

After a few minutes, Carissa walked forward and held out her arms, saying, "It's time you were asleep, young lady."

Grace went immediately and without argument to her mom, smiled down at her grandmother and chirped, "Good night, Lexi."

Alexandra rose, dabbed at her eyes and burbled, "Good night, my darling." She hurried from the room as Carissa

tucked Grace into bed. Phillip stayed long enough to drop a kiss onto Grace's forehead before following them both into the sitting room. Alexandra stood with her hands over her face as if hiding tears, but Phillip noticed that when she dropped them, her makeup still looked perfect and her eyes were dry. She smoothed the hem of her knit top and swayed over to Phillip, doing her best to appear sad.

"I'm sorry that the Chatams have been dragged into all this," she said. "I'd have prevented it if I could have."

Phillip drew his brows together. "The Chatams haven't been dragged into anything. My aunts are always eager to help when they can."

"Oh, I'm sure that's true," Alexandra hastened to say, "but it wasn't necessary in this case." "No? You said yourself that you don't have room for Carissa and the children."

"Well, not all of them," Alexandra hedged, "but we'd gladly do what we can. I mean, family should help family. Don't you agree?"

"Of course."

"And family should go to family first."

"Which is exactly what Carissa did," he pointed out, "by going to her father and then her uncle."

Alexandra ignored that, saying with some exasperation, "If she'd let me provide a home for Grace and Tucker, this whole thing would have been far easier." "For whom?" Phillip had to ask. "Not for Carissa, and not for the children, either."

"Just because my daughter is stubborn and unforgiving," Alexandra began hotly, but Phillip was having none of that.

"You say 'stubborn.' I say

'determined,' and thank God for it, because from what I can tell, she's made it this far on sheer determination and not much else."

"You don't understand," Alexandra insisted, shaking her head. "She's never forgiven me for following my heart, no matter how many times I've tried to explain. My daughter is stubborn and unforgiving. And Nathan is just like her."

"I don't pretend to know what's between you and your daughter," Phillip stated firmly, feeling his temper spike, "but Nathan is a child, a little boy who has lost way too much already. All Nathan is guilty of is doing his best to help his mom, who hasn't exactly had it easy the past several years."

Alexandra waved that away. "I've been dealing with Carissa and Nathan all that time. I've tried and tried with both of them. I really have, and it's gotten me nowhere. Neither of them cares whether I'm happy or not."

"Carissa is your daughter. Nathan is your grandson," Phillip lectured. "That

entitles them to unconditional love from you. They are not here to feed your emotional needs. It's the other way around. That doesn't mean you have to support bad behavior from either one of them, but you don't get to sweep Grace and Tucker off to some fairy-tale life and relegate Nathan and Carissa to a life of misery without them. Carissa and her children are a family. You have no right to interfere with that."

"I have more right than you do!" Alexandra retorted.

"Maybe so," he conceded, "but Carissa's got me in her corner, just the same, and all the rest of the Chatams will line up right behind us. Mark my word. And for what it's worth, lady, in my opinion, Carissa and Nathan each are worth a hundred of you because at least they are honest about what they feel and why."

Alexandra squared her shoulders, let out a huff, spun on her heels and marched out of the room, saying grandly, "I'll be back."

Growling, Phillip executed his own about-face and nearly bowled over Carissa, who stood there staring at him as though he'd grown a third eye. Embarrassed, Phillip cleared his throat.

She swept past him and went to the sofa. Dropping down on the cushion, she put her head in her hands. Phillip followed warily. She suddenly looked up, sniffed and glanced away.

"Are you crying?"

Shrugging, she shook her head. "I never know whether to laugh or cry where my mother is concerned."

"Ah."

She scooted over a few inches. He took it as an invitation to sit down and lowered himself gingerly to the sofa beside her. Carissa clasped her hands together and stretched them out in front of her.

"My mother left my dad for another man," Carissa explained. "She needed 'excitement,' someone with 'style.' Apparently being faithful and hardworking rules out those things in her world."

"So she left him for Leander."

Carissa looked up in surprise. "Oh, my, no. Leander is husband number four, maybe number five or even six. There are long periods when we don't see or hear from her at all, so who knows?"

"I see."

"This thing with Grace really got serious after she married Leander, maybe three and a half years ago."

"I'd guess that he wants children and she can't give them to him," Phillip ventured.

"You may be right about that," Carissa mused. Sighing, she passed a hand across her forehead and confessed, "What scares me is that I might eventually have to let her take in my children because I won't be able to provide for them myself."

"That's not going to happen."

"If I can't make a home for them on my own, she might be able to make a court case," Carissa pointed out in an agonized whisper.

Phillip smiled supportively. "I doubt it, but if she should try, I'm sure that my brother, Asher, will represent you. He's an attorney, you know."

Carissa threw up her hands at that, scoffing. "How can I afford an attorney when I can't even afford an apartment?"

"Now, now." Phillip looped his arm around her, pulling her close to his side in an effort to calm and comfort her.

"There's no sense in borrowing trouble. Has your mother said anything about bringing a court case?"

"No," Carissa admitted in a small voice, relaxing against him and laying her head on his shoulder.

Phillip smiled and resisted the urge to kiss the top of her head.

"Well, then. We won't worry about it. But we will be prepared in case she starts trouble. I'll speak to my brother about it. Okay?"

She hesitated for several long seconds, but then she nodded. "Okay."

He folded her a little tighter.

"Everything's going to be fine. You'll see."

"You don't know that," Carissa argued, but he had the feeling that it was just for form's sake.

"Everything is going to be fine," he repeated, fighting to keep a chuckle from breaking into his tone. Alexandra was right about one thing. This woman was nothing if not stubborn. Right now, that didn't seem like such a bad thing to him.

Carissa said nothing for a long while, but then her hand drifted up to brush his chest, and she turned up her face, whispering, "Thank you."

He didn't realize that she meant to kiss him until she did it, her lips pressing lightly against his. His heart swelled, and without thinking, he angled his head, drawing her nearer—until he caught movement from the corner of his eye and froze. Instinctively, he lifted his head and looked in that direction.

Nathan peeped out of the hallway entrance.

Taking her cue from Phillip, Carissa straightened, turning her attention in the direction of the hallway, but Nathan had already jerked back out of sight.

Phillip wisely let his arms fall away and a moment later folded his hands over his knees.

"Well," he said lightly, "we've all had an emotionally trying evening. I'll let you get some rest."

"Yes, thank you." She sounded tired and...disappointed? Embarrassed,

perhaps, but not disappointed, surely. Getting slowly to her feet, she added, "And thank you for what you said to my

mother, too."

Ah. That explained the kiss, then. Gratitude, not attraction. If anyone was disappointed, it was him, but he tried not to let it show.

"No problem."

Shooting another glance at the empty hall doorway, he left her and went in search of his aunties. He'd meant what he'd said about Carissa having the Chatams behind her. Asher would most definitely help, and the aunts, too, but Phillip would leave nothing to chance. He wanted the entire weight of the Chatam influence behind Carissa and her children, whether she needed it or not. Just in case.

Chapter Ten

Pirouetting in the center of the floor, Grace bumped into Tucker, who promptly circled her throat with his forearm.

"Now I got a hostage."

"No fair!" Nathan bawled. "Mountain lions don't take hostages."

Carissa covered the mouthpiece of the telephone headset with one hand and gestured sternly toward the bedroom with the other. She knew it was unfair to ask them to play only in their rooms, but she dared not work in the master bedroom and let them play here in the sitting room unsupervised. They'd already knocked over the lamp once. Thankfully, it hadn't broken. Besides, the bed did not make a comfortable workspace, especially when she was frustrated because she hadn't closed a sale all morning.

Tucker made a growling sound, showing his displeasure, while Grace sighed then plopped down among her coloring books and dolls to begin gathering them. Nathan, as usual, started to argue.

"Aw, Mo-o-om. It's no fun in there."

Carissa held up a finger and made the keystrokes necessary to activate the microphone in her headset via her laptop. "That's right, sir. Twenty-fourhour-a-day access by telephone and online. If you're at your computer, you can go to our website now and see the levels of service available. I'll be happy to send the link and wait for you to connect." Glaring at Nathan, she typed in the email address and routed the link. While her client made the connection, she muted her end of the connection again and shook her finger at the children.

"I am sick and tired of telling you three to calm down."

"We want to go out," Nathan whined. "I can't go outside now. I have to work."

"We can go out by ourselves. We

won't get into trouble."

Before she could do more than roll her eyes at that, a knock sounded on the suite door, and Tucker scampered to answer it. Odelia and Phillip entered the room. Odelia wore a huge cardinal-red hat and a white dress with a pleated skirt and big red polka dots. White, feathered balls swung from her earlobes. Phillip wore his usual cargo shorts and T-shirt, along with a wide grin.

As the children watched, fascinated, Odelia tugged on a pair of white, lacy gloves, announcing grandly, "We've come to take the children to the park."

Tucker literally crowed at that news, while Grace leaped up and clapped, pirouetting in midair. Carissa could have cried with relief.

"Oh, thank you, but are you sure? It isn't too much trouble?"

"No, no. It's all planned," Phillip said with the wave of a hand. "A Saturday in the park will be fun for all of us. Hilda is packing a picnic basket, and Kent is bringing around the car. We'll have them home before the hottest part of the day."

"In time for a cool swim," Odelia put in.

Carissa closed her eyes in gratitude then held up a hand for quiet as her client came back on the line. "Yes, that's correct. Seven ninety-nine a month includes automatic backup and storage of everything that appears on your desktop." She nodded and went on. "You just fill out the online form. I'll send you a confirmation email with telephone numbers. I suggest you make a note of them. Click on the link to activate the account, and the icon will appear on your desktop. You can find the telephone numbers there, too, but if your computer is on the blink, you'll want those numbers handy elsewhere." After another moment she was able to say, "Thank you. We appreciate your business." Finally, a sale.

She ended the call and addressed Odelia. "I'm sorry, but that's the first sale I've made today. I couldn't put him on hold again."

"No need to apologize. You're

working. We'll just get out of your way."

"Come on, kids," Phillip said, lifting an arm.

"Everyone have their shoes?" Carissa asked.

While Tucker and Grace hurried to find their discarded shoes, Nathan hopped out of reach, shouting, "I'm not going! I'm not going!" With that, he bolted for the bedroom.

Stunned, Carissa sat frozen.

Now what? Hadn't he just begged to go out?

She stared helplessly at Phillip, who said pointedly, "He saw us last night." Carissa shook her head. "I don't understand. Saw us?"

Phillip gusted out a sigh and shot a glance at Odelia, muttering, "On the couch."

Carissa recalled the kiss, her cheeks heating. She quickly looked away, her hand going to her throat.

"That...that was my fault." She shoved aside the laptop and got to her feet, tearing off the headset and dropping it to the sofa cushion as she started forward. "I'll explain it to him. When he knows what his grandmother attempted—"

Phillip stopped her in midstride, his hands clasping her upper arms. "Are you sure that's wise?"

"You're right. Nathan already carries a heavy enough load as it is, and that's my fault, too. He's tried to replace his father with the younger children, and I've let him, even though I've known all along that it's too much responsibility for a boy his age."

"Let's not place blame," Phillip said, his voice wrapping around her like a warm blanket. "I'm sure you've done what you thought was best."

"Perhaps Phillip should speak to Nathan, dear," Odelia suggested gently. "Me?" Phillip queried.

"Man-to-man, so to speak," Odelia said.

"Oh. Well, if you think that'll help."

Carissa hesitated, one hand going to the back of her neck. "Uh, I—I'm not

sure that's... I mean, I doubt he'll be receptive."

Phillip shrugged. "Won't hurt to try."

Carissa sucked in a deep breath then let it out again. "Go ahead."

What was the worst that could happen? Nathan would dig in his heels and refuse to go to the park with his brother and sister. It would serve him right, and she could still get some work done. Maybe she'd have an opportunity to speak with her eldest son in private, too.

Folding her hands, she smiled lamely at Odelia Chatam Monroe and sent up a silent prayer. Phillip gathered his courage as he marched toward the bedroom. He didn't knock on Nathan's door—why give the boy another chance to reject him?—just opened it and stepped inside.

Nathan didn't waste any time beating around the bush. Phillip had barely closed the door before the boy rolled into a sitting position on the side of the bed and demanded, "Are you going to marry my mom?"

The question took Phillip by surprise, but a moment's reflection lessened the shock of it. Of course Nathan would view every man who came into Carissa's life as a potential husband. Phillip himself had already known that, which meant that he should have been able to give Nathan the firm denial that he so obviously wanted.

What he actually said was "I doubt it." *That* was more stunning than the question itself.

Nathan glared and asked, "How come?"

Phillip searched for an answer. "For one thing, people who get married should be in love."

"And you're not in love with my mom?"

Oh, boy. He'd walked straight into that one. After gasping like a fish out of water for several seconds, he did the only thing he could: he answered honestly. "I don't know."

"Why not? On account of us kids?"

"No. I'll admit that I've never thought of myself as husband or father material, but if I was going to be someone's father, I would be honored to be yours."

Nathan thought that over some then shook his head. "Grace and Tucker maybe, but not me. I know you don't like me."

"That's not true. I have a lot of respect for you, Nathan."

"Like I'd believe *you* about anything," Nathan sneered.

"I don't like the way you act sometimes," Phillip admitted. "But you stepped in to help your mom after your dad died, even though, after her, you're the one who misses him most. I'm not sure I'd have done that myself. I'm more like Tucker, frankly—all fun and games."

Nathan narrowed his eyes behind the lenses of his glasses then looked away. "Tucker's okay most of the time," he

muttered.

Phillip hid a smile. If Tucker was okay, then he, Phillip, must be okay, too, in his way.

"Put your shoes on," he said. "Let's go to the park."

Making a great show of his reluctance, Nathan slowly got off the bed, went to the closet and found a pair of shoes. He stomped his feet into them without untying the strings and dragged himself toward the door. As he stood next to Phillip, he looked up and asked, "My mom's pretty, isn't she?"

Phillip's breath caught. Did this kid actually *want* him to marry his mom?

"Your mom's beautiful," Phillip told him flatly. "But I'm not sure she really likes me very much."

Screwing up his face, Nathan gave his head the barest of shakes, as if to say that Phillip was too stupid to live. "She likes you."

Phillip tilted his head, studying Nathan like a bug. "What makes you think so?"

"She kissed you, didn't she?"

Phillip's heart skipped a beat, but he kept his expression blank. "She did, but maybe not for the reason you think."

Nathan rolled his eyes, yanked open the door and marched out, as if to his doom. Phillip stood there a moment longer, wondering if Nathan knew something he didn't or if wishful thinking was about to get him in way, way over his head.

By the time he entered the sitting room, Odelia and Carissa had herded the children to the door. Phillip joined them there, and they all quickly took their leave of Carissa. Phillip ignored her curious looks, uncertain himself what had really happened with Nathan. True to his nature, he simply put the matter out of mind.

Phillip was used to an active lifestyle, but in the space of the next few hours, the children wore out him and the other two adults supervising them. Phillip wound up chasing Nathan and Tucker all over the park while Odelia and Kent took turns pushing Grace on the swings and the merry-go-round. She obligingly matched her pace to theirs, making Phillip muse that Grace often seemed to be a happy adult in a child's body, while too many adults behaved like spoiled children. Nathan and Tucker, on the other hand, were active little boys. They went from driving on imaginary roads to fighting imaginary battles to riding

imaginary dinosaurs, and all of it involved running, jumping, climbing, hiding and making loud noises. Phillip had his hands full making sure they didn't get lost or hurt. He was ready to tie them to the picnic-table bench by the time they all sat down to eat lunch.

Thankfully, Hilda had packed such a hearty meal, crammed with all their favorites, that the children stuffed themselves. Afterward they could barely keep their eyes open. Odelia spread a blanket in the shade of a tree, and even Nathan dozed for a few minutes, but then he and Tucker were up and off again. Odelia and Kent looked positively exhausted by the time they got the picnic

basket repacked and the children loaded back into the car. Even Odelia's hat was drooping.

On the way home, Kent asked the children how they liked living at Chatam House. Tucker and Grace had only good things to say, but Nathan shrugged and grumbled, "It'd be okay if I had my own bed."

Phillip decided then to get those bunk beds moved into the master suite ASAP.

Hypatia and Magnolia agreed to watch the children swim in the pool while Phillip, Odelia and Kent went upstairs to clean up and, in Kent and Odelia's case, nap. Phillip was expected at his brother's for an early dinner, and he'd promised to pick up Dallas on the way. After delivering the children back to the suite in their wet bathing suits and towels, he asked Carissa for a report on her day and was pleased that she was pleased.

"I know you engineered this outing," she said, "and I thank you."

"Well, if it helps you work ... "

"Yes," she said, "the more money I make, the sooner we'll be out on our own." That wasn't his point, but he let it stand. "This will all be so much easier once school starts again," she went on. "We'll be in our own place, and even Grace will be out of the house half days."

"That will be helpful," Phillip

commented idly, thinking how to broach the subject of the bunk beds. "Listen, I know you don't want to get too comfortable here, but Nathan really wants his own bed. Would you mind if I set up the bunk beds?"

She seemed troubled by the prospect. "Oh, I'd hoped to avoid that."

"I think it really would help."

"It would give the boys more room to play," she considered.

Phillip took that as consent and promised to take care of it then hurried off to pick up Dallas.

They arrived at Asher and Ellie's sprawling, modern, blond-brick house just as their sister Petra and her husband, Dale, did. Dale was in the construction business with his father, and Petra had taken over the day-to-day operation of the office. Phillip still couldn't get used to seeing his once-quite-sophisticated sister in jeans and casual tops, but he loved the fact that she always seemed to be smiling. Petra had a soft look about her now, a warmth, that he'd never suspected was part of her personality. Dale seemed his usual easygoing self, nodding as Phillip asked to borrow a truck again in order to move a set of bunk beds from storage to Chatam House.

"I'll do you one better," Dale said. "I'll help you move them later tonight." Phillip grinned, and they shook hands on it. "Can't pass up that deal."

Asher let them in and led them to the living room, his two-month-old daughter cradled in the crook of one arm. She didn't stay there for long. First Dallas, then Petra snatched her up. When Ellie called from the kitchen, Petra passed the baby to Dale as casually as if she was passing him a puppy or a pillow, and Dale took her just as easily, cradling her tiny head in his palm and making a bed for her of his forearms. She kicked and cooed and generally seemed to be trying to join in the conversation as the men chatted about golf and baseball and Asher's passion, soccer. Then, suddenly, for no apparent reason, she screwed up her little face and screamed. Horrified,

Phillip couldn't believe it when both Asher and Dale began to laugh.

"Guess we know what that means," Asher announced, rising from the sofa in the sunken living area. Before he could say or do anything else, Ellie swept in to throw the baby onto her shoulder.

"I'll take care of it."

She went out again, and only as she and the infant disappeared did Phillip realize that they had taken a rather loamy smell with them.

"That child cannot abide a dirty diaper," Asher said with unusual pride. Phillip could only shake his head.

"Ought to be a snap to toilet train, then," Dale observed idly.

Phillip coughed into his hand and changed the subject. "We have a situation at Chatam House I need to discuss with you, Ash."

He gave his brother a quick rundown on Carissa's situation with her mother. As always, Asher listened attentively. Finally, he spoke.

"Well, there's nothing to be done unless this Alexandra acts. If she forcibly takes one or more of the children, or if she files suit, even if she should file a complaint with Child Protective Services, then Carissa can intervene legally. Otherwise..." He spread his hands.

Phillip nodded. "I understand. But if

the need arises, you'll help Carissa protect her children, won't you? She's a wonderful mother, and she's done the very best she could under very tough circumstances. I want her to know she'll have help."

"She's Chester's niece and the aunties have taken her in," Asher replied. "That's enough for me."

"Great," Phillip said, relieved—not that he'd really doubted Asher would help—but then Ash grinned.

"With you championing her cause, though, I'm wondering if legal representation is enough. Maybe we should be preparing to welcome her to the family."

Phillip's mouth fell open. "Why does

everyone automatically assume-"

The words died as Ellie

unceremoniously dropped his niece into his hands, declaring, "Sounds like you should be getting used to this. I have to get back to the kitchen and take care of dinner."

Phillip made a strangling sound and bobbled the child but managed not to drop her. She seemed not to mind, if her toothless grin was any indication. To his surprise, she stared straight into his eyes and lifted a brow as if to ask what he thought of her. Having never held a baby before, he was too busy trying not to break her to form many impressions at first, but soon he began to realize how

soft and tiny she was. Soft, tiny and very real. This was a person, a whole, complete person in a tiny, gurgling, strangely adorable package.

He thought of Grace, and then he remembered a box of baby photos that he'd stumbled across—well, accidentally dumped—while helping Carissa clean out the apartment. Images flashed before his mind's eye: Carissa with very long hair, holding one of the boys on her lap and mugging for the camera, baby smiles and baby feet, fat tummies and chubby hands, a single tooth in a wide smile, drooping diapers and first steps.

He concentrated on the niece he'd avoided all these weeks, this little bit of

helpless humanity in his lap. Soon she would be as engaging and charming as Grace. Or not. He couldn't really imagine any little girl being as engaging and charming as Grace, but Marie Ella would almost certainly be bright and athletic and treasured, and he would love her. He did love her, soft, sweet, little thing that she was. He swallowed a lump in his throat, thinking of her growing up. She would change so much over the weeks, months and years ahead.

So would Grace and Tucker and Nathan.

He realized suddenly and with surprising gratitude that, in some way, Marie Ella would always be a part of his life, but he wondered if he would be around to see the changes that time would bring to the Hopper kids. The insight that he wanted to be there to see them grow stunned him. He could only imagine how much Carissa wanted to see her own children grow up, what it would do to her if Alexandra for some reason gained custody of one or two of them.

No, that could not happen.

Lord, he prayed silently, staring down at his wriggly little niece, please, don't let Carissa be separated from her children. Make the path easier somehow for all of them. She's had enough pain, enough loss, enough difficulty. For some reason, he thought of the phone app. They'd just been playing around with it, but could that really turn into something profitable? He went over it in his mind, realizing that he needed to make some phone calls, ask some questions.

A poke in the shoulder made him jump.

"Well?" Petra asked as she took the baby from him.

He blinked at her, wondering when she'd come into the room. "Well what?"

"Weren't you listening?" She hoisted the baby onto her shoulder and began to pat her little back. "Have the aunties said anything about the Fourth of July?" The aunties often hosted an Independence Day celebration at Chatam House, but with all that had been happening lately, Phillip wondered if it was a good idea this year. Perhaps they were wondering the same thing.

"Uh, with Carissa's dad, uh, that is, Chester's brother, having passed away recently, they may want to curtail activities this year. I'll, um, have to ask them." Someone ought to ask Carissa how she felt about it. She ought to have a say. Chatam House was her home, too, at least for now.

* * *

"So what did you and Phillip talk about

before you went to the park today?" Carissa asked as she tucked Nathan into bed beside his brother that evening.

Nathan smoothed the covers and looked away, shrugging. "Oh, he said he wasn't good husband or father material, stuff like that."

Carissa's heart thunked heavily inside her chest, but she kept her gaze bland. It was no more than she'd expected, no more than Phillip had essentially said to her.

"What else?" she probed lightly.

Nathan looked down at his hands. "He said you missed Dad more'n I do and I miss him more'n Tucker and Grace."

"Uh-uh!" Tucker protested, sitting up sleepily.

"Do too!" Nathan insisted. "You don't hardly even remember him."

"I still miss him," Tucker insisted glumly, plopping back on his pillow. "And I think Phillip is good husband and father 'terial."

Carissa straightened the covers. "It doesn't matter," she said briskly. "Now, go to—"

A tap at the door to the suite had her looking into the hallway. Nathan rolled up onto one elbow.

"I bet that's him."

"Go to sleep," she instructed, her heart rate accelerating as she moved swiftly around the bed and headed out the door, pulling it closed behind her.

She rushed across the sitting room and flung open the outer door, only to be greeted by a mattress. It shifted, so that the narrow end poked through the doorway. She recognized the bunky boards that were part of the boys' bunk beds as Phillip and another man carried them into the suite. She noticed that Phillip clanked as he moved, his pockets full of tools

"I hope it's not too late," Phillip said, "but when Dale offered to help me move the bunk beds tonight, well, I... Oh, uh, Carissa Hopper, this is my brother-inlaw, Dale Bowen. Dale loaned us his truck the other day."

Bowen set down his burden, though

Carissa knew from experience that the padded bunky boards, which were composed of a stiff foam board and a foam mattress, were fairly lightweight. He smiled and shook hands with her. "Thark you Mr. Downer"

"Thank you, Mr. Bowen."

"Dale," he said, picking up the bunky board again. "Where do you want this?" "Uh." Carissa pointed toward the bedroom, and Phillip led the way. "They aren't asleep yet, but I'm not sure about ___"

Nathan appeared in the hallway. "Oh, boy!" he said. Then, "Tucker, get up!" He motioned for Phillip and Dale Bowen to come ahead with the boards. Phillip complied, instructing, "Get these tools out of my pockets so we can tear down the big bed."

Nathan worked quickly, running to his room with the tools in his arms. Phillip paused to look at Carissa. "It's okay, isn't it? He really wants his own bed." "It's okay," she said in a thick voice. While Phillip dismantled the queen bed. Dale Bowen carried in the pieces of the bunk beds from the landing. Then both men carried the queen bed out, returning to put together the bunks. Dale left at that point, and Phillip went to scrounge up linens, apologizing for not thinking to bring any from the storage unit. Carissa used the sheets from the queen bed to make up the top bunk for Tucker, who was so sleepy that she had

to help him climb the ladder into the top bunk. Phillip returned with fresh sheets just as Tucker crawled through the opening in the side of the upper.

"Come on, slide your legs beneath the covers," Carissa coached.

At five feet and five inches in height, she had difficulty at the best of times pulling up the covers, but with so much sheet tucked in, she was finding it nearly impossible. Standing nearly a foot taller than her, Phillip would naturally have an easier time of it.

"Here, let me," he said, passing her the sheets for Nathan's bed. While she shook out Nathan's sheets and began sorting top from bottom, Phillip got Tucker settled. "There you go, buddy. Sleep tight."

Tucker yawned and mumbled, "Good night." Then, with the bedding folded beneath his arms just so and the pillow adjusted beneath his head to his liking, he proclaimed, "See! He is too good father 'terial."

Carissa paused in the act of smoothing the sheet over the mattress of the lower bunk, thankful that the shadow of the upper hid her flaming face from view, while Nathan silently smacked his forehead against the bunk bed's outer foot post. Phillip cleared his throat and backed up a step, his hands sliding into his pockets.

"Well, I'll let y'all..." The words

drifted off as he moved toward the door.

Finding her gumption, Carissa straightened and turned to face him.

"Thank you, Phillip. The room has much more space now, and the boys will be much happier this way."

"Yes," Nathan said evenly, drawing a deep breath. "I like this much better." He faced Phillip then, balancing his weight on the balls of his feet like a

prizefighter, his arms at his sides. Very solemnly, he lifted his hand.

Phillip smiled, just a little, and shook Nathan's hand.

Tears blurred Carissa's eyes. She didn't know why—perhaps because her son was growing up, perhaps because he and Phillip had called a truce, perhaps because it was understood now that Phillip was no threat. Good husband and father material or not, Phillip Chatam had made it clear that he had no interest in becoming either, at least not so far as she and her children were concerned.

"I'll talk to you tomorrow," he said, and Carissa nodded, though she had no intention of talking to him ever again, if she could help it.

She watched him go then tucked in her son once more. Phillip might not think that he was husband or father material, but she knew better. He had been helpful and kind and would be, she had no doubt, until the day that she left this house. But that didn't mean that he could ever feel for her what she wanted him to feel. Therefore, the only sensible thing she could do was keep her distance and hope that would be enough to protect her needy children and her own foolish heart.

Chapter Eleven

Over the next few days, as June wound to its inevitable close, Carissa did everything she could to avoid Phillip. She stayed in her suite as much as possible and kept the children with her, coaching them to answer the door and say that Mom was too busy to speak with anyone who stopped by. It helped that the boys were happy to play in their new bedroom, now that they had more space, and that a case of the sniffles kept Grace confined for a bit. They took all of their meals in their suite, too, but one thing she could not avoid was laundry.

It seemed that she and the children had a load of laundry to do every other day, but at least she didn't have to drive down to the coin laundry and dump her hard-earned cash into a bank of machines. Instead, she carried each load to the dumbwaiter and sent it down to the butler's pantry off the kitchen. Then she would tote it the short distance to the laundry room behind the pantry. After sending the loaded laundry basket down in the dumbwaiter as usual, Carissa tiptoed along the landing then craned her neck to look over into the stairwell. She saw that it was empty, so she moved quickly down the stairs that led to the fover. A quick glance around the curve

showed her that the way was clear.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, Carissa ran light-footedly into the butler's pantry. No sooner did she open the door to the dumbwaiter than Hilda stuck her head into the room from the kitchen.

"There you are! The Misses want to see you in the parlor."

Carissa started and gulped. "The Misses? Oh, you mean the Chatam sisters. What do they want with me?"

Hilda nodded. "They want you to join them for tea. Go on now. I just took in the tray."

Carissa gestured at the basket of laundry. "But I need to—"

Hilda waved a hand dismissively.

"Oh, I'll put that in the washer. You can shift it later. Meanwhile, Chester will go up and sit with the children."

Carissa couldn't very well argue. Her hostesses had asked very little in return for their hospitality. Still, she sensed that this was something more than a friendly tea party.

"Cold water is fine," she muttered, tucking wisps of hair behind her ears. She smoothed the wrinkles from her faded purple T-shirt and wished the hems of her jeans were not so frayed as she sauntered back down the hallway in her worn canvas slip-ons.

Odelia and Kent met her just inside the parlor. Garbed in another outrageous costume, Odelia flitted and fluttered like the origami hummingbirds hanging by delicate springs from her earlobes, the iridescent fabric of her ensemble seeming to have a life of its own. Kent, meanwhile, resembled a plump barber pole encased in a white suit. Carissa couldn't help smiling. Her smile died, however, when she saw that Phillip was also in attendance

He stood with one elbow propped against the edge of the ornate white plaster mantel above the fireplace, looking cool, calm, collected and more handsome than a man had a right to be in khakis and a blue-gray shirt, the sleeves rolled up to display his tanned, corded forearms. His tight smile displayed his dimples and seemed to dare her to try to escape. Any hope that he hadn't realized she'd been purposefully avoiding him promptly vanished.

She switched her gaze to his aunts, putting on a polite smile as Odelia, supported by her husband's arm, dropped down on the brocade settee. Hypatia, sitting on a gold-on-goldstriped chair, waved Carissa forward while Magnolia poured a cup of tea from the gleaming silver pot on the tray in the middle of the low, oblong piecrust table. Magnolia placed the delicate china cup on a matching saucer, added a spoon, picked up a thick cloth napkin and passed everything to Carissa when she

came within reach.

"Take that chair, dear," Hypatia directed, indicating the armless chair beside the fireplace. Kent seated himself beside Odelia just as she leaned forward and slid a small tray of condiments to the end of the table nearest Carissa, who took the opportunity to add a bit of honey and lemon to her cup before sliding back into her seat. She stirred, rested the spoon on the saucer, lifted her cup and sipped.

All three Chatam sisters seemed to be perched on the edges of their seats. Carissa felt that she had to say something.

"Mmm. Very good."

The sisters relaxed with pleased

smiles.

Carissa sipped again and wished that she could relax, too, but Phillip hovered over her like a giant bird of prey. She wondered what was coming and began mentally recalculating the estimate she'd recently made of how soon she would be ready to move out on her own. She was so busy revising her budget that she almost completely missed Hypatia's opening gambit and had to ask her to repeat herself.

"I beg your pardon? What did you say?"

"I said, dear, that it's almost Independence Day."

"Oh. Yes, I suppose it is."

"We here at Chatam House do so enjoy a good Independence Day celebration," Odelia gushed.

"The children would enjoy the parade, I'm sure," Kent put in. "That is, if you think it's appropriate."

Carissa smiled, wondering why an Independence Day parade might be considered inappropriate. "Certainly," she said lamely, wondering where this was going.

"We were thinking of a barbecue this year," Magnolia said, "to show off the pool, you know." She smiled at Kent, nodding in his direction.

"But perhaps a small party would be best," Hypatia ventured, "all things considered."

Carissa blinked at her, getting the feeling that "all things" depended heavily upon her.

"What my aunts are trying to say," Phillip told her, "is that though they usually host a large Independence Day celebration, out of concern for you and your children, they are willing to cut back or even cancel the event this year, although canceling at this late date would be difficult."

Carissa twisted around in her chair to gape at him. "Out of concern for *us*? I—I don't understand."

"Well, of course you don't," he snapped. "You've gone out of your way to avoid contact with everyone in this house! I've been trying to talk to you about this for days."

"I haven't... We..." She gulped and looked away. "I don't know what *we* have to do with the Chatam Independence Day celebration."

"The year Daddy died, we weren't in the mood for a party for months," Magnolia revealed softly.

"Oh," Carissa breathed, as understanding dawned at last.

"Now, we have spoken to Chester and Hilda," Hypatia said briskly, "and their only concern is for you and the children."

Astonished at the kindness and consideration of these sweet ladies,

Carissa quickly said, "We wouldn't dream of curtailing your celebration plans."

"Are you sure, dear?" Odelia asked. "It won't bring back bittersweet memories of celebrations past for you or the children?"

Carissa shook her head adamantly. Her children had seldom enjoyed a real Independence Day celebration. "In fact, I think it might be good for us. You know, take our minds off..." She resisted the urge to glance at Phillip, finishing meekly with "things."

The sisters traded satisfied smiles, then to Carissa's chagrin, they looked to Phillip as if for final approval. He cleared his throat and said, "Well, if she's sure, I guess we carry on as planned."

"There's just one other thing, dear," Hypatia said, smiling benignly at Carissa.

"What's that, ma'am?"

"My sisters and I are wondering where you and the children plan to attend church. We've noticed that you haven't been going with Chester and Hilda, and we thought you might prefer to attend Downtown Bible Church with us. Of course, if you have somewhere else in mind, that's fine, too."

Carissa got the message loud and clear. As long as she lived in their home, these ladies expected her and her children to attend church. It was very little to ask, considering their generosity.

"Actually," Carissa said smoothly, "we quite like Uncle Chester and Aunt Hilda's church."

"Oh," Odelia said, giving the word several syllables and sounding disappointed.

"Your troubles are bound to seem lighter once you get back into the habit of regular attendance," Magnolia stated kindly.

Carissa had thought something similar herself, and she wasn't about to argue the point. She did argue when the topic turned to meals. Perhaps she shouldn't have, but Carissa continued to insist that she and the children take dinner in their suite.

For one thing, she and the children simply didn't have the clothes to wear to the Chatam table every evening. They barely had appropriate clothing to wear to church. For another, the children were tired and not at their best by dinnertime. Often, they needed baths before they could eat, and afterward it was most convenient to dress them in their pajamas. She compromised by agreeing to go downstairs for breakfast in the sunroom and take lunch in the kitchen to make things easier on Hilda.

With that settled, she smiled and sipped her tea as talk moved to plans for Independence Day. When her cup was empty, she declined another, set the saucer down, excused herself and went out to check on her children and her laundry. She felt Phillip's eyes on her as she left the room, but he did not follow, and in the days ahead, he kept his distance, merely nodding when they passed on the upstairs landing or in the downstairs hallways, and did not appear at breakfast

It was absurd to feel hurt, of course. She had started this game, but Phillip's absence left a gaping hole in her life. Somehow, despite her better judgment and best intentions, she had become dependent on him in a dozen little ways, and they all added up to a significant presence that no longer was, had never really been and would never be. The children felt it, too, and all of their lives seemed a little less bright because of it. But they had lived with loss in one shape or another for a very long time; Carissa told herself that they would adjust.

She did what she always did—she kept on keeping on, and soon Independence Day arrived.

Independence Day meant putting aside work and joining in the celebration, being part of the whole Chatam family for the day. It also meant pulling out the red, white and blue bits of their respective wardrobes to make a properly patriotic display.

The kids got into the spirit right away.

Grace wore a ruffled red knit sundress that was too small for her over a pair of white shorts and white sandals. Carissa used a long, white, filmy scarf to tie a big, floppy bow around Grace's soft red hair, above her right ear. Nathan chose a red-and-white-striped shirt, jeans cut off at the knee and blue canvas shoes, while Tucker went all red: T-shirt, shorts. socks and shoes. The left shoe had a hole in the toe.

In a flash of creativity born of desperation, Carissa cut a star out of the denim shorn from Nathan's too-short jeans and glued it over the hole in the toe of Tucker's shoe. The kids were so impressed that she wound up having to glue blue denim stars to their shoes, too. She even hand sewed them to the straps of Grace's sundress top to make them longer so the dress didn't bind the child under the arms.

For herself, Carissa made do with her good white blouse, blue jeans and freshly laundered white canvas shoes, tying her hair up on top of her head in a ponytail with a red bandanna. Half of her hair promptly flopped about her face in wisps and tendrils, but she left it, tucking what she could behind her ears. and hurried the children downstairs to breakfast

She sensed Phillip's presence even before she entered the sunroom. He sat at a table with Hypatia and Magnolia, drinking black coffee and eating a mound of pancakes topped by blueberries, strawberries and whipped cream. Grace ran straight to him, but after a single glance of acknowledgment in Carissa's direction, he seemed content to ignore her, even as he lifted Grace into the chair at his side, filled her plate, tucked a napkin under her chin and proceeded to oversee her breakfast.

Carissa made sure that Grace had milk to drink and didn't use too much syrup, but she might as well have been invisible so far as Phillip Chatam was concerned. He had eyes and ears only for Grace and his aunties. For them he was all easy smiles.

Meanwhile, Carissa seated the boys at

another table, filled plates and glasses for them and made certain that no more than an adequate supply of syrup flooded their pancakes before cutting them into bite-size pieces. Phillip finished his breakfast and rose just about the same time that Odelia and Kent arrived, decked out in eye-popping patriotic finery.

Kent sported a white straw hat, a white linen suit and a red shirt worn with a blue vest decorated with palmsized white stars. Beside him, Odelia dripped white sequined stars of all sizes from her flowing red dress to her blue sandals and sash. She wore them attached to the brim of a red, widebrimmed straw hat and dangled them from her earlobes in long chains, and stars the size of saucers fixed the sash at her waist and shoulder. The boys literally hooted when the pair of them came into the room, and Grace stood in her chair to applaud.

Phillip picked up his plate to clear his place, but Odelia and Kent went to join the boys. Shaking his head, Phillip headed off to the kitchen via the butler's pantry, remarking to the room in general that he'd see everyone later. Carissa took his place, filling her plate from the sideboard that Hilda had stocked at some point.

She told herself that she was relieved to have him out of the room, but deep

down she felt a bit slighted...wounded, even, the truth be told, which was nonsense. The man was much too handsome for her own good, and while he might be kind and thoughtful and instinctively adept with the children, he lacked ambition and discipline, by his own admission. The wisest thing she could do was to keep her distance.

She managed to do that for another three hours or so, walking with the Chatam sisters and her aunt and uncle down to the corner of the estate to watch the Independence Day parade as it wound its way through the historic district from the downtown square of Buffalo Creek. As soon as they returned to the house, however, the place began to fill up with people, and Phillip seemed always to be at hand, greeting the newcomers with hugs and smiles and making quick introductions. The first to arrive were Garrett and Jessa Willows and their son, Hunter, all of whom promptly swept Carissa's children outside to play. Garrett, the former Chatam gardener, promised to show them all the secret places on the estate.

Before Carissa could catch her breath, she met more Chatams than she'd known existed, starting with Asher and his wife, Ellie, and their baby daughter, Marie Ella. Next came Petra and her husband, Dale Bowen, whom she'd met the other night, followed quickly by Reeves and Anna Leland and their daughter, Gilli. Reeves's sister Melinda and her husband, J. W. Harris, came with their little boy, Johnny. To everyone else's surprise, Reeves and Melinda's twin baby sisters, Harmony and Lyric, showed up, too, saying they were just passing through on their way home to California after visiting friends in New York.

While the Chatam sisters were getting their nieces settled upstairs, Kaylie breezed in with her husband, the hockey player Stephen Gallow, and her father, Hub Chatam, who led the grief support group. Kaylie's brother, Chandler, arrived from Stephenville with his wife, Bethany, and their little son, Matthew. Another of her brothers, a much older one, Bayard Chatam, and his wife, Chloe, brought along their married daughter Julia and her sons Richard Paul and Brian Travis, their father being out of town on business. Bayard promised that his younger daughters would be along later, and one of them, Carolyn, arrived on the arm of her uncle Morgan, a distinguished-looking college professor and Kaylie's second-oldest brother.

Then Carissa met Phillip's parents, who arrived with Dallas. Thereafter, Phillip never again left Carissa's side, a circumstance for which she quickly became thankful, given that the Drs. Murdock and Maryanne Chatam made a formidable pair and seemed to have a particular interest in her.

Dr. Murdock Chatam stood tall and straight, with a head of thick, graving hair, cinnamon-brown eyes and a patrician profile, complete with the Chatam cleft chin. Dr. Maryanne Chatam was slender and of average height, with blond, silver-streaked hair cut in a stylish bob and gray-blue eyes as sharp as scalpels, especially when they honed in on Carissa, which they did the instant that Dallas made the introduction.

"My daughter tells me you have three children," said Maryanne.

"And that she's a widow, no doubt,"

Phillip added, stepping up to Carissa's side, "*and* that her father recently passed *and* that she's a whiz with computers and any number of other things, I'm sure."

"Including that she's Chester's niece and is staying here at Chatam House," his father stated in weighty tones.

"And now we're all up to date on Carissa Hopper," Phillip said, taking her by the arm and aiming a very pointed look at his sister. Dallas shrugged and shook her head defensively as Phillip maneuvered Carissa away and escorted her quickly through the house and out onto the patio, which was crawling with people.

"What was that about?" Carissa asked

once they were well away from his parents.

"My meddling sister," Phillip said between his teeth.

"I don't understand."

"Dallas has a penchant

for...interfering," he told her, "but don't worry. I won't let my parents grill you." "Why would they do that?"

He huffed out a breath. "Let me restate. Dallas has a penchant for *matchmaking*. She nearly burned down Kent's house while trying to get him and Aunt Odelia together. And managed to spark a romance between Asher and Ellie in the process. She almost derailed Petra and Dale, however, and after that near fiasco, she supposedly reformed. But now here she is with our parents, and they've got their sights on you, which tells me that someone's been talking you up."

Carissa caught her breath, blinking. "You're saying that Dallas thinks you and I should be a couple."

"And my parents will almost certainly oppose it," he confirmed with a nod.

Carissa frowned. "But why?"

He shrugged. "Because they oppose everything I do, that's why."

"I don't understand."

"Oh, it's very simple. Asher is the responsible elder son. I'm the irresponsible younger one."

"Okay, you don't have a job right

now, but that will change. Won't it?"

"Eventually it has to," he said offhandedly, "but let's go over some of the jobs I've already had. I've taught surfing and snowboarding. I've fished in Alaska. Briefly. It wasn't as fun as it looked. Oh, and I've fed lions in a zoo." "Lions!"

"Elephants, too. Different zoo." He waved that away. "What else? There was skydiving. You'd be amazed how many people want to jump out of airplanes. I led treks in the Canadian Northwest. And in between the grand adventures there was making sails, stenciling boats, tanning alligator hides, selling everything from books to jewelry, modeling kilts."

"Modeling-"

"And I even made a credible barista. Oh, and I did work on a play and for a band, at one time, but that was way back, when I was first in college and thought I might actually make a career in something. Out of all that, I don't think I've ever had one job that my parents actually approved of, though. Or one girlfriend."

"And they think *I'm* your girlfriend?" "Something like that."

"Well, then, we'll just set them straight."

"Oh, sure," he said flippantly,

"because that's always worked so well for me in the past. Just leave it to me, will you? I'm an expert at putting up a wall between me and the Doctors Chatam," he assured her, waving at his brother-in-law and another couple. "Just stay close. Unless you want to be probed."

Sure, that was just what she needed. And what would she say if his parents asked her outright if she wanted to be with their son? That she didn't know what she wanted?

"I'll leave it to you," she muttered, her head swirling.

"Smart girl."

Carissa soon met Dale Bowen's sister and her husband, as well as a number of other young parents. Her cousins arrived with their children, much to the delight of Hilda and Chester. Meanwhile, her own children were having the time of their lives, running and playing with the other kids in attendance.

Nathan, as usual, was the gang leader, but Gilli Leland was giving him a run for his money. A bossy little thing, she had him hopping, justifying his every order and suggestion, much to Grace's giggling delight. Tucker and Hunter Willows, meanwhile, had become fast friends. The others were barely big enough to join in, but Nathan, Gilli and Grace were good about seeing to it that they were included, and the other parents shared in keeping an eye on everyone.

Carissa relaxed a bit, even with the

Doctors Chatam observing from a distance and Phillip glued to her side. Or maybe it was *because* he was at her side. Even with all the couples around her, for once, she didn't feel out of place, an oddity. It was almost as if she and Phillip were a couple, at least for the moment.

Oh, he didn't do anything to especially make it seem that way, behaving exactly as a casual friend might, but he was there when she would otherwise have been alone in a group of young couples. Perhaps the assumption by his parents, and maybe even the assumptions of others, fed the feeling.

Or maybe she just wanted to be a part

of a couple so badly that she couldn't help feeling part of a pair.

For whatever reason, she let it be. For one day. That wasn't chancing too much. Or was it?

She thought over all that he'd told her, all that he'd done, flitting from one interesting occupation to another, doing whatever job took his fancy. She understood what he was waiting for now. He was cooling his heels until the next big thing came along, until a fun job or an exciting adventure presented itself. Meanwhile, he'd amuse himself with her and her kids.

On one hand, she ought to be grateful. He'd been so much help. On the other hand, she wanted to shake him. Didn't he realize what he was doing? He was making her-them-fall in love with him, when he had no intention of staying around. Even knowing that he would take off as soon as the next great challenge came along, she couldn't quite seem to help herself, and her poor children had absolutely no defenses against a man like him. They weren't used to a man who spent time with them and showed affection to them. Even Nathan was at risk.

But what could she do? Berate the man for being kind? She'd tried to keep her distance, and that hadn't worked.

She felt helpless. All she could do was tell herself over and over again that

it was just for one day. Just one day. Just one day to enjoy being with Phillip Chatam.

But it wasn't enough.

Chapter Twelve

Several portable grills had been set up along one end of the patio, and when the steaks, hamburgers and hot dogs came out, Phillip did his part, along with Asher, Garrett, Chester, Dale and Chandler, in cooking the meat. Meanwhile, Carissa helped Hilda and the other ladies lay out a spread that consisted of half-a-dozen enormous salads, a variety of chips and dips, baked beans, a wide selection of condiments, a bushel basket of corn on the cob and many other dishes. What thrilled the children most were the cakes and the three large electric ice-cream makers that sat humming beneath one table. Periodically, either Hilda or Chester would add crushed ice and rock salt to the outer containers while the cylinder turned inside.

The steaks started coming off the grills about midafternoon, much to the delight of the very hungry crowd. Despite having grazed their way through mountains of chips and bowls of dip and other goodies, many had worked up appetites in the pool or playing games of horseshoes or badminton on the lawn. Carissa didn't have a bathing suit, so she'd declined to swim and instead had partnered Phillip in a winning game of badminton before claiming a spot beside

him at one of the tables on the patio and chatting with Jessa and Garrett Willows.

Somehow, they got on the subject of phone apps, and Garrett asked about the possibility of designing an app that would allow a customer to take a photo of a plant and identify it. Carissa promised to investigate the possibility and was shocked, pleasantly so, at Phillip's easy comment.

"If anyone can figure it out, Carissa can. She's a computer genius." She nearly spun her head off her neck goggling at him, but he just smiled and went on. "Maybe when we're through with our current project, we can look into yours in more detail."

Our current project. Carissa cleared her throat and ducked her head. Maybe she shouldn't have avoided him these past several days. Maybe, if they worked together, he would see her as more than a lull in the series of adventures that was his life. She told herself not to be a loon, but keeping her distance hadn't worked, so why not take a chance on spending a little time with him? She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

All right, Lord, here goes nothing. "Maybe, um, we can work on the project Saturday evening after I put the kids to bed," she suggested to Phillip softly. He looked down at her. "I thought you might be working Saturday to make up for today," he replied evasively.

"Well, yes, but not so late into the evening."

"You have to have some downtime," he said. He shifted forward then, enthusiasm lighting his eyes as he went on. "I've been making some phone calls, though, talking to people who might be interested in the kind of application we're considering, and so far the feedback has been very positive."

Phillip's sister Petra came over then and whispered into his ear, but Carissa couldn't help overhearing.

"I just wanted to apologize. It was

Ellie who, um, spilled the beans to our parents, so to speak, but really, it only took a remark that you had mentioned..." She glanced at Carissa. "...a certain someone."

"And Mom and Dad were all over it," Phillip surmised, straightening. "But if Ellie made the initial remark, then why are *you* apologizing?"

"Well," Petra drawled, glancing at Carissa again, "after Mom couldn't get anywhere with Dallas, she called me, and eventually—I emphasize *eventually* —I told her everything I knew. Honestly, Phil, she was like a dog with a bone."

Carissa watched as Phillip's mouth compressed into a tight line, but then he sighed, patted his sister's hand and pushed back his chair.

"I have to go make an apology now," Phillip said. Petra nodded in obvious understanding as he rose. "Stay with Carissa until I get back, will you?" Again, Petra nodded.

Carissa started to say, "Oh, that's not necessary," but Petra cut her off before she got the last word fully out.

"But I want to." She settled into Phillip's chair as he strode off in the direction of his baby sister. "I've been wanting to get to know you better."

"Oh? That's, uh, nice."

Petra laughed. "You must think we're terrible."

"Why, no," Carissa hedged

uncomfortably. "Why would I?"

"It's just that Mom and Dad have such high expectations, you see," Petra explained kindly. "You should have seen what they put Dale through last year before we married. Now, of course, he's perfect, as least so far as they're concerned. And Ellie. Oh, my. They adore her. After all, she's the mother of their first grandchild, but you should see the look on Dad's face even now whenever Ash talks about the practice uniforms that she devised for her soccer team"

Petra launched into a comical description of floppy ears attached to caps and tutus worn over shorts. Garrett Willows joined in to explain how Ellie had used those things to teach the children on her team proper running and kicking techniques. Carissa didn't have the faintest idea what it was all about, but she couldn't help laughing at the vivid pictures they painted. Phillip returned and sent his sister off with hugs. She patted Carissa's shoulder as she left them.

"Nice talking to you."

"You, too."

As soon as Petra disappeared into the crowd, Carissa leaned close to Phillip and asked, "Everything okay with Dallas?"

"Yeah, I think so."

Before he could elaborate, however,

Hubner Chatam stood up and asked for everyone's attention. In short order, Stephen and Kaylie Gallow happily announced that they were expecting their first child in five months' time. What had been a holiday party quickly turned into a true family celebration as everyone rushed to congratulate the beaming young couple. Carissa noted how carefully tall, blond Stephen enfolded Kaylie in his long arms, her back to his chest, as the family gathered around them. Phillip hurried to join the rest of the family, his smile as wide as his face. Carissa couldn't help smiling herself, especially when Hub asked everyone to link hands to join in prayer and Phillip came immediately to snag her hand in his and

pull her into the circle.

She felt a great sense of belonging. standing there among all those Chatams, one hand in Phillip's, the other clasped by Jessa, as Hub asked for God's blessing on the new baby growing in his daughter's womb. It seemed to Carissa that Chatam House must be a blessed place, and she thanked God for the sanctuary she had found there. For however long it lasted.

The afternoon passed into evening without further incident, the awful heat driving many indoors and others to the pool. Carissa allowed the children to swim with Phillip while she sat with her feet dangling in the water. Later, the children pulled their clothes on over their bathing suits and gathered with everyone else to watch the fireworks.

Every Independence Day, the city of Buffalo Creek produced a fireworks extravaganza at the high school football stadium, but not many of the Chatams' guests left to attend. Instead, they dragged lawn chairs out to the west lawn and spread blankets in front of the great magnolia tree to watch from afar as the fireworks painted the night sky with bursts of color.

Phillip spread a blanket between his brother Asher's and that of the Willows family, while Carissa herded her weary children into place. Grace crawled into Phillip's lap and was well on her way to sleep when the first explosion of colored lights lit the sky. Even Nathan seemed too tired to complain, contenting himself with grumbles about the hardness of the ground and the lack of space, but he soon quieted, lying back and folding his hands behind his head to gaze upward with awe at the display. Even with the loud booming of the fireworks, Tucker went to sleep nestled against his mother's side.

Carissa couldn't help stroking his scraggly mop. The boy needed a haircut. She'd have to get out her scissors and make him hold still for it soon. Nathan hated unruly hair and insisted that she keep him trimmed, but if Tucker had his way, he'd be sitting on his hair before he'd sit still for a haircut. She chuckled, thinking that he'd probably use it to swing from the chandeliers.

Phillip looked over, smiled and asked, "What's so funny?"

She shook her head. "Just thinking how strange it is that children with the same parents and raised in the same household can be so different."

He nodded. "I know what you mean. Just look at me and Ash. There's no more responsible human being on the face of the earth than my big brother." He glanced fondly at Asher then shook his head. "But me...I've always jumped from one interesting job to another, living for myself and no one else." She schooled her expression to blandness, stroking Tucker's hair. There was the death knell to any foolish dream she might be hiding in her traitorous heart. Why couldn't she listen and take heed?

"Well, at least you've had an interesting life."

Phillip shrugged and looked down at Grace, whose droopy eyes testified to her difficulty staying awake for the fireworks. "It's made for a lonely life at times. I'm just realizing how lonely."

Carissa glanced around at the plethora of Chatams spread over the lawn. "That doesn't seem to be a problem now that you're here." He grinned. "That's true. Chatam House is the heart of the family. When you're here, you don't lack for company. Or support."

She could see that was true, and she envied him. Her dad and her uncle Chester and aunt Hilda had been the only ones she could ever truly count on in a time of need. Her mother looked out for herself and no one else, and her sister... Only God knew where Lyla was and what she might be doing. Her cousins cared about her, of course, but they had their own responsibilities and difficulties. She wouldn't dream of going to them for help, but Phillip could reach out to almost anyone here tonight,

and Carissa had no doubt that they would do their best to help him. They would, in fact, gather round to help him. Yes, she envied Phillip and all the Chatams. No wonder Chester and Hilda were so devoted to them.

The fireworks ended with a breathtaking display of sparkling excess that had Grace sitting up and clapping her hands. Tucker roused and rubbed his eyes, breathing, "Wow!" Even Nathan sat up in silent appreciation.

The last sparks were still fading from the sky as the party finally broke up, with parents carting off sleepy children. The Chatam sisters and Kent stood on the walk in front of the house, saying goodbye to their guests, while Chester and some of the other men took charge of the blankets and chairs. To the sisters' surprise, Phillip's parents declined to stay at Chatam House, choosing instead to sleep under the same roof as their grandbaby. Carissa couldn't help feeling a bit of relief at that.

Phillip insisted on carrying Grace up to her room. He even went in to gently bully Tucker into his pajamas while Carissa got Grace into her nightgown. For once, Nathan didn't complain. Instead, he went into the bathroom and brushed his teeth then changed his clothes and crawled into bed while Carissa and Phillip helped Grace and Tucker brush. Later, when all the

children were tucked into bed, Carissa walked Phillip to the door of their suite. "Thanks for your help."

"No problem. They were so tired." "They had a wonderful day, and so did I."

"I'm glad."

He smiled down at her, and she stepped closer. She couldn't help herself. A warm feeling flooded her, and she felt certain that he would kiss her. His copper gaze skimmed her face and came to rest on her lips. Her breath caught in anticipation. She shifted her weight to her toes, ready to rise up to meet him. But then he eased back and turned the doorknob. The door opened a few inches.

"If, um, you should change your mind about attending church with the aunties and me on Sunday..."

Disappointment dealt her a crushing blow, but she managed to keep her chin aloft. "I've already told Uncle Chester and Aunt Hilda we'll be going with them."

"All right, then."

"About Saturday night, though ... "

"Oh, um, I'm not sure. With my parents here and everything... I'll try, though. I would like to get to work on the app."

"Yes. The app." "Well, good night." "Good night."

He slipped out and closed the door behind him. She tried very hard not to cry. She kept telling herself it was for the best. He wasn't the man for her. No good could come from putting herself in Phillip Chatam's way more than necessary. But she didn't have to be happy about it, did she? Besides, he'd said he would try to come by on Saturday night so they could work on the smartphone app. And who knew what might come of that?

* * *

Phillip didn't show up on Saturday evening. He hadn't actually said he would, of course, and Carissa tried to convince herself that she hadn't believed he would, but she couldn't help feeling disappointed and foolish. Glad that she'd decided to attend church the next morning with Chester and Hilda, she consoled herself with the idea that she wouldn't have to face him. She prayed herself to sleep that night; it was that or cry again.

The children complained about getting up early the next morning, but they were happy enough by the time they piled into the vehicle with Chester and Hilda. They all went together in Carissa's minivan, with Chester doing the driving, Aunt Hilda riding up front in the passenger seat and Carissa sitting in the bucket seat next to Grace. That left the boys to share the third-row bench in the back.

As Carissa slid the door closed, Grace looked around and asked, "Where's Phillip?"

Carissa's heart did a little flip. Had he become such a part of their lives, then, in spite of everything? She managed a smile and said, "He's going to church with his aunties."

"Oh," Grace said confidently. "He's saving us our seats."

"Uh, no," Carissa told her. "He and the aunties go to a different church."

"Oh." Grace imbued that one word with a wealth of disappointment and sadness.

Carissa said nothing more, just

fastened her seat belt and faced forward.

Chester drove them across town to the small, unprepossessing church where he and Hilda had worshipped for decades.

Buffalo Creek Christian Church was as plain inside as out, but the small congregation could not have been more welcoming or warm. A simple piano and a single guitar provided the music. A mixed quartet took the place of a big, robed choir. There were no media productions, but the worship was sincere and deep, and the pastor's message hit Carissa squarely in the chest.

The theme of the sermon, taken from the fourth chapter of Philippians, was that God supplied all our needs "according to the riches of His glory." Carissa had to admit that her needs had been met, albeit in ways she had not foreseen. She trusted that would continue, somehow.

When they arrived back at Chatam House, Carissa was surprised to see Phillip and Kent carrying in large quantities of fried chicken and all the fixings. Chester chuckled when Kent called out that there was plenty for him and Hilda, too. Chester and Hilda always had Sundays off, and the household fended for themselves. The Chatam sisters had repeatedly invited Carissa and the children to join them for Sunday meals, while reiterating that they "ate simple," out of deference for the Lord's Day, but Carissa had always taken the children out for fast food or managed a simple meal on her own. Today, however, Phillip made it clear that they were expected to join everyone else at the table.

"After the Independence Day celebration, the aunties feel that everyone deserves a break from meal preparation, so today we ordered in." He lifted the bags, wafting the aroma of fried chicken on the July air. "Now, who wants a chicken leg?"

Grace immediately started hopping up and down. "I do! I do!"

Carissa sighed, knowing she couldn't refuse without risking a rebellion. Even

Nathan was licking his chops. "All three of you had better be on your best behavior at the table."

Tucker and Nathan both ran for the front door. Phillip grinned and winked at Carissa. "We ordered a chicken with six legs."

She laughed. "That's a critter I'd like to see around the barnyard."

"I prefer 'em all crispy and brown, dressing the dinner table," Phillip joked, falling into step beside her as she followed the children.

She laughed again, relieved that no one seemed to be avoiding anyone anymore. Maybe he'd just been too busy to stop by on Saturday. No doubt he'd been obligated to spend time with his parents. Besides, it was just business, nothing personal. That was what she had to remember.

They went into the house. Phillip carried the food to the kitchen, while Carissa hurried the children into the dining room. Odelia and Kent were putting plates on the table, and they immediately deputized the children to lay out silverware and napkins, sending Carissa after drinking glasses. Meanwhile, Hypatia, Magnolia and

Phillip transferred the food to serving dishes.

Chester and Hilda elected to take their meal to the carriage house, but everyone else gathered around the dark antique table in the old-fashioned formal dining room. High spirits prevailed. The Independence Day celebration coupled with Kaylie and Stephen's happy announcement had created a gay atmosphere among the Chatam sisters. Odelia had even dressed for the occasion in shades of pastel pink and blue, going so far as to wear one pink rosebud earring and one bluebell earring. Grace thought the earrings were adorable and kept checking out Odelia's earlobes, vacillating between favorites. She finally decided on the pink rosebud because, in her words, "Blue is for stinky boys."

"Hey!" Phillip teased. "I'll have you

know that I had a shower before church this morning."

Grace erupted in giggles. "You're not a boy! You're a daddy."

Phillip almost dropped his fork. Carissa felt her face heat, and throats cleared all around the table, while Nathan rolled his eyes before saying, "He's not a daddy. He's just a man."

Phillip nodded stiffly and dropped his gaze to his plate. "That's right," he said. "I'm just a man."

Carissa rushed to fill the awkward silence with chatter. "Not all adult men are fathers, Grace. In fact, many are not, just as many adult women are not mothers."

"None of us are mothers," Hypatia

pointed out, indicating herself and her sisters.

"We've always been content as sisters and aunties," Magnolia said matter-of-factly.

"Except for me," Odelia put in, squeezing Kent's hand. "I'm also a wife."

"But not a mother," Grace mused, sounding puzzled.

"Not a mother," Odelia said a tad wistfully. "I'm a step-grandmother, though, and great-aunt."

Grace just blinked and shook her head at that. Amused at herself, she began making goofy sounds. Tucker joined in, rolling his eyes and wagging his tongue. Carissa attempted to control them, but Grace's giggles proved infectious, and soon everyone was laughing-everyone, Carissa noticed, except Phillip. He managed a smile, but his heart didn't seem in it. She wanted to squeeze his hand, as Odelia had squeezed Kent's earlier, but she didn't dare. Not when her heart reached out for his every time he was near.

* * *

He's just a man. Just a man.

Phillip had never felt so inconsequential, so pointless. Living in the same house with Carissa and her children was becoming more and more difficult. He felt constantly torn between seeking her out and avoiding her, between drawing her closer and keeping her at a distance. He felt drawn to her in a way that he'd never felt drawn to another woman, but he was painfully aware that he had nothing to offer her. not even a steady income. All his experience amounted to a lot of memories, some of them great fun and some of them not so pleasant, and yet he didn't know how to remake himself.

Oh, his parents had ideas about that. They'd made those notions plain when he'd seen them at Asher's on Friday and again when they'd taken him to dinner on Saturday. His dad had urged him to study for his CPA license, but Phillip didn't

have the constitution to become a Certified Public Accountant. He would hate a job that made him sit in an office day in and day out, doing the same routine tasks. It just wasn't for him. His mother thought he should try for a teaching certificate, of all things, but Phillip could not imagine himself with a classroom full of Nathans or, worse yet, Tuckers. The idea of willingly walking into a classroom full of kids every day gave him the willies. He felt a new respect for his baby sister just thinking about it.

His mother had baldly accused Carissa of pegging him as her next husband, saying that it was understandable why a penniless widow with three children to raise would target a single man from a good family. Phillip had laughed at the idea. Maybe Carissa didn't hate him, maybe she even liked him, as Nathan assumed, but she certainly hadn't targeted him. If she had, Phillip didn't want to think how susceptible he might actually be to any lures that Carissa should cast his way, though what she'd want with him was a mystery. She needed a husband who could help her provide for her children, not an overgrown playmate for them.

If only they could make something of the smartphone app, he might cast some lures of his own. She could do worse than a Chatam, after all, even an irresponsible, self-indulgent one, for once she was part of the family, she would have all the support and help anyone could ever need.

The problem with the app came down to public interest, though. He didn't doubt that Carissa had the know-how to make the thing work, and he had all the contacts. His former employer and coworkers were all surprisingly enthusiastic about the possibilities. In fact, his previous boss had gone so far as to predict that streaming a climb live or on video would increase business by double digits, induce their clients to be better behaved and foster a greater sense of caution in everyone involved. The guy was so enthusiastic that he was talking it up to his suppliers and offering to underwrite a portion of the project. No, the one real unknown was whether the general public would show any interest in watching a climb in real time or on video. Only God knew the answer to that. As Phillip pondered the possibilities, he remembered a couple of points from that morning's sermon at Downtown Bible Church.

"Every experience is part of God's divine plan for you," the pastor had said. "Maybe you've made mistakes, but mistakes are proof that you're trying, and God's plan is bigger than your mistakes, so wherever you are now, that's where God wants you at this moment."

And where he was, at the moment, Phillip mused, was living in the same house with a woman who could very well make the smartphone app a reality, a woman who made him want to be more than he ever had been. If they could pull this off together, maybe they had a chance for something more. Maybe Carissa would begin to look at him as more than a friend to whom she owed her gratitude.

Even if that never happened, however, the successful development of the app could benefit her and the kids financially, and they needed it. Maybe he could give them that, at least. Phillip closed his eyes and sent up a silent prayer for Carissa and the kids. They had to come first. His wants hardly mattered next to their needs.

Maybe he was just a man, but it was time that he became the best man he could be, time that he thought of someone besides himself, so he swallowed the truth of the matter, put on a smile and made himself enjoy the remainder of the meal.

He found much to enjoy. The food wasn't as good as Hilda's, but the company couldn't be faulted. His aunties practically glowed, they were so thrilled for his cousin Kaylie and her husband, Stephen. Phillip had never thought much about babies before, but his little niece had gotten him to thinking. Ash and Ellie were so proud of her, so enchanted by her.

Phillip couldn't help comparing Marie Ella to Grace, wondering if she would one day be as charming and sweet. It didn't seem possible. Already their personalities seemed so different. He wondered how different Tucker and Nathan might have been as babies. Had Nathan been solemn and knowing even as an infant? Did Tucker always have that sparkle in his eyes? These questions seemed so important, but they frightened him, too. What if he never knew? What if Carissa resented him even asking? He knew he had no right to ask.

He focused on Odelia and Kent. Their

love for each other made him smile. His parents seemed to find them ridiculous. He found them wonderful. As a boy, he'd always thought Odelia was a little odd, but he realized now that eccentricity was not the same as insufficiency. She was, perhaps, the wisest of them all. She certainly enjoyed life the most! He decided, secretly, that she was his favorite auntie. Not that he didn't love and value the others.

A feeling of such blessing swept over him that he almost laughed aloud. Fortunately, Tucker said something that made everyone chuckle, so no one noticed that Phillip might be unduly amused or pleased. It wouldn't have mattered if they had. He was too grateful to care at the moment, too determined, for he suddenly knew what he had to do, what he was supposed to do.

He'd never tried his hand at being a businessman; he'd never even thought of it until now, but somehow he knew that he had to at least make the attempt. A part of him acknowledged a certain fear or at least that he ought to be afraid of failure, but a larger part of him knew instinctively that this was what he'd been waiting all these weeks for, that this was the next big thing.

Oh, it wasn't like all the other times. The element of physical danger was missing, but nothing he had ever done had ever truly been important. This had meaning. So much meaning that he dared not even stop to think too much about it. But everything he'd done to this point just might have prepared him for this moment. He hoped and prayed that it was so, because he was about to take the biggest leap of faith of his life.

Chapter Thirteen

After the meal, Phillip pitched in to straighten up the dining room and stow the few leftovers. Carissa sent the kids upstairs with instructions to change their clothes then quickly helped clean up before setting out after them. Phillip ran to catch up with her, ignoring the knowing looks that passed between Odelia and Kent.

"Carissa."

She stopped and half turned to face him. "Yes?"

"Do you think you might have some time for me a little later today? I mean, if you don't have plans."

"I don't have plans. Just give me time to change and get the kids settled."

He decided that if he was going to do this thing, he ought to do it right. His mind awhirl with plans, he asked, "Will a couple hours be okay with you?"

"Uh, sure."

A to-do list had been taking shape in his mind throughout the meal. It was a lot to get done in a short amount of time, but he thought he could pull it together if he had help. "I have to speak to my aunts. I'll see you later."

"Okay."

He didn't have time to explain more fully. Besides, it would be better to show her what he had in mind. Thankfully, his aunts were only too happy to help with his project. They understood that he and Carissa would need space to work that was close to the children, and Odelia had the perfect solution; the large storage room under the attic stairs beside Phillip's room would make a suitable office. It was on the same end of the house as the master suite and would be large enough for a desk, whiteboard and a couple of chairs. In addition, the attic contained enough space to set up a computer lab, as well as a play space for the children, if needed. Odelia asked Kent to help Phillip with the heavy work. She and Hypatia would figure out where to put

everything unnecessary. Meanwhile, Magnolia volunteered to cull the attic for appropriate furnishings. While he changed his clothes, Phillip spared a few minutes to make a couple of phone calls. The first went to his brother. Then he got to work.

By the time he tapped on the door to the master suite, things were in place as much as possible. Carissa greeted him with a smile. Grace abandoned her TV show to try to climb Phillip, while Tucker rolled across the floor pretending to be a wrecking ball, and Nathan ignored him to read a book about boy archaeologists. Carissa invited Phillip to take a seat, but he'd barely sat down before Odelia and Kent arrived.

"I have something to show you," he explained to Carissa, passing Grace to Odelia. Nathan glared at him over the top of his book from the easy chair. "It won't take long," Phillip promised.

"Go see. Go see," Kent directed, waving them toward the door. "The missus and I will stay here with the children until you return."

Eager to show her, Phillip caught Carissa's hand and hauled her out of the suite.

"It's just an overlarge closet," he warned, dragging her along. "It doesn't even have a window, but there's room enough for a desk, a whiteboard and your laptop. Most importantly, it's private and quiet."

When he reached the former storage chamber, he threw open the door and stepped to one side. She put her head in and looked around.

"An office?"

"You can work here in peace," he told her. "The cordless phone reception is just fine. We've already checked. I'll watch the kids." She opened her mouth to speak, but he held up a hand. "Hear me out. I'm hoping that way you'll have time to work on the app. Now, come see this." He grabbed her hand again and hauled her to the foot of the attic stairs, then he went ahead of her, explaining. "I've spoken to my brother, and he's agreed to draw up formal partnership

papers."

"Partnership, as in a business partnership."

"Exactly."

She seemed uncertain, so Phillip said, "I told him the split should be fifty-fifty, but if the terms aren't satisfactory, I'm open to negotiation. I know I can't do this without you, no matter how many contacts I have in the industry."

"No, that's fine," she said quickly, but then she fell silent as Phillip opened the attic door. "The kids will love it up here, but we're going to need equipment."

"Just give me a list," Phillip told her. "We have some underwriting, and I still have a few thousand in cash. Plus, my brother's offered to invest, too."

She gave him a surprised smile. "All right, but I can't promise how many hours I'll be able to dedicate to this project. I'll have to make a minimum number of sales every day before I can leave my regular job and go to work on the app. Agreed?"

"Absolutely. Do you think you could give me a few minutes now to estimate the cost of development? And I'll be wanting that equipment list as soon as possible, too. I've promised a business prospectus to a couple of people."

She raised her eyebrows at that but got down to business without delay. Phillip's excitement grew exponentially. "Business partners," she said wryly. "Who'd have thought it?"

He clasped his hands behind him to keep from reaching out for her. This was business. For now. "Stranger things have happened, I suppose."

"Not that I can think of."

"Well, you know what they say about God working in mysterious ways."

"I think this definitely falls into that category," she agreed. "Now, I think it's time we rescue your aunt and uncle."

He chuckled at that. "You're probably right."

They returned to the master suite to find Nathan reading aloud to everyone. He was very good, his voice full of drama as he finished the tale of the boy archaeologist and a fearsome mummy.

Everyone applauded, including Phillip. Nathan couldn't hide a grin, even while he tried to give Phillip a dirty look. Perhaps that was why Phillip invited Carissa and her children out to dinner; he didn't feel like eating alone or he didn't feel like letting Carissa out of his sight just yet. Strangest of all, he found that he wanted to spend some time with the children, too. Now, if he could just get through dinner without doing or saying something that would ruin the progress he'd made...

But everything seemed designed to try his patience. Grace almost spilled his iced tea. He had to track down Tucker

and haul him back to the table three separate times, and Nathan vacillated between moody silence and downright rudeness. Despite all that, they managed to demolish two pizzas and make numerous trips to the salad bar in just over two hours. Through it all Carissa kept her cool, and so did Phillip. What was the point in losing his temper? Kids would be kids.

"You'll think twice before inviting us out again, I bet," Carissa said at the end of the meal, after she'd prevented Grace from attempting to bus their table.

"Maybe next time it could be just two of us," Phillip quipped, thinking that he'd like to take her for a nice, quiet, childless dinner.

Nathan snorted at that, challenging, "Like you'd take *me* anywhere."

Phillip felt as if he'd been smacked in the back of the head with a hammer. Of course. Of all the children, Nathan would long for one-on-one time of any sort with anyone. How he must miss it, and Phillip suddenly wanted to give it to him.

"Well, now, Nathan. Where would you like to go, just you and me?"

Nathan looked away, but Grace immediately started jumping up and down.

"Me first! Me first!"

"You?" Phillip laughed. "And just where would you like to go, Miss Grace?"

"Tea party," she announced, folding her arms.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Tea party," she insisted, poking him in the thigh. "Just you and me."

That was how he came to be sitting at a table in the sunroom the next day wearing a big straw hat and a string of beads when his brother came to deliver the partnership papers. Asher put his hand over his mouth, but the snickers escaped just the same.

Phillip glowered and sank down a little farther in his chair. "Laugh now. You'll be doing the same in a few years. Just wait until Marie Ella plans a tea party for you."

"You're right," Asher admitted, grinning, "but I never expected to see *you* at it."

"That makes two of us," Phillip grumbled, tossing the hat to the table and yanking the beads off.

"Lunch is over," Grace announced with a sigh.

"It certainly is," Phillip said, getting to his feet. He said to Grace, "I have work to do now." Then he kissed her on the forehead. Hilda came into the room, wiping her hands on a towel. "Grace promised to help you clean up after our tea party. Call upstairs when you're done. I'll send Nathan down for her." "Chester can walk her back upstairs," Hilda said.

"Good idea. Otherwise, I'll have to dig her out of Odelia's closet again."

With that, Phillip and Asher headed up to the master suite to discuss the partnership terms with Carissa. As they climbed the stairs, Asher asked, "So, are you going to marry her?"

Phillip didn't pretend to

misunderstand, but it took him a while to come up with an answer. "I seem to be headed in that direction."

Asher laughed, but to Phillip it was not a laughing matter. In fact, it was terrifying, and it got scarier almost by the hour.

After Carissa had looked over the

partnership agreement and signed it, Asher went on his way. Phillip presented her with sales projection numbers.

"They aren't very thorough because I don't know how much to sell advertising for."

"Couldn't that wait until after the initial offering?" Carissa asked. "Once we have a better idea how many people might be interested in downloading the app, we'd have a better idea about advertising rates, wouldn't we?"

Phillip rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "That's not a bad business model. We might want to do that with the other apps we develop."

"Are we going to develop other

apps?" she asked in surprise.

"If this works out, why not? Asher has some ideas about legal applications, and we did tell Garrett we'd look into his idea about identifying plants."

"You mean it? But...I failed at business before."

"Doesn't mean you'll fail again," he pointed out.

She stared at him for a long moment before dropping onto the couch. "You sound like Tom."

Phillip felt a chill seeping into his veins. He carefully took a seat on the edge of the cushion next to her.

"You're like him in many ways, frankly. It's that rugged, he-man exterior, that try-anything-once attitude." She threw out a hand. "Oh, you're more handsome, more polished, but then, you're a Chatam. No doubt, you're a jack-of-all-trades, just as he was."

"Jack-of-all-trades, master of none." Phillip muttered. "I've roughed it in the Canadian Northwest for months. I'm a skydiver of expert status, which means I'm suitable for instructing tourists. I've surfed every great beach in the world. I've worked as a commercial fisherman. And let's not forget the mountain climbing. Along the way, I've earned three degrees, none of which I've ever really used. Currently I live with my three elderly aunts. Yeah, I'm a real prize."

"Commercial fishing," she exclaimed, sitting up straight. "Surfing. Skydiving. Zoos. The Canadian Northwest! Phillip, we're talking about reality apps here. Why wouldn't it work for those things, as well as mountain climbing?"

He shot to his feet. "That's brilliant. And your father said you didn't have a head for business."

"I don't." She snatched up the folder and shook it at him. "But you do. All I do is write code and maybe do some computer design."

"Then together we ought to be able to make this work," he told her, pulling her to her feet.

She grinned. "I think so, too."

Could they make *more than* business work between them? Phillip wondered, looking down into her face. Oh, how he hoped so! His gaze dropped to her lips just as something hit him in the back of the legs, knocking him against her.

"It's my turn!"

He looked down to find Tucker stepping up onto the coffee table. Phillip plucked him off it. "Your turn?"

"To go to dinner alone with you. Where are we going?"

Phillip looked at Carissa, who did her best not to smile, and mentally sighed. He should've known. If he did it for one, of course he'd have to do it for all. "What's your favorite food?"

"Tacos!" "Mexican it is." "When?" "It'll be a surprise." "Soon!" Tucker demanded. "We'll see," Carissa told him, indicating that Phillip should put him down. Phillip set Tucker on his feet, and Carissa pointed him toward his bedroom "Out."

He ran, because Tucker never walked, shouting, "Oh, boy! Phillip's taking me to a Mexican restaurant!"

Carissa folded her arms. "I'm afraid you won't have a moment's peace until you do it."

Phillip gave her a sheepish look.

"Might as well be tomorrow.

Wednesday is church, and Thursday is grief support group."

She nodded. "Tomorrow."

He grinned. "Does that mean you'll ride to support group with me on Thursday?"

She chuckled. "Why not?"

"And church Wednesday night?" She hesitated, so he pressed. "They have lots of activities for the kids on Wednesdays."

"That might be good for them. But you'd better ride with us. And it's only if I make my quota early enough."

"You'll make your quota," he told her, pleased. "I just know it. How can you not, with me hanging out with the rug rats?"

Smiling, she nodded. He stood there searching for something else to say for several seconds before dropping the folder onto the table and turning for the door. She followed him and then, at the last moment, laid a hand on his shoulder. He spun to face her.

"Phillip, are we crazy to think this might actually work?"

"I don't know," he told her honestly. "All I know is that when I pray about it, I feel...elated, almost. I think it's something we have to do, have to try."

"You pray about it," she said softly, a note of awe in her voice and a faraway look in her eye. "I don't know if Tom ever did that. He was a believer, but I don't know if he ever did that." She looked up suddenly, smiling, and her face seemed to glow. "I'm glad you pray about it. I will, too, from now on."

Phillip suddenly wanted to hold her close, to never let her go again. He wanted so much: to offer financial security to Carissa and the kids, for Carissa to love and want him, marriage, family, the whole ball of wax. It was too much to even hope for, let alone ask for. Instead, he mutely nodded, ran his hands down her arms, squeezed her hands in his and left before he made an utter fool of himself.

Tuesday was a difficult day. The kids seemed to bounce off the walls, so Tucker surprised Phillip when they went to dinner together that evening. He kept himself at the table at the Mexican restaurant, talking and eating a mile a minute, his legs swinging. He talked about everything from Nathan being too bossy and Grace being too giggly to his mom being pretty.

"Anyway, I think she's pretty."

"She is," Phillip agreed. "Very pretty."

"So why don't you marry her?"

"I just might," Phillip heard himself say, his heartbeat suddenly echoing in his ears. "When?" Tucker demanded.

"I don't know," Phillip answered with a nonchalance he didn't feel, "and I said *might*. She'd have to agree, and we're a long way from that. Eat your dinner."

Tucker forked up a huge bite of beans and rice, then said with a full mouth, "Me and Grace want you to."

Phillip's chest seemed to expand. He fought the feeling, scooting his chair a little closer to the table. "But Nathan doesn't, does he?"

"I think he might."

Phillip was surprised by that. Not much he'd done or said had ever met with Nathan's approval, but Phillip couldn't help hoping. "What makes you think so?"

Tucker shrugged. "Things have been better since you been around."

"Ah," Phillip said, disappointed. He wanted to ask how things had been better, but he didn't dare. It was likely that all the better things that Tucker and Grace ascribed to him were nothing more than a result of them living at Chatam House. No doubt, Nathan knew it, too. Still, at least Carissa's children had thought of him as a potential mate for her.

Maybe, though, he was too much like her late husband. The idea haunted Phillip, so much so that he had almost convinced himself to ask her when he took Tucker home after their dinner. Carissa was so concerned about how Tucker had behaved during dinner, however, that Phillip found himself reassuring her instead.

"I threatened to tie him to the bed for a week if he so much as left the table tonight," she said, looking down into Tucker's upturned face.

Phillip chuckled. "He must have taken you at your word, then, because he didn't budge."

"You're not just saying that?"

"He stayed put," Phillip told her, ruffling Tucker's hair.

"I'm so glad." She bent down and touched her nose to Tucker's, saying, "There's hope for you yet, my boy." "Mo-om."

A huff from the direction of the hallway brought Phillip's attention to Nathan, who stood with arms folded, regarding them all, frowning. Phillip put on a smile.

"So where would you like to go for dinner, Nathan?"

"Nowhere."

"Nathan," Carissa said warningly. He rolled his eyes. Phillip tamped down a spurt of irritation mixed with alarm.

"Aw, come on," he said, "what's your favorite food?"

"Nothing you'd like."

"Nathan, that's uncalled for," Carissa

warned softly.

The boy sighed then muttered the name of an expensive seafood restaurant that advertised on TV frequently.

Carissa smiled apologetically.

"Nathan thinks he likes fish."

"I do!"

"But the other two aren't too keen on it," Carissa went on. "In truth, they haven't had much opportunity to eat fish, but Nathan used to eat it occasionally with his dad."

"He was a *great* fisherman, and we used to eat what he caught," Nathan insisted.

"He did like a mess of fried catfish," Carissa said quietly.

"Well, if it's catfish you like, Nathan,

there's a great catfish restaurant here in town," Phillip ventured. "How does that sound?"

"Humph," Nathan said, and turning his back, he disappeared down the hallway.

He had to do this. He had to try.

"How is Friday?"

"I can't imagine why you'd want to do this. You see how he behaves."

"Has any man spent time with Nathan alone since his dad died?" Phillip asked. She shook her head, shamefaced.

"Seems to me that it can't hurt, then."

She smiled, and they agreed on Friday. Wisely, they agreed not to mention it again to Nathan until Phillip showed up to take him to dinner. Meanwhile, he had the midweek service and the grief support meeting to look forward to.

Who would ever have dreamed that he'd actually look forward to grief support meetings?

Chapter Fourteen

They went to midweek service the next evening at Downtown Bible Church in Carissa's old van. She had made her sales quota early, but the day had not been without calamity. Tucker and Nathan got into a fistfight while Phillip was chatting on the phone with an old surfing buddy. Grace wandered off to play in Odelia's closet again, but at least Phillip knew to look for her there first. All in all, however, Carissa was pleased. Phillip had proved surprisingly laid-back with the children, and despite her personal disappointment where

Phillip was concerned, Carissa somehow felt that she could stop holding her breath.

The prayer meeting calmed her nerves even more. What was happening between her and Phillip Chatam might be nothing more than business and casual friendship, but she felt sure that it would ultimately play out to her benefit. She constantly prayed for God to temper her expectations so that she would be open to His will rather than caught up in her own wishes. That way, she feared, lay disappointment and bitterness when she wanted to be open only to obedience and gratitude.

Thursday went so smoothly that she felt a little weird. Phillip showed up

during breakfast, which had become the normal routine of the day, and suggested that he and the children would swim in the afternoon *if* they allowed him to make a few phone calls uninterrupted during the morning. They promised to cooperate and then made good on their promises. Even more surprising, Carissa made more than her quota of sales by midafternoon and was able to get up to the computer lab, now fully stocked with equipment, before evening.

While the children played quietly, subdued by their romp in the pool earlier, Carissa and Phillip worked on the initial design of the app. She'd been toying with it, and Phillip's experiences with mountain climbing helped her refine the look and feel of it.

Dallas arrived that evening, joining Phillip and the aunties for dinner, then went up to the master suite to stay with the children while Phillip and Carissa attended the grief support meeting. When they arrived, they found that a new couple had joined the group.

Middle-aged and fit, the Tillotsons were both doctors whose handicapped son had died of natural causes. They had thought themselves well prepared, but his death had taken them by surprise, nonetheless. As everyone shared their stories and encouraged them, Carissa realized that her own grief and fear had truly lessened, thanks to the warmth and support she had experienced from the group.

As the meeting broke, Mrs. Tillotson shocked Carissa when she commented, "I've heard that many couples find each other in grief counseling." Her gaze swung back and forth between Carissa and Phillip. "I suppose it's as good a way to meet as any."

Carissa blinked. Phillip, meanwhile, reached across and shook hands with the lady's husband before turning to his uncle, acting as if he hadn't heard the comment. Suddenly, Carissa felt as if she skated on the edge of disappointment heartbreak a varying

disappointment, heartbreak a yawning chasm beneath her. She'd told herself

over and over that she wouldn't expect more than a business partnership from Phillip, but she'd been fooling herself all along. She wanted more from him. Hoping for anything else was just asking for trouble. So why, oh, why couldn't she stop?

* * *

On Friday evening, Nathan acted as if he was going to a hanging. He dragged his feet and moped, but he accompanied Phillip to his car, got in and allowed himself to be driven to the restaurant, which was located in a picturesque turnof-the-century house near the Buffalo Creek downtown square. The menu ranged from fried catfish to fried pickles with fried sweet potatoes and fried cheese thrown in to balance things. Nathan didn't like anything except the fish, and he was iffy about that at first. His usual surliness remained unimproved by the experience.

After a while, he asked Phillip, "Why're you doing this?"

Phillip shrugged. "Seemed like a good idea at the time. Besides, I like catfish."

"You like my mom more," Nathan accused.

Phillip just nodded. "I like you, too," he said.

"Well, I *don't* like you," Nathan grumbled, "and making me eat fish with you isn't going to change that." "What will change it?" Phillip asked.

"Nothing," Nathan snapped, "because you aren't my dad and you never will be."

"Nathan, I'm not trying to be your dad," Phillip said. Unfortunately, he knew the words were a lie the instant they left his mouth. What was he doing if not trying to befriend Carissa's children? Wasn't he trying to prove to himself that he could be good father and husband material?

"I just want my real dad," Nathan muttered.

They were an awful lot alike, he and Nathan, both wanting something they couldn't have. Nathan wanted his dad back. Phillip wanted to be a different kind of man. The kind who might actually have something to offer this boy and his mother, something more substantial than an occasional dinner out. He didn't even have his own place to live or a regular paycheck. Shouldn't he be able to do anything, for the possibility of making a life with Carissa and her children?

Lord, make me what they need, he prayed. Or give me the strength to get out of the way so they can have it with someone else.

They returned to the house in silence. Nathan stared out the window of the car, saying nothing. Phillip let the boy be. His own inadequacies weighed on him

like a mountain of rock. He couldn't help remembering the stunned look on Carissa's face the evening before, when Mrs. Tillotson had so casually assumed that they were a couple. It was as if the thought had never occurred to Carissa before that moment. Phillip had felt as if she'd stabbed a hatpin into his forehead, for he had thought of little else since he'd first met her.

Carissa opened the door to the suite before they could even knock, her anxiety obvious. Nathan put her out of her misery, drawling sarcastically, "I told you I liked fish."

She looked to Phillip. "He ate it, then?"

"A whole platter."

Nathan gazed up at Phillip then headed toward his bedroom. Carissa called him back with a sharp "Nathan!"

The boy stopped and looked back over his shoulder. Phillip spared him the effort of saying thanks.

"You're welcome."

Nathan shrugged and went on his way. Phillip felt like all his hopes were disappearing with him. He had to accept that all he would ever have with Carissa Hopper was a business partnership. He prayed fervently that it would turn into something to give Carissa and her kids a bit of financial security. Then he was going to leave, go far away from Chatam House and Buffalo Creek. Meanwhile, he would put his nose to the grindstone.

Over the next week, Phillip picked up fairly quickly on what Carissa was doing—not the code, but the design part of the work. She had an orderly mind but also a cool aesthetic sense when it came to the placement of widgets and buttons and other design elements. He

contributed by culling an amazing photo from his own reel, which he then digitized, for use as their icon. She was thrilled with the result and hugged him. The gesture seemed perfectly natural until they looked up and found all three of the children staring at them. Grace and Tucker grinned at each other, but Nathan stomped off in a huff. Carissa put a hand to her hair selfconsciously. Phillip took a deep, silent breath, suddenly aware that their every gesture was being scrutinized. He didn't realize how much until a throat cleared behind them. Carissa and he whirled around to find his parents standing at the head of the attic stairs. Dallas was with them.

His father waved a patrician hand. "So these are the offices of Chopper Apps, LLC, I presume."

They had chosen the name Chopper as an amalgam of Chatam and Hopper. It had seemed clever at the time. The way Murdock said it, the name sounded cheesy. Dallas sent Carissa an apologetic glance, even as Maryanne Chatam walked across the floor to stoop before Grace.

"Hello," she said. "I'm Phillip's mother."

Grace's eyes grew as round as saucers. Then she put her hands on her knees and started to laugh, pointing at Maryanne.

Maryanne gaped at Phillip, but he didn't have an explanation.

At the same time, Tucker zipped over to Murdock, asking, "You his father?"

"I am..." Murdock cleared his throat.

"...Phillip's father. And also Dallas's father."

"Bffn!" Grace called gleefully,

waving at Dallas, who sent her a tiny

wave back. Grace covered her mouth with her hand, still laughing at Maryanne.

One look at Carissa's glowing pink face had Phillip on his feet. He walked over and plucked Grace up off the floor. "Just what's so funny, funny face?"

"Your mommy looks like a grandma," she said.

Maryanne pushed up to her feet, chucked Grace under the chin and said, "I *am* a grandma, young lady, and proud of it. My granddaughter isn't nearly as big as you, but I think you'd like her, because she's adorable."

"I'm adorable," Grace said confidently, and Carissa gasped, but

Phillip had to smile.

"Don't you have a grandmother?" Maryanne asked.

Grace considered this, sighed and said, "I just have a Lexi."

Before his mother could ask what a "Lexi" was, Phillip set Grace on her feet and gave her a little shove. "Why don't you go downstairs with your mom so I can show my parents around?"

Carissa snapped her fingers, and for once the children responded just as they should, allowing themselves to be herded down the stairs easily. Phillip prepared to be grilled, toasted and roasted.

To his surprise, Dallas lifted a hand and said, "Before this goes one step further, I just want it on the record that Asher is the one who called them."

Phillip decided he needed to have a long discussion with his brother, but after spending the afternoon with his parents, he decided that he just might have to thank his big brother.

* * *

Murdock and Maryanne were waiting when Carissa returned from church with the children the next day. They sat on the front porch of Chatam House in their Sunday best with a low wrought iron table between them. Phillip stood at the top of the stairs, leaning against one of the thick, white columns, while Dallas swayed idly in the porch swing. Carissa had seen nothing of Phillip or his parents after their unexpected visit to the attic computer lab the day before. She didn't know if that was good or bad, but she feared the worst.

Gulping, she brushed lint from the skirt of her navy blue suit after stepping out from behind the steering wheel of her old van. Hilda and Chester had taken their own car so they could join friends from their Sunday-school class for a potluck luncheon. Before Carissa could instruct them otherwise, the children spilled out of the van on their own, Tucker first, as usual, then Nathan. His gaze darted warily behind his glasses as he helped Grace from her safety seat.

Walking around the front end of the vehicle, Carissa knew just how he felt.

Phillip started down the steps as she and the children moved up the walk. Grace skipped toward him, but Carissa snagged her hand, holding her back. He smiled down at the girl before lifting his gaze to Carissa's face.

"My parents and I would like to take you to lunch. To, um, discuss business." He glanced around, adding quickly, "Dallas and the aunties will watch over the children, if that's all right."

Heart pounding, Carissa thought, *This is it, then.* She felt sure that his parents had convinced him to drop their partnership. Well, it was for the best.

The business was likely destined for failure anyway.

Phillip beckoned to Dallas, saying, "We'd better go. Every church in town will have let out by now. We'll be lucky to get a table in less than an hour."

"We'll get a table," Murdock said, appearing at his shoulder. "It's all arranged." Maryanne stepped up to his side. He took her by the elbow and walked her past Carissa out onto the graveled drive, where a luxury sedan sat.

Carissa looked up at Phillip, took a deep breath and let him lead her toward the car.

Murdock drove straight to the finest Italian restaurant in town, and the proprietor met him at the hostess desk. They were shown to a table in a private room at once. After the drinks were brought and the orders were taken, Phillip sat back in his chair and began to speak.

"Mom and Dad want to invest in our company."

Carissa's heart stopped. Were they offering to buy her out?

"What do you think?" he asked. "I told them I couldn't accept without consulting you."

"It would just be a matter of operating capital," Murdock explained. "Enough so you could open a real office." "Or move out on your own," Maryanne said, with a shake of her head and a droll smile, as if she and Carissa had a secret. "Men are always putting the cart before the horse."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"It's not just that we're glad to have him off that mountain," Murdock rumbled. "This thing really seems to have potential, and Phillip is totally convinced you can pull it off."

"If anyone can, Carissa can," Phillip said, smiling at her.

"Some operating capital would mean that you wouldn't have to work the other job," Maryanne put in meaningfully.

"That decision is Carissa's," Phillip pointed out. "You were a working mother. You would know how that is." "Let's be honest," Maryanne said bluntly, meeting Carissa's gaze. "I was more than a working mother. I was a career woman with children, and I didn't always get the balance right. It's tough enough when you have a husband and multiple resources at your fingertips. I can't imagine how you manage on your own."

Stunned, Carissa floundered for a moment before admitting, "Not always well."

Maryanne looked at Phillip, smiling. "Hopefully, that will change for the better."

Phillip reached across the table and covered Carissa's hand with his. "What

do you say, partner? Ready to take on a couple of investors and grab the future by the horns?"

Several seconds passed before reality set in. They weren't offering to buy her out. They were offering to pour money into Chopper Apps, enough so that she wouldn't have to sell computer services over the telephone if she didn't want to! She wasn't sure what to say or do, especially about giving up her job. That seemed like an awfully big step to take, but with the Chatams behind this new project, her hopes soared.

Without realizing that she'd turned her palm up to meet Phillip's, she closed her eyes and said a quick prayer of thanks before nodding her head. "Sounds great. It sounds just great." Phillip's fingers threaded through hers and squeezed. She couldn't stop her huge smile or the fluttering of her heart.

* * *

It didn't seem possible. Phillip could barely grasp the concept. Not only did his parents approve of the business venture, they hadn't said one word, negative or otherwise, about a romantic involvement between him and Carissa. In fact, they gave it their tacit approval in a very shocking way. After dinner on Sunday, they spent the remainder of the day with Asher, Ellie and Marie Ella. As requested, Phillip and Dallas put in

an appearance at the evening meal, during which Maryanne casually suggested that she and Murdock take Carissa's children on an outing the next day, Monday, so he and Carissa could concentrate on business. Dumbfounded, Phillip must have stared at her for fifteen full seconds, after which she put down her fork and calmly reminded him that she was a pediatrician who had raised four children of her own

"I think I'm fully capable of handling three precocious youngsters."

Dallas promptly volunteered to go along.

Phillip managed to stammer, "I'll rrun the idea by Carissa t-tonight and get back to you." Carissa, of course, could not realize how unlike his parents the idea was. She assumed they were so anxious to see a return on their investment that they'd even babysit her children so she could work on the project. "I guess I could skip making calls tomorrow, and the kids would certainly enjoy the outing."

Phillip let her think what she liked, but even the aunties stood at the door of Chatam House with their jaws ajar as Grace, Tucker and a very disgruntled Nathan trailed out between Murdock and Maryanne the next morning, a worriedlooking Dallas bringing up the rear. Their destination was the Dallas aquarium. Personally, Phillip thought they'd get halfway through the place, lose Tucker, spend the rest of the afternoon searching for him and return home in a sullen huff. He stopped worrying about his parents and the children when, after hours of feverish work and several disappointments, the initial phase of the app finally performed like a charm.

Phillip had done nothing more than what he'd been told. Carissa was the boss in the lab, and he couldn't have been more proud. Elated, he scooped Carissa up out of her chair and swung her around the room.

"I knew it! I knew it. You're a genius."

He plopped her down again, aiming

an impulsive kiss at her cheek. Laughing, she unexpectedly turned her head just enough to bring her lips into contact with his.

They both froze as electricity zapped through the air. Then Phillip slowly straightened. Carissa turned back to the computer terminal, her fingers flying across the keyboard. He let his hand lightly caress the back of her head.

"Call Seattle," she said, her voice sounding strangled. "Have them turn on the camera. We're ready for transmission."

Phillip fought with himself, torn between hauling her up out of that chair to kiss her and doing as she asked. In the end, he put the business ahead of his personal needs. This was the ticket to financial independence for her and the children, their chance at the kind of life they needed and deserved. He called Seattle.

Nearly two hours of frustration later, they finally got a clear picture transmitting through Phillip's smartphone. By the time they were done, Carissa had worked all the bugs out and secured the uplink. Before they broke the connection, Phillip learned that one of the guides was taking up a party of six in two days. They expected at least three to reach the summit and one or more to cross the crater at the top of Mount Rainier and sign the book kept in the

metal box there. It would be a climb worth transmitting and filming.

"Our first live transmission, and the first for our archive," Carissa stated.

The climb could be viewed in real time, or the film could be watched later. They posted the app to go live thirty minutes after the start of the climb. In two days, they would be in business. While the transmission would run, uninterrupted on their live feed, they agreed not to track how many people were downloading the app until after church on Wednesday night.

His parents returned the children that evening with barely a word about how the day had gone. Nathan seemed more subdued than usual, but then, all of the children were obviously tired. Grace babbled about the penguins, Tucker mentioned the eels, and all three clutched pricey gifts that Phillip's parents had bought them. For Nathan, it was a large, glossy book about the oceans. Tucker got a model of a shark with a working jaw, and Grace carried a stuffed walrus almost as big as her. Phillip looked at Dallas, trying to ratchet his jaw back into place, but she just shrugged and offered him a limp smile.

Were these the same people who had considered Ellie too young and eccentric for Asher and had urged Petra to focus on career rather than marriage, until a mere carpenter had come calling? Nevertheless, Phillip couldn't imagine that becoming grandparents had softened his parents so much that they were not just willing but eager to accept a penniless widow and three less-thanperfect children into the family. Perhaps they thought that once Carissa was financially sound and independent, she would have no more use for their vagabond younger son.

When Carissa started to protest that his parents shouldn't have spent so much money, Phillip interrupted to announce that the app would go live on Wednesday morning. Murdock and Maryanne greeted this news enthusiastically. Then Murdock confirmed Phillip's worst suspicions by clapping a hand onto Dallas's shoulder and saying, "Call that Realtor friend of yours, honey. I think Chopper Apps needs a new home!"

Carissa said that she needed to work, but Maryanne waved that away, saying that Carissa shouldn't let Phillip and his father make all the decisions.

"You'll wind up working in luxury offices and living in Chatam House from now on, if you do. Of course, if you want to stay on in Chatam House..."

"No," Carissa hastily retorted. "No, we've imposed long enough."

"It's no imposition," Phillip assured her firmly.

"Dallas, you'll stay with the children,

won't you?" Maryanne asked smoothly.

Dallas shuttled a glance helplessly back and forth between Phillip and their mother. "Of course, if that's what everyone wants."

"Well, it's settled, then," Murdock decreed heartily. "We'll go right after breakfast tomorrow."

Phillip glanced at Carissa, ready to argue the matter if she balked, but she nodded. His parents took their leave of the children with handshakes and shoulder pats, but at the very end, Phillip caught a wink that his father sent Nathan. The boy's conspiratorial smile turned the butterflies in Phillip's stomach to lead weights. Something was afoot. Phillip just knew it, and he meant to find out what it was.

Chapter Fifteen

After his parents and Dallas left, Phillip hung around the suite while Carissa spoke to the children about their day. Dr. Maryanne, as they'd been told to call Phillip's mother, had apparently anticipated Tucker's every move and kept him smoothly in check, leaving Grace to her "bffn" Dallas and Doc to shepherd Nathan. He could just imagine his father pumping Nathan for information about his mother's relationship with Phillip.

Because the children were tired, Phillip stuck around to help tuck them into bed. He was shocked when Nathan sat up in the lower bunk and said, "Doc doesn't treat me like a stupid little kid."

Phillip glanced into the hallway, saw Carissa pass into the sitting room and backed up, carefully closing the door behind him. He crouched down beside the bed. "That's because you're not a stupid little kid."

Nathan flopped down onto the pillow and folded his arms atop the covers. "Doc says the Chatams don't have stupid kids."

"He's right about that."

"But I'm not a Chatam."

Phillip wanted to say that he could be. Instead, he said, "So, what else did you two talk about?" Nathan removed his glasses and set them on the bedside table before softly answering, "Forgiveness."

Jolted, Phillip sat cross-legged on the floor. "What about forgiveness?"

Nathan drew his brows together.

"Doc says I'm mad at God for letting my dad die."

Phillip caught his breath, but he managed to keep his cool.

Nathan continued. "Doc said I could just ask God to forgive me, and He would, because of everything Jesus did on the cross."

"That's right," Phillip managed.

Nathan went on in a thick voice. "Doc said I could say it anywhere, anytime,

that I didn't have to wait for church or anything. So I prayed with him."

Phillip reached out and clasped the boy's hand. "You know something, Nathan? I need to ask for forgiveness, too. I haven't always given my dad the respect and honor he's due.

Maybe...maybe you could help me pray now."

Nathan rolled onto his side, facing Phillip, and closed his eyes. "Sure," he said, his hand still in Phillip's. "Just say, 'God, I'm sorry' and stuff."

Smiling, Phillip began to pray, words pouring out of him without thought. "Lord, thank You for my father, and thank You for Nathan's father. I don't know why Nathan didn't get to keep his, but I'm glad I got to keep mine, and I'm glad I get to know Nathan. Forgive me for not always appreciating my dad and how much he cares for me. Forgive me for not always appreciating You and how much You care for me and all of Your children. Help me make my dad proud. And Nathan, too. And You especially. In Jesus's name. Amen." "Amen," Nathan said.

Amen, Nathan Said.

"Amen" came from the top bunk.

Nathan rolled his eyes. Phillip bit his lip and winked. Nathan rolled onto his back and showed every sign of falling asleep. Phillip resisted the urge to ruffle his hair and instead rose to swiftly cross the room and slip out. He took a moment to compose himself before sauntering into the sitting room. Carissa looked up from the sofa.

"Everything okay?"

"Sure. Nathan just wanted to talk for a minute."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, he likes my dad," Phillip said lightly. "Go figure."

Her brow furrowed as if she wasn't quite sure what to make of that, but then she smiled. "Sounds like they had quite a day."

"Mmm-hmm."

"Well," she said, abruptly getting to her feet, "we have a busy day scheduled tomorrow. Best call it a night."

He let her see him out, knowing that he had some thinking and praying—and maybe some growing up-to do. He'd jumped from experience to experience, relishing the new and the unusual, responsible for no one and nothing but himself. He'd felt himself beneath the attention of God, and that had been fine with him—until he'd met Carissa and her children. Now he knew how wrong he'd been. God had been trying to get his attention for a very long time, and he had ignored Him, just as he'd ignored his parents.

Phillip had never worried about finding or keeping a job, always knowing that he could find work somehow doing something, but now he was afraid to fail and afraid to succeed. If he failed, Carissa and her children would continue to suffer, and if he succeeded... The idea that Carissa and the kids might not need him anymore was almost more than he could bear. He loved them. He loved her. He loved everything about her: her never-say-die determination, her work ethic, her pragmatism, the dreaminess in her deep blue eyes that she tried so hard to hide, her laughter and her tears, her breathtaking beauty and the way she fit into his arms. He even loved the way she accepted each of her children for the individuals they were and how she revered her late husband's memory,

though he had left her in a heap of trouble.

For the first time in his life, Phillip Chatam had found something that he truly wanted, and he had no idea how to get it. All he could do was ask God to make him worthy of Carissa and her children. He wished fervently that he'd listened to his parents when they'd counseled him to build for the future—and prayed that it wasn't too late.

* * *

Nathan's cheerfulness worried Carissa. She feared that he knew Phillip's parents intended to torpedo his relationship with her, with Nathan's help, no doubt. Still,

it was all in God's hands. She couldn't make Phillip want her-them-and she couldn't make his parents approve. All she could do was trust God to do what was best for her and the kids. So she rose Tuesday morning and prepared herself to spend the day viewing office space with Phillip and his parents. When she called her employer to say that she would be taking off another day, she was warned that her job was in jeopardy. She had done well the previous week, but if she failed to meet her monthly quota, she would be fired. So be it.

Immediately after breakfast, they set out, with Phillip driving his father's car and Murdock sitting beside him, leaving Carissa in the backseat with Maryanne. They looked at a number of properties: one particularly attractive office building just off the downtown square, several unique structures with many commercial possibilities and what amounted to an estate with a large house and a barn converted to a small leathergoods factory that had outgrown its space. The final stop was a spacious but affordable home in a well-established neighborhood a couple of blocks off Main Street. Zoned as mixed use, the house occupied a large lot with deep driveways on both sides. One led to a three-car garage, the other to an attached office of a similar size. It was the house itself that captivated Carissa, however.

Built of creamy brick and native rock with a tan roof, it might have appeared rather vanilla in appearance if not for the graceful crepe myrtles, sheltering oak trees, neat shrubbery and clinging ivy that surrounded the building. She knew that the children would flip over the pool in the backyard, a smaller version of the one at Chatam House, but Carissa stared in delight at the pale tile floors that flowed through the light, airy great room and the large, open kitchen, separated only by a freestanding fireplace with a deep hearth all the way around. Four bedrooms and a den completed the first floor with a game room above. This was the kind of home

where children could run and play as they grew, where a couple could entertain friends poolside on a summer day or fireside during the winter.

"This would be perfect for you and the children," Phillip said, "and the office space seems adequate."

"But what about you?" Carissa asked.

"Oh, he can stay on at Chatam

House," Maryanne put in nonchalantly.

"For now," Murdock added.

Ignoring his parents, Phillip took her hand in his. "You really like this place, don't you?"

She chose not to answer that. It would be unfair for her to wind up with this beautiful home while all Phillip got out of it was a place to work. "I think we need to pray about it."

Maryanne looked around with dismay on her face. "Oh, but it's such a perfect ____"

Her husband cleared his throat, his hands alighting upon her shoulders. "Carissa has a point. It never hurts to say an extra prayer on a matter."

"You're right, Dad," Phillip said.

Murdock harrumphed, cleared his throat again and gave his wife a nudge, saying, "Let's give these two a moment to talk, shall we?" Maryanne nodded, and they went out.

"We'll pray on it," Phillip said, watching his parents through the window as they got into the car, Maryanne in the front passenger seat this time, "but something tells me this is the place."

The place for her and her children, Carissa thought. Then he would be free to carry on with his adventures. Without them. She looked around at this beautiful house and her eyes swelled with tears.

* * *

After checking to make sure that the app had gone live as planned, Carissa insisted on working at her regular job on Wednesday. Phillip insisted on taking care of the children so she could make phone calls. His parents insisted on staying in town one more day. "You agreed not to track participation until this evening after church," Murdock said at breakfast. "So, we'll get the first reading on the success of this thing, then we'll be on our way in the morning."

Phillip seemed not to mind, and Carissa couldn't see what difference it made. Phillip would do what Phillip would do, no matter what his parents wanted. He always had. He interrupted her just after lunch to say that the head of advertising of a climbing-gear manufacturer had called him to inquire about buying ad space with Chopper Apps. Phillip had promised to put the company's name on a list and get back to them.

"That's a good sign, don't you think?" "A very good sign." Nevertheless, by the time they left for the midweek service, Carissa felt that her insides were tied into knots. She prayed fervently for the success of the business, the well-being of each of her children and for Phillip. She prayed for herself, too.

Phillip drove her old van as they returned home after church. As they crested the slight rise in the long, circular drive, a trio of vehicles came into view: the aunties' town car, his parents' sedan and one other. Carissa groaned.

At the same time, Grace cried, "Lexi!"

"Oh, no," Phillip and Nathan said in

unison.

"Just what we need," Carissa muttered.

"It'll be okay," Phillip promised, but the idea of his parents and her mother in the same room was enough to make Carissa physically ill.

They found them sizing up one another in the front parlor. The aunties had already made the introductions and ordered a tea tray. Alexandra seemed to be trying to decide how to enlist these newest Chatams to her cause.

"Both doctors," she purred from the settee next to Magnolia. "Impressive. Then again, the Chatams have so many more resources than most folks. I guess that's why my daughter has taken such shameful advantage of your sisters, Dr. Chatam, sir." Behind her, Leander shifted uncertainly.

"No one takes advantage of my sisters, madam," Murdock said, taking a stern tone. "It is impossible to take advantage of those as generous as my older sisters."

"At any rate," Maryanne put in from a striped wing chair, "Carissa is almost family."

"Oh, my, yes," Hypatia agreed smoothly from her usual seat. "Why, she is the dearest niece of our own Chester."

"And our son's business partner," Murdock added, moving to stand behind Maryanne's chair, Dallas perching daintily upon the chair's arm.

Kent occupied another side chair. Odelia sat upon its twin next to him, her vibrant red-and-yellow-striped suit in stark contrast to the tasteful gold damask upholstery. Phillip, Carissa and the children clustered together in front of the fireplace, until Alexandra enticed Grace to come to her as Chester carried in the tea tray.

"Don't you want to sit in Lexi's lap, darling? I'll share my sweets with you."

Grace looked to her mother for permission and, at Carissa's nod, slipped across the room. The aunties passed around cups of tea and plates of goodies. Chester hovered near the door, shadowed by Hilda. "Now, what is this about a business?" Alexandra asked offhandedly as Grace nibbled cookies.

"Carissa has developed a smartphone app," Phillip explained succinctly.

Alexandra chuckled dismissively.

"More of her computer nonsense. It never comes to anything."

"It will this time," Carissa said softly. "It was Phillip's idea, you see, and the Chatams have invested in it."

"You'll run it into the ground, Carissa," Alexandra predicted, "just as you did the last time."

"This is different," Carissa asserted. "For one thing," Phillip said, "this is a viable thing. For another, she's not alone anymore."

"For how long?" Alexandra scoffed. "Until you run off to your next little adventure? I know all about you, Phillip Chatam. Before long, you'll be off flying helicopters or hang gliding or something else equally foolish."

"I won't," Phillip insisted, looking down at Carissa. His hand found hers and pressed it. "I promise you. We'll do this together."

"They're already doing it together," Maryanne observed, "and very well, it seems to me."

"Carissa is no more equipped than you to run a business," Alexandra said to Phillip, ignoring Maryanne. "She has three children, and because she refuses to let anyone help her, it'll be years before she's free to concentrate on anything else."

"You won't help me by splitting my family," Carissa said flatly.

"There. You see? She won't take help even when it's best for her little ones," Alexandra accused, wrapping her arms around Grace.

"You are *not* splitting up this family," Phillip declared with some heat. Carissa noticed that Nathan slid back a step and pressed close to Phillip's side. Tucker, who stood in front of his mother, tilted his head back to gaze up at Phillip.

"I don't see what you have to say about it," Alexandra sniffed. "He might have a lot to say about it," Maryanne muttered. Carissa cut a sharp look at her, at which point she rolled her eyes. "Oh...just marry the woman, Phillip, and have done with it."

Phillip gaped at her. "But you...you said she'd targeted me!"

Maryanne waved that away. "I only wanted to see if you'd defend her, and you did. It's as plain as the nose on your face that you adore her." Carissa gasped. "Even your brother says it's just a matter of time before you marry, so do it."

Grace screamed with delight and jumped off Alexandra's lap. Running to Dallas, she threw up her arms, crying, "Auntie!" Dallas caught her and swung her up. Glancing around guiltily, she explained, "I told her she couldn't call me that until...that is, unless..."

"No more bffn!" Grace declared, grinning.

"Best friends *for now*," Carissa murmured.

"You haven't reformed at all!" Phillip blurted. "What on earth made you think...?"

"I don't know," Dallas all but wailed, half in apology, half in defense. "It's just that when I saw you with these three and then her, it seemed like a match. But all I ever did was tell them what a good guy you are." "And that you need us," Tucker put in.

"As much as we need you," Nathan added in a rusty voice.

Carissa's mouth fell open. "Nathan?" Suddenly Phillip squeezed her hand hard enough to break bones.

"I, um, don't know that I really have very much to offer, n-nothing that you and your mom don't already have," he said.

"Yes, you do," she said softly, urgently.

"Do I?" he asked, finally looking down at her.

"Oh, Phillip," she whispered, clasping his hand with both of hers, "you've given me more hope than anyone ever has."

"Hope," he echoed. "It takes more than *hope*, sweetheart."

"I have hope because of the things you've done," she said, "everything from grief support to moving us in here, taking a hand with the kids, coming up with the app and inviting me to take part, even getting your family and friends to buy in. You've even made me feel pretty again."

"You aren't pretty," he told her. "You're beautiful. And I love you, Carissa. I love all of you."

She twisted, shook free of him and threw her arms around his neck. "I love you, too! I have for a long time. I didn't dare dream that you could feel the same way." "Shhh." He folded her close. And felt Nathan's arms steal about his waist from behind. He reached down a hand to the boy, only to feel Tucker jumping up and down on his foot and Grace climbing him like a tree. Chuckling, he caught them all up in the sweep of one arm.

"Daddy Phil," Grace piped, "Doc Doc is crying."

"What?"

"Doc Doc is crying."

Phillip looked around to find his father with big tears rolling down his patrician cheeks.

"I am so proud of you, son," Murdock said in a thick voice. "I daresay, Carissa and the children are the best thing that's ever happened to you, but you put your mind to making Chopper Apps a success for them, and you've done it."

"The app!" Phillip exclaimed, setting down the children and catching Carissa's hand. "I forgot."

He strode for the door, towing her with him. She threw a hopeful smile at the assembly, motioning for them to follow. Teacups rattled in saucers as everyone rose to join the parade. Up the stairs they went to the attic. Carissa brought the system online. A few keystrokes brought up a rolling ticker. Dallas gasped.

"Are those actual numbers of people who have downloaded the app and are viewing the climb?" "This is unbelievable!" Carissa exclaimed.

Phillip put his hands to his head in shock. "Praise God!" he finally breathed. "It's beyond my wildest dreams."

"I knew it!" Murdock exclaimed, hugging Maryanne. "Call your brother and tell him."

Excitedly, Phillip pulled out his phone. He'd muted it during the church service and now found that he had numerous messages. As he began thumbing through them, Carissa rose from her chair.

"What is it?"

"They're all companies who want to

buy advertising," he said, stunned.

"We've done it, babe. We've done it!"

Carissa lifted a hand to her trembling lips. "God did this," she whispered. "He made it all happen."

"Yes," Phillip agreed, hugging her. "Oh, yes. And I thought He didn't even notice."

"Are we billionaires?" Tucker asked excitedly.

Phillip laughed. "No, son, we're not, but we're considerably better off than we were. And tomorrow," he went on, gazing into Carissa's deep blue eyes, "I think we should go buy a certain house."

Maryanne clapped her hands. "It's a wonderful house," she promised the children.

"A wonderful house," Carissa agreed, tears standing in her eyes.

The aunties began talking excitedly about all the furniture up here that needed a good home, while Maryanne told the children about the house. Phillip noticed that Nathan went to stand beside Murdock and that his father's hand rested comfortably on the boy's shoulder.

Carissa looked around and asked, "Where is Alexandra?"

"The Hedgespeths slipped out the front door as we were headed upstairs," Dallas reported.

Carissa nodded knowingly. Phillip caught her hand. "Maybe she finally

knows she's beaten."

"What she knows is that Carissa with a husband is much more formidable than Carissa without a husband," Dallas said, "especially if that husband is a Chatam."

Carissa smiled and wrapped her arms around Phillip's waist, while Odelia quoted from Scripture.

"Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up.""

"No pity for me," Phillip said, looking deeply into Carissa's wondrous blue eyes.

"Or me," she replied happily.

So he kissed her, finally, there in front

of God and everyone.

Epilogue

Watching Phillip watch his wife of hours laugh and flit about the room in a formfitting dress of knee-length pale peach accompanied by a matching swirl of organza veil that reached her slender waist, Odelia Chatam couldn't help smiling. He had ditched his suit coat and loosened his tie as soon as he'd come in the door, rolling his shirtsleeves to his elbows. Then he and Carissa had spent the next half hour welcoming wedding guests into their home, while his sisters and his mother had hurried to lay out Hilda's buffet. It was a most unusual

wedding reception, but quite enjoyable. Then again, it had been a most unusual wedding.

The bride had been escorted down the aisle by both of her sons. Her daughter had served as the flower girl, and the groom's parents had stood up with the happy couple as best man and matron of honor.

Smiling happily, Phillip carried a canned soft drink over to the living-room window seat and folded himself down beside her, giving her that you're-myfavorite-aunt smile of his. Oh, yes, she knew it well and treasured the knowledge. She saw no harm in it. The aunties all had their favorites among their nieces and nephews. It didn't mean that they loved the others any less.

"You don't mind that we did it here instead of Chatam House, do you?" he asked softly.

"Not a bit," she told him, patting his hand. "Now, Hypatia may be another story. You know what stock she sets on big, formal wedding receptions."

Phillip grinned and tweaked the pouf on her pink pillbox hat. "Hypatia did a swell job on your wedding and reception, as I recall."

Odelia clasped her hands together, feeling the pink poufs of her earrings sway at the ends of their chains. "Didn't she, though?"

His laughter boomed across the room,

and heads turned in their direction. Odelia felt herself blush. Perhaps she had gone a tad overboard with the wedding, but she'd waited fifty years for it, after all. "Thankfully, my sister is the epitome of good taste," she admitted sheepishly. "I think she kept me somewhat in line."

Phillip leaned over and kissed her cheek.

"Oh, Phillip, I'm so happy for you," Odelia told him warmly.

He looped an arm about her lacy pink shoulders and gave her a squeeze. "Thank you. Who knew responsibility

would be such an adventure?"

Speaking of adventures, three of them ran up just then to tug at him.

"Come on, Daddy Phil," said little Grace. She looked like a doll in her layers of pale purple organza, a huge, floppy bow tied about her pale red head. "Mom says it's time."

"All right. Okay," Phillip said indulgently, getting to his feet. "Time for what?"

"To throw the flowers," said Tucker. "The bouquet," Nathan corrected, adjusting his new glasses on his nose.

"They're gonna do it at our pool," Tucker announced proudly, "and all the single girls has got to go line up, even the aunties."

"Well, that leaves me out," Odelia said happily.

"Not me!" Grace trilled, clapping her hands and hopping in place.

"We'd better get you a good spot, then," Phillip told her. Reaching down, he grasped her by the waist and threw her up to sit on his shoulder, then they went galloping off for the French door that opened onto the patio at the end of the dining space, Grace giggling with delight, her organza skirts flopping. Tucker ran behind them, but Nathan paused to send Odelia a long-suffering look that didn't fool her in the least. He couldn't hide his happiness as he went off after them.

Odelia hurried to catch the arm of her husband, who was happy to abandon a

conversation about the crisis in health care to escort his wife outside to watch the festivities. She had to bite her lip as the boys prodded Hypatia and Magnolia into line on either side of Grace, who couldn't even stand still in her excitement. Poor Hypatia tried her best to offer a gracious smile, but Magnolia barely managed not to look disgruntled. Dallas stood directly behind Grace, her hands placed lightly upon the girl's shoulders. Perhaps a dozen others crowded in behind them next to the sparkling pool, which Garrett Willows had decorated with plants from his garden shop, The Willow Tree.

Phillip delivered to his bride the silk version of the champagne rose and ivy

bouquet that Carissa had carried at the church, both creations of Jessa Willows. He kissed her then grasped her by the shoulders and physically turned her back to the group of single women waiting to catch the bouquet. Carissa closed her eves, lowered the bouquet and flung the flowers backward over her head. They soared half the length of the pool and dropped straight toward little Grace, only to pass over her head. Dallas reflexively lifted her hands, palms up, only to have the bouquet bounce off them and fly over the heads of several others to land in the pool, where they floated prettily for several seconds while everyone gasped then finally laughed.

"Perhaps we're to have a respite from romance at Chatam House," Hypatia said hopefully, coming to stand beside Odelia, even as Carissa apologized to Dallas and Phillip used the pool net to drag in the bouquet.

Dallas shrugged and laughed, but Odelia's heart went out to the girl. Dallas was such a romantic. Perhaps she was a tad exuberant, a bit dramatic, but Odelia was the last one to hold that against the girl. Surely God had someone in mind for her niece. She just wasn't cut out to live alone. Then again, God knew best, as He constantly proved.

Just look at what He had wrought this time. Odelia watched as Tucker and

Grace pitched in to rescue the silk bouquet, plucking it from the pool net and mopping it with a thick beach towel. Nathan had the good sense to rescue the thing before they beat it to pieces. He presented it to Dallas with a slight bow. She accepted the poor thing with a smile, holding it out to one side, as it still leaked. Phillip and Carissa watched arm in arm, as proud as any parents could be. Meanwhile, Murdock and Maryanne watched them, expressions of utter joy on their faces.

Nathan escorted Dallas toward the house. As they passed by, Murdock laid a hand on the boy's shoulder and fell in beside him. Between them, Phillip and Murdock would provide everything any boy could ever need in the way of male guidance.

Sighing happily, Odelia patted her husband Kent's belly then reached up to straighten his pink bow tie. Yes, indeed, God's plans were always best, and if He chose to make Chatam House a center of romance, who was she to object? After all, spreading love and joy to the world through the doors of Chatam House was not such a bad thing. Perhaps it was not a grand ministry like that of their older brother Hub, a retired pastor now, or a clear calling like that of their nephew Morgan, a professor at Buffalo Creek Bible College. But three old ladies could do worse. Much worse. And it

wouldn't be nearly so much fun.

Odelia giggled as Kent sneaked a kiss at the same time as the bride and groom did.

Not nearly so much fun or so sweet.

* * * * *

Keep reading for an excerpt from FIREFIGHTER'S NEW FAMILY by Gail Martin.

Dear Reader,

Change is a constant fact of life. Some change is sudden and wrenching. Some change, like growing older, comes upon us so gradually that we don't even realize it's happening.

I'm always intrigued by the ways God chooses to make changes in our lives. He can blind us with His glory, as He did Paul on the road to Damascus, or He can work subtly in our hearts, one moment, one need, one challenge, one desire at a time.

Like Phillip Chatam, we all feel, at some point, that we are beneath God's notice, but it's never true. He's always ready, always shaping circumstances, to change what needs to be changed to bring us into His will, where true happiness is to be found.

All we have to do is ask. Have you asked to be conformed to God's will? Do it, and live your own story.

I hope you've enjoyed reading the Chatam House series as much as I've enjoyed writing it. Be sure to look for the next Chatam book, featuring Morgan Chatam, later in 2014. God bless,

Arlene James

Questions for Discussion

1. Grief support groups are designed to help those whose loved ones have died. Do you think that men or women are more inclined to join grief support groups? Why? Both Phillip and Carissa were reluctant to participate in the group. Why do you think that

was? Have you ever joined a support group of any kind? Was it a positive or negative experience?

2. Phillip once remarked to his parents that he didn't think of his life in terms of a career but rather in terms of experiences. What is the difference? If you were advising a young person preparing for the future, would you tell him

or her to think in terms of career or experiences?

- 3. Not only did Phillip believe that God was too busy to pay attention to someone as unremarkable and selfcentered as him but that He really didn't want to hear from him. Have you ever felt this way?
- 4. Carissa believed that being a single mom prevented her from finding a man

who was willing to love her and her three children. Do you agree with this? Why or why not?

5. Nathan seemed to resent any man who was interested in his mother romantically. Why do you think this was? How did Phillip handle this? What would you have done in his place?

6. Without a college degree

in a difficult economy, Carissa found it hard to find a regular job with a good salary. Did her workat-home job seem like the best idea? What made it difficult for Carissa? Why?

7. Phillip feared that he had nothing to offer Carissa and her children and was reticent to get too close to them. Why do you think he felt this way?

- 8. Carissa's mother, Alexandra, tried to help her daughter by offering to take custody of Grace. Why was Carissa upset by this? Why do you think Alexandra thought this was a good idea? What would you have done in this situation?
- 9. When Phillip's parents, Murdock and Maryanne, came to town, Phillip was

nervous that they wouldn't like Carissa or her children. Why was he so concerned about his parents' approval? Do you seek out your parents' approval when you date someone? Explain.

10. Carissa and Phillip made good partners in their smartphone app business. Do you think mixing one's business and personal life is a good idea? Have you ever done so? How did it work out?



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Chapter One

Devon Murphy pulled into his driveway and closed his eyes, mentally and physically drained. His back throbbed, muscles ached and lungs burned from exertion after he and his fellow firefighters had spent all night responding to the storm emergencies. His body cried for rest.

His eyes stung as he opened them. Though the sky was still weighted with ominous clouds, he hoped the worst was over. Tornado season ripped through towns without mercy. Lovely homes sat along the streets now with damaged roofs hidden behind huge trees pulled out by the roots as if they were weeds in a garden.

Grateful that his neighborhood had escaped the spring storm, he longed for a shower and sleep, but rest came hard when rolling images relived the destructive night following the wind's devastation on nearby neighborhoods.

He grasped the SUV's door handle, flinching as a trash can shot like a missile past his windshield. Stunned by the power of the new wind shear, he sucked in air, watching an anonymous lawn chair tumble through his front yard and tangle in a shrub. Limbs from his neighbor's maple toppled to the ground as if they were pickup sticks.

A few houses away, sparks alerted him electrical wires were down, and he pulled out his cell phone, hit 911 and waited to hear the dispatcher's voice. "Ann, this is Lieutenant Murphy of the Ferndale Fire Department. Another microburst just hit the West Drayton area. Electrical wires and trees are down. Send out Detroit Energy and Consumers Energy to check downed lines and possible gas leaks."

When he heard her say, "Help's on the way," he ended the call and surveyed the damage. As he headed toward the downed lines, a child's cry jerked his attention across the street. The toddler stood beside an uprooted tree, one limb jutting through the front-room picture window while the rest covered the driveway and part of the lawn.

Devon darted across the street, dodging a fallen tree limb and scooped the toddler into his arms. "Why are you out here alone, son? Where's your mother?"

The boy's tears rolled down his cheeks as he clutched Devon's neck. "Mama's under the tree." With hiccuping sobs and fear growing in his eyes, the toddler pointed at the tree.

Devon dashed around the trunk, stepping over broken limbs while clutching the boy to his chest. His gaze swept over the limbs sprouting new leaves and blocking his view. His own fear heightened. Where was she?

"Mama, get up." The toddler flailed his arms toward a heavy limb close to the side door.

He scanned the area and noticed a red wagon among the limbs. As he moved closer, encouraged by the boy's thrashing arms, he spotted the woman, her dark brown hair splayed across the concrete, her left leg pinned beneath a heavy branch.

After he made his way through the fallen debris, careful not to jar her, he leaned closer, praying she was alive. He hugged the toddler closer and found the woman's wrist, feeling for a pulse. Relief flooded him as he felt the faint but steady beat. Below the tree limb, a trail of blood spotted her pant leg.

Her name? He'd seen the boy and his mother before in the yard, but he'd never had a conversation with her other than a pleasant greeting or a nod. "Ma'am. Can you hear me?"

"Not ma'am. She's Mama."

His eyes shifted to the toddler's anxious face while the boy peered at him and accentuated his proclamation. "She's Mama."

Despite his concern, he couldn't stop the smile.

The boy nodded, and from the young one's expression, Devon suspected the child thought he was a bit dense. "What's your name?" "Joey." He tilted his head as if

weighing the question, but his eyes never left his mother.

"How old are you, Joey?"

The boy held up three fingers, his focus unmoving.

"Can you call your mama? Really loud?"

The toddler's vigorous nod accompanied his screeching voice. "Maaa-maaa, wake up."

Hoping the child's voice would trigger results, Devon searched the woman's face.

Her eyelids fluttered.

Relief. "Don't move, ma'am, until—" "It's Mama." The boy's determination was evident.

He released a breath. "Mama." He needed the toddler out of his arms, but he didn't have the heart to put him down, fearing what he might do. The woman needed to keep still. "Is anyone else in the house, Joey?"

The toddler didn't respond, his eyes focused on his mother.

Devon used his index finger to shift the boy's face toward him. "No one's home? Where's your daddy?"

The boy's expression remained blank. No daddy? His chest tightened. He'd seen her and the boy outside, sometimes walking and sometimes she pulled him in the wagon. He'd never seen a man, but that didn't mean she didn't have a husband.

The woman's eyes opened, and she tried to lift her head.

"Stay still. Don't move." He placed his hand against her shoulder,

encouraging her to remain quiet. "Where do you hurt?"

Fear filled her dazed expression.

"What happened?"

"The tree fell, Mama." Joey's voice cut through the air.

"Joey?" Her eyes closed again.

"He's fine. I have him right here." He touched her arm. "What is your name, ma'am?" The salutation flew out before he could stop it.

Her lids flickered, then opened.

"Ashley. Ashley Kern."

"Good." He gave her arm a reassuring pat before double-checking the facts. "Are you home alone?"

"It's only me and Joey."

Sirens sounded in the distance, growing nearer every second. "Please try not to move until help comes." He pulled his cell phone from his pocket and hit 911 again. "Ann, this is Lieutenant Murphy. I'm still on West Drayton near Pinehurst. I have a female pinned under a large limb from a fallen tree. She is conscious. Pulse is faint but steady. I see blood on her left pant leg. I suspect she has a bone fracture. Likely a compound fracture with the bleeding. I'll need a paramedic ambulance and

HURT."

The child's body stiffened.

"Help's on the way, Lieutenant."

"Mama's hurt?" Fear filled the boy's voice.

He hit End and slipped the phone into his pocket, realizing the child misunderstood. Now he had to appease the boy's fear. "Joey." He bounced the boy on his hip. "HURT is what we call people who know how to lift the tree so we can get your mama out without hurting her." Any more than she was already injured. His stomach churned, viewing the blood and the large limb holding her fast.

As he finished, the first truck pulled

across the street. The men dropped to the ground, most heading for the downed wires, but his friend Clint Donatelli dashed across the road toward him, taking in the scene. "What do we have here?"

"This boy's mother's trapped. She's dazed but conscious." He motioned toward her. "I called for help."

Clint crouched beside her and felt her pulse. "You'll be out of here shortly, ma'am." He rose and gave Devon a thumbs-up, then ran to the street and crossed.

A police car pulled up at the curb, and before the officers left the car, new sirens drew closer. "Here they come, Joey. These are the good guys who'll help your mom ... mama."

"Good guys." Joey's grip had lessened as confidence replaced his look of fear.

In moments, the ambulance and HURT truck arrived. The men hurried to his side carrying equipment they would need. He stepped back to let them work. While one crew set off air bags beneath the lower and upper part of the limb that anchored Ashley to the concrete, another team built the cribbing, the hardwood structure used to brace the tree's weight if either of the air bags moved and the tree slipped off the bags. Paramedics moved in with a c-collar, splints and a backboard to immobilize her for the ride

to the hospital.

Joey's tears flowed again.

He nestled the child closer. "These are the good guys, Joey. See, they're going to lift the big tree away from your mama and then move her to the ambulance so she can go to the hospital to make sure she's okay."

The child's earlier confidence had vanished, even with his reference to the good guys. Devon's stomach knotted while he tried to explain to the toddler what the crew was doing. When Ashley had been strapped to the backboard and shifted from beneath the limb, Devon moved closer, knowing he needed answers about Joey. "Ashley, I need someone to care for your boy. Tell me

who to call. I'll explain what happened." He turned to the nearest paramedic. "Are you going to Beaumont Hospital in Royal Oak?"

The medic nodded.

He followed beside Ashley as they carried her down the driveway. "Ashley, is your husband at work?"

Her eyelids lowered. "No husband. Call my sister. Neely Andrews."

Devon pulled out his cell phone. "Joey, your mama will be okay, but she has to go to the hospital so doctors can make everything better.

Fear returned to the toddler's eyes.

Kicking himself, he wished he hadn't mentioned the hospital, but he had to be

honest. "Your aunt Neely will come to get you, okay?"

Joey's arms tightened around his neck. "'Kay." Though Joey's voice was hushed, Devon sensed Ashley heard him.

He punched in the numbers as Ashley struggled to relate them. As the phone rang, he shifted away, hoping what Joey heard next didn't upset him. The woman's voice jerked him back to the phone call. "Neely?"

The line was silent a moment. "Yes?"

"This is Lieutenant Murphy from the Ferndale Fire Department." He heard her intake of breath and wished the call could have begun differently. "Your sister Ashley asked me to call."

"Is it a fire? The house? What

happened?"

He provided the details as best he could with Joey listening. "Would you like to pick up Joey here, or should I meet you at Beaumont emergency?"

"Beaumont. I'll be there as quickly as I can."

He stopped to relay his destination to Clint and noticed a neighbor standing at a distance. He waved the man over. "Do you know Ashley?"

"Sure. She's a good neighbor, and so's Joey." He chucked the boy under the chin. "Is she okay?"

"She'll be fine."

"Can we keep an eye on Joey for her?" The man opened his arms. Joey let out a cry. "Mama." He reached toward her. "I want my mama."

"His aunt is meeting us at Beaumont. I think Ashley will feel better knowing he's there, but thanks for the offer." He turned away but stopped. "Can you secure the house?"

"Sure thing. We have a key." He motioned to the broken window. "I'll cover it for her, too. Tell her not to worry."

Before Devon could thank him, a car careened into the man's driveway, and a woman with a halo of white hair jumped out, her hand to her mouth and her eyes wide as a basketball as she darted toward the man. "What happened? Where's Ashley?"

Devon used the distraction to make his exit. House secured. Window covered. Now, Joey. He gave the boy a hug, thinking of his own young daughter and how she might respond in an emergency.

With Kaylee on his mind, he remembered he would need a car seat to transport Joey. He carried him across the street and located the car seat stored in his garage. The plastic he'd used to cover it was dusty, but beneath, the seat looked like new. He grinned, picturing Kaylee strapped in the chair and singing nursery rhymes whenever they went somewhere. Now more than a year older, he'd purchased a larger restraint

seat for her.

Once Joey was strapped into the backseat, Devon slid behind the steering wheel and headed toward Beaumont, sending up a prayer for Ashley's wellbeing.

* * *

Searing red burned through Ashley's eyelids. She tried to raise them, but her effort faded in the struggle. Vague memories stirred through her fogged brain. A stormy sky. The wind. Joey's wagon. The tree. That was it. The haze shifted, and she tried again to pry open her eyes.

A cool hand touched her arm. "You're

fine. Don't try to move yet."

She'd heard those words before, but it had been a man's voice. A kind voice, like the woman's, but rich and comforting. An image flickered in her mind. Dark windblown hair. Brown tired eyes, but in them, she saw compassion. A bristled jaw. And... And Joey against his chest.

"Joey." She tried to lift her head, but a headache hammered it to the sheet. "Where's Joey?"

"Your son is fine, Mrs. Kern." Ashley felt the woman pat her arm again.

Her chest constricted. "Fine. What does that mean?" She tried to shift her leg to the edge of the mattress, but the weight bound her in place. "He's in the waiting room with your sister and a nice-looking gentleman."

Waiting room. She turned her head sideways and willed her eyes to focus. This wasn't her bedroom. The railings along her bed. Eggshell-colored walls. Privacy curtains. The blurred memory eased into her mind. The sirens. The tree. The men. The wail of an ambulance. "Where am I? Beaumont Hospital?"

"That's right. Things will be clearer when the anesthetic wears off."

Her pulse tore through her arm. "Anesthetic?" Through the fuzz, she watched the nurse adjust an IV. "The doctor will be in soon and explain what happened."

Before she could demand answers, the nurse slipped through the curtain. She was alone. Her mind began to clear. Memories one at a time connected. She'd been in the kitchen. Joey had fallen asleep on the sofa as he often did in the late morning, and rather than disturb him, she'd tossed a quilt over him and let him sleep. She'd noticed the May sky, strange clouds that looked threatening. Then she'd remembered her car parked in the driveway with the window down. Why hadn't she pulled it into the garage?

Before she could act, a powerful wind caught Joey's wagon. She'd left it outside the door when they came in from their walk. Another dumb thing she'd done. A lawn chair tumbled through her yard, and fearing the wagon would be caught in the squall, she'd dashed outside and grabbed the wagon handle. That was the last she remembered, except for the vague images that followed when she'd awakened on the ground beneath a heavy limb and Joey was in the man's arms.

Tears edged down her cheeks. She needed to see Joey now. Where was he? Where was the doctor? How long would she have to wait?

* * *

Devon tapped his foot, thinking he

should leave but not wanting to. Over an hour had passed, and his earlier exhaustion had returned, leaving his brain fried. The day seemed like a dream, but then so many of those days did. Bad dreams. At least this one had a happy ending.

Joey had become his buddy, and when his aunt Neely had arrived, the boy called her name and opened his arms to her. She scooped him up, her questions to him flying fast.

"Who are you?" she'd asked, her question causing him confusion. Then he remembered he wasn't in uniform.

"I'm a neighbor a few houses down from your sister's, but I'm a firefighter. I'd just gotten home from the bad night we've had. Everything here was fine until this storm came out of nowhere. The microburst sent everything sailing."

Joey wiggled free of his aunt's grasp and raised his arms to him, wanting back on his lap, but he hesitated, wondering if it would upset Ashley's sister.

Neely's surprised expression merged with a grin. "You're his hero...which you truly are. If you hadn't found Ash, who knows what would have happened."

"No hero. Just blessed to be there at the right time." He hesitated before asking his nagging question. "Do you know what's happening with Ashley?" She blinked as if surprised. "I thought you knew. They're setting her leg...with a screw."

"A screw. That means surgery."

She nodded. "They'll let me know when I can see her. She'll be fine. I know my sister." She leaned down and kissed Joey's head. "I am worried about the house, though." A frown flickered on her face. "Anyone could break in with the window—"

His head hurt. "Sorry. I forgot to tell you the gentleman next door said he had a key and he'd take care of blocking the window. Temporary, but it'll secure the house."

"You mean Mr. Wells. Irvin and Peggy. They're thoughtful neighbors." A grin stole to her face. "I feel better knowing they're taking care of it...for now, anyway."

Gratefulness filled her eyes, and he understood the feeling. Being there to help made him grateful. People helping people. It's the way God wanted it to be. Again his thoughts snapped back to the scene. How long would she have lain there without help if he hadn't witnessed the aftermath of the accident?

"Family of Ashley Kern."

He turned toward the doorway. A surgeon stood in the threshold wearing green scrubs.

Neely bounded from the chair. "Will you hang on to Joey?"

Though she asked the question, she

didn't wait for his response as she rushed to the doorway and followed the surgeon into the hall.

Devon, letting Joey play with his car keys to keep him distracted, prayed everything went well.

In a minute, Neely returned. He waited, expecting to learn the details. Instead, Neely gave a subtle head nod toward Joey. "I can see her now, but I'm not sure if-" she eyed Joey "-they'll allow him in, so I'll go alone and see if it's possible to take him to see her for a minute." She gave Devon a searching look. "Do you mind staying with Joey?" First he wanted answers. "I'm happy to, but what's the diagnosis?" Her gaze shifted to Joey. "Minor

concussion and a closed fracture. The bleeding was a surface wound."

Devon nodded. "I was afraid it was a compound fracture."

Her focus shifted to Joey. "I hope they'll let me take him in for a visit. They'd both feel better."

He nodded, admitting to himself he'd feel better, too, if he saw her. "Go ahead. I'll be here."

She managed a half grin. "Thanks." Turning her attention again to the child, she patted his head. "I'll be back in a minute, sweetie. Okay?"

"Kay." The response was accompanied with the jingle of Devon's keys. Neely hurried away again, and Joey held up the key ring. "Go for a ride to see Mama."

Devon could barely focus, and he ached everywhere but especially for the boy. "We have to wait, pal. Then maybe you can see her." He prayed they'd let the toddler into the room even for a moment. The child had been brave throughout the whole mess. He was bright as a star and sweet as sugar maybe like his mom.

Joey rested his head against his shoulder, and Devon closed his eyes a moment. The feel of the boy in his arms took him back to when his daughter Kaylee was about that size. She loved to cuddle, and he loved snuggling to her, smelling the sweetness of her hair and the scent of innocence. As Joey calmed, stillness settled over Devon. He relaxed his shoulders and took advantage of the silence.

"Devon."

He jerked his head and stared bleary eyed at Neely. Joey wriggled against him, arising from his sleep. They'd both gone to dreamland, and now he faced Ashley's sister, embarrassed. "And I'm supposed to be watching this young man."

She shook her head, a calmer look on her face. "Neither of you needed watching. I didn't mean to wake you. I know you've had a horrible night, but they gave me permission to bring Joey down for a few minutes." She bent over and hoisted the toddler in her arms. "You're getting heavy, big boy."

"I'm a big boy." He grinned at her, then turned his dimpled smile to Devon.

Devon pressed his back from the chair cushion and roused himself upward. He realized this ended his excuse for sticking around. "I suppose I should go then."

"Don't go." She raised her hand. "Unless you must. Ashley wants to talk with you a minute if you can wait. I won't be long with him." She touched Joey's cheek. "Or if you're too tired, I can—" His palm flexed upward to stop her. "No, I'm fine. I'd be happy to stay." "Thanks. She'll appreciate it." She turned and headed to the door.

He sank into the chair, his heartbeat playing a rhythm against his chest. The sensation threw him. He'd received a thank-you from many people he'd helped during one disaster after another, and he'd never reacted with this kind of anticipation.

He stretched his legs and folded his hands across his empty belly, searching for a logical explanation. The boy. That was it. Joey reminded him of Kaylee. Since she lived with her mother while he had only a few days with her during his off time, he felt cheated. He missed so many firsts and heard about them secondhand.

Divorce was a nightmare, especially when it wasn't his doing. He'd taken months to sort through his emotions and to understand what happened. No affair. No sensible reason. Gina announced she was depressed and unhappy. She needed a change.

A change. The word ripped through him. Everyone needed a change once in a while, but not one that ended a marriage. He'd been a good husband...he thought. A hard worker. A loving husband and father. He asked what he'd done wrong. She said nothing.

Maybe that was it. He'd done nothing.

Perhaps her life wasn't exciting enough, while his was too exciting fighting fires and saving lives. He even rescued kittens in trees and dogs trapped in sewer pipes. Sleep swooped over him, and he rubbed his eyes. His head spun with weariness, and he needed to forget the past. She'd wanted a divorce, and his crazy forty-eight-hour shifts complicated having physical custody of Kaylee. Instead, regrettably, he settled for visitation.

He drew in air to clear his mind. Going over it again solved nothing. It was the way it was, and he'd learned to enjoy the time he had with his sweet daughter. Devon rose, smelling the acrid coffee coming from the urn. He took a step toward the pot, but his stomach churned. He dismissed the idea. He needed food. No. He needed sleep.

"She's ready to see you."

His pulse skipped hearing Neely's voice.

She shifted Joey in her arms. "I'm going to take this boy home and give him some food and then off to bed. Thanks so much for all you've done. You've been more than kind."

"I'm glad I was there." Somehow the words meant more to him than they should. He gazed at Joey. "And don't worry about the house. I'll check to make sure everything's safe before I hit the sack."

She nodded her thanks and gave him directions to Ashley's room. With another nod, she pivoted, clutching Joey in her arms and heading for the exit.

Devon strode down the hall, his legs pushing him forward, eagerness in his step. Helping a neighbor, anyone, always uplifted him. But the image of her pinned beneath the trunk depleted his breath. Strange. He'd seen those scenarios many times in his career. People hurt, bleeding, dead. Why this reaction? For one thing, he needed sleep. That had to be all it was.

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ISBN-13: 9781460324615

His Ideal Match

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HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

red.

The Rancher's Secret Son Betsy St. Amant

A Mother's Last Hope

When her troubled teenage son is sent to Camp Hope, Emma Shaver is thrilled and relieved. The therapy horse ranch in Broken Bend, Louisiana, is well-known for giving at-risk teens a new lease on life. There's just one problem—it's owned by her old high school sweetheart, Max Ringgold, who doesn't know he's her son's father. Emma didn't plan on facing her past to ensure her son's future. But when old feelings for Max resurface, Emma must decide if she will reveal the truth to him and restore her family for good.

"I know you have your own life in Dallas."

Max rested his forehead on hers, then backed away completely, as if realizing he just couldn't get that close.

Dallas. Yes.

The fog cleared, and snatches of life real life—pressed back to the surface. But she didn't want real life. She wanted to stay in this pocket of stillness. Where there was only the twinkle of the stars and the love in a certain cowboy's eyes and the whisper that life—her life could still be different. Could be restored.

"But maybe..." Max's voice trailed, and he tucked a wisp of hair behind her ear. "Maybe."

Maybe. So much potential in that word. So much hope. When was the last time she'd hoped? She wanted to hope. Wanted to feel again. To believe. To trust. Was it possible?

"Maybe." She breathed out the word. *Maybe* would have to be enough for now.

Maybe would hold back real life a little while longer.

Books by Betsy St. Amant

Love Inspired

Return to Love A Valentine's Wish Rodeo Sweetheart Fireman Dad Her Family Wish The Rancher Next Door The Rancher's Secret Son

BETSY ST. AMANT

loves polka-dot shoes, chocolate and sharing the good news of God's grace through her novels. She has a bachelor's degree in Christian communications from Louisiana Baptist University and is actively pursuing a career in inspirational writing. Betsy resides in northern Louisiana with her husband and daughter and enjoys reading, kickboxing and spending quality time with her family.

THE RANCHER'S SECRET SON

Betsy St. Amant



And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose.

-Romans 8:28

To my Best Friend, Jesus Christ, whose sustaining presence was with me during

the writing of this novel in a way like never before.

I can do nothing apart from you! I love you.



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Excerpt

Chapter One

Despite its name, Camp Hope didn't manage to lift Emma Shaver's spirits. If anything, she just felt heavier.

She leaned over the steering wheel of her SUV as they rolled nearer the camp, ignoring the steady thump of her thirteenyear-old son Cody's fingers pounding a rhythm on the dashboard beside her. The camp's main structure, a two-story, log cabin-style house, held court in the middle of autumn-weary acreage, still dry from the unforgiving heat of a Louisiana summer, faded golden fields stretching as far as the eye could see.

The outbuildings, a rustic, get-it-done crimson barn and an open-sided lean-to, nestled behind two rows of temporary buildings that, according to the camp's website, served as the dorms for the teenagers.

Cody could probably weasel his way out of one of those with a toothpick.

Rat tattat.

She inhaled a tight breath. Pick her battles, was her motto. Cody was here, ready—if not willing—to get the help he needed or else. That was a battle she had to fight. Annoying drumbeats were not.

Rat tat tattat.

Camp Hope looked tired. Or maybe she was just tired.

Rat tattat.

"That's really getting old, Cody." So was the headache pounding at her temples that hadn't stopped since their appearance in court. The day she got the news that would forever change her world.

Again.

Cody shrugged and flopped against the seat, the seat belt stretching across his thin chest and tangling in the cords of his iPod. At least he'd changed shirts. That was yet another battle she'd had to fight this morning before driving to Broken Bend, Louisiana. She wasn't sure where he'd gotten that holey, rumpled excuse for a T-shirt, but she knew enough about gangs to know it was going straight into the trash.

Too bad all her psych books didn't tell what to do when the client was your own kid. The rules blurred then, the text grew fuzzy. Nothing was black-andwhite anymore like it used to be in college when she'd been working toward her degree. She might have earned her master's and opened a successful clinic in Dallas, Texas, against all odds, but at home-she was an epic failure.

But she wouldn't cry. Not in front of her son.

She steeled her nerves. "We're here." Not exactly the way she imagined her Monday going, but hey, life was full of surprises. She could write the book on that one.

Cody yanked the iPod buds from his ears, grumbling. "I still don't see why I had to come."

That was precisely the problem. She counted to ten before answering, even as she steered the car toward the dusty, gravel parking lot. "You heard what the judge said. It's either Camp Hope or juvenile detention." She pulled into a spot between a beat-up pickup and a shiny hybrid. Guess it took all types to have troubled teens. Yet the reminder didn't make her feel better. This wasn't anyone's kid—it was her kid.

She angled a glance at her muttering

son as she shifted into park. "You think me making you change shirts was bad? At least it wasn't an orange jumpsuit."

Cody snorted, but she could tell her point got across. He grudgingly released his seat belt and peered out the window at the house before him. Was he as nervous as she was? It was hard to trust a system she knew from her job didn't always bring positive results. But the judge had been adamant, and here they were. It beat juvenile detention by far. Apparently the facility had become quite popular with local officials for its moral-based program and positive outcomes.

She'd have been more prone to hope except the camp was back in her

hometown—the town she hadn't visited once since her father's funeral five years ago. She'd arranged to take some time off and stay with her mom in Broken Bend while Cody went through the program, maybe work on some of her own issues. She couldn't avoid her hometown forever, and Cody would benefit from seeing his grandmother again. Besides, despite her own painful past, she had to do what was best for her son. Being nearby if he had a breakthrough was crucial. He'd been miles away for far too long already.

But what if the camp didn't help and Cody ended up in juvie later anyway? Her stomach flipped, and bile rose in her throat. Here she was a professional counselor, and her son had been caught breaking and entering into his school and vandalizing the gym with a crowd of older teens—after shoplifting the month before and getting into a fistfight in the cafeteria three months before that.

Could one month of hard work, counseling and time spent with animals really turn him around?

Not that she had a lot of choices at the moment. She had to trust that the leaders of the program—whoever they were, as the website info had been vague at best —knew what they were doing.

Had to trust that God wouldn't give up on her son.

She opened her car door and squinted

against the afternoon sunlight. Sliding her sunglasses into place, she motioned for Cody to get out of the car and grab his duffel. Packing for a month at a working ranch had been trickier than she'd thought, especially when Cody's wardrobe mostly consisted of dark pants, black T-shirts and tennis shoes. She'd bought boots after she'd browsed Camp Hope's requirements list online but couldn't for the life of her picture Cody wearing them.

Maybe that was a good thing—a sign that he would undergo a complete transformation.

She just wanted her son back. The one who used to crawl on her lap during

thunderstorms, make hideouts from superhero sheets and a few chairs, and open her car door for her while boasting about being a gentleman. What had gone so wrong, so quickly?

Tears pressed behind her lids and she blinked rapidly to clear them away. Last time she'd let her guard down and cried in front of Cody, he'd snuck out of the house for three hours with no word of where he was going. Besides, it wasn't healthy for a child to see his mother cry —especially if he was the cause of the tears.

Cody shut his car door a little harder than necessary and shouldered his duffel. The defensive scowl on his face as he slipped his iPod buds back in reminded her of his dad. She'd managed to stuff away thoughts of Max Ringgold for years, until recently, when Cody's attitude mirrored his absent father's more than she wanted to admit. Cody's hair was blond like hers, but he had a similar cowlick to his dad's, a testament to their shared stubbornness. He also had that same charming, do-no-wrong smile Max had always worn as easily as his trademark leather jacket.

But Max had done wrong. A lot of wrong.

Images flashed through her mind. Weapons stashed under truck seats. Rolled up baggies of white powder stuffed in the glove box. Beefy fists banging on the window of her car, muted threats assaulting her ears as they made out down by the lake.

Yeah, once upon a time, Max Ringgold had been trouble with a capital *T*. All the more reason Cody needed help, *now*—before the darkness in his genes had a chance to fully take over.

Before she lost her son the way she'd lost his father.

A familiar finger of regret nudged her, sending an icy shiver down her back. Choosing not to tell Max she was pregnant had been the best choice at the time—make that her only choice. After she went to college and two pink lines on a stick had determined her fate, she returned to Broken Bend, panicked and unsure how he'd react. He'd made promises about his behavior before she'd left, so many promises. But a baby didn't fit into Max Ringgold's bad boy style any more than the promiscuous role she'd temporarily adopted fit into hers. Would he even accept her—*them*?

After catching Max unaware in the middle of another drug deal, with one of the county's slipperiest and most dangerous gang leaders no less, the decision was made for her. Max wouldn't get a chance to reject them. She never looked back.

Approximately thirteen years later, Cody didn't know the difference. She'd made a home for them, a loving home, despite the sacrifices and hard work required of a single mom putting herself through college, avoiding her hometown and keeping the details a secret from her parents. She didn't want the shotgun wedding her father threatened. Not with Max Ringgold. She might deserve to pay for her mistakes, but her kid deserved better.

Yet despite all those logged miles on the treadmill, Emma had never quite been able to outrun the guilt.

She shut her car door and steered Cody toward the front porch of the main house, where she assumed registration would take place. "Let's go." Time to shake off the past—that's why they were there, after all. To get a fresh start, a second chance. Maybe for both of them. Secrets long buried were best left buried, and just because she was back in Broken Bend didn't mean they'd all be resurrected.

The front screen door squeaked open on its hinges, and boots thudded onto the wooden porch. She glanced up at the approaching cowboy with a smile, relieved that someone was finally there to take charge. She could relax, take a much-needed break. Cody would be in good hands.

The cowboy lifted the brim of his black hat, and her smile slipped away as shock gripped her in a cold, unrelenting vice.

He'd be in Max Ringgold's hands.

* * *

Max Ringgold always figured his past would one day come back to taunt him. He just never dreamed it'd latch around his ankle and knock his feet right out from underneath him.

He stared at the blonde woman before him as if she might have two heads. Two identities, for sure, because she looked exactly like Emma Shaver. Yet there was no way. *No* way. Emma hadn't been back in Broken Bend in a decade. Maybe longer. He used to know the weeks to the day but eventually stopped counting. Hard to heal from an injury when you kept poking at the wound.

But this woman was looking at him as if he'd sprouted a second head, too—so maybe it was possible after all.

Her mouth opened and closed, then pressed into a tight line. Red dotted her cheeks. Yep, that was her. He'd always been able to make her blush. Part of the problem. He'd been inexplicably drawn to the Good Girl, her to the Bad Boyand the chemistry that resulted could have blown a crater throughout most of the town. Why did something that happened a lifetime ago suddenly seem like vesterday?

He knew he should say something, anything, to break the awkward silence, but his years of training in dealing with troubled teens didn't cover how to deal with moms who were ex-girlfriends.

He took off his hat, then regretted it. He probably had hat hair, and now he felt even more vulnerable under her laser-sharp gaze. "I'm Max."

Emma's fair eyebrows lifted, and he winced. She knew that. But he had to say something. Besides, the kid didn't know who he was, and that's why they were there. He turned his attention to the teen standing beside Emma and offered his hand. Man to man. "Max Ringgold."

The boy grunted, reluctantly offering a quick, limp shake. They'd have to work on that. A man was known by his handshake. "Cody Shaver."

An alarm sounded in Max's subconscious. Shaver. So Emma wasn't married. He darted a glance to her left hand to make sure, and wanted to kick himself with his own boot as she caught him, well, red-handed. He slammed his hat back on his head.

"Come on inside. We'll get you signed in then catch up with the rest of the tour." Max held the door and motioned them forward. Cody clomped inside, dragging his duffel behind him on the floor. Emma followed, gaze lowered, the scent of her peppermint perfume lingering long after she squeezed past.

Max checked his watch, partly to

know the time and partly to resist the urge to touch her hair, silky and shiny as a shampoo commercial—the kind that definitely didn't belong on his ranch with all the dirt, dust and horse sweat flying about. Good thing she wasn't staying.

His heart seconded that idea as she flashed wary azure eyes at him—the same eyes that peeked at him from the photo he still had stashed in his sock drawer.

The photo didn't do them justice.

He let the screen door snap behind him as he directed them to his office off the dining room, which he'd converted from an old closet. He didn't spend much time there, except for the occasional paperwork, prayer time or private conversations with the kids.

The other nine campers, three girls and six boys, had arrived and checked in half an hour before and were being given a brief tour by the live-in counselors, Luke and Nicole Erickson. He'd noticed the increasing size of Nicole's stomach beneath her maternity top earlier and had raised an eyebrow at Luke, who'd assured him she wasn't due for another month. Just in time to finish this camp. Then he'd have to find a replacement for her while she took maternity leave.

The stress of that significant problem suddenly dimmed compared to the throbbing in his temples at Emma's proximity. He slipped behind the desk to give himself space, trying to ignore the way his heart pounded under his work shirt like a runaway horse.

"Here we are. Cody Shaver." He ran his finger over the printed name and made a check mark in the column—and a mental note not to let Nicole handle the precamp paperwork anymore. If he'd seen Emma's name as Cody's guardian on his forms earlier, he'd have had a heads-up. All he personally received was the list of the kids' names two weeks prior to camp, so he could pray for them.

Then again, the odds of another exgirlfriend popping up seemed a little slim.

"Is there a problem?" Emma's voice sounded as strained as the muscles in his neck as he jerked his head up to look at her, realizing he'd been staring at the document for far longer than he should have. Emma Shaver. Wow. When did she have a son? How old was Cody? He'd have to check the full file later. But apparently Emma hadn't wasted a lot of time pining over Max after leaving for college.

Though she was supposed to have come back.

The thought burned his stomach and he licked his suddenly dry lips. "No, there's no problem. No problem at all." The past was the past. The important part now was that Cody was here, and he needed help—regardless of who his mother was. Max had to get his priorities in order, quick, or he'd do more harm than good. These kids counted on him, and he wouldn't let them —or God—down.

Not again.

He found his warmest smile, despite the cold expression in Emma's eyes attempting to freeze his heart. "Welcome to Camp Hope, Cody. It's going to be a great month."

The kid grunted, as if he didn't believe him. Emma didn't look as if she particularly believed him, either.

Which was fine, because at the moment, he didn't fully believe himself.

Chapter Two

Luke led the tour of the campus, the scripted words falling naturally from his mouth. Good thing, because Max was having a terrible time paying attention.

As they crossed the worn path from the dorms to the barn, Max glanced up at the white letters painted on the rustic red sign, hanging ten feet above the cattle guard at the end of his long gravel driveway. Camp Hope. He'd painted the sign himself last year, acquired three splinters trying to hang the thing and almost toppled off the ladder on his way back down. But nothing worth doing was easy, the main point he was trying to prove at his ranch for troubled teens.

He knew—he'd been one.

He shuffled behind the group of nervous parents and disgruntled teens as Luke led them into the barn, trying not to let his gaze keep resting on Emma. But that was a little like trying not to glance at a lit candle while standing in a pitchblack room.

God, a little direction here? I'm lost. Max was confident he'd followed the Lord's guiding when he opened Camp Hope over a year ago and received the training necessary to minister to teenagers. He'd already watched almost seventy teens graduate the month-long program, many of whom had come to know God in the process. For a lot of them, Camp Hope was the last stop before juvenile detention, or worse. Max knew how to smell contraband cigarette smoke a mile away, knew the current gang loyalty colors, and now, after trial and error, knew the vents in the dorm could be pried open and made into a hiding spot.

He just didn't know how to look at Emma Shaver without bursting into flame.

Max rested his back against the door frame of the barn and inhaled the comforting aroma of horses. One by one, the teens perked up as Luke went over the rules of horsemanship and what chores would be expected of them in the stables. Funny how they'd give endless grief over making their beds, but most had no trouble shoveling manure or grooming a colt. Something about horses reached deep inside and brought out the good in folks.

A stirring of anticipation returned, and Max fought to hold on to it. He'd been so excited about this particular camp a few weeks ago as the planning process wrapped up. Somehow, he just knew this session would be the best one yet. He felt it in his spirit during his morning Bible readings in the sunroom, heard it in the excitement in his own voice when he shared his plans with his best friend and former boss, Brady McCollough.

Brady had just slapped his hat against his leg to free it of dirt, and heartily agreed. He could feel it, too, and Max trusted his friend's judgment. Brady lived several miles down the road, but the back of their two properties joined at a barbed wire fence. Max had saved for years to be able to buy one hundred acres near his friend and finally start his own spread. Brady's wife, Caley, said he and Brady argued more than an old married couple, but that was just because they knew each other so well and remained friends anyway. Max had been there for Brady through the tragic death of his first wife, while Brady had been responsible for hauling Max out of

the muck and into a church pew. If Brady felt that same prompting, Max could bank on it.

It was just that so far, he didn't have a clue how Emma Shaver and her kid showing up at his camp could possibly be a God thing. Maybe more like a cosmic joke.

Brady would definitely get a kick out of this one. Would probably rattle something off about God working in mysterious ways. Max usually agreedbut this went a little beyond mysterious. Still, he'd do his best to help Cody like he would any other teen there, and thankfully would have little to do with Emma. After all, it wasn't Cody's fault Max knew his mom from another

lifetime ago. He refused to let that fact filter through in any of his interactions with Cody. Another month and Emma would be right back out of his life forever.

Apparently like she'd always wanted. "And that's the tour." Luke clapped his hands, jerking Max back to reality and causing two boys to jump. "Boss?"

His mind raced. He really had to get it together or he wouldn't be a very good example. He took a deep breath and tried to center his head on anything other than Emma. Tour over. So, time for dinner. Then the inevitable parent-teen goodbyes, which was his least favorite part of the camp. He shot a glance at Emma. But today, that part might be a good thing.

He found his smile and gestured toward the main house. "Time for grub, everyone!"

A few teens murmured their pleasure; others kept their hollow expressions as they filed out of the barn and toward the house like a chain gang. Max fought a grin. The campers always started out the same, and with God's grace, usually ended with an 180-degree change. Hopefully this session wouldn't be an exception. It just took faith, perseverance—and a huge dose of patience.

He ended up at the back of the line, Luke in the lead, with Cody lagging in

the middle. The humid Louisiana wind ruffled Max's hair and loosened his sweaty shirt from his back. Late October still boasted afternoon temps in the seventies, though the nights and mornings were downright chilly. It was the perfect time of year for a camp—the summer sessions made everyone grumpy, and the ice storm that hit last January had holed them up inside for far too long. This would be the last session he offered until next year. He needed a break for the holidays, though he usually just crashed Brady and Caley's Thanksgiving and Christmas celebrations.

A thought stirred. Had Emma ever come home for the holidays? Or her

father's funeral, for that matter? Max had been on edge for the entire week after reading the obituary in the newspaper, half afraid and half hoping he'd bump into her in town.

He never did.

As if she could sense his thoughts, Emma glanced at him over her shoulder, then hung back until she fell in step beside him. He fought his surprise and hoped his shock didn't register on his face.

"I know this is weird—us showing up like this." She tucked her hair behind her ears, the familiar gesture from his memories strangely comforting. Except it made him want to do it, too, so he looped his thumbs in his belt loops. "When we got the assignment, I didn't know—I mean, I didn't realize that you were..." Her voice trailed off.

"Not weird. Surprising, definitely." He kept his gaze straight ahead as the campers neared the main house, watching as Luke instructed them to wipe their shoes on the mat before going inside. Sort of pointless on a ranch, but Nicole insisted, so Luke had picked up the habit. "One of the other counselors handles the paperwork, so I only ever saw Cody's name. Didn't have a chance to put two and two together."

Her expression paled, and he wondered what he had said. But she pressed on before he could ask. "Cody is a good kid. He just..." She bit her lip, making him glance away again. She always did that, and it'd always been his undoing. Did she have any idea the effect that lingered after all this time? Did she feel it, too?

It didn't matter. That was a different lifetime, and clearly, they both had other priorities right now.

"He just what?"

She lowered her voice as they neared the cabin. "He just needs some time. Got caught up in the wrong crowd and made some mistakes. I think we caught him early."

"We?" The word blurted from his lips before he could censor. A boyfriend? Cody's dad? Was he still in the picture? Her expression tightened. "Cody's judge and I."

Ah. Not a boyfriend. He didn't want to acknowledge the relief he felt creeping through his stomach.

He held the screen door open for her to enter behind the stream of teens, but she resisted, stepping in front of him so her back was turned to the rest of the crowd. "Just so you know, I'm taking a leave of absence from work and staying at my mom's while Cody is here. I wanted to be nearby—just in case."

Max frowned. Just in case what? She changed her mind about the camp? Or was she that worried about Cody making it through the program? So many questions. Yet only one escaped his mouth. "What do you do?" It'd been years since he'd looked her up on the internet, at the start of the social media hype, but her pages were all set to private. Not surprising. Even less surprising—he didn't have any of those pages for himself.

She shot him a look he couldn't quite interpret, her voice lowering to a near whisper. "I'm a child psychologist in Dallas."

He almost snorted. Child

psychologist. And yet Cody... He didn't have to state the obvious. If Emma was anything like he'd remembered, she'd probably beaten herself up about that enough. She was good at emotional

pummeling. Just ask his heart.

* * *

Max Ringgold had done well for himself. Emma almost didn't even recognize the muscular, smiling cowboy that had greeted her and Cody on the front porch and now sat across from her at the dinner table. Hard to reconcile this Max with the one she'd known years ago, as a naive teenager about to head for college. That'd been a daredevil. moody, flirty Max. This was a successful Max. A contented, living-fora-purpose, fulfilled Max. Scared her to death.

The shock that had racked her body when he lifted that hat brim earlier had almost knocked her in the dirt. How did someone like Max come to lead a camp for troubled teens? He *was* a troubled teen. Apparently he was drawing water from the "been there, done that" well. Had he really transformed so completely? It seemed that way.

Yet for all his success, there was something in his eyes when he looked at her that didn't seem all that complete.

She knew the feeling.

She winced as Cody stabbed at the green beans on his plate with more force than necessary. The campers and parents were sharing dinner together in the main house before the adults left for the night. During their tour, she'd seen a large working kitchen with a temporary live-in cook Max affectionately dubbed Mama Jeanie, a dining room with a picnic bench-style, carved wooden table big enough for everyone to eat together, and a bathroom that surprisingly smelled like peaches and cinnamon. Max's quarters were upstairs, the only part of the house he deemed permanently off-limits.

To the back of the dining hall was a room with a locked door, which Max and the other counselor Luke let everyone peek into briefly—the recreation center. Treadmills, an oldfashioned Pac-Man arcade game, an air hockey table and a large-screen TV with different game systems were just a few of the treats she glimpsed before Max shut the door, explaining the rec room was incentive and a reward for good behavior, only. That is, the kids had to earn it.

Emma liked this setup already, though she could tell by the tight line of Cody's mouth he didn't necessarily agree.

She tried to send him a silent warning with her eyes as he continued to scrape his fork against his plate, forming a rhythm he nodded his head to. The darkhaired teen sitting to his right immediately picked up the grunge-band sound, tapping his knife against the side of his half-empty water glass and stomping his foot under the table. An older teen girl with blond curls snorted and rolled her eyes at them.

"Cody."

He ignored her, as usual, and the parents continued to eat as if nothing had changed, as if their ears weren't suffering from the high-pitched screeching sounds. Maybe that was part of why their kids were there in the first place. Did their efforts to be noticed always go ignored? Not acknowledging cries for attention wasn't always the best course of action. They weren't innocent toddlers playing the drop-the-spoonfrom-the-highchair game. They were miniature adults who needed positive reinforcement-and consequences for

negative behavior.

Well, these parents might think ignorance was bliss, but she wasn't that kind of mom. *"Hey!"*

She looked over in surprise as her firm voice mixed with Max's gruffer tone. They'd spoken at the same time. He glanced at her, amusement flickering in his caramel-colored eyes, then back to the kids.

"All right. That's enough." His deep voice left no room for argument, and if that hadn't been enough, the I-meanbusiness glare he turned on them would have been. He was establishing his authority from the beginning, a smart move. Max had common sense after all. Maybe Cody would be fine here.

As long as they didn't discover the truth before she was ready.

The weight of her secret pressed her into her chair, threatening to send her crashing through the raised floorboards and landing somewhere in the basement below. How low could she sink? Even a tornado cellar didn't feel far enough, deep enough, dark enough to conceal a secret of this magnitude.

Thirteen years of getting over Max Ringgold, of convincing her heart he didn't exist, and now he was in charge of her son for a month. No, *his* son.

God really did have a sense of humor. She realized she'd been staring aimlessly at her plate and quickly sat up straight and brushed her hair off her shoulders. Thankfully, Cody had stopped his impromptu band immediately, and the other kids had followed suit. One grumbled incoherently, but Max let that go. So he picked his battles, too, didn't demand perfection.

Really weird they had that, of all things, in common.

Was it possible this was part of God's plan for Cody? Maybe this was the avenue he needed to turn his life around. God knew what He was doing...right?

Emma sure hoped someone did, because she'd never felt more lost. How embarrassing was it for her to struggle to understand her own child, when she was paid good money to evaluate the inner musings of other kids? In all her career, she never imagined she'd end up here.

Probably just part of the punishment for her own reckless choices that summer. Wasn't there something in the Bible about the sins of the fathers affecting their children? And speaking of fathers and sins...she kept her eyes lowered as she studied Max. He looked more like Cody-or rather, Cody looked more like him—than she'd realized at first glance in the parking lot. The way they hunched over their plates, one forearm resting casually to the side, was identical

Hopefully no one else noticed the

similarities. Her stomach hurt just imagining that particular scenario. At least Cody would have no reason to suspect. All she'd ever told him growing up was that his father had been a bad guy who left her when she was pregnant. Not a complete lie—even though she'd been the one to technically do the leaving.

But Max had left emotionally first when he chose to do that drug deal and break his promise.

She sat back, pushing food around her plate with her fork as she observed the way Max interacted with the other parents. Patience personified, though he didn't seem patronizing or condescending. Just confident. The parents, especially the mothers, seemed to warm to his personality like butter melting on a crescent roll. Not flirty, though one father did scoot his chair closer to his wife when she laughed at something Max said.

She swallowed a sip of water, her appetite long diminished from the tension-laced drive over with Cody and the surprise of seeing Max again for the first time in so long. Her body hadn't caught up to her emotions.

And if her stomach kept jumping every time Max's gaze flitted her direction, it might not ever catch up. Over a decade had passed, and he still had the power to physically undo her. She was absolutely terrified to analyze that one.

"Well, folks." Max scooted his chair back with a scrape against the polished wooden floors and stood. He braced his hands on the table, leaning forward slightly and pausing to briefly look every parent in the eye. "It's time to say goodbye. I've learned the hard way already that here at Camp Hope, dragging it out isn't good for anyone."

No kidding. She'd end up crying and Cody would end up looking for an escape. Not like he needed any more prompting to run away. It wouldn't be the first time. She slowly stood with the others, fighting the rising panic welling in her throat as they filed outside to the porch. He would be fine. And so would she.

But what if he found out? What if Max found out?

She smiled at her son, who bobbed his head in a nod but didn't return the smile. He was nervous. She could tell by the pinched brow and the way his bottom lip curved on the side. Suddenly, all she could see was her baby boy, the one who used to follow her around the house, zooming a fire truck under her feet and burning his fingers on the cookie sheet because he was too impatient to wait. He needed her. Needed his mom.

But the only way for her to be there for him now was to leave.

Unwanted tears welled, and she

blinked rapidly, forcing her voice to stay strong. She held out her arms, praying he would pacify her request for a hug. He fell quickly into her embrace, then hid a sniff behind a cough. She clutched him tightly, despite his stiffening against her touch, and tuned out the sounds of the parents around her performing similar rituals with their own kids.

Far too soon, she pulled away until she could see Cody's eyes. "I'll be back when it's time. You just obey Mr. Ringgold." The name tasted foreign on her lips, but her heart knew it well.

"He said to call him Max." Cody kept his eyes focused somewhere past her shoulder, and she could only assume it was for the same reason she kept darting her gaze to his nose. Easier not to cry that way. Maybe he wasn't so tough after all.

She pulled him in for one more hug, despite his grumbled protest. Don't overdo it, Emma. But the self-coaching wasn't working. Her desperate mommy heart kept taking charge. "Just obey. Let's do this right and get you home, okay?" She still couldn't believe she was telling anyone to do what Max Ringgold told them. Once upon a time that would have been a prison sentence -or worse.

"I know." Impatience crowded Cody's tone as he pulled away, and she bit back any more natural but unwanted advice. He was about to get plenty of that. Maybe he'd listen to someone else. But Max? It went against every instinct she had.

Still, he'd proved himself at the dinner table with the kids. He was capable and in charge. Max wasn't a punk teenager anymore, and she wasn't a needy girl attempting to fill herself with the temporal.

Mostly.

She grazed Cody's arm. "You know I love you, right?" She couldn't help it—her voice cracked.

"I know." Cody shuffled his feet, nodding with a jerk. "Relax, Mom. I'm not a murderer or anything." At least there was that. She figured she wasn't getting a return "I love you," but then again, he hadn't said that in a long time. Probably not since she got him his iPod at his last birthday.

She forced the negative thought away. They were here. They'd get through this, and she'd figure out what—if anything to do about Max later.

Her eyes darted to where he stood a respectful distance away from the group, giving the parents space to say their goodbyes, and then flicked to the ground as his gaze met hers. Right now, her secret was safe, and Cody was in a good position to do what he needed to do. That was what mattered the most. The

rest would just have to wait. Max would just have to wait.

Chapter Three

Emma poured herself what had to be her fourth cup of tea in the past two hours—and still, her headache had yet to abandon ship. She settled back against the throw pillows on her mother's couch, then adjusted positions as a knotted tassel dug into her spine. She'd hated those pillows growing up. Still did.

Her mom sat across the coffee table from her in a straight-back chair, one sandal-clad foot bouncing an easy rhythm over her crossed leg. Her softly curled brown hair was cut the same, maybe a little shorter. The wrinkles under her eyes were new. Then again, the bags under Emma's eyes were relatively new as well, thanks to Cody.

"Camp Hope is a quality facility, Emma. Cody will be fine." Her mother paused as she took a sip from her teacup. "It will be good for him to get out of Dallas for a while."

"I know. You're right." But she heard what her mom wasn't saying. *You should have brought him here more often*. And maybe she should have. But she'd made her choices, and they worked for them. Or at least, they had worked until Cody cannonballed off the deep end.

Besides, it wasn't as if she kept Cody from his grandmother. Her mom came

and stayed with them in the city multiple times during the year, shopping, dining out and enjoying spa days at Emma's expense. She didn't mind pampering her mother—her father never did growing up, and her mom definitely deserved it.

Mom just never understood why Emma kept her secrets to herself.

"Will you still be in town for Thanksgiving?" Her mother's tone was even, controlled, so much so that Emma couldn't decipher the meaning behind the words. Did she want them to stay? Was that hope hidden? Or resignation of the inevitable inconvenience?

"I guess it depends on the program and Cody's graduation." She rolled in her lip. Thanksgiving. Seemed aeons away, though it was only about a month. "If Cody graduates then we should be able to join you. Or you could follow us to Dallas and we could get together there." If he didn't graduate...then Cody would go to juvie? Would the judge give him another chance? Would Cody stay out of trouble long enough to make it through the holidays?

She'd heard the tone of voice the judge had used when he'd pulled her aside privately after the hearing. "I know this is hard on you," he'd said. "Especially as a counselor. So I'm playing this straight with you—Camp Hope is Cody's last chance before serious repercussions. He's on a bad road, Ms. Shaver, and the people he's keeping company with are on a worse one."

Like she didn't already know.

But hearing it from an official's mouth, from someone who had the authority to put her son in some form of teen confinement, made the slap of reality sting all the more.

Cody had to get through this program.

Emma set her teacup on the coffee table, emotion clogging her throat, and stood as her mother wisely remained silent. Adrenaline raced against exhaustion in a never-ending marathon. This was so messed up. She should be planning what to get her son for Christmas, not wondering if he'd even be home on December 25.

She moved to the lace-covered front window, admiring the sunset and soaking in the peace it offered as she ran her fingers over the worn edges of the curtains. They hadn't changed, either. But then again, her mom didn't have any more money now than she did when Daddy was alive.

She closed her eyes, breathing in the musty, familiar smell of the house of her childhood. She hadn't been home since the funeral a few years ago. Even then, she'd kept to herself, rigid in the corner with a sandwich tray, feigning a smile and hoping Broken Bend didn't stain her any further than it already had. She'd left after convincing her mom to come stay with them in Dallas. She had—and after two weeks' worth of facials, manicures and new outfits, her mother went home.

While Emma went back to doing what she did best—fixing everyone else's kids.

"We need dessert." The chair squeaked as her mom stood. "You want a cookie? Homemade oatmeal raisin."

She'd barely touched her dinner at the ranch, but comfort food sounded good. She accepted the plate her mother brought back from the kitchen and plucked a cookie from the top. Crumbly, just the way she liked them. She settled back on the couch, catching the crumbs with her hand. "You always made the best cookies, Mom."

She smiled at the compliment. "You look like you need about ten more of them. I thought Dallas had all the best restaurants."

"It does. We love eating out in the city. It's just..." Just what? She was too stressed lately to eat? Too consumed with Cody's issues to take care of herself? She wasn't avoiding food. It just seemed so irrelevant compared to the bigger things going on in their life.

She intentionally took another cookie. "The campers and parents all ate together at Camp Hope earlier. I was really impressed with the way Max handled himself." Shocked, too, but that detail wasn't worth mentioning.

Her mother bit into her cookie, dusting crumbs from her pants onto the floor. "It wasn't awkward, then?"

A raisin stuck in her throat, and Emma coughed, half choking as the raisin made a painful descent. "No—no, why would it be?" Did she know? After all this time, all the planning, all the carefully laid out details, her mother *knew*?

"Didn't you hang out with him in high school a few times? When you were friends with what's-her-name...Laura. That Laura girl, with the hair that came all the way to her bottom end." Her mom gestured with her cookie.

Laura. The friend she used as an

excuse when she decided to go out with Max. Emma winced. Laura existed, but the friendship wasn't nearly what she'd implied back then. She couldn't lie now —but she couldn't totally evade the question, either, or her mom would grow even more curious.

She sipped her tea until her throat stopped burning from the coughing fit, then set the cup casually back on the table. "Yeah, I know Max. But it wasn't awkward." Awkward didn't even begin to cut it.

Her mom tilted her head. "I wonder what happened to Laura. She seemed like a good kid. Maybe a little misguided, though."

Good grief. Emma's parents had been

more sheltered than she thought. She knew she'd covered her tracks during her rebellious streak after senior year, but she hadn't known she'd been *that* good. Laura was never without a cigarette in hand, even in the Broken Bend Church of Grace parking lot, and the stories of Laura's weekend activities filled the chairs at the hair salon more than once. But that's what happened when your father was a deacon and your mother taught Sunday school-not a lot of privacy, and a whole heap of judgment. Emma never knew for sure how she managed to get away with such a friend, but when compared to Max, Laura was a downright goody-goody.

"I think she moved away." Like they all had, with their heads lowered in shame. Except for Max. Of all of them that hung out together that fateful summer, Max had been the one to stay and shape up his life. Talk about ironic.

She shifted uncomfortably on the couch. She couldn't let the same thing happen to Cody, couldn't let a season of bad choices ruin his life—or at least alter it forever. She couldn't honestly say her own scarlet letter had *ruined* her life, but it'd definitely changed it. And left a permanent mark.

Cody deserved better. He had to take control now, before things spiraled out of everyone's control. The judge was giving him a second chance at the right path, and if he didn't take it, they'd all be roaming in the wilderness.

She couldn't do that again—even if she deserved it.

Her mom sighed and ran her finger over the handle of her teacup. "I'll never understand why you all wanted to get out of Broken Bend so badly. There's something to be said for home, you know."

Emma smiled and nodded, ignoring the tassel once again poking her in the back. Yes, there was.

But there was a lot more to be said for leaving.

Max hadn't felt the urge to leave in a long time. But watching Nicole double over with her second contraction in the past two minutes made him want to turn his back on Broken Bend and bolt for the hills.

She turned wary eyes on him, as if somehow this whole situation were his fault, and braced both hands against her back. The morning sun shining behind her through the open barn doors served as a spotlight for her distorted silhouette. "Don't even say it."

"I wasn't going to say anything." Max didn't know much about expectant women, but he knew enough to be quiet. About, well, everything—especially the particularly bad timing of this event. He was supposed to have a month—four weeks. An entire camp. This changed everything.

What was he going to do?

But it changed a lot more for Nicole, so he wouldn't dare address it. He took two steps backward, out of the barn. So much for their morning trail ride. "I'll get Luke."

"I'm here." Luke rushed up behind him, boots clomping on the dirt-packed floor, sending several horses jerking their heads in aggravation at the interruption. "I was just getting the horses saddled outside when Stacy told me what happened." He rushed to Nicole's side. "Are you okay?" "I'm having a baby. I'm great." She wiped tears from the corners of her eyes, laughed and then winced as what had to be another contraction crumpled her expression. "No. Not great. They're getting closer together, and stronger."

"So, I guess we're not going riding."

Max turned. Stacy, his oldest camper, a seventeen-year-old with curly blond hair, crossed her arms in the center of the barn aisle. The question in her voice held more than a bit of amusement, and even a punch of satisfaction. Something along the tune of *I dare you to try to fix me now. You can't even run your own camp*.

He'd heard that tone before, and there

was only one solution. Denial. "Of course we're still going riding." He cleared his throat and lowered his voice an octave to show authority. "Luke will take Nicole to the hospital, and we'll saddle up as planned. Tell the others."

Stacy rolled her eyes but thankfully turned to obey.

Good enough for now. One hormonal woman at a time, and the one standing in front of him took first priority. He focused on Nicole, who was still alternating deep breaths with winces of pain as she waddled toward the back door of the barn—the one closest to the female dorms.

It was official. He was about to be one chaperone short of a camp. And with his other counselor, Faith, working only part-time since she had young children of her own, he now had no one to stay overnight with the female campers.

God, I need a plan here. And uh, Nicole needs a doctor. Looked like her baby would be four weeks early, unless they were able to stop the labor at the hospital. And even then, he knew enough to understand she'd likely be on full bed rest until the baby came. He swallowed his dismay. "You want me to call 9-1-1?"

Luke stopped as he caught up to Nicole and turned, shaking his head. "Her suitcase is ready. We'll just grab it

and head that way. I'll call you if we

need anything." He started to say more, then stopped as Nicole clutched his arm. "See you later, man." He ushered her away, and just like that, Max was left in a bind.

He breathed a prayer for safety for the baby and Nicole both, added one for sanity for Luke, and then headed into the sunlight to face ten campers.

Alone.

Make that another prayer of sanity for himself.

He forced a smile and took a deep breath as he faced his campers, some standing with concerned expressions, others feigning—or perhaps truly feeling —disinterest.

"So there's been some excitement

here on your first day." He laughed, then cut it short when it sounded as awkward as it felt. "Nicole will be—uh, indisposed—for the rest of this camp session. For good reason, of course. I know she wishes she could be here with you guys. And girls."

Great. Now he was stumbling all over himself, and the kids just stared at him, expecting answers, and he had none to give. He rolled in his lower lip. "Don't worry, I'm working on a replacement now." Or at least, he hoped God was, because he had zero ideas. Luke and Nicole had been his right hands bringing this camp together the past year, and now he was short. Leaving him

handicapped and near panic.

His mind raced. He still had Faith, who would be there later that afternoon; Tim, the middle-aged chaplain who also acted as dorm leader and could stay with the guys overnight; and two college kids who served as activity chaperones as needed on a part-time basis. He could see if they'd offer a few more hours, maybe bribe them with gift cards to stay the night here and there to assist Tim. And if Nicole was able to stay on bed rest, then maybe Luke would still come do a few stints as much as he could until she actually had the baby.

He nodded slowly, trying not to panic. He could do this—but not without another female counselor. Someone from the church, maybe? They'd be willing to volunteer, at least, for the ministry angle. But who was qualified to do it? He didn't just need a babysitter, he needed someone who could interact with these kids and *reach* them. Someone like Luke and Tim, who understood the guys, knew how to talk to them. Could love them without letting them get away with stuff.

His eyes landed on Cody, who seemed to be avoiding what was going on as he rubbed a black mare under her chin. Mental note—the boy liked animals. Just like Emma always had. He wondered briefly what other interests he shared with his mom—

Emma.

He swallowed as an idea lodged in his mind and refused to budge. Emma, with her child psychology degree. Emma, who was staying nearby at her mother's and had nothing to do until Cody graduated the camp in a month.

Emma, who'd been the only other person at the table to speak up during the teens' impromptu concert and showed ability to handle this group of unpredictable, miniature adults.

No. He couldn't.

But as his eyes swept across his three female campers and landed on Stacy's pointed smirk, resignation took over any lingering trace of pride. He had to ask her. There was no one else available on such short notice, certainly not anyone qualified. She could still keep her space from Cody since the majority of their activities were gender-separated. The first day trail ride was an exception, to get all the curious boy-girl stares out of each other's systems. He'd make sure Cody didn't feel smothered having Emma on the grounds.

But would she do it?

And could he really ask her?

"The details will work themselves

out. I'll get someone in here ASAP. For now, let's go ahead and saddle up." Max clapped his hands together, sending a few teens scurrying for their mounts and the others groaning and eyeing their horses with dismay. He knew the feeling. He pretty much wanted to moan and pout, too. *God, I know this camp was Your idea, so I'm hoping You have a plan here.*

His sinking heart confirmed what he knew and didn't want to admit. God had a plan, all right.

He just really wished it weren't going to have to involve Emma Shaver.

Chapter Four

Emma swung on her mom's front porch swing the next afternoon, her bare feet pushing off the wooden deck. Clanging dishes sounded through the screen door, where her mother was cleaning up from lunch, erasing all evidence of their chicken salad sandwiches. She'd offered to help, but Mom insisted Emma stay outside and enjoy the afternoon.

Sort of how she'd insisted she do the laundry that morning without help. And cleaned the kitchen last night after their snack without help.

Day two, and already Emma

wondered if her welcome was fading. That was her mom, though, especially since she became a widow—routine, routine, routine. And Emma wasn't fitting inside it. Maybe that answered her question about Thanksgiving.

She sighed. Could they really make this last a month without driving each other crazy? They had a temporary routine figured out when Mom visited them in Dallas. Everyone had their own room, their own space. They kept a busy schedule so they wouldn't be on top of each other all day. Home, however, was a different story.

Did she really just think of Broken Bend as home?

She didn't want to go there.

Emma tilted her face to the sunlight streaming across her lap and released a deep breath, trying to erase the tension of the past forty-eight-plus hours. The verdict at court. Seeing Max, leaving Cody. The secrets, the burden. She still had to figure out what to tell Max, and when.

Later looked pretty appealing.

She closed her eyes, letting the warmth of the October afternoon sink into her skin. This entire situation left a bad taste in her mouth, and it had nothing to do with the fact her mom had used a little too much mayo in the salad. Her past had caught up to her—and not only caught up, but taken over. She had to deal with it. But what was best for Cody right now?

Tires crunched gravel and she opened her eyes to see a red, extended cab truck pulling into the drive. She squinted at the driver, drenched in shadows as he exited the vehicle. Surely her mother didn't have male visitors... No.

It was Max.

They really had to stop meeting like this.

"What'd he do?" The question sprang from her lips and carried across the yard before she realized how heavy it sounded. Heavy with fear, with accusation. With expectation of failure. How ugly of her. She swallowed the rest of it, clamping her teeth on her lower lip. Max being here didn't automatically mean bad news.

But it probably didn't mean good.

"Hey." Max took the steps in a single hop and came to face her, pausing to remove his hat. His brown hair wilted across his forehead and he shoved it back before replacing what she always thought of as his natural appendage. Max always had two arms, two legs and a hat. Some things never changed.

And some things did.

"Did something happen?" She crossed her arms over her chest, willing away the heartbroken girl from thirteen years ago that rose inside, urging her to run to the safety of her room and lock the door. Shut him out. Convince herself she hadn't made a mistake and wasn't making another one by trusting her son to Max's supposed expertise.

But the professional adult stood her ground and forced what she hoped was a natural-looking smile. At least forming her fears as a generic question made them sound more approachable. Less assuming.

"Happen to who? Cody?" Surprise lifted Max's brows. He shook his head, and relief melted her from the inside out. If Cody got kicked out of the program...

"Sorry. I didn't think how my showing up would seem." He did look sorry as he adjusted his hat for the second time. Worry wrinkled the skin above his nose, and his smile faded to a half quirk. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"It's okay, I wasn't scared." Terrified was more like it. The adrenaline abandoned her limbs, and she sank back on the porch swing. "Just concerned."

"Cody's fine. Doing great." Max edged closer to the swing, though he chose to lean against the porch rail instead of join her. Which was as he should. She wouldn't remember the times they'd sat on that same swing well after midnight, while her parents were asleep, and laughed. Whispered. Kissed. Wouldn't remember that at all.

"We took a trail ride this morning, and now the campers are having a rest time in their room before we introduce them to barn chores." Max shook his head, as if he realized he'd been stalling. "That's not why I came, though,

obviously. I had a question, and it wasn't one to ask on the phone."

Nerves twisted her stomach, and she gripped the rusty chain of the swing. Surely he hadn't come for her. To talk about the past. What if he'd somehow noticed how similar he and Cody—

"I need help."

The blatant admission took her off guard, and she snapped her gaze to meet his. "With what?" Max Ringgold never needed anyone. Except maybe his dealer, back in the day. He'd made that clear more than once. He didn't need family. God. Her.

Maybe some things had changed since then, but how much could a person really transform?

He tucked his thumbs in the front pockets of his jeans, another signature Max move that threatened to sweep her back in time. She kept her gaze riveted to his, determined to ignore the memories desperate for review. She was here for Cody. *Her* son. Not for some traumatic, tormenting stroll down bestleft-forgotten lane.

She straightened slightly, steeling herself for his request. Whatever it was, she had no obligation to answer. He would treat Cody—and her—like any other camper or parent on the ranch. Just because they had a past didn't mean she owed him a thing.

"My lead female counselor went into early labor."

Well that wasn't what she expected. She frowned.

"Nicole will obviously be gone the rest of the camp, whether she has the baby early or not. And that leaves me shorthanded with the men, but completely—well, unhanded I guess you'd say—for the girls." Max let out a slow breath. "So, I was thinking...with your degree, and all, with counseling, you said...that..."

Oh, no. *No*. She knew what he wanted now, despite the fact he didn't seem able

to get the words out. And with good reason. Of course she'd say no. "No."

He didn't seem to hear, just took the spot next to her on the swing. She shifted automatically, hating the alertness that rushed her senses at his proximity. If she'd heeded those warning signs thirteen years ago...but no. Cody wasn't a burden. He was a gift. Even now, through this struggle. He was the best part of her life.

And the most painful.

"Emma, there's no one else."

"In this entire world?" She was exaggerating, a telltale sign of panic and loss of control, but she couldn't help it. She couldn't do this. Not for myriad reasons, namely her secret. Even now she felt it bubbling within, churning her insides like a cauldron of lies. But it wasn't her fault. She'd done what was best for her son. Mothers protected their children.

Even from cowboys.

"Well, sure, there's probably someone even right here in Broken Bend, but not right now. Not qualified. Not sitting on their mother's porch with nothing to do for a month." He gestured to the house, and suddenly she was embarrassed over its chipped, faded condition. What was wrong with her, still caring what Max Ringgold thought all this time later? "The girls at the camp need someone they can talk to. I don't just need a chaperone in the dorms at night or another body on the trail rides. I need someone I can trust with them."

"Trust *me*? I'm the mother of one of your campers." *And you're the father*. The words practically burned her lips. "No. You don't want me."

Not the words she meant to use. Her cheeks flushed, and she looked away, across the yard, staring at his red truck until her vision blurred. "I mean, I'm clearly not much help."

"You're still a professional." Max pushed the swing off with his boots, and the gentle breeze stirred by the sudden motion cooled her heated face. "I'm sure it's different when it's your own child acting out, anyway. Hasn't someone told you that?"

Of course they had—everyone in her clinic had for that matter—but that didn't mean she believed them. Or that they were right. She shook her head. "What about Cody? I don't need to be there, cramping his style or getting in his way. He has to come first."

"The boys and girls typically keep separate schedules, besides mealtimes. I'll make sure he doesn't see you more than necessary." Max's eyes tried to draw her in, and she pointedly looked away, though there was no avoiding the familiar scent of his cologne. "He'll know you're there, of course—I won't lie to him. But it won't be a problem."

It was actually starting to make sense. That was the scary part. Emma shook her head again, though she didn't know why. She couldn't actually do this. But hadn't she just been wondering how she and her mother would make it through the month? Still, awkwardness for a few weeks was a thousand times better than keeping her mouth shut around Max for that long.

"Please, Emma. You're here. You're available." He paused, and she risked a glance. He was frowning as if hit with a sudden thought. "You are available. Aren't you?"

Now. Here it was—her out. But no, she was completely, totally available.

With zero reason to turn this opportunity down other than the one reason she couldn't reveal. Her secret. Hadn't she chosen this profession to help others? What would happen if she turned her back—would Max have to send the female campers home? Then what juvie? Jail? Probation? House arrest? They deserved more than those options.

Because Cody deserved more than those options.

She pressed her lips together, unable to believe she was even considering this. "You can't pay me. It'd seem unethical given my relationship to an existing camper."

Max held up both hands in surrender, grinning as if he knew he had her. But

then again, he'd always known. That was the problem. "Not an issue there, trust me. The extended staff is volunteer, anyway."

Volunteer. Right. Volunteer to put herself in Max's presence every day, ministering to kids she wasn't worthy of teaching. Qualified, sure—but not worthy. Not with her own failures slapping her in the face every time the police showed up with Cody. Every time the phone rang with another telling of his misadventures. Every time he smarted off to her and snuck out of the house.

But if she didn't offer what little she had, who would? Were the girls better off without her? She thought back to the list of "or else" options the judge had provided Cody and shook her head. No, she was the lesser of those evils for sure. Everyone deserved a second chance.

"So? What do you think?"

Well, maybe not everyone. She darted a glance at Max, at his hopeful mask permanently pressed in place, then at her mother's silhouette in the kitchen, obviously listening to their every word. She pressed her lips together to hold in her sigh and nodded before she could talk herself out of it. "I'm available. I'll do it."

She might be available. But when it came to Max Ringgold, her heart was one hundred percent obligated

elsewhere.

* * *

That hadn't been as hard as he thought. Well, in some ways, maybe harder.

Max drove slowly away from Emma, refusing the urge to stare in his rearview mirror at her reflection still settled on the porch. Sitting next to Emma on the swing had been a blast from his past he'd never dreamed of reliving. Well, he'd *dreamt* of it all right—memories that refused to die, visiting him in his sleep-but he never imagined he'd actually be there again in person.

Though this time she'd squeezed as far away from him as possible.

Definitely not like the last time they'd swung on her parents' front porch, late at night while her parents slept, Emma tucked under his arm so closely that he barely had to move his head to plant a kiss on her strawberry-scented hair.

Max tightened his grip on the steering wheel. Those days were gone. Emma had obviously moved on since then, having a kid with someone who apparently wasn't in the picture anymore. That was too bad for Cody, though he had to admit-deep down, he was a little relieved Emma was single. Clearly she'd been with another man at some point in her life, but at least he didn't have to see the guy who'd stolen the only woman he'd ever loved.

But now he had to see her every day for a month.

He pulled back into the ranch drive a few minutes later and stopped to send a few quick text messages to his team members about the temporary change in staff. Thankfully Faith, his part-time worker, had agreed to stay the night instead of leaving after dinner as was her usual routine. She could supervise the girl campers until Emma arrived the next day.

Less than twenty-four hours.

He hit Send on a group text and tossed his phone on the seat beside him, pausing to take a deep breath and focus. Reset his mind away from Emma and back on his duties. Rest period would be about over by now, so it'd be time to introduce the kids to barn chores. Some of the teens would have never held a pitchfork in their life—never lifted so much as a finger, for that matter, toward real labor. Other kids in this camp probably had worked so hard as children because of their family's financial circumstances, they'd been worn down and burned-out by age fourteen or fifteen. There were always different reasons for the rebel heart.

For him, it'd been a matter of history repeating itself.

He slammed the truck door shut just as Brady rode up the drive on his favorite horse, Nugget. Oh, man, Brady would have a time of it hearing Emma was back in town. After all the teasing he'd doled out to Brady a few years ago about his wife, Caley, when they were dating, Max would be in for an earful. He'd wait a bit, make sure the timing was right before telling him—and make sure Cody wasn't nearby. The last thing the kid needed was to discover his temporary guardian had a history with his mom.

This was getting a little more complicated than he'd realized. No wonder Emma had been so hesitant to take the job. Still, it had to be done.

A quick glance confirmed the ranch was quiet, the barn not yet teeming with the afternoon activities. He probably only had a few minutes before the counselors rounded up the teens and brought them out.

Max squinted up at Brady against the afternoon sun, grinning as Nugget stomped and snorted beneath his friend. "Cut it out, Nugget. You're not so tough." He reached up and rubbed the horse under his mane. "I've seen you run away from a bull."

Brady swung easily from the saddle, the leather creaking beneath his displaced weight. "Yeah, I saw it a little too closely. From the ground up."

"Not that you're holding a grudge against me for being gone that time Spitfire got out or anything." He crossed his arms and attempted a stern expression, but it was hard not to laugh at the story that never got old—Brady being chased across his pasture by an ornery bull who'd escaped his pen a few years ago.

"Actually, no. Not bitter at all." Brady gathered Nugget's reins over his head and looped them in his fist. "That was one of the things that brought me and Caley together."

Max grinned. "Then you're welcome."

Brady shoved Max's shoulder, and he laughed as they led Nugget toward the barn. "What brings you by, besides boasting about your marital bliss?" "Not boasting. Just appreciating." Brady tugged at Nugget's reins to prevent him from nibbling the grass near the red structure. "Though I do hate to admit when you're right."

"Get used to it, pal." Despite all his teasing along the way, Max had encouraged Brady, a former widower, to act on his feelings toward Caley when she'd worked as his daughter's nanny. "Caley still volunteering at the fire department?"

Brady nodded. "Only when they get overworked, or when there's a big fire." "So only during the times it would make you the most nervous." His friend rolled his eyes with a groan. "Pretty much. But it's working out. She's good at what she does."

"No doubt." Max looked again toward the dorms, halfway eager to tell Brady what had transpired in the past two days, and halfway dreading it. Though he'd never met her, Brady knew the whole story about Emma-the whirlwind relationship, the way Max fell faster than a steer during a team roping competition. Her desertion. If anyone would "get it," it'd be his friend.

But admitting he was still so affected by her didn't come naturally.

"I actually came to borrow your wire puller." Brady gestured toward the general direction of his property. "Have a fence to repair and Ava broke mine last time I let her help." He cut his eyes at Max. "And trust me, I say *help* lightly."

Max snorted. But Brady was letting his young teen daughter, who he'd kept on a tight leash since her mother's death years ago, spread her wings on the ranch, and for Brady, that was huge. Another hats off to Caley there. "Sure, no problem. It's in the barn." Finding the puller would give him more time to decide how to break the news of Emma's return-and that she had a son -to his friend.

And time to figure out how to say it in a way that wouldn't put Brady on the alert to Max's not-so-dormant feelings for her.

Brady tied Nugget's reins to the hitching post and Max led the way inside, blinking to adjust his eyes to the dimmer light. He opened the supply room door. "Here it is." The wire puller lay on the top shelf, just where it should be. He never imagined in his years of working for Brady that one day he'd have his own spread—and that it would be organized, no less.

"Top shelf. I trained you well." Brady helped himself to the tool and stepped back, grinning as he shut the door. "Seriously man, this is awesome what you've got going here. As much as I

hated to lose your help at the Double C, you've done well." "You gonna need a tissue?" Max joked, but the compliment sank in deep. Praise from Brady always meant a lot. They'd seen each other through some rough times.

Hopefully that wasn't an omen of what was coming along with Emma.

Brady clapped his shoulder as he passed him in the aisle. "Maybe marriage made me a little soft, but whatever. I still recommend it."

"I hear you." They walked in silence back toward Nugget. Max was running out of time to talk before the teens descended on the barn. It was now or never. He drew a deep breath, fighting to keep his voice casual. "So, turns out Nicole went into labor a little early. Guess who's filling in with the female campers?" Not that Brady could ever actually guess.

"Someone from church?" Brady turned at Nugget's side and handed Max the wire puller so he could mount.

"Not exactly." He hesitated.

"Someone who recently came back to town."

Brady's brows lifted. "I'd guess one of your exes, but there's too many to keep up with all their geographical locations."

Max passed the puller to Brady in the saddle. "Ha-ha-ha, very funny." Yet true. So what if Max had dated a lot—or more than a lot—back in the day? Including the local veterinarian, which hadn't gone over well with Brady when Max had been in his employ. It didn't matter—he wasn't like that now, despite his former reputation. Besides, all those women had just proved one fact to him over and over again.

They weren't Emma Shaver.

"So it's not an ex." Brady gathered the reins and turned Nugget toward the road.

Max rolled in his bottom lip, stepping back to give the horse room. "I didn't say that."

"I really need to get this fence repaired, man. What's with the guessing game?" Brady shifted his hat back on his head as he peered down at Max. Nugget snorted his own impatience, and Brady's eyes slowly narrowed. "Unless it's—"

Gravel crunched as an SUV parked a few yards from where they stood. Brady's head swiveled to look just as Max recognized the vehicle. Emma was early. They'd agreed for her to show up first thing the next morning, Wednesday, vet here she was. And from the way she grudgingly heaved her suitcase from the backseat and blew her hair out of her eves, she was tired. Maybe even grumpy.

This wasn't good. He hadn't had a chance to talk to Cody or do more than text the other counselors the news of the fill-in help. Hadn't had a chance to tell Brady the turn of events. Hadn't had a chance to wall up what was left of his heart.

"I'm here." Emma set her wheeled suitcase on the dusty ground at her feet, looking as if she thought simply being there would have to be enough. Good thing Max had turned off the idea of more a long time ago. Somewhere around the time she disappeared from his life, maybe. But no, it'd taken a lot longer than that.

Still was taking time, if he were painfully honest.

He shot a glance at Brady and let out a long sigh. The inevitable had arrived, right on time. "Welcome back." He focused his smile on Emma, hoping he successfully hid the nerves wringing his stomach. "This is Brady, a neighbor and friend. And, Brady, this is the temporary counselor I was telling you about— Emma." He swallowed, darting a glance as Brady automatically reached down a hand to shake hers. "Emma Shaver."

Chapter Five

Emma had no idea why Max's friend Brady seemed to lose his tan right before her eyes when they were introduced. Or why his friendly grip on her hand seized up like a vice.

She pulled it free and fought the urge to rub off the lingering pressure. "Nice to meet you." Mostly, anyway. She shot Max a quizzical look, but he was staring at Brady beneath the rim of his cowboy hat, as if waiting for a bigger reaction. Suddenly she got it.

Brady knew about her. About her and Max.

Her face flamed and she reached down to pick up her suitcase. She'd been through enough the past few months standing here like a circus sideshow wasn't going to be next on her list. "Sorry I'm early, just needed to go

ahead and get settled." And get away from her mother's prying, never ending questions before the truth erupted from her soul like a jet stream. "I'll just get out of your way, as soon as you tell me where to unpack." Too bad that couldn't be back in Dallas. But no, she was here for Cody. And now these female campers.

Definitely not for anything else. "No problem. The female dorms are there, and the girls are probably finishing up their rest time. Faith's in there." Max pointed to the temporary building behind the barn. "I make a point not to go inside those dorms, to avoid any negative appearances. But once you go through the front door, you'll be standing in an entryway. Bedrooms are to the left, bathrooms to the right."

"I'm sure I can figure it out from there." Anything to leave the awkwardness hanging in the air like a noose. Yet whose neck it was destined for, she wasn't sure.

She adjusted her grip on her suitcase and risked another glance at Brady, who finally had the decency to look away and pretend as if he hadn't been staring. Though *staring* was putting it mildly. He ogled as though she might have just arrived from six feet under instead of via a used SUV.

What exactly had Max told his best friend? And why did it matter a decade later?

Refusing to ponder either question any further, she began to roll her suitcase toward the dorm, but Max interrupted. "Brady was just leaving. Broken fences wait for no man. Right?"

Emma caught the look he shot his friend, and Brady immediately caught on.

"Right, right. The fence." Brady held up the tool in his hand and forced a laugh. "Duty calls." He glanced at Max, then back at Emma as he proceeded to urge his horse forward. "Nice to, ah, meet you, Emma." He started to say more, then shook his head and rode away, dirt stirring beneath his horse's hooves.

She raised an eyebrow at Max. "That was subtle." The guy who'd stolen her heart along with a variety of goods from the Broken Bend General Store once had apparently lost his ability to be sneaky.

He rubbed his jaw, either hiding a smile or he'd acquired a new nervous tick since they'd last parted. "He had a fence situation."

"And a staring problem."

Max snorted. "He was surprised to

see you, that's all. Sort of like—" "You were?"

"Trust me, Brady's a good guy. The one responsible for, well..." He held out both arms to his sides. "Me."

There were so many potential sarcastic responses to that, she wasn't even sure where to start. She opened her mouth then shut it. She wasn't that girl anymore, and Max wasn't that guy. Being snippy wouldn't solve anything but prove her master's degree didn't make her as mature as she'd thought. Stress didn't give her the right to be rude. She was better than that.

Most days.

He shot her a knowing smile.

"Dinner's at six in the main house." He hooked one finger through the belt loop of his jeans, projecting a confidence his tone didn't complement. Did her sudden appearance this afternoon throw him off as much as seeing him had startled her yesterday? She should have kept to the plan to come tomorrow. But her mom...

Emma blew out her breath. "I'll be there." She paused, manners taking over -partly from years of training and counseling, and partly from guilt over the mental debate she'd just processed. "Do you need anything before then?" *Please no, please no.* She needed space. Time to debrief. Time to figure out how she was going to put up a wall thick enough to keep Max and the memories at bay, while allowing the girls she was in charge of access. They'd see right through the facade. She had to be real and honest with them in order for any progress to be made in their lives.

But Max didn't get that privilege.

And who was she to assume he'd even want it?

Her pulse pounded in her temples, and a dull headache began to creep down her neck and into her tight shoulder muscles. She reached up to rub it.

"No, dinner is fine." Max shifted his weight, his body language a telltale giveaway of how uncomfortable he felt around her. Well, that made two of them. "That gives me time to get the kids settled into barn chores this afternoon and explain to Cody your presence here. Hopefully before he sees you."

Cody. Her heart twisted as the headache roared to a full blaze. "I didn't think about how you hadn't had a chance to warn him yet." Though everything else she'd have to eventually tell Cody paled in comparison to this. She briefly squeezed her eyes shut and opened them

to find Max's face lit with concern.

"You all right?"

"Just a headache. Been getting them a lot lately." Oops. She hadn't meant to reveal that part. She didn't want Max's worry, and she knew the headaches were only because of stress and her own inability to handle everything. She had to get it together. For Cody's sake, and for her own. She wasn't useful to anyone like this. How would it look if she not only failed with her own son, but with the girls at this camp, too? No, she had to prove she could overcome.

Prove that she was enough.

"There's some pain meds in the main house if you'd like some Tylenol." Max's forehead crinkled as he studied her, his cocoa eyes bright and piercing beneath his hat. He'd always been able

to see too much. That was part of why she refused to lay her sights on him again after her decision to leave had been made.

He'd have read—and changed—her

mind.

She looked away. "I've got medicine in my bag." She never traveled without it anymore these days, considering the frequency of her headaches.

"That's fine, but if it's anything stronger than Tylenol, I'd prefer you lock it in the medicine cabinet in the house." Max gestured toward the dorms. "So it's not a temptation for the campers."

He was right. She needed to get her head in the game. Though the reference to drug use rang some sort of ironic bell. Did he even remember all that he'd put her through? No doubt Max had come a long way from his past.

But if that was true, why did it still

feel like yesterday?

She swallowed the memories and accusations daring to burst free and nodded briefly. "No problem." Once she steeled her heart, she met his gaze and boldly held it, hoping to be dismissed. Until Max's expression softened completely off cue.

"I'm really glad you're here, Emma."

A warning sounded deep in her stomach, and she drew a breath so fast and tight her chest hurt. She squeezed the handle of her suitcase to hide her suddenly shaky hands. He said that as if he meant it. As if maybe the past decade wasn't so far away for him, either.

Max's eyes widened. "You know, as

a counselor. It's a big help."

Right. The camp. Her breath released from her body in a sudden whoosh of air, and she steadied herself with her suitcase. Who was she fooling? Besides, she had no doubt he'd take back the sentiment if he knew exactly who he was in Cody's life—and that the role went a lot deeper than counselor at a therapeutic camp.

If the secrets she accused Max of having in the past were bad, what exactly did that make hers?

Guilt tied her quivering emotions into a tangled knot, and for a brash moment, she considered blurting it out. All of it. She could get her whole point across in about two questions. *Remember that* night after the party on the Bayou, when you told me you were a different man because of me? Well, do you care to guess when Cody's birthday is?

What would happen if he knew? Right now, before anyone got any deeper into this mess? Would he send Cody home? Would it be considered too close of a conflict for him to stay?

Would Cody have a chance elsewhere?

She wanted the best for her son, which is why she booted Max out of their lives in the first place. But how could she keep digesting this secret for a month without completely selfdestructing? Suddenly, the door to the girls dorm opened, temporarily solving her dilemma. Three teens piled outside into the afternoon sunshine, followed by a woman who looked to be in her midtwenties, shiny brown hair pulled up high in a ponytail. She wore a whistle around her neck and a smile that made even Emma want to confide in her.

"There's Faith, now. She's great and will be here helping you out as much as her part-time schedule allows."

Emma nodded, though she wasn't sure which burned worse. His compliments and obvious admiration of Faith—or the fact that she even noticed.

"The campers are Stacy—" Max

pointed discreetly to the older, curlyhaired blonde Emma remembered from dinner the night before "—Katie and Tonya. Katie's the short one, and Tonya is the tall one. Stacy is seventeen, Katie and Tonya are fifteen. They're both from Texas, while Stacy is from south Louisiana. Faith can fill you in on the rest."

She couldn't help but be impressed with Max's attention to detail, especially without the campers' files as a cheat sheet. Hopefully she could get to know the girls as quickly. Faith already had a huge one up on her. But this wasn't a competition. She and Faith, as perfect as the younger woman seemed, were on the same team. Still...she watched as Faith led the campers toward the barn. "Is Faith married?"

Max frowned, revealing his confusion as to why it mattered, but didn't question it. "Yes, and she has two small children at home. That's why she's only parttime."

Emma refused to admit why that suddenly made her a lot more open to having Faith as a friend.

* * *

After unpacking her suitcase, downing her headache medicine and dozing off for a half hour, Emma felt ready to face the world. Or at least her ex-boyfriend, his perfectly perky counselor and three sullen teen girls.

On second thought, maybe she should have napped longer.

She opened the dorm's front door and was nearly barreled over by Stacy, Tonya and Katie as they hurried inside. She stepped back, offering an easy smile despite the teens' instant suspicion.

"Who are you?" Tonya crossed slim arms over her chest, frowning. "And why are you in our dorm?"

"Silly." Katie hip-bumped Tonya out of the way and grinned at Emma. Her red hair and freckles made her seem younger than Max had indicated, while Tonya's flawless, cocoa-colored skin and braided locks made her appear years older. "She's one of the moms. Remember?" She snapped her fingers. "That cute little guy."

"You're Cody's mom?" Stacy, who had shouldered past on her way toward the bedrooms, stopped and looked back with surprise. "They allowed parents here again? I thought all of y'all left yesterday." Her eyes widened as if worried her own guardian might pop back up unannounced.

Emma sighed. Apparently Max hadn't been able to make the announcement during her nap, or at least not in front of all the campers. All the more reason she should have stuck to tomorrow's plan. Hopefully he'd at least been able to warn Cody.

She forced a smile she didn't feel, ignoring the fact that she very likely might already be in over her head. "Yes, I'm Cody's mom, but that's irrelevant right now. Max needed a full-time counselor for you girls, so he asked me to step in. I'll be taking over for the woman that went on maternity leave."

"You're the replacement?" Tonya snorted. "Maybe that's why Cody looked so bummed earlier. I'd be, too."

Katie nudged her, mouth open in overly dramatic shock. "Don't be rude!" "Just being honest." Tonya held up both hands in defense.

Yeah, Emma knew that kind of honesty—and it wasn't steeped in truth.

She tightened her smile. "Cody will be fine. Besides, I'm here for you girls. I'm a licensed psychologist."

"Who obviously can't control her own son." Stacy smirked and pushed open the door leading to the bedrooms. "Come on, girls. Dinner's almost ready." She peered over her shoulder as the door began to shut. "Better hurry before Ms. Psychologist tries to shrink our heads."

The click of the door separating her from the teenagers felt like an insurmountable wall, and for a long moment, Emma considered turning and leaving. She swallowed the dismay bubbling in her stomach and worked to keep back the familiar tears of failure. Dinner might be almost ready, but she already felt as if she'd been chewed up and spit out.

But no. This was her chance. The girls were baiting her, testing her. Especially Stacy, who already demonstrated leadership influence on the other girls by being the oldest in the camp. If she let them pull rank now, the next month would be torture on her—and useless for them. They'd all lose.

She shoved aside the personal barb and followed the girls inside, briefly wondering where Faith was and why the girls were even walking around the ranch alone in the first place. Was that against the rules? She'd have to ask Max. So much she didn't know. But she knew how to handle this.

Her heavy footsteps brought all three girls' heads up. Stacy, where she perched on the edge of her bed changing her shoes; Tonya, where she examined her complexion in the room's only fulllength mirror; and Katie, who rummaged through her top dresser drawer.

Emma took advantage of their surprise and squared her shoulders. "Here's how it's going to be." She lifted her chin and crossed her arms, purposefully coming across defensive in her body language. First step, lay down the rules. Set the standard. "I'm in charge here, whether you girls like it or not, and whether you think I deserve to be or not. That's not your decision to make, it's Max's. And it's been made."

She drew a breath, maintaining eye contact with them all, especially Stacy, whom she had the farthest to go to reach. Second step, initiate heart. "We can do this the easy way or the hard way.

Personally, I'd like to have fun with you girls. I'm not here to braid hair and paint fingernails and be your best friend. But I really don't want to be a dictator, either."

That seemed to reach Katie, whose expression flickered briefly before morphing back to neutral.

Emma held her breath, intentionally uncrossing her arms, wanting to appear open and approachable. Third step, issue invitation. "What do y'all say to meeting in the middle?"

Silence registered, as all the girls plucked at loose threads in their jeans or on their bed comforters.

So it wasn't going to be that easy. Maybe she needed to play a little dirty. She shifted her weight to one side and tilted her head casually to the other. "I know you're all really loyal to Faith, but can't you give me a chance?"

Katie jerked her head up so fast, her short red hair flew across her cheeks. "What? We barely know Faith."

"But I've seen you with her already, all buddy-buddy." She glanced at Stacy, who frowned slightly. She knew that would get to the older teen. The last thing the rebellious girl wanted would be to seem like she was in tight with an authority figure. Emma shrugged as though it didn't matter. "I guess that's only fair. After all, she seems pretty cool." Max certainly thought so, anyway.

"Faith isn't cool. She's a mom." The words flew out of Stacy's lips so quickly, she was done talking before Emma could even look at her.

She hesitated, not having expected that answer. "I'm a mom."

"Exactly." Stacy leveled her gaze at her. "Moms aren't cool."

"Says who?" She refused to be offended. Though it sort of stung because she knew that was how Cody saw her and that he would only continue seeing her as less and less cool—or admirable, at the least—as he grew up. The thought dug in and twisted.

"Faith isn't that bad." Katie's tentative voice pierced the weighty silence. She played with the dresser drawer pull, letting the metal piece bounce between her fingers and the wood with a steady tap. "She taught you how to stay on your horse today during the trail ride."

"Shut up." The look Stacy shot Katie could have melted concrete. "I didn't need help."

Tonya laughed, finally moving away from the mirror to sit on her bed across

from Stacy's. "Yeah, right. You were whiter than those bedsheets."

Stacy threw her shoe at Tonya, who dodged it with a shriek—the first undignified, emotional reaction Emma had seen from the girl yet. Progress in some ways, probably, but she was losing control—if she'd ever had any in the first place. She raised her voice to be heard over the commotion, implementing the next measure in her strategy. "So you guys wouldn't prefer Faith to be your full-time counselor instead of me?"

The looks the girls shot her clearly said they weren't particularly partial to either of them. Perfect. Emma wouldn't be making up ground, but rather, carving her own path. That would make it a lot easier to reach them if she wasn't playing catch-up. "Good."

She should have stopped there, but her mind wouldn't cut the connection to her lips fast enough. Some deep part of her needed these girls to laugh, to like her. To respond to her. To make up for how Cody didn't. She winked. "I promise I won't smile as much as she does, okay?"

Stacy's gaze darted over Emma's shoulder and then dropped to her lap as a reluctant grin spread across her face. She wasn't going to challenge. Score one. Emma glanced at Tonya, who seemed the second-hardest one in the group, and was rewarded with a genuine grin. Or maybe it was another smirk. Oh, well, close enough. Next she looked to Katie, who giggled uncontrollably. Well, that was easy enough.

She'd done it. Won them over for now. Relieved, she allowed herself a moment to relax. "So, how about some dinner?"

"Actually ... "

Emma spun around at the sweet voice sounding from behind her. Oh, no. Faith.

The ponytailed counselor slid her hands on her trim hips and arched one eyebrow at Emma. "I thought we'd just stay in here so I could give smiling lessons."

Chapter Six

Wednesday started early, as evidenced by the chorus of groans as Max paced before his troops, a whistle tucked between his lips. Dew wet the top of his boots, and the late October chill cut through his button-down shirt. He struggled to keep his mind on the yawning teens before him, rather than dwelling on how cute Emma looked first thing in the morning, hair haphazard while wearing jeans and a rumpled sweatshirt. Her charges, though grumpy, were there on the chalked meeting line by the barn, on time and wearing the

required work clothes. He was impressed—not bad, since Emma hadn't even gotten the camp schedule until last night at dinner.

Where she'd been quieter than he expected. Maybe her headache hadn't fully gone away by the time they'd been served steaming chicken and dumplings. Then again, did he know anything about Emma well enough anymore to make assumptions? He considered questioning Faith about her, but he didn't want to give the other counselor the wrong idea about him and Emma. He and Emma were definitely no longer "he and Emma."

No matter how much her makeup-free image reminded him of the younger

version that still stalked his dreams.

Yeah. Time to get to business.

Max blew the whistle, and Cody clapped his hands over his ears. He fought the wave of sympathy rising in his chest. Growing up, his reaction to sudden sounds had always been the exact same, which got to be embarrassing as he grew older and the mere sound of a chair scraping against the floor in school would be enough to send his hands flying to his head. He eventually broke himself of the habit. Hopefully Cody would, too.

At least the young guy had taken the news of his mom filling in as counselor like a champ. There'd been a hint of panic in Cody's eyes at first, but as Max explained that he would rarely even see Emma besides at mealtimes and during occasional group projects, he'd shrugged it off-probably thinking his easy acceptance would win him brownie points later. Max would have to be careful to keep an eye on that and make sure Cody didn't play Emma against him or vice versa. One hint of that and he'd stop it immediately.

Yesterday, Max was Mr. Nice Guy. Today that would change. He had the teens' best interests at heart—and while their first day had been all about rest time and chicken and dumplings, today, tough love was the main course.

Hopefully Emma would be able to

hack it.

He blew the whistle again in two quick successions. "Listen up!" The kids stared blankly, except for Cody, who slowly lowered his hands from his ears and scowled. "First on the agenda is barn chores. Then after breakfast, where you'll receive exactly one half hour to eat, we'll move on to the obstacle course."

That got their attention. Some of the boys grinned and nudged each other with excitement, but the girls looked beyond confused. "Obstacle course?" Katie's red eyebrows nearly disappeared into her matching hairline. "Like, with ropes and barbed wire and stuff?"

"You'll have to wait and see." At one time he'd considered making a separate course for the girls, an easier one, but Nicole had almost taken his head off at the suggestion. Ever since, he'd seen how the girls in each camp had proven themselves time and again. These kids needed a challenge, the girls especially needing to see their own strength, the boys learning how to channel that strength into something positive.

Not for the first time, he wished he'd had someone to drag his teenaged rear end through an obstacle course, to force him to reach beyond himself and for new heights. Then maybe he wouldn't have turned to girls, alcohol and drugs to fill the yawning spaces left behind from his father.

Enough of that. He blew the whistle. "To the barn." The teens groaned, and he silenced them with a look. "All the horses are to be loosed in the paddock. Halters go in the tack room on the hooks. And remember—never approach a horse from the back unless you're partial to getting kicked."

Emma's lips twitched at that one, and he wondered if she was remembering the time he "borrowed" Mr. Judson's mare for a joyride late one night after enjoying too many beers—and gotten exactly what he deserved in the form of a horseshoe imprint on his thigh. His leg twinged at the memory. Yet the most vivid detail of that night was Emma, perched on the fence railing, head tilted and blond hair streaming down her back in the moonlight as she watched for shooting stars.

His gaze darted to her stoic expression in line, and the memory faded. Whatever she'd once seen in him, she certainly didn't anymore. Not that he deserved it-then or now. Sure, he'd turned his life around, but he'd put Emma through the ringer in the meantime. No wonder she deserted him all those years ago. Her temporary draw to the "bad boy next door" had been exactly that-temporary. He never deserved her. Maybe she finally realized that same fact and moved on. Maybe her reasons for never returning had been as simple as that.

With another whistle blow, he herded the kids toward the barn, wishing with all his heart that some mistakes weren't permanent.

* * *

Max had failed to mention that as chaperone, Emma was obligated to interact with the teens in the midst of their projects. Riding horses, brushing horses, cleaning stalls—and, apparently, crawling under barbed wire.

She winced as once again her hair snagged in the fencing above her head.

She propped on one elbow in the dirt and reached up to free the tangle with her other hand, trying to note where her girls had gone. Katie and Stacy had taken to the course as if they'd already been through military basic training, flawlessly running the tires and scooting under the barbed wire like a couple of prairie dogs.

At least the exertion had fought against the midmorning chill in the air. She could feel most of her toes, though not many of her fingers. Probably because they were half-buried in the earth. So much for her last manicure.

Though at the moment, nail care was the least of her worries. Some counselor she was, having already lost over half her group. She could only hope they had gone ahead with the rest of the boys who had finished the course. She couldn't raise her head far enough right now to check.

"Need help?"

She tilted her head and peered as far sideways as she could without risking another tangle or mouthful of dirt. Faith, bright-eyed and exhilarated, grinned from her position a yard or two away, looking as if she did this kind of thing every day.

"You probably think I deserve this." Emma wasn't sure which rubbed worse —her verbal blunder in front of the fellow counselor at the dorms yesterday, or the sand currently gritting in her teeth.

Faith army-crawled toward her and laughed. "I know I smile a lot. It's my trademark." She reached over and freed another piece of Emma's hair she hadn't even realized was stuck. "I can't be angry at you for noticing."

"I really wasn't making fun of you." Emma felt about three inches tall, which was pretty accurate seeing how she was crawling through cold mud. "I just—"

"Wanted the girls to like you?" Faith motioned for them to keep going, and Emma pushed herself to follow the younger woman's lead as they neared the end of the course. "I felt the same way when I started here last year. All this pressure to 'fix' these kids at whatever cost." She crawled a few more paces, then slid out from under the last string of wire and stood, offering her hand to Emma. "I forgot that fixing them wasn't in my job description."

Emma accepted the offer, then slid to her feet and started to brush the dirt off her clothes before realizing the effort was futile. If helping the teenagers wasn't the counselors' job, then whose was it? She met Faith's frank, open stare and raised her eyebrows in silent question.

Faith crossed her arms over her stained T-shirt. "I had to remember that was God's job."

Oh.

"I'm here to guide them—but I'm not responsible for their success." She hesitated. "Or their failure."

Great. Now she felt about two inches tall. This was a faith-centered camp, and she'd already tried to usurp God by her own efforts—and made fun of a fellow counselor in the process.

Emma swallowed, ignoring the aftertaste of dirt—and crow. "You're right. That's priority." Or it needed to be, anyway. But how could she lead by an example she wasn't following herself?

Faith started to speak, but a muffled cry sounded from behind them. Emma turned to see Tonya still attempting to make it through the barbed wire course. Despite the teen's lithe figure, she struggled to progress—likely because of having less muscle tone capable of pulling her forward. Emma knew; she had faced the same problem. Sitting in her office, seeing patients the past several years in a row had clearly done nothing for her endurance.

Or apparently, her own emotional health.

Emma shook off the guilt and focused on Tonya. "Use your knees." She immediately dropped to her own, her faded jeans sinking into the dirt, and gestured to Tonya through the rows of barbed wire. "Dig in with your forearms, not just your elbows." Tonya let out a muffled cry of defeat, her face twisted into a mask of helplessness. Gone was the facade of "I've got it all together," the masked image of "I belong on a runway." Suddenly, she resembled exactly what she was—a scared, dirt-streaked young girl. "I can't."

Well, she had to, unless Max was willing to cut the course apart to get her out. Emma glanced at him across the field, several yards away, blowing his whistle as the group gathered at the next challenge. Somehow, she didn't figure he would.

Faith touched Emma's shoulder and she jerked, having almost forgotten the

counselor was there. "Do you need me?"

Emma couldn't express how much she appreciated that trust—so undeserved. She shook her head. "No, I'll talk her out. Don't worry."

"I wasn't worried in the least." Faith proved her statement by wiggling her fingers in a wave and heading toward the rest of the group without a single glance back.

It was up to Emma.

She directed her attention back to Tonya. "You *can* do it. I know you're tired, but it's a lot better on this side. Trust me." There was a metaphor somewhere in that, but neither of them had the time to go there now. Next crisis, maybe. Tears slipped down the teen's beautiful, cocoa-colored cheeks, and she squeezed her eyes shut. "I'm dizzy."

Probably from stress. A lot of her patients manifested stress physically through headaches, nausea or dizziness. Emma leaned forward on her knees, tilting her head to meet Tonya's bleary gaze. "Try again. Slowly."

Tonya shook her head rapidly. Great. Now her hair was threatening to tangle, and if that happened, Emma might as well go grab some wire cutters. There was only one thing to do. With a resigned breath, she lowered herself flat on her stomach and began crawling into the dreaded course to meet her. Surprise highlighted Tonya's glistening eyes. "You came back." Relief saturated her voice so completely Emma couldn't help but smile.

"I'm on your team." She held the teen's gaze to make her point, then tapped her dirt-caked hands. "Now dig."

Tonya's lips pursed and she took a deep breath, then began pulling herself forward.

"Forearms."

She adjusted her form and Emma began to crawl backward to get out of her way. After several bogged moments in the mud, they finally slipped under the end of the wires together and stood. "Thanks." A red flush tinted Tonya's face and she looked down, then away, the mask vacant but starting to flicker. "You know, for doing that. Coming back in and everything."

The immediate expression of gratitude still caught Emma off guard. She wanted to turn the incident into a lesson, but sometimes, the best lessons learned were the ones that weren't forced. "No woman gets left behind."

A surprised smile quirked the corners of Tonya's mouth, then faded. "Not everyone thinks so." Her gaze darted to her teammates, who Emma could now clearly see were well on their way to the next event.

"You'll realize, probably sooner than you want, that friends don't always make the best choices." She flicked her hand to dismiss her before Tonya could revert to distant default. Emma wanted to leave this battlefield one step ahead. "Go on, now. The next challenge awaits."

"I'm pretty sure a significant one was already met."

She spun around at Max's voice in such close proximity. "Max." Her heart raced, and she squeezed her cold fingers into a fist. He still had the ability to get her blood pressure up.

She refused to ponder why.

His eyes warmed as they drew her in. Vaguely, she noticed Tonya jogging toward her group, but really, all she could take in was the way Max's T-shirt hugged his muscles. He'd apparently shed the work shirt from earlier that morning, and the heather-gray color did dangerous things to his eyes.

And her heart.

He smiled, oblivious to the reaction she fought so hard in his presence.

Anger, that was it. It had to be a weird visceral response to the years of

bitterness toward him. Nothing more.

Not attraction. Not curiosity.

Definitely not regret.

He ran his hand briefly over his hair, cowboy-hat free in honor of the course. "That was great." He gestured toward the barbed wire course with a tanned arm. "Faith told me Tonya was having trouble but that you had it under control."

Yet he still had to come see for himself? Well, she couldn't hold that against him. Other things, yes, but not that.

She forced a smile in return. "She just needed some encouragement."

"I saw you go get her." Max reached out and briefly touched her arm. The graze of his fingers burned and she jerked automatically away from the impact. "A lot of ground was covered. And not just literally. I'm impressed."

"I did what anyone would do." She crossed her arms to avoid another congratulating pat, not sure she had enough bitterness riled up at the moment to be a sufficient barrier. Her heart soared at the thought she'd actually made a difference toward Tonya, and that she'd made the right choice in how she'd handled the girl's struggle. Maybe she could do some good at the camp after all.

Yet that good mood lowered her defenses, and with a secret the size of hers, she had to stay on guard.

Max shook his head. "I think most counselors would have talked her through it from the sidelines. You dove back into the game."

She'd never been one for sports analogies, but she got his point. "I'm glad you're not regretting hiring me." Wait a minute, she wasn't getting paid. She fumbled for the right words. "Or not hiring me. I mean, asking me to volunteer." Perfect. Maybe if she kept talking, she could actually fit her foot in her mouth.

A slow grin lit Max's face, and her stomach reluctantly flipped. "I don't regret *that* at all."

His emphasis on the word made her breath hitch, and she rolled in her bottom lip. The weight of her secret suddenly resembled a thousand anvils taking residence on her shoulders—too heavy to bear. Had she been wrong? About everything?

No. She blinked, reminding herself of the memories she dredged up regularly

to starve the guilt. Drugs. Guns. Bad guys. She'd saved her son.

But exactly how far was Cody from that now, anyway?

Max's expression suddenly shadowed. "Uh-oh. Looks like Cody's having trouble on the rope swing."

She followed his gaze to the challenge ahead, where the rest of the teams had gathered with Chaplain Tim, Faith and another male counselor whose name escaped her. The joy she'd known from helping Tonya bled from her heart like water through a sieve. She could hear the taunting of Cody's failure on the rope from some of the other boys, and compassion mixed with her natural mama-bear instincts. No one made fun of her son. She rushed forward.

"I've got it."

His protest didn't deter her and she pressed on. "I have to—"

Max's brow furrowed and he grasped her wrist to stop her. "I said, I've got it." The warning in his eyes spoke volumes, reminding her of her place. She might have made a significant step with Tonya, but the proof was in the pudding—or more accurately, the bog. And right now her son was dangling above it, trapped and scorned.

Proving once again that she could help everyone in the world except for those she loved the most.

Chapter Seven

It was the same in every camp—it never took long for the group to find the weakest link and stage an attack. Now the guys who had taunted Cody were raking the front yard as punishment, while the rest of the campers were allowed an hour of free time before dinner—their only break after an entire day of barn chores, the obstacle course, hiking and the individual chats with him he dubbed One4One.

Max folded his arms and leveled his gaze at Cody, who could have been enjoying some video games or watching a movie had he not gotten in trouble, but was instead washing Max's work truck. A trace of guilt still lingered over the way he'd stopped Emma so abruptly that morning, but she couldn't go barreling over to save the day for her son. Talk about making matters worse for a guy. Plus, it was Max's issue to handle. Emma had proven herself in the incident with Tonya, but even with the girls, she wouldn't have final say in everything that came up. Volunteers were volunteers. Necessary, yes, but the bottom line came down to the kids, God -and Max

He had a lot of making up to do there. Speaking of making up—he hoped Emma wouldn't be mad at him. He had only done what he had to in order to stop her from making a mistake, but that look in her eyes still taunted his soul. It'd been one part confusion, two parts hurt, all topped with a healthy heaping of doubt. Emotions he could recognize a mile away.

He should know, he saw them in the mirror often enough.

"This stinks." Cody let out another, stronger word as he sloshed a bucket of water against the driver's side door and halfheartedly rubbed it with a sponge. The water hose tangled on the gravel drive at his feet. Max considered suggesting that he un-kink it before turning the water back on but held the advice inside. The kid would figure it out when it wouldn't flow.

And just like the hose, he needed to figure out what was clogging Cody.

"You do understand why you're out here, don't you?" He tugged the brim of his hat lower over his eyes to block the glare of the afternoon sun reflecting off the windshield.

Cody shrugged, water dripping down his forearms and leaving dirty trails. He glared. "Because I said those bad words on the rope swing?"

"Hardly." Max snorted. "You just said a bad word ten seconds ago and didn't even notice."

Cody remained silent, scrubbing at a mud streak on the truck door with more

attention than it really required. Was he listening, finally? Max shifted his weight, wishing he'd brought a chair outside to pull up and level with the kid. But there'd be time enough for that during their One4One tomorrow. "You'd have been punished for the cursing, too, but not as severely. You're out here because when you got off the rope, you swung at Peter."

"And missed." Cody shot him a pointed glance, as if his bad aim should excuse him.

"Sometimes, intention matters more than result." A fact he wished he could go back and alter in his own life. If only these kids could glimpse five years, ten years into the future—man, what changes they'd make. "Trying to hit him is as bad as doing it."

The sponge splashed into the bucket, spraying water on Max's boots as Cody straightened to his full height. "It's not fair! He was laughing at me. They all were."

Not all, but Max could imagine it felt that way, hanging above a crowd and demonstrating to everyone that he couldn't hack the challenge. Cody was the youngest, and smallest, kid in the camp. Physically, he was behind the other guys, but in spirit, he could rise far above-if only he'd properly channel that frustration and rage. Max had been the same way when he was in junior

high, having not grown into his tall frame until later in his teen years. It stung being the smallest kid on the team in a culture obsessed with equating muscles with masculinity.

But if he'd been told there were more important things to consider at the age of thirteen, would he have listened any better than Cody? If his dad had told him...maybe. Too late to ever know now. And from the blank line on Cody's paperwork regarding his father, well, the kid wouldn't get to discover that theory for himself, either.

Once again, he and Cody were in the same holey boat.

But Max hadn't sunk to the bottom,

and he was determined that Cody—and the rest of the kids in his charge this month—wouldn't, either. He drew a steadying breath, praying for patience and wisdom. "How'd you feel, when they laughed at you?"

Cody picked up the hose, fumbling with the nozzle and averting his eyes. "I didn't care."

"No lying at Camp Hope."

He let out a huff. "Fine. I felt stupid. Happy now?"

"Not really." Max waited a beat, understanding the frustration that drove the teen's illogical outbursts. They'd work on that together. But first things first. "Why did you feel stupid?" "Because I couldn't do it. And everyone else could."

Definitely wasn't the time to point out the girls had struggled with the challenge, except Stacy, who'd shown surprising strength and made it across the bog on her first try. "It's not about what everyone else does. It's about *your* effort. And if you hadn't come down off the rope trying to land punches, I'd have been proud of how hard you tried."

Cody's hands stilled on the water hose. "Really?" The gruff tone attempted to camouflage the hope under the words but failed.

Max pretended not to notice. "Yeah, man. And besides, not being able to do something challenging on the first try doesn't make you stupid. But handling it the way you did makes you a quitter."

"Let me guess." Cody tried to spray the truck, but the water clogged as Max had predicted. He looked at the length of hose and finally knelt to untwist it. "No quitting at Camp Hope, either."

Max grinned. "You're a fast learner. And that's why you're going to try again tomorrow."

Panic flashed across Cody's face before he unleashed the water on the truck. The spray created a mist against the sunlight. "Do I have to?"

"You want to be a quitter? Feel stupid?"

He shook his head, staring down at the river of soapy suds sliding across the

gravel.

"Remember—everyone does things at their own pace, in their own time. You're here for you." Max reached out and clapped his hand on Cody's shoulder, slightly surprised at the connection he felt toward the little guy. Probably because he was one of the youngest campers he'd ever had at the ranch—and maybe because so much of Cody reminded him of himself as a teenager. If he could keep these guys from making some of his mistakes, it'd all be worth it.

"Just keep trying." He patted Cody's shoulder before dropping his hand to his side. "And keep your fists to yourself." Cody smirked but didn't argue as he shut off the water. "If you say so."

"There's just one more thing." Max plastered on his most serious expression, effective enough that Cody's face fell.

"What is it?" He squinted as if bracing himself.

Max gestured to the truck, holding back a grin. "You missed a spot."

He totally deserved the wet sponge that splattered against his stomach.

* * *

Despite the day of heavy physical activity, Emma couldn't sleep. She adjusted the pillow under her head for the tenth time, wondering if Katie were going to snore every night or if this was an exception. Across the room from her bunk, Stacy muttered in her sleep, her deep Southern accent giving an odd rhythm to the half-formed words, while Tonya lay quietly, a pink glittered sleep mask covering her eyes.

Emma rolled over, pulled the blanket over her ears, and squeezed her eyes shut. But all she could see in her mind's eye was a replay of Cody swinging helplessly from a rope, the expression on his face a mixture of anger, embarrassment and fear.

She sat up abruptly before she could picture the same expression paired with an orange jumpsuit, and swung her legs over the side of the bed. Maybe some water or milk from the kitchen would settle her nerves and help her sleep. A distraction was necessary, regardless. She couldn't keep lying in bed alternating between regretting the past and wishing away the future.

Including the regret of not having slammed past Max when he'd stopped her from getting involved with Cody.

Max asked her to come to the camp as a favor—for him, of all people—then expected her to look the other way when her child was hurting and in need? When Cody was made out to be a target? When the last thing he needed at the camp was more reason to grow angry and bitter and distant?

Though deep down, she couldn't ignore the sensation that Max had a point. Underneath the surface layers of mama-bear instincts and desperation lay the truth—she'd have made things worse.

Still, that didn't take away the incessant desire to fix it. Fix Cody.

Fix herself.

Maybe she'd make that milk a hot chocolate.

Emma threw on a flannel robe, knotted it at her waist and shoved her feet into the closest shoes she could find —her shower flip-flops. The night air would be chilly, but she'd rush to the kitchen and be back before she had time to get cold—or before the girls could wake up and realize she'd left.

She hesitated at the door, one hand grazing the knob, and studied her sleeping charges. Still snoring. Still unmoving. Nothing to worry about after all, hadn't Faith left the girls alone for a short time yesterday, before barging in and catching Emma in her verbal blunder? They'd be fine.

Careful not to let the door slam, Emma slipped outside the dorm and into the main house. Since Mama Jeanie did all the cooking and served their meals, Emma hadn't had reason to rummage through the refrigerator yet and didn't know where anything was in the kitchen. Probably wouldn't find it in the pitch black. She flipped on the low light over the sink, brightening the stone tiles on the floor. The room felt different this late at night, and she tiptoed quietly toward the refrigerator, aware that Mama Jeanie's sleeping quarters weren't far down the hall.

She quickly found the milk, searched in vain for a bottle of chocolate syrup and finally discovered a drinking glass in the cabinet to the right of the pantry. She took a big gulp of plain milk just as heavy footsteps sounded on the stairs.

Pausing midsip, she stared at Max over the rim of her glass.

He raised his eyebrows, the corner of his mouth quirked as amusement danced

in his eyes. His wrinkled T-shirt and pajama pants, along with rumpled hair void of its usual cowboy hat, gave testament to his own lack of sleep. "Thirsty?"

A flush heated her neck, and she swiped her mouth with the sleeve of her robe. Juvenile, but faster than trying to find a paper napkin—and better than conversing with a liquid mustache. "Couldn't sleep."

"Long first day, huh?" He reached for the fridge and pulled out the carton of orange juice.

"You could say that." She stepped back as he rummaged for a cup. Memories long buried burned for release. He'd always preferred juice over milk, regardless of the time of day or food he was eating. Some things never changed.

"I feel like I need to apologize for earlier." Max set the carton back in the fridge and turned to her, sincerity shining in his gaze. He ran his finger around the edge of his full glass, meeting her eyes briefly before averting them.

She threw him a proverbial bone, however grudgingly. "You did the right thing." The words tasted unfamiliar. Max Ringgold, making the right decision? But she had to somehow let go of the Max she knew from the past and reconcile it with the one standing before her now. Old Max drank orange juice out of the carton, cared about nothing but his own next adventure—illegal or not and lived for the moment.

New Max poured juice into cups, helped troubled teens and ran a successful ministry.

Somewhere in between the two extremes lay a missing puzzle piece, and Emma couldn't help but long to find out where it went. Where it fit.

What hole it might fill.

He picked up his glass but still didn't drink, rather studied it as if the yellow liquid held answers. "I wasn't apologizing for the why, but the what. I was abrupt."

Well that sounded more like the Max

she knew. But this one wasn't arrogant, only confident. There was a difference if one looked hard enough.

She just didn't think it wise to stick around and try.

"It was the right choice." She took another quick sip of milk and rinsed her glass in the sink. "No worries." There was so much more she wanted to say, but standing in a dark kitchen with Max in their pajamas didn't exactly lend to the right timing.

"I know it's awkward."

She hesitated, her back to him as she turned off the faucet. She didn't want to turn around, didn't want to risk seeing something in his eyes she only once imagined she'd see—change. Pure, heartfelt, hard-core change. Max had clearly made something of himself, had chosen a better path after she abandoned their sinking ship of a relationship by escaping to college and never looking back. She'd wanted to see that change in him so bad then but had gotten burned. He'd not only broken his promise to her to change, he'd flat-out mocked it. How could he whisper such heartfelt assurances of her being good for him, of her being enough-and then turn around

and do another drug deal the minute he thought her back was turned?

It was too late.

And she couldn't bear seeing the change in person when it couldn't undo

the past.

She lowered her eyes as she turned, wiping her hands on the sides of her robe. "What's awkward?" Denial at its worst. But what choice did she have? None of the events of the past few days made any sense to her heart, already fragile and weary from the strain of Cody's rebellion.

"Us."

She lifted her gaze, grateful for the shadows shrouding his half of the kitchen, and moved away from the light lest he see too much. "It's just a month." That currently felt as if it'd already been about six. Sort of reminded her of another time in her life where nine months went by as slowly as a decade. Her cheeks burned.

"There was just so much...left..." Max coughed and took a long drink from his glass. He didn't bother to finish his sentence when he set it back on the counter.

"Between us." The words drifted from her mouth, as lazy as a warm wind on a summer's day. She didn't even mean to say them. But they hung in the gap.

"You left." His voice barely rose above the hum of the ice machine kicking on in the freezer. "And you never came back."

A fist of tension closed around her throat, and she opened her mouth, unsure

what to say or what she even could say at this point without ruining everything. Blinking rapidly, she stared at him, anxiety pressing in on her chest.

He moved toward her, as if taking her silence for regret. And was there regret? Plenty. But not in the way he'd anticipate.

She held up one hand as he drew nearer, her fingers grazing the muscles of his chest beneath his T-shirt. "That's not true." If he came closer, she'd forget who she was, where she was—how *old* she was-and slam right back into the past. Straight back into the body of her naive, eighteen-year-old self who couldn't see that her daddy was right about more than she wanted to admit.

Who couldn't see that flirting with fire guaranteed burns.

Who couldn't look past the chemistry with Max still currently flushing her cheeks.

Even back then there'd been this innate urge to fix people. To see past the surface and reach through the exterior to the heart of someone hurting. As a young adult, Max had hurt. And she'd been drawn to him, convinced she'd turn him around. It brought a sense of purpose, knowing she'd made a difference in someone's life when she couldn't do a thing to help her own family's problems. She couldn't pad the checking account or convince the stubborn soil to yield

produce for her father—but maybe she could heal with love.

She just never thought she'd get sucked in. That the darkness would overcome the light, that the single step she took down a path would pull her along until she was miles deep.

"You came back?" He took a step away from her, whether out of shock or because of her raised hand she couldn't tell. "When?"

She couldn't answer that one. Not now. What could she say? *I came back to tell you I was pregnant with Cody and caught you in the middle of a drug deal with one of the area's "most wanted"*? She hesitated, and he filled in his own blank. "For your dad's funeral."

That was true. She'd been there and stayed as incognito as possible.

She didn't even get a chance to nod before he wrapped her in a hug. "I'm sorry I didn't know you were here." His strong arms curled around her waist and held her tight. "I'd have come and found you."

The heartfelt words sank into her dry heart like a desert rain and soaked in deep. She returned the hug automatically, hands pressed against the hard contours of his back, certain he felt her heart pounding out of control under her robe. He radiated warmth, familiarity, memories... No. *No*. She was back in Max Ringgold's arms, after-hours. Maybe some things had changed, but apparently not enough.

She jerked away. "I've got to check on the girls." She flew through the kitchen door, wincing as the screen slammed behind her.

The perfect punctuation to the turmoil in her heart.

Chapter Eight

If Max batted zero one more time with Emma Shaver, he'd make some kind of unfortunate, proverbial hall of fame. She'd pulled out of his arms faster than he'd run out of church the first time Brady dragged him—and with just as many fears etched across her face.

But not before she hugged him back. Not before she'd fit against him like a missing puzzle piece from his past. As if the past decade plus hadn't separated them at all.

And that might be the scariest part. He adjusted his cowboy hat as he

leaned against the door frame of the recreation room, where he supervised the kids' free time. He really needed to get his mind off Emma and what transpired—or almost transpired—in the kitchen last night and back on the kids before him. All but two were enjoying the rewards of their hard work and the bonus system he'd put into place last year. For each good deed done or extra mile taken in conduct toward their peers, they were awarded an extra ten minutes of free time for the week.

The two that hadn't earned any rewards yet, Peter and Ashton, were in the kitchen helping Mama Jeanie peeling potatoes for soup that night. Mama Jeanie always made soup on Fridays. She said in life, it was the little things you could count on that meant the most. And that these kids coming through the program needed stability, needed to be able to depend on the little things, so she made soup.

There was probably a lot of genius in that.

Max shifted his weight, watching as David and Hank shot a puck at rapid speed across the air hockey table. Luke always loved playing that game with the teens. Thankfully Nicole's doctor had put her on bed rest at the hospital, so Luke still had a little bit of freedom to help out at the ranch periodically while she rested. He'd be there tomorrow for the next group trail ride and could fill in with the boys while Max did more One4One sessions. He couldn't wait to meet with Cody again so they could dig deeper on the issues the boy had. He'd barely scratched the surface, but Max could tell that the lack of a father figure in Cody's life had affected him. How badly, he had yet to determine.

Sometimes he wasn't sure if physically absent fathers were better or worse than the emotionally absent ones like his own had been.

His eyes drifted toward the younger boy, who lounged on the couch in front of the TV, fingers furiously punching at the Xbox controls. Cody's speed and concentration were testament that the fast-paced car game on the screen wasn't his first rodeo. The kid definitely had a mind geared toward technologythough in the past few days, Max had noticed his confidence increase with the animals, as well. He had the capability to be well-rounded, but clearly the video games and iPod buds were a bigger draw. Hopefully they'd break through that before the end of the camp, since the violence utilized in most of those games —and the lyrics of the music Cody chose -didn't lend to good behavior. In fact, he was surprised Emma hadn't made more rules about those choices.

And then she was there, as if his thinking about her had drawn her. Her

fresh, peppermint scent wafted past him as she peered around the door frame into the room, her blond hair sweeping her shoulders. "Are the girls okay?"

Emma's tone, all business, doused the spark of hope that had birthed last night. He eased aside to give her space, though his instincts warred inside him to press closer. But it was like working with a frightened filly—pushing only led to someone getting trampled.

He forced what he hoped looked like a casual smile and hoped she couldn't tell that just minutes ago he'd been psychoanalyzing her child. "The girls have been playing board games. Tonya seemed to get bored and hit the treadmill earlier, but now I think the competition is pretty fierce." He gestured toward where the girls were gathered in one corner of the room, hunched over a board with multiple pieces. Katie frowned as she rolled the game dice, while Stacy grinned as she counted her wad of paper money.

Emma acknowledged the update with a slight nod, though she still didn't meet his eyes. Probably a good thing, too. At this proximity, with last night still fresh in his mind, he might forget his batting average altogether and do something crazy-like kiss her. Just to see if the sparks they'd once lit like the Fourth of July were still flammable. To see if he could detect even a hint of their old

relationship like he'd imagined he'd felt in her hug.

To see if there was any reason at all to reignite the embers he'd never been able to fully put out.

He kept his eyes on the room of kids, the knot in his throat growing until he thought he'd choke. The tense silence between them spoke more than most words could, and he hated what the message relayed. "You ready for the trail ride tomorrow?" Not the most genius of topics, but at least it broke the ice freezing him out.

She stiffened beside him at the reminder of the horses. "Ready as I'll ever be to sit on top of a moving beast." "Come on, now. You've ridden before." Settled in front of him while they rode bareback together, if he remembered correctly. And he didn't forget most things involving Emma Shaver.

She met his eyes then, with a pointed look that shot like a barb into his heart. "And it's *still* not my cup of tea."

And it's still not my cup o

Ouch. Point taken.

Definitely not the time to remind her she'd once ridden on his friend's Harley, either.

He opened his mouth to say

something, anything to get her head away from the negative past, when one of the biggest boys in the camp, sixteen-yearold Jarvis Mason, sat down suddenly on the couch next to Cody. "My turn."

Cody wrangled the controller slightly out of reach, his eyes never leaving the TV screen as the race car continued careening at high speeds around a digital track. "Not yet."

"Come on, you've been playing ever since we got in here." Jarvis reached for the controller, crowding his space as Cody jerked it away once again.

Uh-oh. Max felt Emma's eyes bore into the side of his face, gauging, judging, waiting for him to intervene. But he wouldn't, not yet. In the real world, he wouldn't be there to run interference for these kids. They had to learn to handle opposition and conflict in a healthy way, and after the talk he'd had with Cody the other day by his truck, he was confident Cody could make the right decision.

He crossed his arms and waited, believing. *Come on, Cody. Make good choices*.

Jarvis sneered and used muscle this time, elbowing Cody in the side and snatching the controller for himself. "Time for little boys to share."

Cody lunged, like a bull from a chute, straight at Jarvis's barrel chest. Jarvis yelled in surprise, and, with his hands full of the game controller, couldn't dodge the scrawny fist Cody shot right at his nose.

Apparently Max had been wrong.

Emma sucked in her breath, hands covering her mouth. Blood dripped from Jarvis's nose, and with a growl, he threw down the controller. The room stilled, and Katie gasped. Several of the other guys stood up, whether to jump in to help or make it worse, Max wasn't certain. To Cody's credit, he only lifted his chin and met Jarvis's gaze head-on as they glared at each other in front of the TV

This would be the time to intervene.

Max covered the distance between him and the boys in three long strides. "That's enough, guys. Game over." He took the controller and tossed it out of reach on the floor. "He *punched* me." Jarvis wiped his face, red streaking across his cheek, and his eyes narrowed to slits.

Cody scoffed. "Because you deserved it."

"I saw what happened." Max raised his voice over the sound of Jarvis's high-pitched protests. "Stacy, could you throw me those tissues, please?"

She tossed the box at him from across the room. Max caught it deftly in one hand and plucked several for Jarvis, who pressed the thin tissues against his face.

Max could almost feel the trembles racking Cody's body, whether from adrenaline or shame he couldn't be sure. But these boys needed separation, quick.

He hooked his arm through Cody's elbow and tugged the boy to one side, halfway behind him. Jarvis could still retaliate, and from the looks in both boys' eyes, he wouldn't be surprised if they acted first and gladly accepted punishment later. He couldn't risk any more blood.

He nodded at Emma, who stepped uncertainly into the room, eyes glued to Cody as if she weren't sure if she could go to him or not.

She couldn't.

Max coughed intentionally, drawing her gaze. "Please take Jarvis to Chaplain Tim in the dorms." Away from here. Away from Cody, before the older teen realized he'd just been bested by a thirteen-year-old and tried to outmuscle them all. The last thing Max needed was a dog pile, and some of the other boys in the room still pressed in closer than he liked, the excitement of a fight lighting their eyes.

Emma's lips pursed into a line, but just like he knew she would, she snapped out of mama-mode and into counselor-mode. "Sure." Her tone grew firm and impossible to argue with. "Come on, Jarvis." She held out a steady hand, ushering him toward the door.

"I get punched in the face, and *I* have to see the preacher man?" The bigger boy's voice rose to a crescendo, but he didn't argue further as he tossed crimson tissues in the trash can they walked past. "Totally unfair."

"We'll talk soon. Don't worry." Max waited until they left the room, keeping one hand on Cody's shoulder, and met the gaze of the other boys in the room. "Back to your games. Or you can all peel potatoes."

The group instantly broke up and went back to their activities. Max couldn't leave with Cody, though, not until Emma got back or Faith or the other part-timers came on duty. With this much tension in the air, no way was he leaving any of the teens unsupervised. He'd seen it plenty of times—one broke a rule, and the others were tempted to follow close behind. It was that carnal temptation to push the limits. Sort of like how Max had been the majority of his life until the Lord wrangled it out of him.

Even now, though, wasn't he doing the same thing with Emma? Wanting to push, test his limits, see how close he could get to winning her back?

No. He couldn't go there right now.

He led Cody to a corner of the room that wasn't occupied and turned his full attention to the boy. The pained glaze in his eyes felt hauntingly familiar. Max had been the same way growing up—it was like looking in a mirror from years ago, all that hurt and sadness bottled behind a thick wall of defense. If it hadn't been for Brady and his influence —not to mention Emma's—Max would still be in big trouble. Who would be "Brady" to Cody? Who would knock down those walls?

He wanted to do it. But one month in a camp wasn't always long enough. Yet somehow, Max felt more compelled to try than ever before. He sat Cody down on the edge of a chair near the front of the room and took the ottoman across from him, pulling it up so their knees nearly touched and their words wouldn't carry. "What gives, man?"

Cody shrugged, an odd mixture of pride and repentance engraved in his expression. "Jarvis is a bully."

Max leaned back slightly, crossing his

arms over his chest. "You hit him, though. What does that make you?" "Smarter?"

He almost laughed, a gut reaction, but he held it at bay. Despite the surprise of the answer, this was serious. Moments like these had eternal consequence. If Cody didn't realize the severity of his choices, he might never turn back. The weight of that wiped any trace of a smile from Max's face. "Wrong answer."

Cody sighed and looked down at his hands. "It's not that big a deal."

"It's sort of a huge deal, Cody." Max waited until the boy looked up, and held his gaze. "That's twice you've either attempted or succeeded at starting a physical fight here at Camp Hope. You know that's against the rules."

Once more and it'd be his third strike. Unless Max and the other counselors met and decided to wipe the first offense off his camp record since he didn't actually make contact with Peter at the rope swing. But that could go either way and, regardless, the situation brought Cody way too close to being terminated from the camp. Max had to keep the camp safe for the other campers.

No playing favorites, even if he did feel inexplicably drawn to Cody.

"Am I being kicked out?"

Max couldn't tell if that was his goal or not, and the thought that it could be made him want to simultaneously slap the teen upside his head and hug his neck. He knew where the rebellion was birthed; he'd experienced it himself.

But that didn't make the blatant disrespect and apathy any easier to swallow—especially by those who went out of their way to help hurting kids. Kids who lashed out and hurt others because of their own wounds, like an angry lion with its paw in a trap. Assaulting the one trying to set it free.

Well, Max had his share of battle wounds and wasn't afraid of a few more. Not when it could mean the difference between life and death. "If you want out, you're free to leave." The words were a gamble, but he knew when a scared teenager was bluffing. Cody's sudden wide eyes proved his instincts true. "Hit the road, Jack. Have fun in juvie. I know for a fact the food isn't nearly as good."

Cody's eyes narrowed in defense. "I'm not going to juvie."

"You will if you leave here. This is Last Chance City, and you know it."

The fight momentarily left his eyes, and suddenly the abandoned, lost little boy was all Max could see. He leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees, not wanting to lose the momentary breakdown of a wall. "I want you here, Cody. But you have to follow the rules for the program to work. I can't help you if I'm constantly breaking up fights." Cody traced an aimless pattern on the knee of his jeans with one finger, not responding.

"I need you to meet me halfway." Max held his breath. "And I need you to realize that hitting someone bigger than you doesn't make you better than them. In fact, it makes you pretty small."

The teen's gaze lifted then, doused in hope and confusion. The sight of it nearly broke Max's heart. Had no one ever told him that in a way that he could relate to? But who would have if the boy didn't have a father or even, as far as he knew, a family member or friend taking on the role?

He swallowed the unusual level of

empathy he felt toward Cody and pressed forward with his advice.

"Anyone can throw punches and maybe land a few. But it takes a bigger man to walk away and to learn which battles to take on." He paused. "Make sense?"

"Sort of."

"It will. If you just follow my lead and quit attacking people." Max rushed on as Cody's mouth opened in protest. "Even those who you feel attack you first. Trust me, it's the only way."

His shoulders deflated. "Yes, sir."

"And, Cody?"

The boy raised his eyebrows indifferently, but life flickered in his eyes. He cared—whether he wanted to or not. Max continued before he could get too excited about the fact. "Man to man, I'm here for you. About anything. All right?"

A tiny smile lifted one corner of Cody's mouth before he shoved it aside with his typical, bored expression. He nodded, feigning disinterest.

It still counted. A small victory, but he'd take it. Max stood, relief coursing through his veins, and gestured for Cody to join him. "You know you have a punishment to fulfill now, huh?"

"I figured." Cody sighed and trudged toward the game room door. "Potatoes?"

"Nope. Rope swing." They'd kill two birds with one stone, however pathetically small it might be. And they'd stay out there until Cody got it right. "Potatoes will be dessert."

He shot the boy a look that silenced his protesting groan and nodded in satisfaction at the "yes, sir" that abruptly followed. One step at a time, whether it was two forward and three back or not.

One thing remained certain—Cody Shaver was going to know what it was like to have a father figure.

Even if only for a month.

* * *

She shouldn't have listened. Eavesdropping was wrong, and disrespectful. But after Pastor Tim had intercepted Jarvis in the hallway and she'd gone back to check on Cody, she couldn't help but overhear the words Max murmured urgently to her son. Things she'd been trying to say to him for months but they had fallen on completely disinterested ears. Would Cody listen to Max any better than he had to her? Would it change anything? Detour him from the path he'd started walking down?

He'd attacked Jarvis. The memory made her hands shake. Clearly he'd been provoked, but still—her little boy had jumped another kid. At a camp for troubled teens, no less.

Was this hopeless after all?

She'd nearly gotten caught when they'd abruptly ended their conversation

and headed her way. She'd ducked around the corner into the upstairs bathroom, which was thankfully empty, and hid behind the half-closed door until they passed, breathing the smell of the citrus plug-in and trying to calm her erratic heartbeat as Max's words replayed in her head. I need you to meet me halfway. It takes a bigger man to learn which battles to take on.

Man to man, I'm here for you.

Her heart constricted until she couldn't breathe. Max had no idea the depth of what he was saying. Not the slightest clue—and it was her fault. But if Cody was starting to respond to him, even slightly, how much more harm would it do to tell the truth now? It wouldn't be letting a cat out of a bag no, this would be more akin to unleashing a snarling tiger.

On her son.

No. She couldn't do it. No matter how much it hurt to hear Max be tender and compassionate with her son—*his* son—she wouldn't wield a giant red stop sign in front of Cody. Not while there was even a smidgen of hope that this program could save him.

She sagged against the bathroom wall, the towel bar digging into her back. But oh, Max had sounded so...sweet. Strong. Achingly familiar. Like all those nights he'd held her and promised he wanted a life with her. That she was a good influence on him. That he'd change.

Well, he had, sometime over the past thirteen years. And he'd never bothered to let her know.

She stiffened, the scent of the orange air freshener and the adrenaline churning in her stomach strengthening her resolve. This situation wasn't *all* her fault. The door swung both ways, after all, and the other side had never been knocked on. Max could have sought her out if he'd missed her as terribly as he indicated last night in the kitchen. She might have purposefully gone off the grid while pregnant, but there were always ways around that if someone wanted to make the effort badly enough. He could have

found her.

The fact that he didn't pursue her after turning his life around said plenty about what she'd actually meant to him. She'd been a good time, just like all the other girls he'd been rumored to be with, and nothing more.

And she knew that going into it. She'd sought Max initially out of rebellion and a skewed sense of need and didn't deserve anything more than the heartache she got. That's what happened when good girls went rogue. God had taught her a lesson, and she'd learned it the hard way—in fact, she was still paying for her mistake.

But she refused to let Cody be a casualty of her spiritual battle. She'd do

whatever—whatever—it took to make sure he didn't follow in his father's early footsteps. Max would be a good dad to Cody, when the time was right. But that time was not today—even if the memory of their gentle conversation would linger in her ears long after the lights were shut off in the dorm.

She pushed away from the wall. Enough of this mental back-and-forth. She couldn't hide in a bathroom forever, and debating with herself wouldn't accomplish anything. It was time to get back to work. Just because she had to be hands-off with Cody right now didn't mean she couldn't try to help Katie, Tonya and Stacy to the best of her ability. Those girls needed her.

And she needed to be needed.

Emma cautiously peered around the frame before slipping into the hallway. Surely it was safe to come out now.

Though anywhere near Max Ringgold could never be considered safe.

Chapter Nine

The weekend flew by, and with the activities Max had lined up, Emma didn't see him or Cody much.

Thankfully.

Instead, she focused on her girls, and Faith came by for the entire day Saturday to help out with the group projects. Max lightened the intensity of the workload on weekends, meaning the teens-and by default, Emma-got to sleep until eight o'clock in the morning instead of sixthirty. So she and Faith took the girls on a hike, since exercise was required every day, and then messed around at the

rock climbing station until all their arms were too achy to continue.

Being outside under the impossibly blue sky had been therapeutic, providing Emma a temporary reprieve from the thoughts that circled as relentlessly as vultures. Her first week at Camp Hope hadn't been boring, that was for sure, though at least Cody hadn't had any more issues—that Max had made her aware of. Who knew what went on in their private counseling sessions? But being with the girls, facing physical challenges and inhaling the wheat-scented country air, made Emma forget the turmoil of seeing Max and Cody together. Forget her son was one breath away from serious trouble.

Forget that the man in the cowboy hat still carried a piece of her heart somewhere in the pocket of his Wranglers.

Now, Monday morning, they were taking their shift in the barn, an hour before the boys would arrive to do their chores. Faith had gone home to her family Saturday night late, meaning she'd missed the optional Sunday morning devotionals. Max didn't force that time on the teens, though he offered rewards for attending, so more than half the group showed up. Stacy and Tonya hadn't wanted to attend, preferring to sleep an extra thirty minutes instead, so Emma stayed with them in the dorm,

grateful for the excuse. She didn't know if she was ready to see Max hold a Bible with the same hands he once used to take drugs and hot-wire cars. Her world had been rocked enough the past week. One mind-blowing event at a time.

She paced the barn aisle in a slow rhythm, feeling way too much like a prison warden as she checked the girls' progress on mucking stalls. Stacy, her curly hair pulled back into a messy ponytail, worked hard, though not exactly cheerfully. Tonya hoisted her pitchfork with much slower movements, a sheen of sweat dotting her brow despite the early November chill penetrating the barn walls. Then there was Katie, who actually whistled while she shoveled, pausing now and then to pet one of the horses or coo at them in baby talk.

Emma slowed in front of the stall Katie cleaned, rolling in her lower lip as she studied her. The teen was a mystery, seemingly completely unaffected by the bad moods of the others in the camp. Her file was thin, her transgressions not nearly as severe compared to the other campers. If it didn't sound so ridiculous, she'd think Katie wanted to be at Camp Hope.

The ambitious little redhead had thrived the most on the rock climbing wall, too, reaching a height the other girls couldn't, though Stacy had certainly

given it a solid try. Tonya struggled with the challenge, her feet slipping off the rocks and sending her swinging in her harness several times. She'd wobbled unsteadily once back on solid ground but quickly wrote it off to a fear of heights. Faith had pulled Emma aside, worrying that Tonya was lying since she hadn't mentioned her fear previously, but Emma chalked it up to the fact Tonya probably hadn't wanted to admit her phobia in front of the other girls. From what she'd seen at Camp Hope so far, saving face meant everything to these kids.

She could relate. Wasn't hiding her fears from both Max and Cody her own daily goal?

"How's Buttercup?"

Emma turned at the unfamiliar voice behind her. A pretty woman her own age strolled toward her, shiny chestnut hair pulled back in a low ponytail. She wore a denim jacket and carried a large duffel-style bag, and her eyes gave each horse she passed a cursory glance before she focused on Emma with a smile.

She assumed Buttercup was one of the horses but couldn't for the life of her figure out which one or why this woman cared. Was she a visiting parent? Max hadn't mentioned another counselor, even a part-time one. She hesitated. "Buttercup?" Made her think of cupcakes, which made her miss her favorite indulgence in Dallas. Funny how she hadn't missed anything else in the week-plus they'd lived in Broken Bend.

The woman gestured toward the last stall on the right. "The bay mare? Max said she was limping." She laughed. "Sorry, I always was guilty of getting right down to business. I'm Dr. Rachel Peters—veterinarian."

"Oh! Of course. I didn't realize something was wrong." Emma stepped aside for Rachel to pass her in the barn aisle, craning her head to make sure the girls were still working. "Go ahead. I'll go find Max."

"No." The doctor's expression darkened momentarily, and she cast a

quick glance over her shoulder as if checking to make sure he wasn't already there. "That's totally not necessary."

Weird. Now an uneasy feeling crept through Emma's stomach. Maybe she'd read too many spy novels lately, but why would the vet *not* want the horse's owner to watch her perform a treatment? Something wasn't on the up-and-up. She might not know much about horses, but Emma knew enough about body language to know this woman was hiding something.

She followed her into Buttercup's stall. "Listen, this might not be my place, but I am on staff here right now, and I don't feel comfortable with this. I think I need to get Max." She crossed her arms, ready to argue further if necessary.

Rachel looked up from where she already knelt by Buttercup's left leg. Surprise highlighted her classically beautiful features. Then she laughed. "I guess that did sound sort of cryptic." She shook her head, and wisps of her hair fluttered against her face. "Max and I...we have a history of sorts. So I try to stay out of his way when I make house calls."

Another sick feeling spread through Emma's midsection, though she much preferred the first one to this. History. They'd dated. When? For how long? Had it been serious? A dozen questions vied for release at once, and Emma swallowed them all back. "I see." She didn't see, not really, and the fact left a bitter aftertaste in her mouth.

Rachel rubbed her hand down various parts of Buttercup's leg, and the horse continued to pull hay from her feeder with stubby lips as if nothing unusual were happening. "He and I go way back."

She nodded, though her heart shouted a contradiction. Not as far back as she and Max went.

Or did they?

Better yet, why did it matter?

"It's none of my business."

Understatement of the year. But at the same time...Emma began easing

backward out of the stall, dying to hear more, yet desperate to escape before she did. "I shouldn't have interfered."

Rachel lifted Buttercup's hoof and studied the shoe before carefully setting her leg back on the straw-covered ground. "It's sweet you're protective."

Protective? Of Max? Hardly. She'd just wanted to make sure some stranger wasn't harming his horses under her own nose. She opened her mouth to argue but Rachel continued, brushing her hair back from her face. "It's good to know he has someone looking out for him again. He's been brokenhearted before, you know." She knelt and rummaged through her bag.

Heat flushed a trail up Emma's neck and into her cheeks. She pressed her cold fingers against what surely had to be a telltale blush and sucked in a sharp breath. Brokenhearted. By her? By Rachel? Someone else?

Why did she have to care?

"By you?"

The words fluttered from her lips, and Emma bit back a gasp at having released them. Ever since she crossed the county line into Broken Bend, her self-control and restraint had been nearly nonexistent. She stifled words all day long in counseling sessions in Dallas. Why was she suddenly Ms. Loose Lips?

Rachel shook her head with a wistful smile. "Not me. That was the problem, actually. He was still hung up on someone from his past. Emma, I think was her name." She shrugged as if it didn't matter, but the two syllables rammed into Emma's ears like a fiery dart. Her chest caught and her ears flamed. Max still cared about her—after all those years. Even after her sudden desertion. So much so, he hadn't been able to move on.

She hadn't, either, though she hated to admit it was for the same reason.

But it was.

Emma braced one hand against the stall door to steady herself. His hug in the kitchen the other night had lent to the idea, but this—this was proof. Facts. More than just an emotional hug between two friends who used to be more. Why, oh, why, did this new knowledge have to affect her so strongly? If anything, it twisted the knife of her secret deeper. Max had really been hurt by her leaving—even though she made the best choice she could at the time, it'd be so much easier to think he never cared. Never missed her. Never regretted anything.

Now what was she supposed to say? She could barely breathe, much less form a sentence.

Thankfully, Rachel didn't seem to expect an answer. "There's mild swelling in the left pastern. I'm going to have to do an X-ray." She stood and brushed her hands on the legs of her jeans. "We need to see what's going on in there."

Too bad the pretty veterinarian didn't have a machine that could tell Emma the same.

* * *

Max saw Dr. Peters's truck pull up from the window of his office, where he prayed between One4One sessions, and breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe now they could get to the bottom of what was hurting Buttercup. He shot a quick text to Tim to let him know he'd be right back before sending the next teen in, shoved his hat on his head and strode toward the barn.

Rachel preferred to treat the horses on her own unless there was a problem that required a decision on his part, and he couldn't really blame her. They'd dated a few times back when he worked for Brady, and while it'd been obvious she wanted to take things to the next level, he couldn't. Not honestly. Not without traces of Emma lingering in his heart. It just wasn't fair-Rachel deserved better.

So did Emma, for that matter. As she clearly realized on her own the day she disappeared from his life.

But today, he wanted to see Rachel. He hadn't needed her at the ranch in almost six months, and it was a little ridiculous that they still acted like junior high kids at a dance—Awkward City. He was tired of hiding. It was time to be adults. Besides, he wanted to hear her opinion on Buttercup's leg firsthand since the mare had been perfectly fine last week. Hopefully it wasn't anything too dire—or expensive.

He entered the barn, welcoming the familiar scent of hay, leather and horseflesh, and inhaled deeply. It never failed to amaze him of all he'd accomplished in the past several years. If it hadn't been for Brady's kick in the hindquarters to get his own spread and put feet to his faith, he'd probably still be assisting his best friend at the Double C Ranch. But God was good, and

through hard work and more than a little patience, Max had planted himself where he'd never imagined he'd be. And now, he couldn't imagine doing anything else.

All the more reason to keep atoning for the past. He owed God, big-time, for that much grace.

A horse nickered to his left, and he glanced over in time to see Stacy finishing up mucking Winston's stall. He smiled at her, but her lips barely quirked in response. Uh-oh, someone was getting tired of manure. At least she withheld any sarcasm, which was a major improvement. He made a mental note to praise her for that in their next session together.

To his right, he glimpsed Katie, whistling loudly as she groomed Max's best quarter horse, Remington, not even looking up as he strode past. Of all his campers, so far Katie had shown the least improvement—because she'd started out so far ahead of them all. Her file had only vaguely explained she needed to get away from negative influences, but he had yet to determine what all they were. She'd clearly wanted to come, as evidenced by her personal statement in the paperwork, but he still felt as if he was missing a piece of her story. It couldn't be anything that terrible, though, if she functioned so well at Camp Hope. He'd try to figure

that out at their next One4One. As far as attitudes went, Katie won the award for Miss Congeniality.

His stomach twinged in automatic response as he glimpsed Emma at the far end of the barn, leaning against Buttercup's stall as she chatted with someone inside. Clearly she'd already met Dr. Peters. His step hitched as he drank in the sight of her. She looked good in his barn, though he'd already known that. Still, watching her stand there with arms loosely hanging over the door, one booted foot kicked up against the side, made her look as though she belonged. Once upon a time... He opened his mouth to call a

greeting, give the ladies fair warning of his approach, but not before Rachel's crystal clear voice rang from inside the stall.

"He was still hung up on someone from his past."

Oh. No. Max hesitated, unsure whether to hurry up or slow down. Interrupting would be embarrassing, but not as embarrassing as if Rachel actually said—

"Emma, I think was her name."

He should have hurried.

Max came to a stop, his boots scuffing on the concrete floor. They couldn't be discussing what he thought they were could they? She and Emma had known each other all of, what, ten minutes? His chest tightened, and he drew a deep breath against it, trying to talk himself down. No big deal. Emma already knew he cared about her—at least a little, after that encounter in the kitchen last week. He'd hugged her in the middle of the night, for crying out loud, and told her he wished he'd have been there for her at her father's funeral. But what Rachel said took it a little further

If he recognized that as a dude, he could only imagine how much further Emma was taking it.

His fears—hopes?—were confirmed as an immediate red flush crawled up her face. Her mouth opened and closed, as if she were unsure what to say, and she grabbed for the stall door frame. He really wanted to be the one holding her up right now.

A warm feeling spread through his chest, returning his breath even as hers was apparently being stolen. His feelings mattered. The past few years still counted. Even hearing about it secondhand, her reaction proved it-she still felt something, too. If she were as indifferent toward him as she pretended, she'd have cared less at Rachel's admission.

Rachel came out of Buttercup's stall with her bag, her next words too low for Max to catch, and stopped abruptly as their gazes locked. Emma turned, and there they stood, an unlikely triangle, all eyes pointedly fixed on Max.

First he was jealous of the wood propping up Emma, now he was jealous of the horses that got to hide in their stalls. Not that he had any reason to be embarrassed—if anything, Rachel should be, for having slipped personal information about him to a near stranger.

Though, since they'd dated back in his womanizing, desperate-for-distraction days, he probably deserved it.

He adjusted his hat and grinned.

"Ladies." He still had some charm left, somewhere. Not that it would affect either of those two. "How's Buttercup?"

Maybe if he pretended he hadn't heard, they could all save face. But

denial had never been his specialty. He might have done a lot of things worse in the past, but lying was never his crutch. He hadn't had anyone trying to keep him accountable in the first place until Emma. His dad couldn't care less what he did, and if Max told him flat out, he'd probably reach for another shot glass and toast him best wishes.

But they knew he'd heard. He could see it in the guilt clouding Rachel's eyes and the mortification lurking in Emma's.

"She needs an X-ray." Rachel jangled her truck keys as if in proof of her pending deed. "Was just headed to get the machine."

"And let me know?" An X-ray definitely fell under the unofficial

doctor/client relationship they had going, though the question was more to distract from the tension radiating off Emma than from his own personal desire to find out.

"Of course." Rachel smiled, that gentle, practiced white smile she'd perfected over the years of having to break bad news to animal lovers.

But this time, Max knew the bad news had nothing to do with Buttercup.

"Need help?" She'd say no, but he had to ask anyway. Maybe she'd take pity on him—or Emma, at the least—and give them an excuse to delay the inevitable.

Nope. Rachel Peters owed Max Ringgold no favors. Her smile deepened as she rushed past them. "I've got it." Of course she did.

He couldn't resist. Not that he'd call it desperation but... "Are you sure? Emma or I could—"

Rachel stopped, back stiff, and slowly turned. "Emma?"

He pointed, and Emma ducked her head, turning even redder than before. In fact, she was downright burgundy. Clearly, he'd missed a step. He frowned. "Emma Shaver."

And then the pieces connected. Rachel had been talking to Emma earlier without knowing her name. Obvious, now, by the particular way she'd phrased her tell-all sentence. Too bad he hadn't caught that tiny detail before now. Talk about upping the embarrassment factor.

"I didn't know." Rachel's apologetic gaze was focused on Emma, not on him. Ouch. Probably some form of girl code he didn't get, either. "Sorry for...well, you know." She turned without meeting Max's eyes. "I'll just grab that machine now." Apparently the vet was still clinging to hope that Max hadn't overheard what she'd said. She hurried down the barn aisle and into the sunshine

"You heard." Emma pointed out the obvious the second Rachel was out of earshot.

"I heard." He still couldn't lie—

especially not to her eyes.

"So you and Rachel...Dr. Peters..." Emma gestured between him and the empty barn aisle behind him, her hand flopping listlessly like a fish on a bank. "You and she..."

He'd never seen such desperation for someone to fill in a blank. If it'd been anyone else, he'd have teased them a bit. Drawn it out. But she'd been through enough pain, he could tell. Talk about knowing the feeling. "We dated casually." He made sure to keep his voice down, despite the female campers being across the barn.

Instant relief drained the anxiety from her expression. "So it wasn't serious." "Were you jealous?" He really didn't mean to say that out loud, but on second thought, maybe he did. Emma couldn't hold all the cards and leave him with nary a peek.

Her eyes flashed, and she crossed her arms over her chest, the defensive motion one he recognized all too well from her. "You're one to talk. You haven't dated anyone seriously since me."

"You're right."

The fight fled from her stance, and she took a tentative step toward him. "Why?"

"Why do you think, Emma?" She was so close. So familiar. He reached out and grazed her arm with his knuckles, her shirtsleeve soft under his touch. Man, that hurt deep. He hadn't realized until that fateful hug how badly he still craved her presence in his life. Craved her arms around him and her head on his shoulder. No one had ever fit like Emma had. But how could he tell her that without losing the tiny splinter of dignity he had left?

She shrugged, but the hope in her eyes left his head spinning. She wanted him to tell her. But could he really hold his heart out for her to trample over a second time?

He yanked off his hat, ran his fingers through his hair and sighed before replacing it. "You're the one who left. Not me." That was about as straightforward as he could get. Without putting himself on a silver platter and saying "here." "Remember?"

The hope in her gaze morphed into something colder. "Oh, I remember, all right. I remember you—"

"Miss Shaver!" Katie's panicked cry sent a burst of adrenaline into Max's veins. He'd forgotten they weren't alone in the barn. Had the girls overheard Rachel's confession?

"Help!"

Either way, it didn't matter at the moment. He half caught Katie as she barreled toward them, straw stuck in her hair. His heart raced. "What's wrong?"

"Are you okay?" Emma grabbed for

her hands, and Katie squeezed until her knuckles turned white.

"It's Tonya. She's on the floor next to Remington's stall." She panted for breath, eyes wide with fear. "I think she's unconscious."

Chapter Ten

Emma laid a cool washcloth on Tonya's head, gesturing for Katie to back up as she continued to bounce nervously. Apparently her burst of adrenaline over finding Tonya facedown in straw had yet to fade. "Careful now. Let her breathe."

She could say the same for Max, who didn't seem to care in the least that he was breaking his own rule about staying out of the female dormitory. He hovered over Tonya's bed, frowning down at her pale face, her dark hair stark against the white pillow. "I still think we need to take her to the hospital."

Tonya lifted from the pillow, panic highlighting her expression. "No!"

He flinched, and even Katie backed up a step. No way could someone truly ill coax that strong of a tone. Emma raised her eyebrows at Tonya.

Something was going on, for sure—had she been faking to get out of barn duties? She needed to run the idea by Max, but not in front of Tonya.

"Why not, Tonya? Afraid of needles?" Stacy spoke up from her spot on her bed across the room, and Tonya glared at her.

"That's enough." Max's voice left no

room for disagreement—or sarcasm. Stacy slumped back against her pillow, but her smug smile didn't fade. Max caught Emma's eye and gestured with his head to the entryway area outside the dorm. He wanted to talk to her alone, too. About Tonya? Or their unfinished conversation?

She wasn't sure how she felt about the interruption earlier. One part grateful and two parts disappointed. She probably shouldn't have finished the sentence she'd been tempted to before Katie arrived panicking, but saying it would have felt *so* good. So relieving.

Sort of like justifying her decision and her secret for the hundredth time.

Great. How healthy was that? There

she went again, trying to fix everyone around her while ignoring her own broken pieces. Too bad counseling oneself didn't work nearly as well. Though she knew what she'd tell herself if she were a patient—that truth was always better than lies. That anything worth hiding was worth telling. That relationships built on untruths would only crumble.

Saying it was easy. Living it, not so much. Especially when one's son could potentially go to jail based on the consequences of said truth.

And speaking of secrets, Tonya definitely had one.

Emma adjusted the washrag on the

teen's forehead. She didn't feel warm, and her pulse had calmed. Maybe she really had faked it and knew an examination from a professional would rat her out. Still, she'd never been one to shirk out of chores before. If anything, Emma would have expected that behavior from Stacy—not Tonya.

At least the girls didn't seem to have heard the awkward conversation between the adults in the barn. Maybe Tonya passing out cold had been a blessing in one sense.

Max traded places by Tonya's side with Katie. "We'll be right back. Katie, keep this rag cool and come get us if something happens, okay?"

The eager redhead nodded and

immediately stood guard and stared at Tonya as though she might fade away into the sheets if she so much as blinked. "Yes, sir."

Stacy snorted again, but Max let that one go. Emma followed him just outside the bedroom door and lowered her voice as she secured her stance by a potted fern. "So what are you thinking?" Best to let him lead the conversation, or she'd put them right back where they left off in the barn. She still couldn't decide if that would be good or bad.

"She might be faking. And if she is, I want her busted." Max crossed his arms and sighed, the sleeves of his work shirt pulling taut across his biceps. "On the other hand, she says she just got hot shoveling and forgot to eat breakfast. It could be a blood sugar issue."

"I sat by her at breakfast. She only nibbled on an orange." Emma hesitated. "Come to think of it, I don't think she ate much at dinner last night."

Understanding began to slide across Max's face. "She's the only one that's been on a treadmill since we've been here, too. Have you ever seen her leave the table at a meal for the restroom?"

Surely he didn't think... "Eating disorder?" Emma frowned. "No. Well, maybe. I guess it's possible. What's in her file?"

"Nothing about that. But she's so thin. And I've seen it at this camp before." He rubbed his jaw, the day's stubble bristling under his fingers. "Let's keep a close eye on her."

"So, hospital or no hospital?" The heater in the dorm kicked on, sending a brush of warm air across Emma's shoulders. Still, she rubbed her hands up and down her arms, fighting a chill that wouldn't go away. If Tonya had a disorder, Emma should have picked up on it. She should have noticed long before the girl fainted. What good was she even doing here?

"I'm not going to make her go this minute. But I do have to call her parents and see what they advise. Legally, I can't ignore this whether Tonya thinks she's fine or not." Max leaned against the door, his voice nearly a whisper to avoid being overheard from inside. "If they don't insist, then we'll see what happens tomorrow. I'll make her go if she passes out again."

"Will her parents come get her early? Is that even allowed?"

"It's a disruption, one we try to avoid at all costs. Anytime a parent has to intervene in the program, it typically halts progress."

A second, more intense shiver skirted up her spine. "And I'm *not* intervening?"

His mouth opened, but Emma pushed ahead, panic driving her words past her control. He'd just said it himself—her nightmare, brought verbally to life. Fear clouded her vision. "I'm Cody's parent first, Max. Before I'm these girls' counselor or your lifesaver or whatever it was you called me when I agreed to this whole crazy thing." She jabbed her finger at his chest. "I'm his *mother*."

He wrapped his hand around her pointed finger and gently, but firmly, lowered her hand. Her breath caught, his touch sending small sparks up to her elbow and combating the chill leftover from cold truth. "I know who you are, Emma Shaver."

And there they were. Back in the barn, with a thousand unspoken words hovering between them. But which ones to speak? And would it accomplish anything other than relieving a bit of stress and then leaving her drenched in regret? She was tired of regret. Tired of wondering. Tired of doubting. Would she ever make it through the rest of the month?

Would Cody?

A sob began to work its way up her chest, and she swallowed it back. She couldn't be that vulnerable in front of Max. It just wasn't right. Not after everything they'd been through. No, she needed walls. Brick ones. Big, tall, brick ones.

"If I thought you were hindering Cody, I wouldn't have let you stay." Max's confident tone spiked through her fears and left her hoping for...well, hope. "Are you sure?" Her heart thundered. "Maybe you're just blinded to the facts because of need."

"Don't pull that textbook stuff out with me." His smile tempered his words. "I would never sacrifice a teenager because of a camp need. The campers are why I'm here."

"Then what would you have done if I'd said no?" Emma realized suddenly he hadn't let go of her hand, yet she couldn't force herself to pull it away. She wanted him to let go first.

This time.

"If you had said no, God would have sent someone else." He squeezed her fingers, and she squeezed back as if on autopilot. "He's sort of on the side of Camp Hope, you know."

She really didn't know whose side God was on, except that it probably wasn't hers. But no need to get into theology while they had a potentially bulimic girl, a lame horse and a camp full of teenagers needing their supper to deal with. She risked a glance into his face, and her heart clenched at his eyes, so similar to Cody's, gazing down at her with such sincerity. Such honesty. Such compassion.

Where had Max Ringgold gone? The man she knew from days ago was nothing like this. That man had been hard enough to walk away from—but this one... How could she walk away a second time?

She tugged her hand free. "I'll keep a closer watch on Tonya. I promise."

"This wasn't your fault." Max's arm hung limp at his side as if he didn't know what to do with his suddenly empty hand. She could relate, so she hooked her thumbs into her back pockets. "You do know that, right?"

Not her fault. That's what everyone told her about Cody, too, and what she often told parents of wayward children she saw in counseling. But wasn't a piece of it her fault? She had to be responsible to a degree—even if it was the single mistake of going against God's Word and sleeping with Cody's father when she knew better. Knew he wasn't legit. Knew he wouldn't change for her.

But he had changed, and maybe the fact that it *wasn't* for her was what hurt worst of all.

"These teens ultimately have to make their own choices. That goes for Tonya —and Cody." Max's fingers brushed her shoulder, and she leaned into the warmth before easing away from the touch that so easily got her in trouble. "Emma, you have to believe me."

His words hit her heart but didn't penetrate, like an arrow flung at a target without enough force to stick. "I know you think that."

"It's true."

Maybe it was. Maybe it wasn't her fault, so much as it was his. Max Ringgold, for however much he'd crossed over to the good side, had once very much occupied the darkness. Weren't bad boy genes hereditary? The Bible even talked about the sins of the father being passed down. Maybe Cody didn't have a chance at all because of his very DNA. Maybe his future was already determined in the negative. Didn't all of it—the vandalism, the fighting, the rebellion—come so naturally to her son?

She'd seen the same thing in his father.

And if she looked really hard—in

herself.

"I'm going to go check on Tonya." She drew a ragged breath before pushing open the dormitory door behind him. "We're done here."

* * *

She was getting really good at walking away from him. Max stayed in the entryway after the door shut behind her, wondering if he should follow.

Or walk away for good.

But the only way to walk away from Emma Shaver was physically. And he wasn't leaving Camp Hope, and for the time being, neither was she. He somehow had to find a way to stick out this arrangement he'd plopped them both into and move forward for the sake of the kids. This was about the campers not him. His struggles and dreams and desires were not at stake, but an entire dormful of teenagers' were, including one potentially sick young girl who needed his attention and support. Not his half effort and attention because he was so distracted by Emma.

The heater shut off, leaving a heavy silence surrounding the entryway. He rubbed his temples beneath the rim of his cowboy hat and stared down at the linoleum squares beneath his boots. He should have known. And maybe he had. Maybe God had sparked the idea and arranged for Emma to fill the temporary need of counseling—but hadn't his own heart jumped at the opportunity to spend regular time with her again? He'd bit that bullet a lot more eagerly than he'd tried to convince himself at first.

Hopefully he hadn't jumped ahead of God. He was so used to lingering behind the Lord, dragging his heels and denying his purpose in starting Camp Hope for so long, that he wasn't sure if he'd recognize what it meant to run ahead, to carve his own path and hope it was the same one God wanted him to walk.

Maybe he wasn't supposed to be anything more for Emma right now than a counselor to her son. That would have to be enough—regardless of how good she felt in his arms. Regardless of how his heart ached to atone for the past.

Regardless of how the sight of her walking away from him made him feel like a helpless, love-struck teenager once again.

But they had to come to some kind of truce. He and Emma couldn't keep playing emotional relay, passing the baton of the past back and forth in heated arguments. He glanced toward the door, wishing he could barrel back inside and demand Emma come settle this once and for all. He was sick of elephants crowding their time together and wreaking havoc on his memories.

The door opened, and his heart leaped before realizing it was Stacy. Then it

jumped again for a different reason. Had something else happened to Tonya?

"She okay?" His tone sounded more clipped than he meant for it to, and it seemed Stacy picked up on it, as well. Her posture stiffened.

"She's fine. Trust me." Stacy smirked. Smug. Too smug. Max narrowed his eyes. "What do you know?"

Her grin faded, and real anxiety flashed across her expression before morphing back into neutral. "Nothing, I swear."

Yeah, right. "No lying at Camp Hope."

Stacy snorted. "You do realize that's a dumb rule? Everyone lies. And how

will you even know?" She crossed her arms, all rebellion. And probably a bit of jealousy over the attention her roommate was receiving.

Max's spirits sagged. They'd come so far, and now... He withheld the sigh begging for release. "Call it a gift." Too bad he'd never seen the truth in Emma's eyes before she deserted their relationship years ago. He could have saved himself the pain and embarrassment of all the unanswered calls and emails. Could have avoided the hope that she just got busy at school and would be home for Christmas. Or Valentine's. Or Easter. But the holidays passed, and then spring, and then the entire summer.

He'd never seen it coming. And he would never make that mistake in misreading someone again.

Starting with Tonya—and the stubborn girl standing before him.

"I can tell when someone is lying." He leaned down slightly and peered right into Stacy's eyes. She backed up a step, brow furrowed, as one hand nervously reached up to wind blond strands around her finger. "Trust *me*."

For a moment, it looked as though she might believe him. Panic took over once again, and her lips parted. But instead of revealing truth, she slammed the mask securely back in place and turned her mouth into a sarcastic grin. She shot a pointed look at the dorm behind her leading to Tonya. "Guess we'll see about that."

* * *

Emma sat at the long kitchen table inside the main house later that night, legs crossed in her favorite pair of lounge pants. A mug of hot chocolate that Mama Jeanie had graciously prepared for her sat at her side, while Tonya's, Katie's and Stacy's files were spread open before her.

She slowly flipped through the pages as a carved wooden cuckoo clock ticked above her head, reminding her she'd been here for a while already and didn't

have much to show for it. She'd been able to get away from the dorm for a bit since Faith had come to stay the night as backup for Tonya, who had been excused from the rest of the evening's activities. Max told her, though, if she couldn't keep up the next morning, she had an E.R. trip in her immediate future -even if her parents had allowed her to skip it today.

She turned another page in Tonya's file, hoping to find insight that could point her in the right direction. It was weird looking at Max's careful, handwritten notes in the margins. Too bad she couldn't get a true glimpse of Cody's file. When she'd gotten close enough to be tempted earlier, all she'd seen was the contact page of Cody's information, before her conscience caught up and she'd shut the folder and put it away. She really wanted to read what Max had written during their counseling sessions, and gauge any of Cody's potential progress for herself. She was so desperate to know what to expect when they went home in a few weeks. Was the fact that Max wasn't keeping her up-to-date a bad sign? Or just protocol?

Her eyes lingered on the stack of files again. But no, she couldn't interfere like that. It wasn't her place, and those choices wouldn't exactly draw her closer to her son. Besides, she'd already seen more than she knew what to do with —a typo. And not just any typo, but one regarding Cody's birthday.

Her stomach flipped like it had when she'd seen it. A blessing in disguise? Now even if Max suspected, he wouldn't be able to prove it....

Or was it just one more item to add to her guilt-ridden list?

The desk lamp she'd borrowed from the living area cast a dim glow across her paperwork. She picked up her mug of cocoa and swirled it gently, watching the marshmallows float in an easy circle by the rim and wishing this whole situation hadn't grown so complicated. Somehow, she'd lost control of her own son, yet been put in charge of three incredibly different young ladies—not to mention been dropped straight into the daily presence of the exact man she'd gone to great lengths to avoid for over a decade.

Who said God didn't have a sense of humor?

If she weren't so jaded, she'd examine that a little further. She didn't really believe God was laughing at her or had arranged these circumstances at her expense. Rather, she believed in punishment. Judgment for sins. Living out the consequences of bad choices. Hadn't she done that her whole life? She'd sacrificed so much to keep her pregnancy a secret, and then to keep

Cody's father's identity a secret because she should. She deserved to pay for her mistakes. As the saying went she'd made her bed.

But had those sacrifices cost too much?

"Marshmallows can't talk, you know."

She jerked, cocoa spilling onto her hand. Of course Max knew she'd been there, since he'd gotten the files for her earlier that evening. But she hadn't expected him to come hang out especially not after their exchange that afternoon in the dorm.

He grabbed a dishrag that was folded by the sink and tossed it to her, his lips turned up in amusement. "Sorry. You were just staring into your cup so hard I figured you were expecting an answer."

If only it were that simple. "It's okay. Just daydreaming." At night. About him. And his son.

She dabbed her hand dry and tossed the towel at the far end of the table. Too bad she couldn't throw away her worries as easily.

He pulled up the chair beside her, turning it backward before straddling it. Clad in faded jeans and a college sweatshirt, sans hat, he looked way too much like the Max from the old days. The one who could charm his way into her heart with a single look. The one who'd stolen a lot more than he'd ever given back.

The one who once had convinced her he wanted a life with her.

"Find any hidden treasures in there?" He pointed to Tonya's file, and she closed it before passing it over.

"If you mean explanations, no." She brushed her hair out of her eyes and shifted to face him, suddenly regretting the decision to wear yoga pants. "We'll have to play it out."

"I figured. I've read all the campers' files several times, and I just don't know. At least we're watching closely now."

"Better late than never, huh?" She offered a half smile, but he returned it with that serious gaze that still seemed so foreign to her—and still sent shivers over her skin.

"I agree." His heavy-lidded eyes narrowed thoughtfully as he studied her, and an impish grin quirked the side of his mouth.

Her stomach clenched, and she slowly slid her mug away. "We're not talking about Tonya anymore, are we?"

Chapter Eleven

"I need you."

She stared at Max as if sitting motionless could somehow make his words visible. Surely she didn't hear him correctly. "What did you say?"

He didn't blink, just held her gaze with those steady eyes. Those eyes that always reminded her of hot chocolate with a little too much milk. "I need you."

Oh, wait, they'd done this before. She relaxed slightly in her chair, futilely attempting to calm her erratic heartbeat. "Right. You mean, here. At the camp." She let out a breath. "I know. Trust me, I wouldn't be here if you didn't." Hadn't they said that already? Why did he have to keep bringing it up? He probably thought she needed more affirmation after today's episode with Tonya, but he was taking it a little too far.

"No." He reached for her hand resting on the table and threaded his fingers through hers. An immediate shock wave radiated up her arm, and she tensed but didn't pull away. "I mean, I need you. I need to be around you. I need..." His voice trailed off and he glanced down at their joined hands. "This."

No. He wasn't. He couldn't. "Max." His name left her lips like honey dripping from a spoon. Sweet and achingly slow. She couldn't conceal the emotion he still generated inside her. But this couldn't happen. Not for a hundred reasons.

Especially not for one.

"I miss you."

She missed him, too. And what did that say about her? She missed the man who represented her biggest regret in life. Not Cody, of course. He wasn't a regret, even in spite of the heartache of the past few years.

But Max—big regret. Big heartache.

What was wrong with her? She was worse than a moth to a flame. At least the moths didn't know better. She did and was still tempted.

"I know it's impossible." He held on

tightly to her fingers, as if fighting the inevitable, and finally broke eye contact to rub his thumb over her hand. "But if it wasn't...I'd be tempted to do this." He lifted her hand and brushed his lips against her knuckles.

Chills raced down her arms as heat and memories—warmed her heart. His lips moved up to her wrist, sending tingles into her shoulder.

"Or this." In one fluid motion, he scooted his chair a foot closer to hers, leaned over and cupped her neck with one hand, thumb grazing the side of her cheek.

She closed her eyes, knowing what was next. This was wrong. So wrong. But it was Max. So familiar. She couldn't think. Couldn't breathe, much less form a coherent thought. When was the last time he'd kissed her?

Oh. Yeah.

She jerked away as if burned, nearly tilting her chair backward. "No. No!"

"I heard you." Max held up both hands in surrender, still close enough to touch but obeying her protest. "I'm sorry."

He'd tried to start it up again. And she'd almost let him.

It was almost enough.

Almost.

"It wouldn't be right." His words came out a statement but left a clear question mark ending. "You're working here." "I'm working here." She parroted numbly, unable to back away any farther from his magnetism but knowing if she didn't, she might very well find herself pulling the same move on him. "I work here." There, that was a reason he could understand. A reason she could actually share, anyway.

"You work here." He repeated it back, nodding, until the sly charm she never could resist filled his eyes. "For three more weeks. Give or take."

Three weeks. A lifetime. Same difference. With Max, time stopped and sped up and rewound and did all sorts of crazy things she couldn't control. And that was the problem—with Max, she had no control. Never did.

And unfortunately, not a lot had changed, because if a year ago—six months ago, or even a week ago someone had told her she'd have Max Ringgold's hands in her hair, she'd have laughed in their face at the absurdity.

God really, really had a sense of humor.

She needed control back. Not just with Max—with her life. With her son. With the family she'd sacrificed for and fought to create.

A family Max didn't fit into. Not yet. Not like this.

She had to resist.

She dug deep, closing her eyes and bringing back to life a box of memories

she alternated between, regularly reliving and regularly shutting out. Max with a baggie of white powder. Max, getting yet another DUI from the sheriff, who threatened to tell Emma's parents on her if he ever saw her with "that riffraff' again. Max, trading cash for drugs with a local gang banger two weeks after promising her he'd been clean.

There. She could do it.

"Three weeks or three years—it's not happening." She opened her eyes and steeled herself against the hurt radiating from his posture.

A muscle worked in his jaw, and despite knowing better, she desperately

wanted to touch it. Feel the rough bristle of a permanent five o'clock shadow under her fingers. Graze that dimple in his chin. She knew, instinctively, she had one last chance. He hadn't shut her out yet, she could tell by his expression. She could undo her last words—if she spoke now.

But what would that accomplish? More pain? More mistakes? More daily reminders that she'd screwed up and had been paying for it ever since? Maybe he'd be a good influence on Cody. But once he knew the truth—it'd change everything. He'd never look at her that way again, and worse yet, he could resent Cody for her choice. Resent them both.

Her heart couldn't break over Max Ringgold a second time without permanently disassembling.

Besides, she couldn't risk Cody being kicked out of the program. Smack-dab in the middle of his last-chance before juvie was not the time to correct a mistruth he'd believed his entire life. Not without doing damage none of them could repair in time.

The clock ticked a rhythm above their heads. Max raised his eyebrows, waiting. One more try. One last heartbeat. She held her breath.

And the cuckoo chirped the hour.

Max ignored the crack spreading across his heart, ignored the desire seeping through his chest, and plastered on the best fake smile he could muster. "Truce, then." He held out his hand, and Emma shook it, wariness holding her expression hostage. He didn't blame her, after what he'd just pulled. What had he been thinking, going for broke like that?

He let her hand go immediately, despite the cry of his instincts to hold on longer, and stood to straighten his chair. He dragged it several feet away, back to its rightful place, and reminded himself that from now on, this was his rightful place, too. Where he belonged—away from Emma. A respectful distance, anyway. She'd made her choice.

A man could only get kicked while he was down so many times, and twice was enough.

Emma stood, too, as if she was afraid he was forcing her to leave. Hardly. He needed her here—for the camp. He'd just be sure to keep his personal issues out of it. "You can go back to your files. No need to run off."

Again.

"I think I'm done for the night." She stared at the paperwork, looking young and overwhelmed in wrinkled sweatpants and a purple hooded sweatshirt. He drew his eyes away from the strands of blond hair skimming her shoulders. "There's nothing there." Oh, there was.

Just not in Tonya's file.

"We'll see how she does in the morning. In the meantime..." Max hesitated, gripping the back of the dining room chair in front of him.

Emma crossed her arms. "The truce." "The truce." He nodded. "Friends?" Surprise flickered across her pale face, and he'd have given his right arm to know why. Did she really think he was an all or nothing kind of guy now? That their history forever determined their future? There was always room for pages to be rewritten. If he didn't believe in fresh starts, what kind of leader was he, anyway?

She rolled in her bottom lip, just like she'd always done when she was younger. Just like he'd seen Cody do a dozen times while at the camp. "Friends."

Relief flushed through his body. It wasn't what he really wanted, but at least the awkwardness could be shoved behind them now. They could move forward and focus together on what was most important—the kids.

"Then I'm going to need your help." He motioned for her to sit again, and she quickly obeyed as if eager to press forward with their new relationship. They needed to cement the decision, for sure, before the sun rose and reality doused them in an unforgiving light. "I really want to brainstorm a few new ideas for the campers. I'm not getting through to some of them like I expected to by now."

"Is Cody one of them?" Her brow puckered, and she tapped a nervous rhythm with her pencil.

"Don't worry about who." He offered what he hoped was a reassuring smile, but he couldn't discuss Cody right now. It was too soon—and not fair. He couldn't do that with the other campers and their parents, so he wouldn't start breaching confidentiality now. Besides, Emma was too anxious over it-wrong mindset on her part. There was still a long road to walk.

For both of them.

"I'd like your help, especially with some project ideas for the girls. These kids need to work hard, but they need to have fun." He patted Tonya's files. "They need to see they can have a good

time without abusing substances or breaking the law."

"But isn't the point of the camp to learn discipline and responsibility? Learn how to respect authority?" Her frown lingered, though interest had sparked her gaze at the mention of fun.

"Of course. Don't you think we've been doing that?"

She hesitated, then snorted. He took that as a yes. She was probably

remembering the early hours, the structured eating schedule, the punishment for forgotten manners, cursing and fighting, the strict rules about free time, the obstacle course that nearly did the group in...

"So, you'll help me?" He hated how much it mattered that she not turn down this small gesture.

She nodded slowly, eyes appraising him. He tried to look stoic. No more tricks. He wouldn't take advantage of their chemistry again—even if the air sizzled like a campfire every time he got within three feet of her. He tried to convey that honest message with his own gaze, not surprised in the least that they could still read each other so easily. After all they'd been through... "I'll help."

"Great." His breath escaped in a rush of air. "Tomorrow, then." He wanted to shake her hand again. No, scratch that. He wanted to kiss her good-night.

Time to cowboy up and face facts. He stood, scooted their chairs in, gathered the files, held the door for her and smiled like a gentleman.

The entire time Emma stomped over his heart on her way to the dorms.

* * *

Emma slapped her alarm clock as it buzzed, and then curled into a stretch, wishing she could crash for another eight hours. She'd lost a lot of sleep over the years because of Max Ringgold, and last night was no exception. His words kept replaying in her head, a record stuck on repeat with an incessant message.

Max still wanted her.

The fact brought more nightmares than dreams, and she fell asleep too close to dawn.

Suddenly, she sat up in bed, fully awake. Today was Tonya's testing period. Would she pass?

Tonya's bed was empty, the covers pulled up and her pillow fluffed. Emma frowned. A quick glance confirmed Katie and Stacy were still asleep, sprawled haphazardly across their sheets as only teens could do. Where was Tonya?

Grabbing her slippers in one hand and her toiletry case in the other, she padded toward the entryway for the bathrooms, heart thumping with unease. If Tonya was still sick, she wouldn't be up and about so early.

But what if they were on to her, and she'd panicked? Done something really crazy, like run away?

Sort of ridiculous to think a teenager would make her bed before attempting jailbreak, but it was just as ridiculous for someone as beautiful as Tonya to think she needed to starve herself to look attractive. Teenagers sometimes did crazy things to feel loved and accepted. Emma was a poster child for that particular motto.

She ducked back as the dormitory door swung open, nearly clipping her slipper-clad toes. "Oh, sorry." Tonya grimaced at the near miss, but the vibrancy in her complexion and the simple fact that she was there, dressed in a purple robe with her hair freshly braided, lifted Emma's spirits.

She fought the urge to hug her. "You're looking better." Understatement of the year. Compared to her pallor yesterday after the barn incident, Tonya looked runwayworthy once again.

"Feeling better." Tonya smiled, and it seemed sincere enough. Either she'd taken some acting classes overnight, or whatever had plagued her had passed. Maybe it'd been nothing more than low blood sugar, after all.

She just really hoped it hadn't been lies. Max didn't do well with those. Ironically.

"Ready for breakfast?" Emma lowered her voice so not to wake the other girls, though they'd be getting up in about ten or fifteen minutes anyway. "I think Mama Jeanie said something yesterday about pancakes."

A brief shadow flickered across Tonya's expression before the grin returned. "Sounds great."

Did it? She made a mental note to watch Tonya's eating habits closely.

"I'm glad you're on the mend, but if you feel off today at all, let me know." She tried to mimic the firm tone Max used that worked so easily on the teens. "We want you to be okay." She tried to hold Tonya's gaze, show her compassion, but the younger girl dodged it, shaking off further inquiry.

"I'm fine. I promise." She lifted one slim shoulder in a shrug and fiddled with the satiny ties of her robe.

Max's famous line ran through her mind in protest—*no lying at Camp Hope*—but she swallowed the words. The girls heard that often enough. They needed to trust Emma, not take her as a nag. They already had moms—well, most of them. They needed a teammate, someone they could trust while they grew and healed.

But healing never began without first acknowledging the wound.

Her thoughts turned back to Max as Tonya slipped past and began rummaging through her dresser. Emma thought she'd healed from their fling no, it was more than that. Labeling it as such was clearly a defense mechanism she'd concocted years ago. She had to start being honest with herself, just like Max had been honest last night.

A heavy sense of realization settled in her stomach, as hard and unforgiving as a boulder. But she couldn't avoid it any longer. This particular truth didn't seem able to set her free, but rather, it confined her in the same chains she'd struggled against for years. She still needed him, too.

Chapter Twelve

Cody Shaver might not have his mom's eyes, but he'd definitely inherited her uncanny ability to clam up at the slightest hint of a breached wall.

Max shifted in his office chair, ignoring the squeak of the fake leather and trying not to show the frustration building within his chest. They'd been making such progress in their One4One -two-plus weeks into the program now, and he'd gotten through to Cody about his behavior. He'd also been able to praise the kid for several well-done chores and even secured a promise to

apologize to Jarvis for the fighting incident.

Then he'd asked Cody about his dad, and the boy's jaw clamped tighter than Nugget with Brady's favorite cowboy hat.

"So your father ... "

Face pale against his black T-shirt, Cody shook his head, a dull ache in his eyes. "I already told you. I don't know who he is."

That was so not like Emma. A blank name on Cody's paperwork under father? How could she not know? No, Emma knew, and didn't want to say. Why?

Unless... A wild thought crossed his mind, so wild he felt ridiculous even

considering it. But the timing... He turned Cody's file to check the kid's birthday and started a desperate backward count down in his head.

Cody slumped in his seat. "All I know is he was some jerk who left my mom when she was pregnant and never came back."

His eyes lingered on the numbers before him, and his heart swam in an odd mixture of disappointment and amusement, all at the same time. The timing was impossible, by almost a year. Who was he kidding? Emma hadn't thought twice about him after she left. But this wasn't about him. No, this was about a boy who had been abandoned by his own father before he could even meet him and clearly carried those wounds around on his shoulders.

And Emma—he hurt for her. Even though she'd clearly gotten involved with someone quickly after she left Max, no one deserved what she'd been through. What she and Cody had been through together.

Max drew in a deep breath, determined to put Emma aside for the moment and talk about Cody's issues alone. "Let's talk about your dad for a minute. How knowing that he never came back makes you feel."

A warning flashed in Cody's eyes, indicating a hot button, and Max

hesitated. He didn't want to start a fight or war of the wills, but he had to reach through the shield Cody still held and get to the source of the boy's hurt. Once there, Max could help him figure out how to process the behaviors Cody felt and decide if he needed to be referred to a professional. More than half of the teens that left Camp Hope received a referral, which made Max sick inside. The teens' parents clearly cared enough to bring them to the facility, but they never realized how much of a part of the overall problem they often were themselves.

Workaholism. Alcoholism. Perfectionism. Transferring fears of guilt, rejection and failure onto their kids. Without the right coping skills, the teens ran to whatever distractions or pleasures they could get to the quickest. It was sad.

And it made Max wonder if he'd be better off never bringing his own children into the world someday. Brady teased him about finding the right woman already so their kids could play together one day, but he didn't know. His own father had screwed him up—and it was solely by the grace of God that Max had escaped the destructive cycle. He had no guarantees he would be able to keep it up.

"I don't feel anything. I'm fine." Cody crossed his arms.

"I understand this isn't a fun topic." Max shifted forward in his chair, having chosen to sit beside Cody rather than let the desk separate them. "But it's probably more important than you realize. If you can just tell me a little about how—"

"No!" Cody stood up, skinny chest heaving, cheeks red and eyes glassy. Clearly, he was fighting a losing battle with tears. "I don't have to, and I don't want to."

Time to retreat. But they wouldn't end the session in such a negative place. Max gestured for Cody to sit back down. He obeyed, grudgingly, his eyes as wary as a doe's in November, and fixed his gaze somewhere near the potted plant behind Max's chair.

Fortress closed. But he'd dealt with worse. There was always a drawbridge if you looked hard enough. "There's one more thing we need to talk about today, then you can go on to your chores." He pressed on, pretending not to watch as Cody slowly regained control of his emotions and unclenched his jaw. "How are you doing with your mom being here on campus?"

"I hardly ever see her. So it's fine." He rolled his eyes. "Wish she'd avoid me this much at home."

Ouch. That would have cut right through Emma's jean jacket and straight into her heart. Max struggled to hide his surprise at the boy's choice of words. "You feel smothered at home?" Well, didn't every teen?

"I guess. I mean, she's just always on me, wanting to know what I'm doing and where I'm going and who I'm with."

He hid a smile. That just meant she was doing her job as a mom—and doing it well. "Don't you think that maybe some of your past choices have given her a reason to ask a lot of questions?" He flushed red. "Yeah."

"So give her some slack, okay? Here's a secret about parents." He leaned forward as if he were about to reveal the mother lode of teenaged treasure. Cody pretended indifference, but his eyes lit with interest.

"The more truth you tell them, the more they back off." He knew that was the case more often than not, and he could easily see how Emma's personality fed into that. If Emma could trust Cody again, she'd be more comfortable giving him some space. And teen boys needed a degree of space—he could remember the hormones and the struggle that came with being thirteen. It was a balancing act, and Emma and Cody were about to topple off the wire if something didn't change.

"You think so?" Cody squinted with uncertainty.

"It's a fact. You need to show your mom she can trust you. And she can't trust you until you make good decisions in front of her. Be responsible, that sort of thing."

"Like, doing my chores the first time she harps on me?"

Max rubbed his jaw, briefly hiding the smile he couldn't contain. There were moments like this every so often that popped up and reminded him that Cody was only thirteen—his youngest camper, and in so many ways, still a child. It brought comfort-that maybe Cody wasn't too far gone after all-yet also, unease. Kids in Cody's position didn't need to be naive or gullible about

themselves, either.

"Yes, like that. And also, like, not sneaking out of the house to vandalize your school." He hardened his pointed stare, and Cody ducked his head.

Mission accomplished. He'd gotten through. Now to move forward.

"You're doing really well here." He waited until Cody glanced up at him, and smiled, willing the boy to relax and not shut down again. "I'm proud of your accomplishments."

The straight line of his shoulders sagged slightly, and his eyebrows perked. "So I'm going to pass?"

"That's up to you." Max shrugged, the casual move a contradiction to the urgency in his gut. He still wasn't certain why Cody passing the program mattered so much to him personally. He cared about all his campers, and it ate at him the few times he'd had to send teenagers home early for consistently destructive behavior. He couldn't save them all, and he knew that.

But he really wanted to save Cody.

It had to be his ties to Emma, which hopefully Cody was still unaware of. It'd be hard for him to trust Max if he felt Max was more on his mom's side than his own.

Which was true in some ways—but not necessarily in others. He knew no parent was perfect, but until he got the whole story, it was hard to determine where the blame really lay. Each teen was ultimately responsible for his own actions, but if it were evident they'd had a disadvantage from birth, Max tried to address it with the parents and even the courts, if needed.

Cody had to pass. For his own sake, and for Emma's. Max would do all he could to help him, but he wouldn't cut corners or let the boy off without earning it. Enabling would only land Cody in jail one day. "You'll pass if you keep doing the hard work."

Cody plucked at the intentional hole in the knee of his jeans. "I've almost nailed the rope swing." His voice lifted with a thin layer of optimism, though Max could sense the trepidation still under the surface.

"You'll get it." He nodded with confidence, wishing he could follow Cody around and verbally build the boy up even after he left camp. He thrived under compliments. Did Emma realize? He made a mental note to tell her. "But I don't mean just physical hard work."

Cody sighed hard enough to rustle the stack of papers on Max's desk. "I know."

"Next One4One." His tone didn't elicit an argument, and thankfully, Cody didn't try. He stood, inviting Cody to do the same, and walked him to the office door. "You're doing good, man. You know that, right?" He stopped just outside the door, eyes focused somewhere near his boots. "I guess."

Under-confidence was just as bad, if not worse, than overconfidence. It seemed lately it was a lot easier to knock down than build up. "Just do me a favor. Don't stop the process." He wanted to jump inside Cody and fill whatever void lingered. From his father. From his lack of connection with his mom. From God. The teen years were scary enough in the most ideal of conditions-and Cody's situation was far from ideal

As was Emma's.

When Cody finally lifted his head and

nodded, blond hair falling over his eyes in a cowlick he'd been fighting since his first day on the ranch, Max drew a sharp intake of breath. For a minute, he'd seen something so familiar in Cody's expression, it'd been like looking in a mirror.

Must be his own past saying hi to Cody's present. How many times had Max felt the exact same way Cody looked? Confused. Lost. Trapped in his own skin.

More determined to help the boy than ever, Max shut the door behind him with a solid thump and briefly rested his forehead against it. He still needed to find out what made Cody tick.

Which meant one thing.

He needed to talk to Emma.

* * *

Emma didn't know which had her more on edge—the constant awareness of everything Tonya did or didn't put in her mouth, or the fact that Stacy stood armed and ready ten paces to her left with a bow and arrow.

Rubber tipped, but still. Good thing she didn't have an apple on her head.

Emma pulled the sleeves of her hoodie down farther over her hands to warm them as Luke and one of the parttime counselors jogged back and forth between campers, demonstrating the proper technique of drawing back the arrow on the bow. The goal was to let it fly toward the stacked hay bales so many yards downwind. It looked impossibly far to her.

"What's the point of this whole archery thing?" Emma snagged Max's shirtsleeve as he strolled past, his face relaxed and bronze in the sunshine streaming across the open field. The afternoon breeze rustled the hair under his cowboy hat, and he glanced down at her hand on his arm before she abruptly removed it. Definitely had to remember her no-touching rule, or she'd permanently walk around feeling as if she'd been zapped in the hand.

"It's a group competition. I'm teaching them the value of teamwork and

encouragement." His grin widened. "Plus, it's fun."

Teamwork and encouragement. Right. Emma just hoped it wouldn't teach a new vehicle for violence. They weren't exactly in the presence of a bunch of Maid Marians.

"Trust me." Max squeezed her shoulder before moving past her. "You'll see." He winked, and she was left torn between focusing on the butterflies stirred by his touch and snorting over his request to trust him.

Either inevitably proved useless, so she focused on her girls instead.

Beside her, Katie bounced excitedly, waiting for her turn, while Tonya stood

coolly with arms crossed, no doubt concerned that archery wouldn't go much better for her than the obstacle course. Those two were on Luke's team, while Jarvis, Stacy and Cody had been placed on the other male counselor's team.

"Archers ready!" Max clapped his hands. "Luke, you're up. You won the toss."

Luke's team slapped high fives, while he quickly bent and went over a few reminders to Katie. "You're up, Red."

She blushed at the nickname but seemed to enjoy the cheers from her group. Emma slowly relaxed. Apparently the team idea was a stroke of genius, because even those that had mocked the competition previously were suddenly on board, shouting encouragement to Katie.

Her first shot went high, over the bales, but her second nailed just to the right of the target's bull's-eye. She struck a sassy pose before passing the bow to the boy in line behind her.

From Max's team, Jarvis drew back the arrow and landed two solid hits to the target, though not as close as Katie's near bull's-eye. He handed their team's bow off to Cody and sneered. "Good luck. You'll need it."

Emma took a step forward before catching herself, then looked to see if Max had caught the exchange. If he had, he wasn't letting on. Frustration stirred, but she kept her feet firmly in place despite the urge to march over to Cody's side and intervene.

Then a cold wave of suspicion doused her anger. Was this the kind of thing Cody dealt with at school every day? If he were the subject of constant teasing and tormenting due to his size and the perspective of being an easy target, no wonder he had so much pent-up aggression. No wonder he kept trying to prove himself to his peers, earn acceptance the wrong way.

She stared at her son as if she'd never seen him before.

Maybe she hadn't.

Cody waited for the next guy on

Luke's team to go, then warily drew back his arrow, his arm visibly shaking even from her vantage point down the line. He sucked in his breath, and his first shot went over the target by a foot, disappearing into the golden field beyond.

He scowled, and Emma bunched the cuffs of her hoodie in her hands. Max used to have that same expression when pushed past his emotional limit. It was the same scowl she'd seen when his friend got sick in the backseat of his truck the day after he'd vacuumed it out for their first date. And the same scowl he wore when he saw Emma talking to a guy from her church youth group at the

grocery store about a week later.

Did he recognize the expression at all? Would anyone else notice the similarities? Their matching cowlicks, identical eyes...

Max broke apart from the team and approached Cody, and her heart squeezed. He bent slightly to talk to him privately, clearly instructing him on how to better grasp the bow. He demonstrated, and Cody mimicked the motion with concentration.

The could-have-beens and shouldhave-beens paraded through her mind in sickeningly slow motion. Max and Cody batting a whiffle ball. Max and Cody teetering on a two-wheel bike without training wheels. Max and Cody in grease-stained jeans, bent over the hood of his truck.

He'd missed all those opportunities to be a dad. And Cody had missed all those opportunities to experience a father.

Emma tore her gaze away from them as Max jogged aside, allowing Cody space to prepare for his next shot. Cody raised the bow with a much steadier arm and frowned downwind as he focused on the target. Jarvis whispered something and nudged the guy next to him, and Emma chalked it up to the Lord's grace in Jarvis's favor that she didn't catch what it was.

Cody continued to hold his position, the lines of his face more determined than she'd ever seen. Her heart stammered, and she desperately wanted to pray. For him to hit the target. For him to find what he was so desperately seeking. For him to get through this entire experience in one piece.

For him and Max both to forgive her once they knew the truth.

She held her breath as Cody's amateur grip released. Her hopes soared along with the arrow as it shot straight and true in a steady arch toward the bull's-eye.

And landed just short of the target.

Chapter Thirteen

"You are allowed to take breaks, you know." Max put down his pen and studied her over the rim of his reading glasses, the likes of which Emma still couldn't get used to. The small black frames alluded more to college professor than cowboy, but the contradiction only added to Max's appeal. He made any look seem attractive

Unfortunately, she was supposed to be concentrating on brainstorming new group projects with him—not admiring the way his hair curled slightly at his neck or the way his button-down work shirt strained slightly at the buttons, as if his broad chest couldn't be fully contained.

Definitely not.

"I'm on a break now." She straightened from her spot on the tan suede sofa, resisting the urge to stretch despite the kink in her neck. They'd agreed—reluctantly on her part—to work together in the living area of the main house while the kids enjoyed their recreation time. They were nearby if the other counselors needed them but were still situated privately enough to discuss upcoming events without overeager young ears.

And without being too private.

She fought a blush, hoping he couldn't read her thoughts as easily as he used to. "Faith is with the girls."

"I know where she is." Max grinned, and she quickly looked back at her notebook, which sadly held very few usable ideas. She just couldn't concentrate with Max so painfully close. Not after finally admitting to herself what his proximity did to her, even this many years later. But after all they'd experienced and shared together, how could she be immune?

If she could concoct an ex-boyfriend antidote, she'd be a billionaire.

"I just meant you're still working right now, helping me out like this, even if it's not directly with the kids. Whenever Faith relieves you, it's totally fine for you to go have some alone time, or visit your mom, or whatever you want." Max leaned forward from his position in the recliner across from her and reached for his canned soda on the end table. "I know this job can be exhausting. I just don't want you to feel trapped." He winced. "Especially since you're not getting paid."

Good thing she wasn't, or she'd have to refund every penny at the rate she was going. Maybe she'd covered some ground with Tonya originally, but she still hadn't been able to confirm anything one way or another, despite days of surveillance. As for her progress with Stacy, well, Emma didn't know if anyone was capable of breaking down that stony exterior. At least she had Katie, who continued to be a bright spot in the camp.

"I'm not trapped." The words felt like a lie leaving her mouth, and she drummed her pen against the notepad in her lap. She was, in so many ways. But that wasn't really Max's fault. "I mean, I know I *can* leave. I just don't—" She caught herself before admitting she didn't want to visit her mom. She cleared her throat. "I prefer to stay."

The momentary smolder in Max's eyes hinted at his seconding that particular choice, and she blinked quickly to bat it away. Glimpses of the old Max, the one she fell for so many years ago, kept sporadically popping to the surface, catching her heart unaware. Just when she felt her guard was firmly in place, he'd make an inside joke from back in the day or shoot her that wink that had once left her breathless, and just like that, her armor chinked. "Besides, you needed my help with this."

Unless it was just an excuse to spend more time with her. She wouldn't put it past him—the old Max had been incredibly crafty and manipulative when he wanted to be. Had that personality trait gone by the wayside when he'd cleaned himself up? How much personality went away when one made such dramatic life changes, anyway? Or did God just tweak it to be used for good instead of bad?

Good questions. Too bad God didn't seem prone to give her direct answers anymore. She'd severed that connection with Him years ago, when she chose sin over what was right. When she succumbed to the same temptations she once judged in her peers.

When she was left to pay for the consequences all by herself.

Loud laughter suddenly rang out from the rec room down the hall, and warmth spread across Max's expression. "That's always nice to hear."

"Yeah. Unless they're laughing at

someone." Her stomach clenched, remembering the way Jarvis had teased Cody during the archery competition the afternoon before. It still riled her inside, and worst of all, made her feel helpless.

She could handle fear. Rejection. Abandonment. Anger. Insecurity. Bring it on.

But helplessness? Her least favorite. She wanted to *act*. Fix. Be. Do. And at Camp Hope, she might as well be watching from behind a two-way mirror. All visual, zero interaction.

Helpless.

Again.

Max frowned as he set his soda can back on the table. "They don't pick on Cody 24/7, despite how it might look to you."

"Jarvis has pulled some kind of stunt with him every time we're in the group projects." Emma wanted to draw a big line through the list of ideas she'd come up with on her page. If the group projects were what made the camp harder for her son, she'd rather just eliminate the whole thing.

"He's acting out for the girls. It happens like that at every camp."

Emma frowned. Max almost looked more amused than concerned. And there was nothing funny about it. "I don't think it's that simple. Something tells me Jarvis is more hard-core than that." "Jarvis will realize it's a wasted effort soon enough, trust me."

He wasn't listening. "Sure. And meanwhile, my son is sacrificed."

Max arched an eyebrow at her. "Not fair."

He was right. It wasn't. She drew a deep breath and tightened her grip on her pen. She was lashing out because she had no control. Over Cody—or even her own heart. She might have seen warning signs in the past over guys like Jarvis, but Max probably had, too. And he was in charge of this one, not her.

"You're right." She glanced down at her notes, the words swimming as her vision blurred. "So, what about incorporating art into the kids' schedule?" She fought to keep her tone level and free of emotion. "For expression."

Max's mouth opened and shut twice, as if debating whether or not to push their previous topic, but he finally nodded. "Sounds good. Some of the teens would probably think it a chore, but I bet several would enjoy it. Could be helpful."

"And interesting, to see what they'd paint if they had complete freedom."

"Good idea." His eyes lit at the possibilities. "Maybe it'll open some doors into their subconscious for us." Before she could argue, he got up and joined her on the sofa, forcing her to scoot sideways several inches to avoid being sat on. "I'll set that up for tomorrow. It'll be a good Saturday project." He looked down at her notes, tilting his head sideways to read. "What else you got there?"

As much as it meant to her that he valued her opinion, she almost covered her list with her hand from embarrassment. At least she had scratched out where she'd accidentally doodled his name earlier. "Nothing much."

"Trust exercises?" Max pointed to an entry halfway down her sheet, under where she had drawn a line through *relay races*. "What do you mean by that?"

"You know, all the cliché, old-

fashioned stuff they used to make us do at church youth camp."

He stilled, and she hesitated, not sure if she'd offended or just brought up a bad memory. She'd forgotten—Max hadn't gone to youth camps. He didn't grow up in the church with her—or any church, for that matter. "I don't know, actually."

She sidestepped the conversational pothole she'd created and rushed forward. "Where you pair off into teams of two and take turns leading each other verbally through an obstacle course. Or falling backward on a short stool or chair to be caught by your partner." She'd always hated that one. Guess she had trust issues from way back.

He nodded, but his guarded gaze kept her from determining if he'd let go of whatever negative emotion had momentarily stirred. "I like that. Let's add that to the schedule, too." He met her eyes, and slowly the wall evaporated into a sincere smile. "You're good at this."

"I have a degree in this." She shrugged.

"No, it's a gift. Really." He reached over and brushed her hair off her shoulder. Her body stiffened on instinct, and she tried to relax to keep from letting him know how much it affected her. "You're a natural."

Then why was Cody still immune?

Why was Tonya shutting her out from her problems? Why did Stacy attempt to shoot daggers with her eyes? She should say "thank you" to be polite, but she wouldn't mean it. Couldn't sincerely accept the compliment. So she stayed silent, wondering what she'd do if Max touched her again.

Wondering what she'd do if he didn't.

The heater kicked on, and the gentle whirring noise blended with the sound of the kids interacting down the hall. She edged a few more inches away, under the pretense of closing up her notes. "Let me know if you need help getting the art supplies. I could run into town tonight or in the morning for the paint and brushes. We'll need canvases, too, and easels, unless you just want to—"

"What happened with Cody's father?"

Her stomach constricted like she'd been punched. She sucked in air, but it didn't refresh. Rather, it stuck in her nose, her throat, choked her. She coughed, lungs aching. Or maybe that was her heart.

Max held up both hands. "I know that was left field. But I've been wondering for a while now, and well...I didn't know if that was a sore subject or not. I'm sorry."

He didn't sound very sorry. She inhaled again, and this time, the oxygen revived. Her blood pulsed through her veins, and she twisted to face Max on the couch, pulling one of her legs up between them. If she could have this conversation from across the room without raising more suspicion, she'd try it.

That is, if her dramatic reaction hadn't already given her away.

"Sore subject?" She echoed, unable to say more. If he only knew. But no, he couldn't know, because of the typo. She pulled in her lower lip. Could Max hear her runaway heartbeat? How could she lie to him flat out? Maybe she'd been doing that for years, but doing so from a distance felt a whole lot different. Maybe she hadn't been responsible for that typo, but she hadn't corrected it.

either. "It's not a great one."

"I've been trying to talk to Cody about it." Max shrugged, looking pained. Maybe the conversation was more awkward for him than she thought. Especially if Max's feelings for her were as strong as Rachel had let on. Did he assume she'd married, or kept up her less than pure ways as she'd had with him? But he'd been her only.

"He's pretty shut down," Max continued, rubbing at a callous on his palm. "I've hit a wall, and I thought any information you could share would help."

She fought back a sarcastic snort and turned it into a cough. Oh, the irony. "There's not much to say." Much she could say, was more like it.

"So I take it Cody has never met his dad?"

He was twisting the knife and didn't have a clue. She pressed her hand to her chest, the pressure of his words as tangible as a weapon. How could she answer without lying?

He must have taken her silence for a confirmation. "Is that your choice?" Max frowned, clearly confused. "Or the father's?"

Tears sprung, and she fought to keep them below the surface. "All of those, I guess." Not true, though. The real father had had zero choice in the matter, but the choices he *did* make had left Emma with none. She clenched her hand into a fist. Such a complicated, confusing cycle.

"I don't know your situation. But I know a boy's relationship with his dad is crucial, and that void—"

"No!" Emma leaped off the couch, unable to sit that close another second with her secret weighing so heavily. She stared down at Max's stricken expression, feeling her heart crumble into dust at her feet and helpless to stop it. "Just drop it, okay?"

His features morphed into a careful, practiced mask. One she knew from experience—she donned the same one when dealing with irate clients in her office. "Look, if it's a bad situation, I understand. But anything you can tell me about this guy-"

"There's nothing you need to know about him." She had to stop this conversation now. What if she accidentally said "you" instead of "him"? The pressure building inside her head threatened to explode. She jabbed her fingers into her temples and briefly closed her eyes. "Just trust me on this. It's for Cody's own good." Not that he had any more reason to trust her than she did him.

Max rose and stood before her, reaching for her hands. She jerked them away, avoiding the hurt in his eyes. "Emma. Talk to me."

No. If she said anything else, she'd

say too much. Especially with the tenderness in his voice, the compassion in his gaze. The sincerity in his touch. Time to leave.

"I'll be back in a bit." She grabbed her notebook from the couch, stuck the pen behind her ear and marched to the kitchen door before she—or he—could change her mind. "I'm taking that break you mentioned."

Visiting her mom had never seemed so appealing.

* * *

Max stared out the window into the afternoon sun as Emma bolted to her car, spraying gravel in an exit worthy of a

Golden Globe nod. How did they go from having a comfortably quiet time together, to a really productive talk about the campers, to Emma running out nearly in tears from the room? From the entire ranch, for that matter?

Cody's father must have hurt her worse than he'd imagined.

He probably looked like a real winner, too, dredging it all up. Still, he needed to know the basics, for Cody's sake.

And maybe a little for his own sake.

Max slapped his notebook closed and began gathering the pens and highlighters they'd used. Emma had chosen pink, of course. She'd always loved pink. The one time he'd brought her flowersokay, they'd been stolen from a neighbor's rosebush, and still had the thorns, but it still counted—he'd made sure to find pink ones. And not that pale, flimsy pink, either, that seemed like it'd fade before it could be appreciated. Emma needed bright pink. A statement color.

The kind that stained and lingered.

He headed for his office to put away their notes and almost ran into Mama Jeanie, who was coming out of the kitchen, drying her hands on a dish towel.

"Land sakes, boy! You trying to give an old woman a heart attack?" She planted both fists on her apron-clad hips and grinned to take the sting out. "Then who would cook supper for all those kids of yours?"

"The pizza joint in town." He grinned back, grateful for the break from the heaviness that'd taken over the minute he'd popped the father question to Emma. He should have known better. But if he didn't ask, how could he find out? It was hardly something to look up on Google.

Mama Jeanie's wrinkled but wise face slowly drifted into a frown. "I saw that new counselor, Miss Emma, tearing out of here like a rabbit from a fox." Her dark brows wrinkled deeper as she peered up at him with expectation. "What did the fox say?"

If anyone else had insinuated such a thing, he'd have been offended, and probably smarted off. But not to Mama Jeanie. Never to Mama Jeanie. He licked his lips, then shrugged. "Was something personal, apparently." To put it mildly. He wondered if she saw through his attraction to Emma. The woman missed nothing. At least she stuck to the kitchen, because if she ever found that picture he'd kept of Emma and him all these years...

"If it was personal, then why were you nosing around in it?" She inched toward him, and despite the fact that she had to be almost six inches shorter, Max felt like backing up a step. He resisted the urge and placed a friendly hand on Mama Jeanie's shoulder. "I'm just doing my job." He tried to step around her to his office, but she sidestepped with the spryness of someone half her age.

"I do more around this camp than just cook, you know." She crossed her arms, the dish towel dangling from two bony but capable fingers. "I observe. I listen. And I hear."

"You just said that."

"Uh-huh." She waved her finger at him and grinned, her teeth stark white against her brown complexion. "Hearing and listening are not the same." She leaned closer, and this time, he backed up. "You should try more of the latter." Well that was cryptic.

"Anyway." She waved the towel like a white flag. "Turkey and dressing all right for the Thanksgiving dinner?"

He blinked in an effort to keep up, feeling as winded as if he'd just run a 10k. "Thanksgiving dinner?"

"Remember? Before this session started, you said it'd be nice to have a Thanksgiving feast the last week of camp. Before the real holiday began."

Oh, yeah, he had said that—especially considering several of these kids came from home situations where they might not have a traditional meal. He nodded, grateful for the subject change. "Yes, that sounds perfect. With all the usual trimmings. If we need more for the grocery budget, let me know. I'll call the church."

Broken Bend Church of Grace was their biggest supporter, along with several other wealthier families in the county. He'd get whatever donations were needed—when it came to the campers, he learned a long time ago to choke off any lingering traces of his selfpride. The kids were worth it.

"I've cooked on a shoestring budget for years, my boy. I'm not afraid of the challenge now." She snapped the towel good-naturedly at him before heading back to her kitchen haven.

Max took the opportunity to dart

inside his office and shut the door. He dumped the office supplies he'd been holding onto his desk and slumped against the corner of it. The wood dug into the leg of his jeans, but he didn't move. Mama Jeanie's words kept playing in his head, a strange echo to Emma's reaction to his question.

It all meant something. But what? What wasn't he hearing?

Emma's voice sounded next, as clear and vivid in his memories as the night he first told her he loved her. That had led to a more physical expression, but the words themselves—for the first time in his life—hadn't been spoken for that reason. No, he'd meant them.

And hadn't stopped meaning them yet.

There's nothing you need to know about him. It's for Cody's own good.

The panic behind her short sentences hinted at more to the story. Did that mean even Emma didn't know who Cody's father was? That thought left a bitter taste in his mouth. No way. Not Emma. Or was she a victim? But if she'd been attacked, why the secrecy?

Nothing made sense.

God, some wisdom. Discernment. Something, please. He bowed his head and prayed, but the words felt as if they didn't filter past the roof. And then he was struck with the certainty that it didn't matter. Whatever Emma had gone through or however she had lived in the years since they'd parted ways, it didn't really matter.

It didn't change his past or current feelings for her one iota. After all, whose past was squeaky clean? His was dirty enough to make even an infomercial cleaner give up. At least God hadn't given up on him. That was enough.

And that was why he needed to pay it forward. Whatever it took, he would make sure Emma knew that she was still worthwhile. A treasure. Priceless. To him, and to God.

And even to her son.

Chapter Fourteen

Her mom knelt in the small garden to the left of the house, digging in the dirt with the same stained, floral-print gloves she'd worn when Emma was a child. Those gloves, with the tiny rosebuds once red and now faded pink, had been a fixture in the house for as long as Emma could remember. Lying on the counter by the sink where she'd washed her hands after gardening. Lying on the floor by her Bible in the living room, where she'd shucked them before having her evening quiet time. Lying on the porch swing where she'd taken her

last tea break.

Emma watched her work for a moment, allowing the warmth of the sun on her shoulders to ease the chill of her conversation with Max. She'd almost bought her mother a new pair of gloves during her last Christmas at home, back before she left for college. Back before her father died. Back before she'd gotten involved with Max and changed her entire course of life.

Maybe familiar wasn't always so bad, after all.

She shoved her keys in her pocket and crossed the front yard to stand behind her mother.

"Emma?" Mom turned with a slight smile—or was it a grimace—and lifted one hand to shade her eyes from the lateafternoon sun. "What are you doing here?"

The question was innocent enough, as was the tone accompanying it, but it still dug in like a burr. She fought off a wave of frustration. Couldn't she just be visiting her mother while in town? Why did she need an explanation? She drew a deep breath, trying to convince herself it wasn't that bad, that her defenses were just up because of Max's probing.

But it felt like more than that. Her mom had never treated her the same way after she'd gotten pregnant.

Or maybe she'd never treated her mom the same way after.

"Just taking a break." She folded her arms against her chest, then recognized the vibe the body language gave and forced herself to lower her hands to her sides. "Max said I could."

No idea why she added that last part. As if she needed Max Ringgold's permission for anything. He'd been the reason she'd wound up where she was —and Cody, too. She hadn't asked Max for permission or help thirteen years ago, and the thought of starting now made the indignant, self-sufficient woman inside her cringe in her highheeled career shoes.

And made the counselor inside her realize just how many issues she still

had with various factors of Broken Bend.

Her mom rocked back, eyes narrowed, except this time it wasn't because of the sunshine. Guess Emma's intuition and knack for probing into others lives came from somewhere honest. "Let's go have tea."

"No, Mom. You're gardening." She wasn't about to interrupt her mother's routine, or she'd never hear the end of it —whether from her family or herself. Besides, despite Mom's strong belief, tea *didn't* cure everything. She dropped to her knees in the grass instead and gestured toward the rows of seeds. "Carry on."

Mom adjusted one of her gloves,

hesitated with another sharp glance and then obeyed, continuing to pluck weeds from the stubborn patch of earth surrounding her meticulous lines of soon-to-be-vegetables.

Emma tentatively reached for another section of weeds, in spite of her lack of gloves, and tore the skinny green intruders from the earth. She hated to sit and do nothing, and maybe if she worked, they wouldn't talk as much. No such luck.

"How's Cody?"

Wasn't that the question of the hour? She schooled her expression into an indifferent mask, not willing to let her mom know just how much was riding on the next couple weeks. "He's as good as he can be. Making progress."

Mom nodded as she shifted over to the next row, the pile of discarded weeds beside her growing taller as she worked. "And the girls you're counseling?"

Why was everyone shooting questions from the hip today? "Doing okay." She ripped out another, surprised at the level of stress relief the simple action brought. She might not be able to make a difference where it counted, but she could make a difference to this garden. In both appearance and substance.

"So everyone is okay."

Her mom's tone hinted at her disbelief, and Emma couldn't blame her.

But that didn't mean she wanted to open the floodgates of confession, either. Because once the words—and the tears

"It's a good thing you're there, then."

Emma sat back and stretched her shoulders, bracing herself for something else hard to hear. "Why's that?"

Her mother continued working as if the tension between them didn't exist. And for her, maybe it didn't. She'd always leaned toward being oblivious. "You have a gift for making 'okay' turn out better than okay."

A compliment. From her mother. And it wasn't even Christmas.

Emma stared at the tiny rows of seeds,

eagerly waiting to sprout. They had no idea the danger they'd been in from the weeds, no idea the death they'd be sure to experience had the gardener not come and tended them.

Just like Cody had yet to fully grasp the ramifications of his actions. Like Max had no idea the bomb she would eventually drop on his carefully reformed world.

Oblivious. Like she'd been before trading her innocence for a short-lived ride with rebellion. And all for the sake of what? Proving a point? Testing her limits? Escaping the supersticky label of "Good Girl"? All she'd done is trade it for another label she couldn't tear off. Tears pricked her eyes, and her chest tightened. The floral print on her mom's gloves blurred into a pastel jumble. Suddenly, she wasn't a grown woman anymore with a successful practice in a big city. She was eighteen again, and scared, and alone—and overcome with feelings she couldn't identify or ignore.

Before she could stop herself, she reached out and grabbed her mother's arm.

Mom immediately stopped and turned, covering Emma's bare hand with her dirty gloved one, and raised her eyebrows without speaking. The acceptance in her gaze was nearly Emma's undoing, and she blurted out the truth for the first time in thirteen years.

"Max is Cody's father."

* * *

Max wasn't sure if the art expression project Emma created had been pure genius or pure torture.

He squinted at the rows of easels before him, set up in the early-morning sunshine near the barn. They didn't have an indoor spot in the camp big enough to house all the campers and easels at one time that wouldn't suffer from paint splatters, so Luke and Tim spread some tarp on the grass, lined up folding chairs and let them go.

Max paced absently behind the rows of folding chairs, hanging back to give

the teens room to create while keeping an eye out for Emma. He hadn't seen her return to Camp Hope yesterday, though he'd kept a subtle watch for her. She'd shown up at dinner as expected last night, though, relieving Faith to go home to her family. But after dinner, she'd taken the girls on to their next activity without giving him more than a passing nod. Breakfast had gone pretty much the same way.

He didn't know exactly how to smooth things over between them, but ignoring it didn't seem the best way to go. He wasn't sure which was worse her avoiding him, or the awkward tension that hovered when they had to be in the same room. How was he going to meet his new goal if she refused to speak to him? Somehow, he had to show her he was legit. That she could trust him. Maybe she was right not to when they were younger. He hadn't been ready for a heart like hers.

But now...

He wanted the chance to earn it back. To show her that nothing was lost forever. That she and Cody would find their way out of this, with God at their side—and hopefully with him right there, too.

"That's beautiful, Katie."

Emma's sudden voice to his left both warmed him and created shivers on the back of his neck, all at once. Max drew a deep breath to resist rushing to her side and slowly adjusted his cowboy hat so he wouldn't do something stupid like sweep her in his arms.

Emma stood behind Katie's easel, where the perky redhead sat with paintbrush poised, sweatshirt sleeves pushed up to her elbows. She'd painted the barn beside them, complete with rolling golden hills of pasture. A dark blob on the farthest hilltop hinted at a horse. Or maybe a cow.

Max squinted. Maybe a rhino.

"I love the barn. Nice detail."

Katie beamed under Emma's praise, and Max had the sudden urge to earn her compliments, as well. He joined them, hesitantly, as one would approach a startled stallion. "Emma's right. Very nice job." With the exception of the unidentified hilltop creature, but hey. They weren't giving lessons here. They were letting the kids express themselves. Speaking of...he had the perfect excuse to talk to Emma.

Alone.

"Join me?" He touched her elbow, trying to ignore the hurt that radiated when she stiffened in response, and led her several yards away where they could talk quietly without being overheard. "What do you think so far?"

Panic laced her eyes before her gaze settled on the easels. "You mean about the paintings." "What else would I mean—" Max cut himself off. "Emma. Are we going to ignore the elephant here or go ahead and take care of him one bite at a time?"

A tiny smile teased the corners of her lips. Man, she was beautiful. "I think you're mixing metaphors." A spark lit her eyes and ignited his stomach with memories.

"Some things never change." He grinned. "Remember when I meant to say pretty as a picture, and I said pretty as a catcher?" He'd had a few in him at the time, but he clearly remembered the confused expression on Emma's face as they sat on the tailgate of his truck, stargazing. And the embarrassment that had flooded afterward. At least she'd thought his blunder was cute.

Or he'd thought she thought so.

Emma snorted, shoulder bumping him like old times. "You do realize by now that it's *picture*, not *pitcher*?"

"Come on, now. I'm not that hopeless."

Her eyes met his and held for a moment before she directed her attention back to the teens.

Oops. Now what? The sadness in her expression nearly stole his breath.

"What is it?" Did she still believe him that far gone, even after all he'd done in her absence? After all he'd cleaned up and changed and accomplished?

A light breeze brushed strands of hair

over her eyes, blocking his view of her stoic profile. She didn't reach up to brush them back, so he did.

"Just...thinking." She fluttered her hand to wave off the topic, as though it was as easily shooed as a summer bee. At least she didn't dodge his touch this time.

He turned so he faced her, giving her his full attention. She deserved nothing less. "Elephant, remember? Here's a fork."

"That's seriously gross." But the smile was back, and the sadness slightly dissipated. Mission accomplished even if she still kept her profile to him. Then she sobered. "You're not hopeless, Max."

Well, at least there was that. "You do realize the same is true for you?" He wanted to touch her again but knew she'd spook. Not to mention they stood behind ten teenagers all eager for gossip and rumors—including Emma's own son.

"I know."

But did she really? Her lips pressed together in a thin line, and she wrapped her arms around herself, rubbing her forearms with her hands. He started to shrug out of his zip-up hoodie, but she shook her head to stop him. "It wouldn't look right."

"What? Teaching these guys how to act like a gentleman?" But he zipped it

back up at the stubborn glint in her eye. Time to change the subject before he pushed her any farther into a corner. He'd gotten two smiles out of her and broken the iceberg that had risen between them last night. That'd have to be enough for now. "So, what do you think?" He gestured to the easels.

This time she launched right into her opinions, saving them from any more painful banter. "Katie's painting is detailed, like you said, which I feel lends to her personality. She likes things neat, together and orderly. But it's also bright and happy—how she feels right now. She's in a good place."

He nodded, absorbing the picture.

Maybe too good a place. Was anyone that happy at a camp for troubled teens? It wasn't like they were here for s'mores and Monopoly. He still felt as if something was missing from Katie's file, but he couldn't read information that wasn't there. Maybe he was just paranoid.

"What about Stacy's?" The abstract swirls of blues, greens and purples sort of lent to a teenaged version of van Gogh's Starry Night-Max's favorite painting for its cryptic beauty. He hoped Emma picked up a good impression from it, too. He worried about Stacy. Of all his students, she'd been the most blocked in their One4One talks.

"To me, it looks like twilight. And I

think those splotches at the top are supposed to represent stars." She tilted her head to get a better view. "But the important part to realize about hers is the color choice. The blue color family represents peace, relaxation and tranguility. That hints at how she's not nearly as hardened inside as she appears on the outside. There's a wall up, for sure—but the foundation of it doesn't go deep." She hesitated. "Maybe one of us will reach her "

"If anyone can, it's you."

Emma winced at the compliment, as if she didn't fully believe it, but he didn't care. He'd keep sprinkling the truth on her until her confidence grew. He'd seen her with the girls and knew what she had already accomplished with them. She might not see it, but he did. So did God. Nothing was being wasted, however small it might seem on the surface.

Hopefully that same principle would remain true as he pursued her.

He wanted to ask about Cody's painting next but didn't dare. Then Emma's gaze lingered on it, and he knew from her quick intake of breath the diagnosis wasn't as favorable as the others. The painting in front of the boy contained a careful red circle that took up nearly the entire canvas. A thick black slant slashed across the center of the circle diagonally, the universal symbol for *no*.

Max frowned. No...no what?

One glance at Emma's crestfallen expression determined she wasn't sure, either. No to Camp Hope? No to authority? No to rules? Or was it a more positive portrayal, as in, no more fighting? No more crimes? No more misbehaving?

He couldn't be sure. But he didn't need a course in symbolism to conclude that the dripping red and black paint spoke of intense feelings, likely anger. Maybe even hatred. Cody was dealing with something hard-core, and until their next One4One chat, he wouldn't get a chance to find out. He couldn't exactly march over and demand an explanation. The last thing they needed was to judge the kids based on their project. This was supposed to be a safe exercise, a chance for them to express themselves, though he did caution them ahead of time about keeping the paintings PG—no nudity or curse words, or they'd lose recreation time for a week.

"What about Tonya's?" He couldn't see the girl's entire canvas from here, but it had to be more encouraging than Cody's-and right now, the best gift he could give Emma was distraction as well as prompting her to use her training productively. He hated the helpless gleam in her eye and sent up a quick prayer that God would redeem their situation ASAP. Something would give,

soon.

It had to.

Emma straightened her shoulders, and he wanted to applaud the way she gathered herself together, despite the trauma still lingering in her eyes as she focused on Tonya's project. "I'm not sure. I can't tell."

They both eased sideways several paces until they could see around her bent head, still hunched over her painting as she did detail work at the bottom. The top of Tonya's easel was covered in pastel stripes, representing a sunset or sunrise.

"I still can't see the rest. It looks like a self-portrait, maybe? Those look like her black braids." Emma craned her neck as she spoke.

Max did the same. The painting held promise, what he could see of it-much less amateur in style than the others. Tonya was either a natural or had taken classes at some point. The eyes on the figure she was painting appeared nearly alive, while the cheery background hinted at a lighthearted mood that well complemented the young girl in the drawing.

Then Tonya leaned back, paintbrush lowering, and studied the portrait, allowing Max and Emma a full view of a beautiful, African-American girl with braids, vivid eyes...

And a distorted, wide-open jaw that

yawned and swirled off her face.

He shot a startled glance at Emma, whose eyes widened in recognition. When she finally spoke, it was to confirm what Max already knew. "Tonya has a secret."

Chapter Fifteen

Emma never thought she'd ever seek solace in a dusty barn stall, but the repetitious motion of running a currycomb through Remington's mane somehow brought as much relaxation as her last spa trip.

Maybe more.

Remington shifted his weight, bobbing his head slightly and leaning into her smooth stroking. Maybe the extra attention was just what the horse needed, too.

Emma slowed as she worked through a tangle. Tonya's painting from

yesterday weighed heavily on her spirit, almost as much as Cody's did. She whispered to Remington. "Did Tonya tell you her secrets before she fainted?"

Remington's ears flicked forward at her voice, and then he snorted through his nose.

She kept brushing, trying not to dwell on the fact she had just resorted to talking to animals. "I understand. Confidences are confidences."

Sort of like how it seemed evident Stacy knew something about Tonya that she wasn't telling. Did the older girl know Tonya had been faking her illness the other day and was holding it over her? It seemed a valid possibility, but Emma couldn't reconcile with the idea that Tonya would care so strongly about pretending to be sick. It'd be easier to just admit the truth now and take the consequence than cater to Stacy's whims.

Or would it? Emma sure wasn't taking that advice herself.

She pushed the uncomfortable thought aside, finishing the tangle before moving to the next portion of mane, the dark strands wiry between her fingers. The girls were finishing up breakfast, and she'd excused herself to start chores early and have a minute to de-stress before the constant chatter, brooding and occasional whining from her charges began. Even after the optional Bible

study that morning before breakfast, they seemed grumpy, as though they sensed something in the air. Maybe because only half the kids had attended the study.

She felt disgruntled herself. Sitting across from Max and listening to him read the Bible for fifteen minutes left her breakfast lodged in her stomach like a rock, heaping guilt in generous dollops on top.

And her mother...Emma paused, her fingers knotted in Remington's mane. Her garden-side revelation had brought more regret than relief, though it was sort of freeing to know a living soul finally knew her dirty little secret.

Slowly, she unclenched the strands of horse hair and resumed her brushing,

stomach knotting instead. Her mom had taken the news a little better than Emma had suspected. But her words lingered.

Broken Bend's bad boy transitioned into a solid, God-fearing man, Emma. If you'd told me the truth from the beginning, I could have let you know that.

After Emma's immediate defense, which went over her mom's head as usual, more words left a permanent mark.

It could have been different, Emma. So much different. For all of you.

The weight of those words latched on to her shoulders and clung for dear life. She might as well name the baggage she'd just acquired, because it wasn't going anywhere.

Her mother was right in one regard. But in another, she still didn't understand. No one did. And unless they had been pregnant, rejected and alone, watching the man who promised that his love for her transcended any addiction live out his lie in neon color, well—they never would.

Besides, who was to say that it wasn't intentional? If she'd stuck around that day she caught Max in the middle of a deal, would he still have eventually changed and devoted his life to helping others? Or would she somehow have derailed God's plan even further?

Regardless, whatever Max had

become didn't change what he'd been.

She dropped the brush in the grooming bucket she'd snagged from the tack room and rubbed Remington's neck. "Don't count on this behavior from me regularly." Weird that she wasn't already craving a hot stone massage treatment by now, one of her more frequent rewards for her stressful career in Dallas. Maybe there was something to be said for open skies and fresh air, after all

Now, if only it'd work on Cody.

Remington snuffled the hand she held in front of his nose, and she grimaced at the soft, wet horse skin. "It'll take more than that to convince me, you know." "Convince you of what?" Max appeared in front of the stall door, and Emma jumped. A petite blonde stood beside him, wearing a T-shirt with the fire department logo blazoned across the front.

Emma stepped away from Remington, his head bobbing at her abrupt movements. "Nothing." She tried to smile and pretend like she wasn't caught talking to a horse, though with Max's lifestyle now he probably wouldn't have thought twice. But who was his friend, and what would she think? "Just waiting on the girls to get here."

"You might want to go check on them." Max frowned, glancing at his watch. "Breakfast was cleared away fifteen minutes ago, and they're supposed to come straight out here for chores."

"Maybe they needed a bathroom break." Emma started to open the stall door, and Max stepped back to give her room.

"This is Caley, by the way. Brady's wife."

Caley held out her hand, her grip warm and solid. "Nice to meet you. I've —" She swallowed the rest of her sentence and finished with a smile, instead. But the unspoken words lingered. *I've heard a lot about you*.

Emma still wasn't sure how they made her feel, but the dividing line

teetered more toward good than bad, and she wasn't sure how she felt about that, either.

Time to go. "Thanks. I better go check on the girls." Max was probably being paranoid, considering how long girls took prepping in the bathroom and knowing how they did anything possible to legitimately stall their chores, but at least this way she wouldn't have to make awkward small talk with Caley. If Brady knew about her, then it went without saying Caley did, too.

Max's voice followed her down the barn aisle. "Caley's here to meet the girls, so why doesn't she go with you?" She paused and turned slowly. "Sure." Talk about awkward. Hopefully Caley wouldn't want to talk about her and Max. Or anything to do with Max, for that matter. Not while her heart still tottered on her sleeve, her secret one breath away from being revealed.

Caley fell into step beside Emma as they made their way to the dorm. "Max wanted me to come speak to the girls at some point before camp was over, sort of show them what it looked like to follow a career dream." She lifted one slim shoulder in a shrug. "I'm a firefighter, and he thinks they could use encouragement, since most of his campers don't have good home lives. Sort of like I'm proof they can succeed even when they feel the odds are stacked against them."

Her defense against Caley dissolved slightly. "That's not a bad idea." Wow, Max thought of everything. He seemed truly invested in each of his campers lives, especially to go to such effort to cover every element of their future.

Caley's eyes shone. "I'm happy to help. I've been through some stuff in the past, and while it's probably nothing like these girls, we're all in need of grace."

Wasn't that the truth. Her steps faltered. She knew God gave grace to sinners...but what about when those sinners knew better, like she did when she messed up by getting involved emotionally and then physically with Max? Did that cancel it out? Or did she just have to pay more consequences, like now, with Cody's rebellion and her own struggle regarding her feelings for his dad?

Thankfully they reached the dorms before she could determine an answer if there even was one.

Emma stepped inside the temporary building. "Girls? There's someone here to meet you. And by the way, you're late for chores."

Katie and Stacy looked up with guiltridden expressions as they hunched on the side of Tonya's bed, whispering furtively. Tonya was nowhere to be seen. Emma stopped and crossed her arms. "Okay, that's it. What do you know?"

Katie looked away, and Stacy smirked as if confident she knew Emma couldn't force her to tell. "Well, let's see. Two plus two equals four, and the capital of Louisiana is—"

Caley snorted beside her, and covered it with a cough.

It would have been funny to Emma, too, though still disrespectful—but Caley didn't know the whole story about Tonya, and there was nothing funny right now about the fact the girl wasn't in her room, and her roommates were sharing secrets. Secrets Emma needed to know. "To the barn. Now. Caley will walk you." Let the firefighter introduce herself on the way. She caught the blonde's eye, and Caley immediately nodded and ushered the girls out the door. "Max has told me a lot about you" were her trailing words as the door closed behind them.

Well at least she got to say it to someone.

Emma paced the small walkway between the beds, wishing the quilts could talk. She needed to alert Max in case Tonya had run away, but first, she wanted to figure out what was going on. Why had the other girls landed on Tonya's bed to share secrets if she wasn't here? Probably implied Tonya had been there recently. Maybe she and Caley had missed her on their way from the barn. Maybe Tonya hadn't run away, just gotten upset and walked out first instead of coming over for chores together. Had the girls upset her?

She didn't want to overreact, but she really didn't want to under-react, either.

She stopped in front of the bathroom door, noticing the light on and the toilet running. Might be leaky, unless someone had just used it before she came in. She looked inside, unsure what she was searching for.

Her gaze caught on the trash can tucked between the toilet and the counter, and she sucked in her breath. Remington and the bed quilts might not be giving Tonya's secrets up—but the wastebasket sure did.

* * *

Max stood back, surveying the rows of folding chairs spread across the sundried grass, splotches of red and blue paint evident on several patches where the tarps had failed. Trust exercises. He still wasn't sure about this, but Emma seemed to know what she was talking about, and he wanted to incorporate her ideas. Wanted her to feel as though she was a part of this.

He knew how terrible it felt to be involved in something up to your eyebrows and still have zero control. For him, it'd been a drug addiction. For Emma, it was watching her son spiral beneath her grasp.

With God's help, he'd beaten his. Hopefully he'd get to see Emma and Cody share a similar victory.

The kids' voices rose on the brisk November wind as the gang filed toward him, led by Chaplain Tim, past the makeshift obstacle course he'd thrown together and wearing dubious expressions he probably mirrored. He quickly schooled his features to hopefully resemble confidence. This would go well. How could it not?

"Another obstacle course? The other one looked harder." Cody's voice carried on the breeze and held two parts bravado, one part trepidation. He'd struggled on the rope swing of the first obstacle course, which had set him and Jarvis at each other—no wonder he'd be wary about this one, even if by all appearances it seemed a huge step down on the difficulty factor.

But the teens didn't know yet they'd be doing this one blindfolded.

"It was only hard for you." Jarvis snorted under his breath as he drew near, and Max shot him a warning look that wilted his arrogant expression. No way was that getting started today. In fact...Max grinned as he glanced at the red bandanas waiting on one of the folding chairs. He knew who Cody's partner would be.

Emma brought up the rear of the group with the girls, who Caley had brought to him in the barn earlier that morning. Stacy and Katie had acted a little odd, but he figured it was just for getting busted for lingering in the dorm after breakfast instead of coming out to do chores. Tonya had gone right to work, even volunteering to soap saddles, the one chore the girls especially hated because of getting the polish under their nails. Despite her eagerness, he'd still have to handle the girls' disobedience eventually, once he decided which punishment fit the crime. Maybe he'd ask Emma for her suggestions.

But in spite of his attempts to catch her eye, she remained fixated on the girls, as though afraid they'd disappear if she didn't stare directly at them. He frowned. Weird. Something was definitely going on, and judging by Emma's pale expression, he might have more discipline coming up than he'd thought.

Time for that later. Right now he had a horde of teens to blindfold and attempt to teach about trust.

"Line up." He motioned for the guys to take one line and the girls another, then realized the girls were unevenly numbered. Who would sit out? Unless Emma took a spot. He made a quick decision. "Stacy and Katie, you're partners. Grab a blindfold. Emma and Tonya, you two will pair up." He raised his eyebrows at Emma, and after a quick wince, she nodded. He hated to put her through the paces with the teens, but the girls couldn't miss it and he had no reason to keep one of them out. They needed the experience.

"David and Ashton." He motioned for them to take their blindfolds. "Jarvis and Cody."

He heard Emma's gasp before her gaze landed on him, probably in an attempt to shoot some sort of fire. Well, maybe he deserved it, because it did seem mean on the surface. But he'd been doing this a long time, and Emma had to trust him.

Too bad she couldn't just fall off a chair, let him catch her and be done with it.

Jarvis's and Cody's protests mingled, but he waved them off and continued assigning partners. Grumbles permeated the group. Good, that must mean he was on the right track. What was the point in learning to trust someone you were already buddy-buddy with?

He let Stacy and Katie go first through the obstacle course, Stacy blindfolded, which she clearly hated, and Katie leading her, which she clearly loved. They managed to get through the maze of cones, chairs and low-slung ropes with only one or two banged knees. The guys went next, teasing each other and not taking it as seriously as Max hoped.

Until it was time to reverse, and the tormenter became the tormented.

"The golden rule exists for a reason, guys," Max hollered as snickers rose from revenge being played. Ashton crashed into a chair as David snorted in amusement. "Do unto others, and all that. Not so fun on the other side, is it?"

The lesson finally sank in as the boys began taking the course seriously, leading each other through unscathed. Finally. "Chairs are next."

More groans, along with quibbles over who would go first and on which team. "That'll be Tim's decision." Max shut down that argument quick. "Emma? A second?"

She joined him on the fringes of the group as Tim began lining up the teams in front of the row of chairs. "You okay with this? I know I put you on the spot."

"It's fine." Her eyes darted to Tonya, then back to his face, something guarded and downright strange in her gaze. "It's just...I found out..." Her voice trailed, and he wished they were alone so he could cup her chin and make her look at him.

"Found out what? Her secret?"

"It's not what you think." Emma glanced back at the girls before meeting his eyes briefly. "I can't tell you here." She pulled in her lower lip, looking nearly like a teen herself.

Not what he thought? Then what else was there—and why was it bothering Emma so deeply? He grazed her arm with his fingers, forgetting about their audience. "Are you all right?"

She jerked at his touch but didn't pull away. "We'll talk later. Let's do this."

She was more willing to fall backward off a chair than talk about Tonya, so it had to be bad. Or maybe it really was that private.

He led them back to the group, where Tim had gotten the first set of teams on the chairs and ready. This time, one person would fall while three caught them. They couldn't do their original teams of one on one, since there were several teams where one person significantly outweighed the other. He didn't want to send a whole crew to the E.R.

"Hands crossed across your chest, cupping each of your shoulders." Max pointed to Cody, who stood on the chair, for once looking vulnerable. Jarvis, David and Ashton gathered beneath him, arms outstretched. "When you're ready, trust—and fall backward."

Cody snorted in disbelief, and Tonya, who stood on the chair beside him in front of Emma, Stacy and Katie, looked as if she might faint again.

"When you're ready." Max waited. So

did Cody and Tonya, not budging. The seconds on his watch ticked away, and the groups of teens with outstretched arms grew restless, shifting their weight and sighing.

"Okay, forget that. On three." He cleared his throat, a wariness of his own suddenly creeping into his stomach. Must be picking up the kids' nervousness. "One."

Cody coughed. The kids below him stretched their arms farther, gathered in tighter.

"Two."

Tonya sucked in her breath. Katie and Stacy squeezed in, Emma's eyes darting back and forth from Tonya to Cody as if she weren't sure who she'd rather catch. "Three."

Tonya fell into the arms of her friends. And Cody landed flat on his back in the dust.

Chapter Sixteen

"What a day." Max leaned against the wooden fence railing, propping one booted foot on the rail behind him. He vanked off his hat and rubbed his hair, the gesture familiar and comforting yet at the same time, unnerving. Moonlight against his profile highlighted his rugged features, which looked as weary as she felt

"You can say that again." Emma tried not to let him see her watching, tried not to let him see her hanging by a rapidly fraying thread. Was that even possible to hide anymore? Voices from the past rose up in a suffocating mist. She squeezed her eyes closed as memories assaulted, some from a decade ago, some from that very afternoon, sounds and images mixing and twirling in a cyclone she couldn't escape. The comfort of snuggling in Max's embrace on her parents' swing. The hardness in his eyes the day he accepted that last delivery of drugs. The beeping of the monitors while she was in labor with Cody. The slamming doors of his rebellion. The thud as Cody landed flat on his back in the dirt

Max's voice softened. "He's okay, Emma. I promise."

He'd probably uttered those same words thirty-seven times in the past three hours, even after she'd seen for herself Cody was fine and moved on to the next activity as planned. But the assurances refused to soak into Emma's heart. Maybe physically he was okay from his fall. But she wasn't okay. And neither was Cody. Not really. Not where it mattered. How could he be?

"It's my fault." All of it. No, most of it. There was a good bit that was still Max's fault.

But the fall was her fault.

She gripped the fence rail with both hands, aware of possibly gaining a splinter but unable to care. "I'm the one who had the bright idea to make the teens fall off chairs." Stupid, stupid, stupid. Exercises like that at church youth camps were one thing—but among a group of potentially reforming delinquents? What had she been thinking?

"It's not your fault." Max leaned in and parroted back everything she needed to hear, everything she would tell someone else if the roles were reversed, but she knew better. Deep down, she knew better. She should have seen this coming.

"We saw the way those guys acted on the blindfold course." She spun around, not realizing he'd edged as close as he had. The stars provided a canopy of light across the darkness above his head, enveloping them in the still quiet that could only come from a ranch after hours. The kind of quiet she wanted to embrace and tuck into her soul and keep once she was back in the hectic bustle of Dallas.

Assuming she and Cody ever made it back in one piece.

"We had no idea they'd team up against him like that and let him fall." Max's brow tightened, probably remembering the same thing she had. After making sure Tonya was safely on the ground, Emma had run to Cody, only to find Max had beaten her there. He'd single-handedly shoved the teens back, helped Cody catch the breath that had been knocked out of him, and doled out

punishment to the boys at fault.

While Emma stood back. Helpless. Guilty.

Her stomach roiled. "I don't know why I'm here."

"You're here because you're needed." Max's answer came swiftly, as if he'd kept it ready for just such a declaration. "You can't control everything, Emma."

No kidding.

She rubbed her eyes with the palms of her hands. "Tonya's pregnant."

"Pregnant." He said the word as if it tasted bad, as if he wished he could spit it back out. She knew the feeling; she'd felt the same the first time she stared at two pink lines crawling up a tiny display window. He let out a huff of surprise. "Never thought I'd wish for an eating disorder instead."

"She confided in me after I caught her." Emma hitched herself up on the fence, tired of standing and carrying her own weight. She perched on the top rail, now face-to-face with Max. "I found the test in the bathroom."

Surprise flickered. "She didn't even try to hide it?"

"I think she knew it was a matter of time at that point." She'd held Tonya's braids back as the girl dry heaved in the bathroom later that evening after the trust exercises and promised her they'd figure it out. She was in for a long road.

Max sighed as if releasing the burdens

of the entire world. "I'll have to call her parents in the morning. She can't stay here in that condition."

"I figured." She hated to let Tonya go, but this required a different level of care than Camp Hope could handle. Tonya needed counseling and support and a health plan. "I'm going to keep in touch with her."

"Of course." Max nodded as if he'd never expected less.

"Why do you believe in me so much?" The words left her lips in a whisper, and she half hoped he didn't hear.

He took her hand from the fence railing and brought it to his lips for a quick kiss. "Because I know your heart." She pulled her hand free. "No, you don't." If he did, if he really knew what lay beneath the surface, he'd run. Just like she'd run thirteen years ago. He'd hold against her everything she deserved for him to, and it would hurt. Worse maybe than it did a decade prior.

She wasn't strong enough to make it through that kind of pain a second time.

"Just because we haven't kept in contact over the years doesn't mean you've changed so much I don't know you." He tucked her hand between both of his, craning his head up slightly to speak into her eyes. "I've seen your heart for the girls. I've seen your heart for Cody. I've seen your heart for his freedom." His voice caught, and he looked away before taking her gaze hostage once again. "It's beautiful. You're making a difference."

"Some difference." She couldn't pull her hand away if she tried, but she didn't really want to. After her emotionally draining day, the human contact warmed a piece of her she wasn't sure she should thaw. "I didn't even realize Tonya was pregnant. It's so obvious now...."

"Hindsight is always clearer. You were great with her, and she trusted you. She showed us that over and over." Max rubbed his thumb across her knuckles. "You didn't have to confront her about the test. She came to you. That's huge."

True. And the trust exercise *was* a large part of what had prompted the

confession. Maybe she hadn't completely lost her skill, but what did that say about Cody? Was it really that different just because she was his mom? Max had gotten through to him in ways she couldn't, and he was Cody's father. But he didn't know.

Her chest tightened. Maybe that was the difference. If she confessed before the graduation, she could literally mess up Cody's entire progress. Before, it'd just been a fear and a gut instinct prompting her toward that decision. But now, it seemed more like proof. The odds were already stacked so high against Cody, and the fact that the kids were continually picking on him as the

runt of the litter didn't help at all. It only urged him to prove himself harder and faster—with more rule breaking and chest thumping.

She really missed the days of superhero sheets and cracker crumbs and stepping on building blocks. They were alone, but they had each other, and life was so much easier. Back when only Emma knew what they were missing, and she could make it up to Cody in the form of ice cream cones and tent sleepovers.

Now she had nothing. Nothing to offer but a court ordered camp and a desperate arsenal of prayers. Would it be enough? "I want to start over." Max's confession blasted like a shotgun in the silence of the star-studded night. "I want another chance."

She stared at him, mouth slightly open, all too aware of the responding pound of her heart.

Then before she could decide what to say, he broke the silence for her.

His mouth against hers was familiar in a bittersweet way, but the gentleness in his fingers threading through her hair was brand-new. So was the caution he exhibited as he kissed her, carefully, as though she was a treasure that might break. Gone was the selfishness from the touch she remembered years before. And in its place lingered something she wanted to hold on to forever.

She kissed him back with more than a decade's worth of longing, then turned away, her lips trailing across the stubble along his jaw. He let out a ragged breath in her ear, his hands gripping her waist firmly even as he pushed away, putting distance between them while keeping her balanced on the fence.

"I know you have your own life in Dallas." Max rested his forehead on hers, snuck another kiss, then backed away completely as if realizing he just couldn't get that close.

Own life. Dallas. Yes.

The fog cleared, and snatches of life —real life—pressed back to the surface. But she didn't want real life. She wanted to stay in this pocket of stillness, where teen pregnancies and teen rebellion and life-altering secrets didn't exist. Where there was only the twinkle of the stars and the love in a certain cowboy's eyes and the whisper that life—her life could still be different. Could be restored.

"But maybe..." His voice trailed, and he tucked a wisp of hair behind her ear. His touch burned a trail along her cheek and she shivered. "Maybe."

Maybe. So much potential in that word. So much hope. When was the last time she'd hoped? She wanted to hope. Wanted to feel again. To believe. To trust. Was it possible? "Maybe." She breathed out the word, and the smile that started at the corners of his mouth let her know it hit its target. *Maybe* would have to be enough for now.

Maybe would hold back real life a little while longer.

* * *

She felt the exact same in his arms. Maybe better. Max couldn't believe he stood near a fence on his own property, hosting a ministry near to his heart and holding the hand of the one woman who'd branded him years ago as her own. He finally felt whole.

He squeezed Emma's hand, debating

kissing her again but afraid he wouldn't want to stop. He took in her flushed cheeks and heavy-lidded eyes, and his breath caught. No, he definitely wouldn't want to stop. Some things never changed, but keeping any developing relationship under God's direction this time would be one thing they'd for sure do differently.

Better to get back to conversation. And maybe movement.

"Let's walk. Check on the horses." He extended his arm and Emma hopped down from the fence, linking her arm through his as they plodded through the shadows toward the barn.

"Caley said she enjoyed meeting you." He watched Emma's face carefully for her reaction, knowing how guarded she'd been around the firefighter earlier that morning. "The girls seemed to take to her. She said she'll be back."

She nodded, eyes cast on the ground as she dodged a hole. "Good. I think her talking to them about their careers is a great idea."

He did, too—though Tonya's immediate future was definitely altered at the moment. The reminder sobered Max's spirits. Still, the girl had clearly made her choices before she came to Camp Hope. It wasn't their fault, but they could still at least propel her on to the right course from here on out.

Which brought up another question.

"Why did Tonya's pregnancy hit you so hard?" He opened the door to the barn, and the automatic lights lit the sharp corners of the darkness.

"What do you mean?" A wall went up; he could see it climbing as tangibly as construction workers laid brick.

Oops. "Nothing. You just seemed to take it almost personally. I didn't want you thinking that was your fault, too."

Remington popped his head over the stall door, and Emma reached in and rubbed his mane. "It's a long story."

"I have all night." He crossed his arms and grinned, but the effect was wasted. Emma had officially launched into her own world, and she didn't seem to be issuing any invitations to join her. "You don't have to bear the burdens of the world, you know."

That got her attention. Her eyes narrowed, and the warmth between them began to cool. "You don't know a thing about my burdens."

"Whoa." He held up both hands in defense, causing Remington to toss his head and duck back into his stall. "I'm trying to help here."

"I know you are. But Cody

is...impossible. He's not who he used to be." Emma turned to face him, tears glistening. "Not everything is an easy fix, you know. Not Tonya. Not Cody. And not—" She stopped herself, and he'd have given his back forty acres to know what she'd been about to say.

He tried a different approach. "I never said it was easy. Cody is just tired of being treated like a textbook. He wants a mom, not a counselor."

Her eyes widened as if she'd been struck, and his heart shifted toward his boots. He'd said too much—crossed a camper confidentiality line, and at probably the worst possible time.

He tried to backtrack. "Emma, I'm on your side." He reached out to touch her, but she didn't soften. If anything, she grew stonier. This was not what he'd intended to do. "I just meant it's not all your responsibility."

"So whose is it?" Her eyes flashed.

"Who *is* responsible for wayward kids? Whose fault is it?"

"Fault?" They'd gotten way off topic, but clearly this was something Emma had been keeping just below the surface. As much as he'd wanted to know what was going on in her head, he wasn't sure he could handle this much roller coaster. Not tonight, with the weight of the day still pressing in. He struggled to take a breath against the heaviness suddenly covering the barn. "Why does it have to be anyone's fault? Stuff happens. Kids are influenced or hurt and no one can necessarily prevent-"

"But some can. Some can be prevented. And in those cases, there *is* someone to blame." She believed a lie, and it was killing her. His heart softened at her burden.

"You're not to blame, Emma. There's no way."

Her lips pressed together but didn't contain the words that exploded forth like a shot from his favorite rifle. "You're right. I'm not." The tears spilled over, leaving makeup speckled trails down her cheeks. "You are."

Chapter Seventeen

She'd said it. There was no turning back now.

But that didn't stop her from hightailing it out of the barn.

Emma picked up her pace, the ground rising to trip her, but she kept going, stumbling in the darkness toward the light shining in the main house's front window. Her outburst raced through her head almost as fast as her legs churned the ground, and she mentally railed on herself. How could she have said that? Thirteen years of keeping a secret, down the drain. She never should have told her mom. That unplugged the dam, and now she was about to pay for over a decade of silence.

Max didn't let escape come easily.

He caught up in a few quick strides and grabbed her arm. She pulled him along, knowing he was too stubborn to let go, yet too much of a gentleman to force her to stop. "Emma, wait. What do you mean?"

He had to know by now, typo or not. Did he really *not* get it? The possibility that he didn't brought hope, but it was tainted with instant disappointment. She either had to lie to his face, or confess. Neither option felt right.

She stopped just inside the front door, and Max finally released her as if

realizing she had nowhere else to go.

And she didn't. Her past had finally caught up to her, right there in a dimly lit living room on a ranch in the middle of Broken Bend, Louisiana. A ranch for troubled teens. *Their* troubled teen.

"I know you're angry. But I don't really get why." Max stepped back to give her room—or maybe give himself room-and tossed his cowboy hat on the table by the door. His rumpled hair just made him all the more endearing, and the memory of their kiss seared her lips. What had she been thinking, saying "maybe" like that? As if they actually had a chance? As if this bomb of a truth she was about to detonate wouldn't

change anything? Change everything? Out. Of. Her. Mind.

"Talk to me, Emma." His tone pitched at the end, revealing his desperation, and it almost broke the shield around her heart. He cared—really cared.

But not for long.

"Why are you mad? Was it the kiss?" He was starting to look angry now, too, probably because she couldn't make herself speak. Her mind wouldn't shut up, but her lips refused to open and say what she'd buried for so long. "I'm sorry if I rushed you. If it was too—"

"That's not it." There, finally, her voice. She held up her hand, wanting to touch him but knowing it'd just be pouring fuel on the fire she was about to light. "The kiss was...well. It was." Wonderful. Perfect. Everything she'd missed since their last one years ago. But the desire seeped and soaked underneath layers of bitterness she thought she'd rid herself of, yet apparently, had only been hiding.

"What's my fault?" He stabbed his fingers through his hair, drawing the rumples even higher. "I don't get it, Emma. I was trying to reassure you that Cody's choices aren't your fault, and you spin it around on me? You know I've done nothing but try to help him this entire time. And he's making progress. I don't understand why you're so-"" "You're right. You don't understand." Her stomach cramped. "There's something you don't know." She wanted to pray, wanted to beg God to take this situation away, just make it disappear but there was no way. This was her choice. Her sin. Her consequences.

Coming full circle.

Hadn't she paid enough?

"If there's a missing puzzle piece here, then please, by all means fill me in." He spread his arms to the side, his expression as haphazard as his hair.

Guilt shook her insides. She'd pushed him to his own limit, what with their exhausting day, their kiss and halfspoken declarations, and now her random—in his eyes, at least—freakout. He stilled and lowered his voice. "I told you from the beginning the more I know about these campers and their home lives and their backgrounds, the better equipped I am to make a difference."

"You made a difference all right." Ah. *There* was her alternating archenemy and best friend, Resentment, bubbling to the surface. She could psychoanalyze herself down to her own core, but somehow, she felt helpless to put into practice the advice she'd give her clients. This was too deep.

His eyes narrowed. "Quit with the riddles, Emma. Shoot straight." Straight? Fine. Right to his heart.

"You're Cody's dad."

* * *

Max had never told anyone this before, not even Brady, but he'd always secretly enjoyed the story of Alice in Wonderland, He'd discovered it in school, when a librarian read it to his class over a series of afternoons, and he'd carried those images with him for life. There was something appealing about it—though at the time, he'd not been masculine enough to admit itabout falling into an alternate reality, where cats grinned, and rabbits carried watches, and flamingos served as croquet mallets. Where nothing was as it

seemed. Where anything could be possible—like finding a father who actually cared.

He never thought about how Alice must have felt tumbling down the hole to get there.

He knew now.

"Cody's dad." The words stuck on his tongue like they belonged to someone else. And maybe they did. How was this even possible? His mind raced with a reasonable argument, but all he could sputter was time. "Thirteen years. Thirteen years ago?"

Thirteen years ago?"

"Right. Do the math."

He had.

And it hadn't added up. After he'd counted, all he'd focused on was Cody's

explanation. *My dad was a jerk who left my mom when she was pregnant*.

How could—

Him? He was the jerk?

Heat spread across his cheeks and jaw and into his ears. "The birthday in his file doesn't—"

She swallowed, looked away. "It's a typo."

A typo. Everything, his entire life, and future, and past, boiled down to a typo.

What if she'd never admitted it? He'd have never known.

Because of a typo.

But black ink on paper or not, the truth remained. She'd lied. To both of them.

An ache started deep within as the

realization of all he'd missed paraded before his eyes. He never got to feel his son kick. Never got to hold Emma's hand in the delivery room, never got to pose for a picture beside his newborn. Never got to help him potty train or take him to the doctor for checkups. Never got to watch Saturday cartoons or ride a bike.

Nothing.

Because of her.

"How could you?" He didn't recognize his own voice. Couldn't control its timbre. Couldn't stop the boiling rush of emotion rising in his throat and taking over. He slammed his fist against the door frame, and the wood cracked. "How could you!" She didn't flinch. Didn't shake. Didn't even blink. Just stood there and took it as if she knew she deserved it. Well, good. She did. How dare she stand there and tell him Cody's behavior was his fault when he hadn't even been there? Hadn't ever been given a choice? His hand hurt.

Not as much as his heart.

The room felt as though it was caving in. Walls coming closer. He closed his eyes and shoved his fingers through his hair, his chest burning with unnamed feelings and regrets. And yet, underneath all of that...one question remained. "Why?"

If anything, her grip around herself

tightened. "I did what I had to do."

"Oh, right. You *had* to run away and keep a secret." He laughed, a harsh sound void of amusement, one that rippled up from his churning stomach. "That makes perfect sense."

"Max, it's not like that." She reached out, but he jerked away as if her touch would poison him. Maybe it already had. Maybe that was the source of his ache the past decade-plus—the effect of Emma and her secrets. Her selfishness. "You don't understand."

"You're right. I don't." He grabbed his hat and shoved it back on his head. "I'll never understand how you could keep a secret like that. How you could bring your son—our son—to my camp and still not tell me the truth." His voice rose with every new word. "How you could stand there and blame me for his choices, how you could kiss—" His breath caught and he hardened his heart. No. No tears. She certainly hadn't spent the past decade crying over him.

He wouldn't waste another solitary one on her. "Forget it." He wrenched open the door.

Her fingers brushed his sleeve. "Max, wait."

The door shook the frame as it slammed behind him, drowning out her protests.

Drowning out his own.

Emma curled up on her bed, trying to silence her sobs so as not to wake Tonya, Katie and Stacy. Her cell phone glowed on her nightstand, revealing that only seven minutes had passed since she'd last checked. Since time had decided to all but stand still. Since sleep continued to elude her.

Though that could be a blessing, since her dreams wouldn't be much better than reality.

She twisted on her back, scrunching her pillow under her head and brushing at the wet spot left from tears. It wasn't the first time she'd cried herself to sleep —or tried to—over Max Ringgold. But these tears stemmed from somewhere previously untapped.

And were oddly mixed with a small, yet very tangible, sense of relief.

It was done. Her all-too-familiar burden had been lifted, though a new one had immediately settled in its place. The secret was out. It was over. She could take a breath, a full breath, for the first time in too many years to count.

But they still had to tell Cody.

The relief vanished, and fresh tears soaked onto the neckline of her sleep shirt. And she thought telling Max had been hard? What was she thinking? She wasn't. Hadn't. But no, her plan used to make sense, back when it was just her and Cody, when she knew that there was zero chance of running into Max, zero chance for anything to change.

Yet everything *had* changed, and no one told her.

Because you never gave anyone a chance to.

Her conscience reared, sharp and ugly and all too honest. She flopped on her side, the wet pillowcase sticking to her cheek. All these years, she'd convinced herself Cody's problems were Max's fault. If Max hadn't passed on those genes, if Max hadn't lived the way he'd lived, if Max hadn't done drugs, Cody would be different. If Max, if Max, if Max

If Emma.

Now her conscience sounded a whole

lot more like the Lord, another voice she'd squelched over the years of doing everything for herself. She'd been running from more than Max and her past. She'd been running from herself. And her faith.

"I'm tired of running," she muttered into her pillow, and across the dorm, one of the girls shifted in her bed, sheets rustling. She stilled, trying to calm her pounding heartbeat, and uttered the words she should have spoken to God years ago. "I'm done running."

A slight pocket of peace began to envelop her, and she nestled into it like a downy quilt. Cody's problems weren't Max's fault. And they weren't hers. They were probably a little bit of both—but they were mostly Cody's. Maybe he'd been reacting in a way that connected to Emma's bad choices, but he was still ultimately responsible for himself. Just as she was. Just as Max was.

Of the three of them, Emma's choices might just be the worst. Hers didn't involve drugs and gangs. But she'd kept her choices and sins a secret. Max had always lived out loud, had never hidden who he claimed to be. He'd definitely made wrong decisions, but hadn't she? At least Max hadn't pretended to be something he wasn't.

She'd been pretending for thirteen years.

Another weight lifted, and her body

relaxed even as her heart sought to rid itself of her years of guilt and regret. She prayed honestly for the first time in too long, turning Cody over to the Lord and embracing the fact that for once, not having control over a situation might just be a good thing. The best thing. For all of them.

Chapter Eighteen

Max managed to avoid Emma most of the following day, making an extra effort to keep the boys' and girls' schedules separate. He could go about Monday business as usual, as long as he didn't have to look at her. Luke had come in for the afternoon, since Nicole was resting and stable, and offered to take over with the campers while Max arranged for Tonya's parents to pick her up. He still couldn't believe he had a pregnant teen, a lying ex-girlfriend and a secret son on the premises.

His beloved camp had morphed into a

low-budget soap opera.

He hung up the phone with Tonya's parents and ran his hand down his jaw. He felt old. Tired. And borderline useless. Not exactly the way he should be feeling as the end of the camp approached. He'd been so sure this would be the best session ever, yet it was shaping up to be an utter failure.

Did God want him to even do this ministry anymore?

He picked up his Bible, tried to quiet the rustlings in his heart, but he couldn't hear past the layer of anger. It was too raw, too fresh. He just hurt on too many levels—it was as though Emma betrayed him all over again. He'd dealt with the pain of losing her so suddenly, her rash change of mind that now, looking back, made sense. She hadn't wanted to have a child with him, so she'd bailed. Never looked back.

Until she'd been forced to.

Had the kiss they'd shared last night been real on her part, or more lies? He might never know—and it didn't really matter. It wasn't as if there could be a repeat with this huge barrier between them. No wonder she'd been so guarded in her time at the ranch. The fact that she'd even taken the job he offered was huge. Maybe she'd been seeking to make amends in her own way, knowing she owed him. But no, that wasn't Emma. Emma wasn't the type to strive to right

wrongs.

That was more his style.

He tucked his Bible back into his desk drawer. No number of Psalms would stop the incessant roiling of his thoughts today. He'd read later when he could make sense of the words beyond his own heartbeat.

He was a dad. A *father*. He had a son.

It still didn't make sense, though the uncanny connection he felt to Cody now rang clear. The similarities, the matching stubbornness. That deep desire to help him that went beyond what he'd ever felt toward a camper before.

His son.

How was he supposed to act around Cody? How could he look at the boy the

same? Impossible. He couldn't—nor should he. But when would they tell him? Had Emma even considered the ramifications of *that*?

He almost wished she'd kept her secret a couple weeks longer.

Max groaned. He wasn't ready for this. He had no training of his own to be a dad, no example. Look what his own father had been and how Max had turned out. Maybe he'd made it eventually through the worst, but the earlier years...well, he still had a lot of making up to do. A lot to prove. To himself, and to God.

What if he messed up Cody even further?

Max shoved away from his desk, the chair squeaking against the floor, and moved to turn off his office light. He couldn't dwell on that right now, not when he'd have to see Cody soon and be forced to keep up Emma's charade a bit longer. He had to focus on business for the time being. People depended on him -like Tonya. Her parents would be there by the end of the day, so he needed to tell her to get her things ready.

He tucked the folded slip of paper recommending professional counseling into his shirt pocket and made a mental note to hand it over to her family when they arrived. Hopefully she'd find the right path and stay on it. He could sort of commiserate now with Emma's misplaced guilt over the girl. Tonya had such potential—but she'd been keeping a secret, too. He couldn't help what he wasn't aware of.

Which begged the question—what else didn't he know about his campers?

It was enough to make a man paranoid.

He started for the kitchen to grab a bottle of water, then ducked back out at the sound of Mama Jeanie's singing. She always sang when she cooked, and he didn't want to listen to the hymns right now, nor did he want another lecture full of cryptic wisdom. Just couldn't stomach it today.

He turned up the stairs to his master

bedroom, thinking to grab some water from the dorm fridge he kept by his bed instead, and paused at what sounded suspiciously like footsteps—on the second floor, where no campers were allowed. He frowned, quickening his step and pushing open the door to his room with authority.

No one was there.

Probably just the floorboards creaking. The house wasn't exactly new.

He grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and twisted open the lid. He took a long sip, then replaced the cap as a sinking sensation spread through his gut. Something was different. He turned a slow circle in the center of the room, trying to place it. The rug on the wood floor by the dresser lay flat and straight. The dark green bedspread still hung crooked like he'd left it-as usual, since the only reason he made his bed in the first place was because he enforced that rule with the campers. The rustic clock of a cowboy knelt before a cross ticked a steady rhythm, the only sound breaking the quiet. He shrugged. All was right.

Except he hadn't left his top dresser drawer open an inch.

He tossed the bottle down and pulled the drawer open. Should be socks. Boxers. And...he fished underneath the rolls of wadded socks. It wasn't there. Oh, no.

He slammed the drawer shut just as an

angry voice sounded from behind.

Cody, red-faced and steely-eyed, stood framed in the doorway, holding the picture of Max and Emma. "You're a liar."

* * *

Emma woke with a remnant of the peace she'd found the night before but not all of it. She went through the motions of the day, trying to focus on the girls and their activities, realizing her remaining time with Tonya was short, but she couldn't shake the memory of Max's face when she'd confessed.

Finally, she couldn't take it any longer. She had to see Max, had to know

how he was processing this, or she'd explode with the what-ifs. She left the girls with Faith in the barn, saddling up for a trail ride under Luke's direction, and headed for the main house.

Mama Jeanie intercepted her outside the kitchen before the door even shut behind her. "Don't go upstairs." Her tone, always brisk and authoritative, seemed even firmer than usual.

Emma hesitated. "Where's Max?"

"Upstairs." Mama Jeanie shifted the mixing bowl she held in one hand to the other, pausing to swipe her free arm against her apron. "You're not going on the trail ride?" She gestured out the front window, where Luke, Faith and Tim were monitoring the teens as they buckled saddle girths.

"Maybe later. Right now I need to find Max." Not that it was any of Mama Jeanie's business. The woman had a kind heart, but Emma wasn't in the mood for instruction from someone who had no idea the level of chaos they were currently in. She headed for the stairs.

Mama Jeanie's voice neared panic. "I don't think right now is a good time."

Sudden yelling sounded from above, punctuated by a slamming door and thumping footsteps. Emma's heart raced as she stared with dread up the staircase. Had Max totally lost it? She looked back at Mama Jeanie, her former irritation long gone as she considered hiding behind the petite woman. Max had never had a temper like that—in fact, that sounded more like how Cody used to—

Cody pounded down the stairs, almost flying past her, but she reached out with long-honed instincts and caught the sleeve of his sweatshirt. "Not so fast. Where are you going?"

He spun in a sudden half circle at her interception, and something small and square fluttered from his grip and landed at her feet.

Emma stared down at her own image, arms curled around Max's shoulder, a happy grin on her face as he pressed a kiss against her temple, and dread seeped through her chest. She released Cody's sleeve, staring in horror at the proof she couldn't deny. No. No. No. Why had Max kept that? So many years ago...the implications bubbled to the surface and layered her dread with regret. He'd waited for her.

She was going to be sick.

Max appeared on the bottom steps moments later, out of breath but not heaving nearly as hard as Cody. "Cody, wait." His "I'm in charge" voice did nothing to defuse the situation. "I know you're upset, but we've got to talk about this."

"Talk about what?" The teen bent and snatched the photo from the ground, waving it in their faces. "Dad."

Emma sucked in her breath, and

Max's face drained of color. He hadn't told him. Cody had figured it out? How? It was as if he read her mind.

"Yeah, I might get in trouble a lot, but I'm not stupid." He pointed at Max. "Everyone kept telling me how much you looked like me. How we talked the same. Same stupid cowlick." He slapped at his hair.

"Why were you in my room, Cody?" A slow flush of red filled Max's throat and jaw.

"Looking for cash." He stuck his chin out in contrived bravado, but the slight quiver gave away his emotion. "On a dare."

"From who?"

"What's it matter? I found this instead.

I didn't steal." His eyes, glassy with unshed tears, narrowed at Max. "You lied to me. Made me think you were on my side. And, Mom...you..." His voice grew smaller and the betrayal in his eyes shattered Emma's heart. "You lied the most. The longest."

"We need to talk." Max held out his hand. "Give me the picture, Cody."

From the corner of her eye, she observed Mama Jeanie slipping quietly back into the kitchen, giving them space. She wished she could follow her. Emma knew what Max was doing, trying to defuse the situation by establishing control, by prompting Cody to respond to them in obedience in a small matter to build trust toward the bigger issue. Handing over the picture was the first step to them all calming down and restoring the proper order.

Not that it'd be that easy.

"Fine. You want it?" Cody picked up the photo, ripped it in half and tossed the pieces at them. "Take it. I don't want it. Don't want either of you."

The door slammed behind him, and something unleashed deep inside Emma, cracking open and revealing even more shattered pieces. Her son was done with her. Because of Max.

Her peace from the night before disappeared completely into a dark abyss of hopelessness. "This *is* your fault." She poked her finger hard against Max's chest. "You did this! You kept that picture. You passed down all of this anger and rebellion. It's you!"

"It takes two people to make a child, Emma." Max gripped her forearms and held her away from him. "You're the one that left, that never even gave me a chance to be involved!"

"How could I? I came back, Max. I came back!" She struggled in his grip, all logic and reasoning fleeing her senses as she surrendered herself to the pent-up emotion she'd restrained for far too long. "I saw you making that deal." The words hissed from her lips, words she'd been longing to fling at him for thirteen years. "What deal?" Confusion and pain seeped from his expression, despite his voice rising even louder than hers. But instead of anger, it was laced with panic. "I don't know what you're talking about!"

"The drugs, Max. You said you would quit. That I was enough." Her voice shook with unshed sobs and she struggled to get the words out through the tears. "I saw you taking that deal. At the park. Near our spot."

Clarity bled through Max's eyes, and he released Emma's arms abruptly. "I flushed those."

She staggered backward. "What?" He stabbed his fingers through his

hair. "I flushed them. I did the deal, yeah. I was weak. I missed you and wanted a distraction. But the second he left, I remembered my promise to you and that meant more to me than a temporary fix. I never did a hit after the last one you knew about, Emma. I flushed them."

He'd flushed them.

And he'd changed.

Yet she'd ran.

Despair began a slow assault, pummeling her heart. She reached toward Max, but it was like stretching toward the past—impossible to grasp.

"I didn't know." The words sounded impossibly weak, and the biggest understatement anyone had ever spoken. The grief in his eyes would linger in her memory for the rest of her days. "You didn't let me tell you."

The back door burst open, and Luke ran in, hair mussed and jacket flapping open. "Cody and Jarvis are gone."

"Gone? What do you mean?" Max strode past Luke to the porch, scanning both directions. "He was just here."

"There was a mix up. We split up the group for the trail ride, and Tim and I both thought Cody was with the other group. We didn't get far before realizing we didn't have Cody or Jarvis with us. They're not in the dorms, either, or the rec room." Luke's eyes filled with worry. "I think they ran away."

Chapter Nineteen

Not even twenty-four hours into fatherhood, and Max had lost his son.

He paced in front of the barn, wishing there was something else he could do besides walk and watch his breath puff as the afternoon waned colder. Tim and Faith had gone back out to finish the trail ride with the rest of the campers, in an effort to keep them in the dark about what was going on a little while longer. Luke called in backup from the church for a search party, while Tonya's parents picked her up not a minute too soon. Emma had hugged the girl goodbye on the porch, then disappeared inside the dormitory. He didn't know what she was doing. Packing? Pacing? Praying?

Would she leave?

Did he want her to?

Thankfully Brady, Caley and Ava had come over right away. After quick hugs, the girls went to the kitchen to help Mama Jeanie make some refreshments for the search crew while Brady followed his pace.

"It's going to be okay, man. We'll find them." Brady rubbed his hands together before pulling his gloves from his jacket pocket.

"He's my son."

Brady stopped midstep, one glove dangling from his fingers. "Say what?"

"Cody's my kid. Emma told me last night." He shoved his hands in his pockets, not having any gloves to wear and grateful for the cold ache in his fingers that reminded him he wasn't totally numb after all. Yet.

Brady's hand clamped his shoulder. "We'll figure this out. Nothing's too big for the Lord." He offered a wry grin. "Not even this kind of a secret."

Max snorted. "Guess we'll see." If they found them, that is. Jarvis and Cody together were an unlikely pair, and Max couldn't figure out what they were up to. Why would the two kids who hated each other the most run off together? To create trouble? To fight it out alone? That didn't seem like Cody's style, though the anger that had radiated off him when he left the house earlier hadn't, either. The kid's—his *son's* wounds ran deep.

Mostly because of him and Emma and their mistakes.

"Search party's ready. We're going to split up and spread out." Luke strode to Max's side and gestured to the group of men behind him, wearing jackets and ball caps, some with walkie-talkies clipped to their belts. Max recognized most of them from the church, though there were new faces, as well. Ten men in all.

"Thanks for coming." They made a quick plan to determine groups and who would search where. Most would go on foot, while one set took the remaining horses from the barn, and another took his and Brady's four-wheelers. Some would take the road, though that was the least likely way the boys would have traveled.

Luke stepped closer to Max and lowered his voice. "Have you called the police?"

"Not yet." Max rubbed his jaw. "Trying to avoid that if possible. But if they get too far..." His property spread a good ways, but the worst part was, it joined with Brady's. It wouldn't take the boys any effort to shimmy under the fence and then have free rein for miles on the Double C-including bulls and wild animals. "Let's see what we find first." Just couldn't wait too long, because once it got dark, the boys were in for a rough night. In some ways it'd teach them a valuable lesson, but Max hoped to avoid lessons involving coyotes-or worse. Besides, his campers' parents trusted him to keep them safe.

The sight of Brady's pistol tucked into the back of his jeans as he hurried off only made the reality of their situation more grim.

The men left, agreeing Max would stay at Camp Hope to be there for the campers when the trail ride ended. He had to keep things running, whether he felt like it or not. Suddenly alone, he stared down at the path he'd created in the dirt while pacing and slowly began to rub the evidence away with his boot. Too bad he couldn't erase the past twenty-four hours as easily.

But what would he change? He couldn't go back to pretending he didn't have a kid. The thought now brought a hollow ache to his gut. There were some things the heart couldn't un-know. He would be there for Cody from here on out, no matter what. But what would that look like? They lived in different worlds. His work was at Camp Hope, in the nowhere town of Broken Bend, Louisiana, while Emma and Cody had

their own life in a big thriving Texas city.

So many questions. So few answers. And none of them would matter if Cody didn't make it back in one piece. Panic, the kind Max realized only a father could feel, seized his heart. He began to pray. God, I can't fix this. I don't know where my son is, but You do. Could You show us, please? He began to pace again, this time praying with every footstep. There was nothing he could do about the past-he couldn't get back the time he'd lost, the time Emma had robbed him of. But he could pray for the future.

And despite his lingering anger and betrayal over Emma's choices, he

wanted a future with them. As a family.

It seemed too impossible to even pray for.

Was that what a father's love did? Sought the impossible? Hoped when there was little or no proof to do so?

His father hadn't shown him that kind of love.

But his Heavenly Father had.

And he'd ignored it. Shoved it away. Sought to prove himself against the grace freely offered to him.

He stopped pacing. Just like he loved Cody regardless of this bad choice he'd made, regardless of Cody's sin and rebellion, God loved *him* the same way, plus some. He didn't have to strive to make up for the past, to make up for his own years of rebellion and sin—he'd already been forgiven. Just like he'd already forgiven Cody for running away.

And just like he needed to forgive Emma.

Her feeble protests racked his brain. *I* did what I had to do. She really did. He tried to put himself in her shoes. Pregnant, scared, uncertain. Coming back to Broken Bend to announce the biggest news of her life, when her parents didn't even know they'd been dating, and discovering her baby's father buying drugs.

Wouldn't he have been tempted to run, too?

Empathy began to replace the

judgment he'd been holding, and it bled through his heart. They'd all made bad choices.

But that didn't mean there wasn't room for a second chance.

* * *

There were some regrets even raw cookie dough couldn't touch.

From her spot on the bar stool in the kitchen, Emma breathed in the aroma of chocolate chip cookies wafting from Mama Jeanie's oven, yet the smell just made her sick. Her son was out there, somewhere, with another teen who was nothing but trouble, and all she knew for sure was that Cody hated her. She buried her face in her hands. She'd tried to join the search party, but Max interfered, stating Cody would be more likely to hide if he saw her coming. True painfully true.

"Don't worry. They're going to find them." Caley wrapped her arm around Emma's shoulders and rubbed. "They're good men. Some are volunteer firemen —they know what they're doing."

Emma nodded, refusing to lift her head, afraid to look at anyone for fear of breaking down and never stopping. A drawer opened and shut, and Mama Jeanie mumbled to Caley about taking Ava to help set out the cups for the cider she'd made.

The door shut behind them, and Emma

finally dared to look up at Caley. "I'm an idiot." The whole story poured from her lips, and Caley didn't move or interrupt except to don an oven mitt and remove the cookies.

"Sounds to me like you're getting smarter." She turned off the oven and grinned. "Seriously, don't be so hard on vourself. You're aware of what went wrong, and you want to fix it. That's a lot farther than some people ever get." She took the bar stool beside Emma and tossed the mitt on the counter. "Trust me. You guys are going to be fine. When Brady and I were getting together-man, it was rough. I didn't think we'd ever find a way around our differences."

Emma shoved away from the counter, holding up both hands in defense. "No, no, no. This is different. I'm not getting back with Max."

Caley winked. "Yet."

"How can you be so sure?" Her heart began to pound again, and this time it had nothing to do with the fact that her son was missing or she'd just ruined a good man's life with her selfishness. "He'll never forgive me. And he shouldn't."

"Yes, he should. And he will. I know Max." Caley hopped up and began scooping cookies from the sheet onto a plate. "He might nurse this wound a little while, but he'll do the right thing." The right thing. As in, obligation? No thanks. She'd run from that once already, which was why she didn't tell her parents about her and Max in the first place. No shotgun weddings in her past —or her future—even if Max held the proverbial gun this time. She didn't want obligation. She wanted love.

But she'd ruined it.

Like she'd ruined Cody.

"They found them!" Ava's excited teenaged voice shot through the silence of the kitchen, and Caley dropped the spatula on the stove. Emma shot off her stool, hope breaking through the depression and taking over like a beacon in the night. She raced onto the porch in time to see Brady leading Cody toward Max, who eagerly ran to meet them across the yard. Joy burst free deep in her chest. She took three steps off the porch, then hesitated at the anger in Cody's expression as he shoved Max's arm away.

This wasn't the prodigal son returning.

Luke began dispatching into the walkie-talkies to end the search, then stopped, his finger still on the button as static burst from the contraption. "Wait. Hold that thought. Where's Jarvis?"

All eyes landed on Cody, who stared stubbornly at the ground and shrugged.

Max shut the door of his office and perched on the side of his desk as Cody slumped into a chair. "So what's my punishment?" He scowled.

He was in no way equipped for this. Any other camper, yes. But his own son? Not even close. Max briefly closed his eyes, wishing there were a handbook, a class, a conference he could have attended to know what to do in this case.

But it was just him and Cody.

And the Lord.

He breathed a prayer for guidance and clasped his hands in front of him. "There's still a bigger issue at hand than punishment right now, Cody. That's going to have to wait." "Great." Cody shifted away from Max, his body language loud and clear. Max took the seat beside him, wanting to appear less imposing, and cleared his throat. "We need to know where Jarvis is."

"How should I know?" He stared at the bookcase lining the wall beside him, eyes flickering between the titles.

Max took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He couldn't afford to show anger. He at least knew enough to realize that wouldn't help. Cody was hurting, and he was lashing out because he didn't think he had any other options.

"You both disappeared at the same time. Are you telling me you weren't together?" He stared at Cody, wishing he could break the barrier between them with something tangible. No wonder Emma felt so frustrated for so long. She was a professional, and she couldn't reach her own son. Rather, she was stuck watching him spiral downward in a cycle she was helpless to stop.

It hurt like nothing else did.

Cody met his eyes, and something shifted slightly. He didn't want to lie to his face, and that spoke more of the good in the boy's heart than anything else since his arrival at camp. They'd connected before, and Cody was remembering. He could see it in his gaze. If only he'd remember Max wasn't the bad guy.... "We left together." Cody grudgingly admitted the truth. "But that's all I know."

"I don't think it is."

Cody snorted. "You're calling *me* a liar? Sort of ironic."

He'd have a point, though Cody didn't know Max hadn't known about their relationship until hours before he'd discovered it, too. But how could Max tell him that now without throwing Emma under the bus? Oh, it was tempting. He wanted that bond with Cody, wanted to see forgiveness in his eyes more than he'd ever wanted anything else. Wanted to take that first step toward a real relationship of trust.

But he wouldn't sacrifice Emma to do so.

A knock sounded on his shut office door, and then it swung open before he could respond. Emma stepped inside, her face a fixed mask of determination. "It's not Max's fault. And yes, I was listening at the door."

His mouth opened a little. Gone was the meek, unsure Emma he'd seen around Cody in the past. In its place stood mama-bear Emma, whose claws were out and teeth were sharp—ready to do what was necessary regardless of the cost. "Your dad isn't the liar, Cody. I am."

His admiration for Emma grew ten

leaps. She was finally stepping up.

"Yeah, right. How can I believe that you're even telling the truth now?" Cody stood up, his voice rising, but Max gently sat him back down with a firm hand on his shoulder.

"I think you should listen to your mom." His tone left little room for argument, and even Cody knew it.

He slumped and crossed his arms, redirecting his gaze to the floor. "Whatever."

Emma came around and stood directly in front of him. "I kept the secret, Cody. It was my fault, not your father's."

Cody's lips rolled in at the word *father*, and Max felt his own insides tremble a little.

"We were a couple, a long time ago, when I was leaving for college. I found out then I was expecting you." Emma took a deep breath. "Your dad didn't know until last night."

Cody's eyes darted to meet hers, surprise replacing the previous sullen stare. "Are you serious? You didn't even tell *him?*" Judgment sprang forth, the same judgment Max had felt hours before.

Now it was his turn to do the right thing.

"Your mom did what she thought she had to do. It's a long story, and it's complicated and between us adults." Max leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees. "But bottom line—she made her choice because she loved you and wanted what was best for you." He hesitated. "Once upon a time, Cody, I was definitely not what was best for you. Or your mom."

He'd finally admitted that out loud, and the truth brought his own measure of much-needed freedom-and possibilities. Could it be possible that God's timing really was perfect? That if somehow Emma had pushed past her own instincts and morals, and made a life with him right away when she'd come home, that he wouldn't have made it where he was now? Maybe if he'd had Emma and everything he'd wanted right away, he wouldn't have grown closer to

the Lord as he had in those tumultuous years. Wouldn't have started Camp Hope. Wouldn't have the message and testimony that had changed so many lives.

He didn't know for sure, and never would. But he believed that God hadn't left them—any of them—in the meantime. And that good was being worked regardless.

Cody's gaze bounced back and forth between them, as if feeling out their sincerity. Then the hardness cracked, and he licked his lips, a hitch in his voice. "I didn't mean that, Mom. About, you know...not wanting you."

She quickly closed her eyes as a tear

slipped down her cheek. "I know."

Max wished he could hug her, or better yet, somehow prompt Cody to, but that would come. This elephant was going to take a bite at a time. At least Cody seemed off the ledge now, and maybe he'd finally find some healing and move forward.

With both of them.

"I don't know why I'm the way I am." Cody's voice, so timid now, was nearly lost in the hum of the heater. "I just don't want to do this anymore."

Emma stiffened. "Do what?"

"You know...the bad stuff. Getting in trouble. It started out just trying to make friends. Be accepted." He sniffed, his jaw set. "It got out of control. And I couldn't stop. I had to keep up."

"You don't have to keep up anymore, Cody." Max shifted forward, heart full.

"You can start making better choices today. You don't have to go home the same." He hesitated. "It just takes work, son. Are you ready to do the work now?"

Suddenly, Cody sprang to his feet, but not with the eagerness Max had hoped he'd show. No, this expression was nothing if not sheer panic. "Wait. You've got to find Jarvis!"

"That's what we've been trying to tell you." Max stood as well, trying to switch gears as abruptly as Cody had. "Do you know where he is?" "No. We split up once we cleared the property line. But you've got to find him!" Cody pointed outside with fear in his eyes. "He's going to start a fire."

Chapter Twenty

Emma didn't even have time to bask in the longed-for moment of Cody's breakthrough. She followed Max and Cody outside as Max rushed to use a walkie-talkie to alert Luke to Jarvis's plan. Her son felt so good tucked under her arm-it seemed as though she hadn't been able to touch him in months, despite their goodbye hug the first day of camp. She squeezed him a little tighter on instinct, and he leaned slightly into her embrace before regaining his usual stance

She'd take what she could get, and

she'd love every second of it.

There were still too many pressing questions hounding her mind. What now? What next? But she refused to answer any of them, determined to be content to just stand beside her son and watch the chaos unfold before her as news spread about Jarvis's plans.

Max jogged back toward them. "Cody, do you know where he was going to start the fire?" His eyes were wide with concern, yet his stature confident as Brady and the lingering men filed in behind him. A rush of emotion spread through Emma's stomach. She would have never dreamed that Max -her Max-would one day exhibit such desirable traits, would one day be in

charge and leading a worthwhile group rather than following the lead of others with ill intent.

But he wasn't hers anymore.

The emotion morphed to pain. Maybe there was something to be said for God's timing, but it was too late for her and Max. She needed to put any hope of such craziness out of her mind

immediately, or she might never recover. She still had to focus on her and Cody, and doing what was best for her son.

Even if that meant leaving Broken Bend for the second time.

Max spoke in a clipped tone into Luke's walkie-talkie, then handed it back. "We're going to have to spread out again. He could be planning to hit the dorms, or anywhere in the forest, or—"

A sudden orange glow filled the window of the stables, and Emma's heart jump-started. "Or the barn."

Max jerked his head toward the stables, and his confident demeanor vanished. "Fire!"

Immediately, the men on the property sprang into action. Brady called 9-1-1 while Max and the others ran toward the barn and began hauling hay, buckets and other miscellaneous objects away from the perimeter. Thankfully the barn was empty of animals since all of the horses were on the trail ride or on the search party.

Tires squealed, and Emma looked in

time to see Caley peeling out of the driveway in Brady's truck, gassing it toward the road.

"Where's she going?" Cody craned his head, but the only thing that remained was the dust stirred from the sudden departure.

"She's a volunteer firefighter. I bet she's going to get her gear." She held Cody close, and this time, he didn't pull away as more flames began to lick the sides of the barn, threatening to devour the structure in a mass of gold, tangerine and crimson light.

"I didn't mean for this to happen, Mom." Panic laced his voice, and he turned and muffled his words into her shoulder. "I was just so mad. And Jarvis heard me railing about you and Max and said he had an idea for revenge. I didn't really think—"

Emma shushed him, running her fingers through his golden-blond hair. "It's okay, Cody. We'll work this out." She wrapped her arms around him. "This isn't your fault. You didn't light the match."

Mama Jeanie and Ava came outside and stood on the porch, Mama Jeanie's face a mask of disbelief as she tucked Ava against her side. "I never."

Emma had never seen anything like it, either. She knew these teens came from troubled backgrounds—clearly—but to set fire to the camp, to try to hurt Max so intentionally when all he'd done was want the best for them...it broke her heart.

She could only imagine how he felt and on top of the personal whammy she'd already handed him, no less. Guilt crept up her insides like the flames crept up the barn toward the roof.

"I've got him!" Brady came around the far side of the flaming building, Jarvis's arm caught in Brady's unyielding grip. "And his book of matches."

Max's lips pressed together in a firm line as he took the book from Brady.

"Take him to his room please, and have Tim monitor him." He met Jarvis's gaze, which didn't hold for long as the boy lowered his eyes in defeat. "I'll deal with you—and your parents—later."

Jarvis shuffled off with Tim, but not before sending Cody a scalding glance. Cody met his gaze head-on and didn't back down—neither did he puff up, ready for a fight.

Emma leaned to whisper to him. "You did the right thing, telling Max—I mean, your dad—about the fire."

"I know." He shrugged a little, eyes still focused on Jarvis's back. "Doesn't make it easy."

"That's true." She watched Max step back as the firefighters arrived and took over the scene, took in his crestfallen expression as he stood with his hands resting on top of his head. "Right is rarely easy, baby."

* * *

Hours later, Max and Emma sat under the starlit sky on the porch, surrounded by leftover plastic cups of cider, remnants of chocolate chip cookies and the lingering scent of smoke. The fire, while contained to one portion of the barn thanks to the quick discovery and the prompt arrival of the fire department, only did minimal damage. The campers had all gone to bed for the night, way past their scheduled time, with grim faces. Jarvis's family had taken him home a little while ago, juvenile

detention the next stop on his particular journey. It seemed the teen's choices had shaken them all up, especially Katie, who came to Emma after the chaos had dimmed.

"I have a confession," she'd whispered, her red hair dusted with ash that continued to float from the barn roof. "I haven't been honest with Max."

She'd gone on to admit that she'd been a part of a gang back home for years and couldn't get out. She'd gotten busted initially for repeated shoplifting, which was what sent her to Camp Hope in the first place—but only after she intentionally shoplifted all the more, hoping to be sent away to safety. "I can't carry the secret anymore, Miss Emma. Not after watching Jarvis do something so stupid. I mean, if he reaches his limit and tries to burn down a barn, what am I capable of? I don't want to break." She'd looked so scared and so young that Emma had gathered her in a hug and assured her that the truth was always best. She'd stood by her side while Katie told Max, and he'd promised her an extra-long One4One session the next morning where they'd set everything straight and look into long-term options to keep her safe.

"This day has been unreal." She leaned her head back against the porch swing beside Max. "Tonya leaving. Cody's discovery and breakthrough. Jarvis's freak-out. Katie's confession."

"So many secrets." Max rocked their swing in a gentle rhythm. "You were right about Jarvis. I'm sorry I didn't heed your advice sooner. We both knew all along something was too good to be true about Katie, though, didn't we?"

"Yeah. I think she was so relieved to be free of her past, she didn't care what the camp was like." Emma shook her head. "She was just grateful to be away from that gang. But didn't stop to think about what would happen when she had to go home."

"They can't stay here forever. Guess there's several important calls to make tomorrow." Max pushed them slightly higher on the swing, and a smoky breeze wafted through Emma's hair. "Funny how secrets always seem a good idea at the time...." His voice trailed off, and she didn't know if he were being sincere or taking a well-justified jab at her.

"I think it's best if I take Cody back to Texas." Her statement planted Max's feet on the ground, and the swing came to an abrupt stop. "I can plead with the judge for a different facility, explain the conflict of interest or whatever. Maybe they'll have pity. This is just too much." Her voice broke. "Too much on all of us."

Especially on her, if she were being selfish and painfully honest. How could she keep working at the camp, or even keep Cody there at all, when their family dynamics were so tangled no one could sort them out? Her heart broke over and over just being in Max's presence,

knowing he'd never be able to forgive to the point that she desired. To the point of their being a family.

"That's crazy." Max finally spoke, breaking the silence of the night. "He needs his family."

"But you're here. And I'm there."

"That could change." Max lifted his eyebrow at Emma, and her hopes hitched before she remembered Caley's comment alluding to obligation. No. That wasn't best for anyone, especially not Cody. They'd made it this far on their own. She and Max could work out some kind of custody arrangement, but when it came to being a family...they couldn't force that. Not even for Cody's sake.

"How could you even say that?" She twisted on the swing to face Max. "I know you're going to forgive me, eventually, but that doesn't mean you have to take us on."

"I already have forgiven you." He took her hand and ran his finger over the creases of her knuckles. "I forgave you this afternoon, when we were searching for Cody. I probably forgave you even sooner than that." He shook his head. "But I need you to forgive me."

She blinked in disbelief. "For what? I'm the one who lied to you, and our son, for years."

"I judged you."

She waited for his explanation, slowly pushing the swing into motion once more.

"I didn't hear you out and made my own assumptions. When you finally got to tell me what really happened, it made sense, Emma. Made me wonder if maybe I'd have done the same. You were thinking of Cody." He lifted one shoulder in a shrug, identical to Cody's. "I was still making bad choices, just in taking the deal even if I didn't use the drugs that time." He sighed. "We're all paying for the past here, and I think it's

time we stop. Move forward in God's forgiveness."

It sounded too good to be true. Emma squeezed his hand, wondering if this would be the last time she'd get to hold it. "I don't know what to say."

"I do." Cody's voice sounded from the open front door, and Emma jerked, rocking the swing to a stop. She'd almost forgotten he'd been assigned to clean up the inside of the house for Mama Jeanie and do the dishes left over from the search crew. "Tell him we want to stay, Mom."

He came on the porch and stood before the swing. Emma scooted over, and he plopped down in the middle. "I don't want to go back to Texas. It's it's no good for me." He rubbed his palms over his jeans. "I feel different here. I don't want to get sucked back in."

Emma looked at Max over the top of Cody's head, and he nodded slowly, catching her urgent point. "Cody." He waited until Cody met his eyes. "It's good to get away from reality sometimes and learn new things. Sort of figure out who we are."

Cody nodded eagerly.

"But at some point, you have to live in the real world again. Put what you learned and believed into action."

His shoulders slumped. "So does that mean we have to go back to Dallas?"

"I think you should finish the session here, at least. There's not even two weeks left, and we have that big Thanksgiving meal coming up Thursday." Max jostled him in the ribs. "I bet there's room in there for some of Mama Jeanie's famous Cajun turkey."

"Mom?" Cody's pleading expression tugged at her heart.

She nodded slowly. "I think Max is right. Let's finish the camp and go from there."

"From there?" He frowned. "But—"

Max raised his eyebrows at Cody, and he stopped midsentence and sighed. "Yes, ma'am."

Talk about unexpected blessings. Emma couldn't ignore the warmth seeping through her heart at the way Max took over in such a natural way. He was going to be a great dad.

But dad didn't always equal husband. There was the hollow ache again.

"Why don't you take this trash inside, and then I'll take you to the dorm. It's way past bedtime." Max waited until Cody had gathered the remaining debris and taken it inside the house before pulling Emma to stand beside him. "I let you walk away once before, Emma Shaver, and I'm not making that mistake again."

Her heart stammered in her chest, and the ache began to narrow into something almost manageable. Was this even possible?

"I should have followed you when you left the first time." She was afraid to hope. He regretted not following her the first time? But why? She had to know. "Because it was the right thing to do?"

"No." He snorted. "Did anything I did back then seem like it was based on the right thing to do?"

So much she could say there. She just shook her head.

"I wanted you back. I loved you, Emma. But my immature pride and stubbornness wouldn't let me. I thought if you rejected me, then I shouldn't have to chase you." He leaned forward and pressed his cheek against hers. "Don't make me chase you, Emma. I'm really pretty busy around here." She hiccupped back a laugh of surprise. "Is that so?" The tease broke the weight around her heart and set it free. No obligation. Just her. Just him. Cody.

And love.

"We're not kids anymore. Let's give this a real try, whatever it takes. I love you, Emma." His lips were a breath apart from hers, and she found herself stretching on her toes to brush them with her own.

"I love you, too. Always have." She hugged him back, heart soaring, and knew he had to feel it thumping against the pocket of his shirt. She closed her eyes, nestling against the familiarity of his embrace. God had brought them full circle—despite their failures, their sin, their mistakes—He'd worked all things for good. Just like He promised.

And the best part was His forgiveness covered it all.

"You always have, huh? And always will?" The confidence in Max's gaze spoke a contradiction to the question. He already knew the answer.

"Just try to get rid of me again." She grinned at his responding chuckle. There was still a lot to figure out, a lot to wade through. But by the grace of God, they'd get there—all three of them. Because God knew from the beginning, secret son or not, they were meant to be a forever family.

Epilogue

"Mama Jeanie, you've outdone yourself again." Max settled in his chair at the head of the table, breathing in the aroma of walnut-crusted turkey, green bean casserole and honey-buttered rolls —to name a few. The table seemed almost unable to bear the load of the food and serving dishes covering every square inch.

He could relate. He knew a little something about carrying burdens. He shot a glance to his right, where Emma was trying to convince Cody that the sweet potato casserole tasted great even though it was orange, and smiled, a swell of thankfulness rising in his heart. Across from the two of them, Brady, Caley and Ava sat in a row, Caley and Ava giggling more like sisters than stepmother-daughter as they bent their heads over their plates.

"Thank you, but I had help this year, my boy." Mama Jeanie grinned down the length of table at him as she plucked her napkin from the decorative ring and placed it in her lap. "Your new wife there knows her way around a kitchen."

And his heart.

"You know that turkey was all you, Mama Jeanie. Don't give me too much credit. I pretty much heated and reheated." She gestured to the counter in the kitchen where an assortment of desserts waited. "Though I confess to making the pies. All four different kinds."

"Mmm. My kind of woman." Max nudged Emma's leg under the table with his boot, and the sassy wink she shot him warmed his skin. He still couldn't believe how much had happened in a year. In fact, it was worth announcing out loud.

He stood, tapping his knife lightly on his glass of water—real glass, which didn't happen often at Camp Hope, where all things plastic and sensible reigned. But today was worth celebrating—their first Thanksgiving as a whole family.

"I'd like to make a toast." He smiled at Emma, then at her mom, who sat on the other side of Cody, then at Mama Jeanie, his friends and finally at his son. "Every Thanksgiving at Camp Hope, we've made it a tradition to go around the table and voice what we're thankful for. This year, we didn't schedule a camp over the holiday, but I'd still like to keep up the tradition. So I'll go first."

He cleared his throat, knowing Brady would never let him hear the end of it if he teared up, then decided it really didn't matter. Men who discovered they had a secret son and then rediscovered love with the woman of their dreams could shed a manly tear or two. "This has been a crazy year, but one of the best. I wouldn't trade a single moment, however rocky they might have been at first." He reached over and rested his hand on Emma's shoulder. "This year, I'm thankful for second chances. For love and family."

Emma squeezed his hand as he sat down, then brushed her hair back from her face and gave that shy smile she always did when she spoke in front of a group-the same smile she'd offered to countless teen girls in the past year as she led beside him at the camp. "I'm thankful for hope. That just like God, it's always nearby, even when we can't necessarily feel it."

Everyone looked at Cody to go next. He stopped midchew and tried to hide a roll in his lap. "Do I have to?" He turned pleading eyes to his mom, who nodded. With a sigh, he put his roll on his plate and fisted his napkin in both hands. His voice rang timid, but sincere. "I'm thankful for a lot of stuff. For moving this year and getting away from those old friends of mine and making new ones here. And for finding my dad." He looked at Max, then away, and Max's heart thumped double in his chest. "I wish we had sooner. But I'm learning at church that everything happens for a reason, and I'm just happy we're all together now." Then Cody grinned, the

same grin Max had seen in a mirror growing up in his own teen years. "And I'm really thankful that there's four kinds of pie."

Everyone laughed, breaking the band of emotion that tightened Max's throat, and he pointed at his new mother-in-law in relief. "Next."

She patted Cody's shoulder and reached around him to rub Emma's arm. "I'm thankful that all my family is back in one place. And for new additions." She winked at Max.

Mama Jeanie folded her hands atop her empty plate as she took her turn. "I'm thankful for the lot of you. All such good friends and family, taking care of

each other and looking out for each

other. It's a blessing to watch." She pointed at every person around the table. "And never forget the hand of the Good Lord is on you all. That's something to be thankful about right there."

Caley murmured her agreement, as she and Ava took turns announcing their blessings. Then Brady wrapped it up. "I'm thankful for family, friends and the chance to celebrate together." He reached over and tapped Max's arm. "And thankful that nothing is impossible with God—not even changing the most stubborn of hearts."

"Hey, I'd argue, but...we all know it's true." He grinned at his friend. "And while we're being sappy, I'll admit I'm thankful that God uses the most unlikely people in our lives to get through to us." "Now I'm unlikely?" Brady scowled,

a tease in his eyes.

Emma snorted. "I think he meant me."

"That's probably true of all of us." Caley laughed. "On that note, Max, why don't you say grace already so we can eat?"

"Great idea. Let's pray." As Max bowed his head to bless the meal, he couldn't resist one more glance around the table, one full of food, family, friends—and love. His gaze lingered on Cody, then on Emma, who opened one eye to check on him as he knew she would. Their gazes met and mingled, and the love he saw returned in her eyes was one of the biggest blessings of all.

"Happy Thanksgiving." She mouthed the words to him, and he mouthed it back.

Thankful, indeed.

* * * * *

Keep reading for an excerpt from SEASON OF REDEMPTION by Jenna Mindel.

Dear Reader,

Sometimes, life throws curveballs that don't just knock you off balance; they knock you flat on your back in the dirt. That's what happened to me during the writing of this novel, and it's what happened to Max when he discovered the truth about Cody.

I've seen over the course of my life that people—both real and fictional have a choice to make when they get bowled over. They can either stay down, complain about the dirt while wallowing in it and carry grudges toward the one who threw the ball (or toward the One who allowed it to be thrown) or, they can get up, brush off and turn their wounds over to the One who always keeps His promises. The One whose love is everlasting. The One who died for us—Jesus Christ.

As Max discovers in this story, secrets can be devastating—but nothing is too hard for God to work for the good of those who love Him, as is promised to us in Romans 8:28.

Whether you're walking along just fine, or whether you're suddenly gazing up at the sky, wondering what happened and why you're covered in dirt, you have a choice to make. To follow God, or not. To believe in His truth, or not. To allow Him to work *all* things for good, or not.

Max made the right decision. I hope

you will, too.

Sincerely,



Questions for Discussion

- 1. Emma carried a heavy secret for the majority of her adult life. Have you ever kept a secret that weighed on you nonstop? Do you think secrets in general are good, bad or somewhere in between?
- 2. Do you think Emma's choice to keep Cody's father's identity a secret

from her parents was a good one or bad one?

- 3. Max had a past he wasn't proud of, but that past enabled him to reach out to teens because he could relate to them. How is this an example of Romans 8:28 coming to life?
- Emma dated Max in high school because of temporary rebellion against her parents. Have

you ever grown tired of being "the good girl" all the time? Did you ever act out in a similar way?

- 5. Do you think Emma's fear that Cody had inherited Max's "bad boy" genes was merited or a myth? Do you think a heritage like that is left in one's DNA?
- 6. Cody made bad choices and got into trouble

because of wanting to be accepted and receive attention he felt he didn't receive elsewhere. Why do you think kids and teenagers struggle with the concept that negative attention is better than none at all? Do you think adults are tempted to feel the same?

 Max's best friend, Brady, played a key role in his

turning from his wayward life and finding the right path toward God. Have you ever had someone play that role in your life in a spiritual or emotionally positive way? Did you ever thank them?

8. Emma's relationship with her mom was strained because of her secret and because of misplaced judgments on both sides. Has a secret ever strained a friendship or relationship in your life? How did you handle it?

- 9. Max and Emma struggled to get beyond the weight of the past in different ways regarding their relationship with each other. Why was forgiveness needed on both sides?
- 10. Many of the teens at

Camp Hope carried one secret or another. What was Tonya's secret, and what do you think happened to her after she left the camp?

1. Katie's secret was perhaps the most surprising of all because she was the most adept at carrying it. Have you ever been shocked to discover the truth about someone's life or background? How can you help someone in that position?

12. Jarvis is an example of how some teens might never discover the desire to turn to the right path in life, despite being given every opportunity spiritually, emotionally, mentally and physically. Do you think a person ever reaches the point of

"too late," or do you believe that God's grace offers endless second chances?

- 13. Do you ever struggle with receiving forgiveness like Emma did at the end of the story? Do you struggle more with extending forgiveness?
- Emma and Max were able to overcome their differences and the past by

the grace of God and by the mutual effort of forgiveness and desire to make their family a permanent one. Have you ever experienced such love and sacrifice in your own life?



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Chapter One

Kellie Cavanaugh rushed into the office bringing with her a blast of chilly autumn air and a few colored leaves that had blown against the door. She was late. Not a good thing considering she interned for LightHouse Center, a substance abuse outpatient office in LeNaro, Michigan. She wanted a good report despite her tardiness.

Grabbing a quick cup of coffee, she took a sip and coughed. "Ugh, who made this?"

Marci, the receptionist, laughed. "John."

"What's wrong with my coffee?" Her boss, John Thompson, stood with hands on his hips.

Kellie made a face. "It's like tar."

"Get here on time and you can make the coffee." His voice sounded stern, but Kellie knew better. John was all bark.

Still, she managed a sheepish smile. "Sorry I'm late. I overslept."

John nodded. "How'd your interview go yesterday?"

Kellie had left early to interview with the large school district in Traverse City. One of their school counselors had tendered her two weeks' and needed to be replaced. The school was currently interviewing. John knew the school's superintendent and had pushed to get her in the door. She owed him big-time.

"Promising. Very promising." Kellie added more cream and sugar to the super strong coffee.

Again, John nodded. "Ginny's not here today, so I'd like you to take this morning's assessment. It's a court order and the guy's waiting in the lobby."

Kellie peeked at the tall, dark and handsome man pacing the tiles. "You want me to take *him*?"

"Yes, I do. We're all part of a team. When one of us is missing, others fill in. Besides, you've done well with our teens. I think you're ready."

She was ready. With only a month left of her internship, Kellie had been doing

teen assessments on her own. She'd even facilitated the teen group sessions for the last few weeks. Kellie had shadowed her mentor, Ginny, for months. She knew how to conduct an adult assessment. She'd seen it done by the best.

Still, Kellie didn't appreciate the way her heart pounded. Was it normal nerves or something else? She peeked again at the guy in the lobby and a flutter of attraction rippled through her.

Nope, not going there.

The guy moved with impatient grace, like some fairy-tale prince who'd lost his way to the castle, but he was no storybook hero charging in to give Kellie a happily-ever-after. Kellie didn't believe in fairy tales anymore. She believed in hard work and faith in God to get a person where they wanted to go.

"Here's the alcohol screening questionnaire he completed. Looks pretty clean." John handed her Prince Impatient's paperwork. "It's his first offense."

"You mean the first time he's been caught." Kellie scanned the documents for his name. *Ryan Marsh*.

John gave her a tsk-tsk of warning. "Careful, Kellie, you haven't been here long enough to be that cynical."

Kellie shrugged. Her cynicism had been cultivated long ago. She flipped through Ryan's papers. He'd been courtordered for a substance abuse assessment as part of his conditional sentence for Operating While Visibly Impaired. A misdemeanor. It didn't matter that he'd been hit with the lowest charge; the guy had been arrested for an alcohol-related crime. In her book, that made him a modern-day leper—treat with compassion but do not touch.

"Okay." The lobby seemed to shrink before her eyes. She could do this. She knew how to control her reactions and her feelings. She'd done it for years.

Kellie glanced at Marci, sitting primly behind a sliding glass window that gave her an eyeful of Prince Impatient's delectable pacing. "Give me a minute and then send him back."

"Sure thing, Kellie." Marci snapped her gum and gave her a wink.

Kellie took a steadying breath, picked up her doctored coffee and headed for her office. It was one thing meeting with kids, quite another to assess someone so handsome it hurt to look at him.

After five minutes of mental prep, she looked up to see her Prince Impatient literally darken her doorstep. If a person could look like a thundercloud personified, it was definitely Ryan Marsh.

"Come in, Ryan, please. I'm Kellie Cavanaugh, an intern here." She extended her hand hoping he didn't notice the way her voice had cracked. He briefly returned her handshake. Kellie didn't cower at his strength or the fact that he towered over her. "Have a seat."

He sat down, his knees brushing the front of her desk. So far, he hadn't said a word, but she could feel his frustration and something darker emanating from him like a low growl. Shame? This bear of a man had been caught in his own snare.

"So, tell me why you're here."

His eyes widened slightly, and he wiped his palms against long, jean-clad thighs as if it took considerable effort to remain seated. His impatience hadn't cooled as he gestured toward the paperwork on her desk. "You've got the court order."

"Yes, I do. But I'd like to hear your story."

"It's so stupid." His deep voice sounded remorseful rather than defensive.

Most stories she'd heard here were, but Kellie didn't say that. She nodded for him to continue.

"How long will this take? I've got to get to work."

Ryan had a job that he was worried about keeping. Definitely a good sign. Same with his questionnaire. He'd given a lot of right answers, but that didn't mean they were true.

"About an hour or so. I have a series

of questions to ask, so you might as well get comfortable."

He nodded but didn't relax.

"You were about to tell me what happened," Kellie coaxed.

"I was at a party and had a few beers too many—" His gaze pierced her.

"Something I don't usually do. Anyway, a friend agreed to drive me home. While I was waiting for him in my truck, I must have dozed off. The police were called because of the noise, and the next thing I knew I was arrested."

Kellie studied him. Hard. Something didn't add up. He didn't usually have a few too many beers? *Right*. A person didn't get arrested without cause. "What happened to your friend?"

"He bailed on me."

Classic.

She sat back. "Do you hang out with this friend a lot?"

Ryan shook his head. "No. We went to high school together. I ran into him at a football game, and he invited me to the party and I went. He hadn't been drinking and agreed to drive me home."

"In your truck?" Kellie had heard all kinds of lame excuses sitting in on assessments. This one was right up there.

He ran his hand through thick dark hair that had a nice wave to it. "Yeah. I know. Stupid."

"So the police arrested you

because...?" She wanted his perspective on why he'd gotten into trouble.

"It was cold that night, so I started the truck to turn on the heat. I was sitting in the passenger seat, but it didn't matter. The cops said I had control of the vehicle with the intent to drive."

"And did they talk to your friend?"

"No. They couldn't find him. He left with someone else and that's all it took to make me out as a liar."

Was he? A twisting worm of doubt in her gut said he wasn't. Maybe he'd been at the wrong place at the wrong time under the wrong circumstances. "This is how you remember it happening?" He looked her straight in the eye. "That's how it happened. I had no intention of driving. I don't drink and drive."

Kellie shifted under that direct gaze, but she didn't look away. His eyes were dark brown and hard like bitter chocolate. That worm of doubt turned again. Liars weren't usually so forthright.

She cocked her head. "Okay, tell me about yourself. Who are you, Ryan?"

The corner of his eye twitched. "What do you want to know?"

He did things the hard way. Okay, fine. "I have an entire sheet of questions here, which we'll take in order. The more open you are, the easier this will be." "I don't have a drinking problem," he said.

He wouldn't be here if there wasn't something amiss in his life. "A problem is a broken shoelace, something you fix and it goes away. We treat the disease of alcoholism and addiction. That requires management skills."

This time he shifted in his seat, looking wary. Nervous even. "Okay, what's your first question?"

"Your general health appears good. Are you currently taking any prescription meds?"

"No."

"Have you ever been prescribed medications for pain?"

"Yes."

Kellie narrowed her gaze. "When and what were they?"

"I had my wisdom teeth pulled a month ago—they were impacted pretty bad. I still have the bottle of Percocet."

"Did you take them?"

"I took one."

"Why only one?"

Ryan shrugged. "I didn't like how it made me feel."

"And how did it make you feel?"

"Sort of loopy." He sat forward with an annoyed look on his face and his dark brows furrowed. The thundercloud was back. "Look, Ms. Cavanaugh. I don't do drugs. I never have. And I don't normally drink much."

How many times had she heard her brother deny his addiction? How many times had her parents believed him? They refused to see what his substance abuse did to their family.

What it did to her.

She cleared the painful memories inching into her brain. Ryan Marsh was convincing. He believed he was okay, and part of her wanted to believe that, too. He wasn't like her brother. For one thing, Ryan looked a person in the eye.

"Except for that party?"

He sat back and blew out his breath in frustration. "Yeah, except for that party." She'd hit a nerve but had to dig deeper. "Why?" Now he looked angry. "What do you mean, *why*?"

"Why did you have a few beers too many?"

He looked away then and shrugged. Now he *was* lying. By refusing to admit his reason, he wasn't being true to himself or to her. Ryan Marsh had a definite purpose in drinking that night, she was certain. He didn't strike her as the kind of guy to do anything by accident.

She waited, feeling the struggle going on inside him. "Ryan?"

He looked up.

In his eyes she read stark pain so acute, her heart flinched. It felt like

she'd run into a jagged piece of glass that cut quick and deep. "Alcohol won't make it go away."

"It did for a while."

Her stomach tipped over and fell, feeling like it had dropped to the soles of her feet. Ryan Marsh hurt, and he hurt badly. People hurting that bad often tried to medicate their sorrow to make it go away instead of dealing with it. Is that what he was doing? Was this the first stepping stone to a bigger issue?

Please, God, no ...

The prayer whispered from her soul. She often prayed for clients, especially the teens in her group. She cared, but this was different. This bordered on something else. A connection between them where she felt his pain and wanted to take it away. But she couldn't do that. Things didn't work that way.

Straightening her paperwork, Kellie regrouped. This man wasn't her client nor would he be. She was only filling in for Ginny. Ryan Marsh would become an agency client if recommended for counseling. She needed to remain impartial, objective and, above all else, emotionally removed.

But those eyes of his were killers, sucking her into a vortex of feelings she shouldn't have. Settling the list of standard questions on the desk in front of her like a shield, she continued her line of questioning and note-taking.

His employment, his education, his family life—everything checked out. He was a regular guy with a normal life. From what he'd told her, a very stable life. Ryan was the middle child of three. He grew up on his family-owned cherry orchard, but he worked as a farm manager for a nearby horticultural research station. He'd worked there since graduating from college five years ago. The guy had no prior arrests, not even one speeding ticket according to the court records.

Yet, he was here.

She looked at him. "So, you've never been in trouble with the police before." He fidgeted in the chair and his boot hit the front of her desk when he tried to cross his legs. "Sorry."

Again she'd hit a nerve. Had he been in trouble before? She smiled and waited for him to answer.

"I'm sorry, what was the question?"

She rephrased. "Have you ever been in trouble with the police before? Maybe not arrested, but warned? Or questioned?

The color drained from his face. "Questioned."

"Why?" She held her breath.

"My fiancée was killed in a tractor rollover. My brother and I were there when it happened." A brief glimpse of that tragedy shone from his eyes, but then he shuttered it off as easily as she might pull the shades on a window.

"When was this?"

"A little over three years ago." He looked down at his feet. With his elbows balanced on his knees, Ryan clasped his hands so tight his knuckles had turned white.

She watched him closely. It was eating him up inside. Was he an alcoholic without knowing it or headed there because of his grief? It wasn't uncommon for someone who'd never showed signs of substance abuse to slide down that slippery slope as a way to cope.

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"Yeah, me, too." He struggled for

control.

Part of her wanted to dig deeper, get him to talk about what had happened that day, but she stopped herself from asking the question poised on her lips. She wasn't his counselor.

Kellie quickly gathered her papers and stood. "I think I have everything I need for now. You signed a permission waiver for us to check with your family, so I'll complete those interviews later today."

He stood as well. "Why do you have to talk to them? I told you everything you asked."

Kellie wouldn't sugarcoat the reason. "We need to establish your credibility." He jammed his hands in his pockets. "Okay, fine. Then what?"

"Then I'll review what we discussed along with the questionnaire you completed and make my recommendation to my boss and mentor counselor. Once they've reviewed the paperwork, we'll forward their findings to the court. You'll get copies of everything."

Ryan looked worried. "When will I hear something?"

"By the end of the week." She extended her hand. "I know this isn't easy on you, but we're on the same team."

Ryan took it and squeezed.

For a moment, Kellie didn't think he'd

let go. His touch wasn't threatening at all. In fact, all the bluster had gone out of him and he hung on like she was a rescue ring tossed in rough waters.

When he finally did let go of her hand, Kellie was tempted to reach for him again. And that was plain old crazy thinking. And dangerous.

He headed for the door and then stopped, turned around and gave her a hint of a smile. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." Kellie's heart pounded all over again.

* * *

Ryan stepped out of the treatment center into cold October sunshine peeking out

from behind dark gray clouds. He felt a lot like the dried-up leaves getting swirled into a circle in the parking lot. His whole life had been stirred into a mess of decayed matter.

What had he gotten himself into? One stupid decision had cost him way more than the money spent on court fees, increased insurance and an invasive assessment. Despite the promise of dropped charges once he satisfied the conditions of his sentence, namely an evaluation and possible treatment, this thing had the power to impact the rest of his life.

Clicking the unlock button on his keys, Ryan climbed in his truck, but he didn't start the engine right away. He stared at the trees on the surrounding hills that blazed in bright hues of orange and red. He'd made two stupid decisions. The first had been letting Sara try that asinine stunt with the tractor.

If only he'd told her no...

He leaned his head back and sighed. "I am such an idiot."

The night of the party would have been their third wedding anniversary had Sara lived. They would have been married three years, maybe with a baby on the way. Ryan briefly closed his eyes. The pain hadn't gone away. The hollow feeling he carried around had grown like a cancerous tumor.

He'd tried to recover through church,

then isolation, and then that night, he'd tried something else. The party had given him an excuse to go further than a few beers to relax. He'd effectively blurred his memories until he couldn't recall them anymore. He'd drunk enough to blot out that look on Sara's face when she lay in his arms, dying.

It had been a real treat for his family to find out he'd been arrested. His one call had been to his future brother-inlaw instead of his parents. Adam had picked him up from jail without lecture, but it was still a humbling experience he'd never want to repeat. Not something he'd wanted to place on his parents, either. Knowing his mom, she might have left him in jail overnight to

think about what he'd done to get there.

That pretty intern reminded him a little of his mom. Kellie Cavanaugh wasn't exactly short, maybe more average in height, but she looked small and delicate despite her powerhouse of a handshake. With light freckles all over her face and eyes that couldn't decide whether to be blue or green, she'd nailed him with a direct gaze that saw far more than he'd wanted her to see. A good talent when it came to counseling, but potentially bad news for him.

He wasn't a drunk. But would Kellie Cavanaugh see that? He wanted this whole thing done and over with, but his future lay in her hands. He started his truck and slammed it into Reverse.

By the time he got to work, Ryan was glad his duties today included fall cleanup in the cherry fields. Throwing stuff around sounded good right about now.

"How'd it go?" His boss, Liz, stood in the doorway of his small office.

"I don't know. I'll find out if I have to go to 'treatment'—" Ryan made quotation marks with his fingers "—by the end of the week."

Liz gave him a smile. Only a few years older than his twenty-seven years, Liz was hired in as the new director of the research center six months ago when she moved back to the area with her husband. She'd been great through this whole thing, promising to go to bat for him if record of his arrest printed in their local newspaper was ever questioned by the board of directors.

"Have you thought maybe this is what you need?"

"I don't abuse any substance—" He cut himself short. Was that true anymore?

Liz held up her hand. "You're the most dependable, hardworking guy on staff, but there's this sadness in you.... I know it's about your fiancée, but maybe this is all for some big cosmic reason."

Ryan snorted. "You sound like my brother."

"Well, maybe we have a point."

"Yeah, well. I've got stuff to do. Thanks, Liz." Ryan wasn't interested in a theological debate. If he heard one more time from well-meaning folks how *all things work together for good to those who love God*, he'd tear his hair out.

How could God use *this* one? Ryan had blocked out God for a while now. Maybe He'd finally received the message and had given Ryan a hands-off. And look where he'd landed.

* * *

Two days later while waiting for her evening teen group session, Kellie sat at

her desk with her office phone cradled against her shoulder. "Mrs. Marsh? Hello, this is Kellie Cavanaugh from the LightHouse Center in LeNaro. Do you have a few moments?"

She heard a sigh at the other end.

"Yes, I do. Ryan told me you might be calling." Ryan's mother had a pleasantsounding voice.

Expecting the call was another good sign. Ryan Marsh demonstrated responsibility by giving his family members a heads-up. Or he could have prepped them on what to say. Either way, Kellie would find out.

She'd hit a wall with his evaluation. She believed what Ryan had told her even though her boss thought his answers were too perfect to be true.

Was Ryan headed for trouble? If he remained on this course, most likely he would be. She'd spoken to Ryan's brother, a minister, who had shed a lot of light on the accident that had killed Ryan's fiancée. Her name was Sara, and she'd died in Ryan's arms. Kellie nearly cried after she'd hung up.

"Mrs. Marsh, I was wondering if I might ask you a few questions about your son."

The chuckle on the other end of the phone surprised her. "Mrs. Marsh?"

"Oh, please call me Rose. And sorry, but this is just so unusual."

Kellie tipped her head. "How so?"

"It's not like Ryan to do anything wrong. When the boys were younger, I used to get all kinds of calls about my oldest son, Sinclair. But he's settled down and recently married. Ryan was always the responsible one."

Rose Marsh sounded vibrant and proud of both her sons. There wasn't that weary tone in her voice, like she'd been through the wringer over and over again. Interesting.

"Does Ryan have a history of abusing alcohol?"

"No, not really. In fact, Ryan was the type of kid who'd call me fifteen minutes before his curfew with the reason why he might be late. I never worried about Ryan in that respect."

"Rose, if I may ask, is there anything that worries you now?"

"His grief." Another sigh. "He's not moving on, and it's been three years."

"Yes, he told me about that. I'm very sorry for your loss."

"Thank you, Miss Cavanaugh."

"Kellie."

"Can you help him, Kellie?"

She felt her back stiffen. "I'm not his counselor. I'm helping with the evaluation."

"He'd have a fit if he knew I'd said this, but I want him to go through some sort of counseling. Ryan's too deep a thinker. He keeps his feelings locked up inside and wouldn't dream of seeking help on his own. And he needs help." Still waters run deep with dangerous currents and undertows.

"Kellie?"

"Yes, ma'am?

"Do you believe in God?"

A personal question for sure, but Kellie wasn't surprised or offended. Ryan's brother was a pastor, and he'd told her that they'd been raised in a Christian home. The Marsh family had been more than simply Sunday morning churchgoers. They tried their best to live their faith. Like her.

Kellie cleared her throat. This call was taking an unexpected turn. "Yes, ma'am, I do." "There's an old poem that refers to God as the Hound of Heaven. Well, I think God's tracking down my son to bring him back. Please recommend Ryan to go through counseling. He can't carry his burden of grief anymore. He needs to finally give it over to the Lord, before he lets it destroy him. Do you know what I mean?"

"I do, Mrs. Marsh." A little too well, in fact. Some things were hard to let go of.

After a few more questions, Kellie hung up the phone. God worked in mysterious ways, but this one really confused her. Was she supposed to be God's instrument in this man's life? That was a big responsibility. One she didn't take lightly. A knock on the door to her tiny office interrupted her thoughts, so she hit the save button on her computer.

Ginny stuck her head around the door. "Do you have that Marsh evaluation done yet? John's asking for it. He's got a relatively new group starting up and can take on another client."

"It's right here." Kellie hit the print button and then pointed at the shelf. "Or rather, there."

"Great. Let's review it before our teen group session, okay?" Ginny gathered up the pages and scanned them quickly. "Heard anything from the school yet?"

"Not yet. I don't expect to for a

while." Kellie sat on her hands to keep them still while Ginny settled into a chair. She gave her time to read the report thoroughly.

"So, you believe this guy's telling the truth?" Ginny's gaze narrowed.

"I do."

Ginny smiled. "You're so young."

Kellie knew that was her mentor's way of saying naïve. One of the things Kellie had learned interning here was that the counselors were pretty skeptical. They had to be.

"And yet you're recommending a minimum amount of counseling. Why?"

Kellie wouldn't admit that Ryan's mother had asked her to, or that she'd

confirmed Kellie's thought process. "I think he might be headed for real trouble if he doesn't deal with his emotional pain."

Ginny rolled her pen between her fingers. "*Might* being the operative word here. Do you think he's an alcoholic?"

"Most of the signs point to no." But Kellie had her doubts.

The way he'd admitted to a reprieve that night at the party, the night he'd been arrested, raised a red flag. Ryan Marsh had found a destructive way to cope.

Kellie knew all about that.

Ginny gave her a hard stare of

consideration. "Okay. I'm approving it. John will be happy for a solid self-pay, and maybe we can prevent this guy from going down the wrong road."

"Exactly." Kellie nodded, but she felt like she'd betrayed Ryan.

A guy like him wasn't going to be happy with the news. Nope. Not one bit.

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ISBN-13: 9781460324639

THE RANCHER'S SECRET SON

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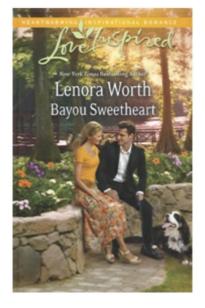
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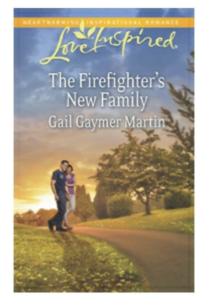
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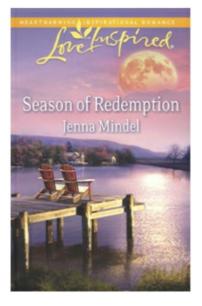
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